

Political Elites in East Central Europe: Paving the Way for “Negative Europeanisation”?

Nicole Gallina

Synopsis

More than 20 years have passed since the fall of communism in East Central Europe (ECE). In 2004, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic celebrated their accession to the European Union. The European integration process and the accession to the European Union underlined ECE adherence to Western political values and ways of governing. But, nationalist developments in all four ECE countries and difficulties with state reform speak another language. Twenty years after regime change--with rule of law formally in place--a reform of the security services and police and the judicial branch has not been achieved in any of the four East Central European countries. Also, political elites have contested achieved democratic values such as a free press. Tightly connected to failed reform and inadequate legal control is a high rate of corruption. Evidence for reform difficulties could also be understood as a problem for Europeanisation of ECE countries and the proper “Europeanness” of ECE political elite.

Europeanness is generally understood as incorporating democratic and European values and acting according to them. In contrary, ECE elite behaviour pattern after 1989 have been characterised by double standards, intransparency, and corruption. On the one hand we can observe doubtful elite behaviour, on the other hand that democratic institutions based on democratic norms are in place. From this constellation it could be concluded that the political transformation has not achieved a full accordance between the political elite and the institutional system.

Therefore, the question arises of whether the Europeanisation of ECE has taken place sufficiently, in the sense that political elites adopted democratic values and act according to the guidelines of a democratic institutional system. In fact, ECE countries have functioning political parties and parliaments, but do the elites who work within those institutions respect the democratic norms (such as to establish democratic legislation, work out adequate regulation, communicate with the political adversary etc.)?

This work is an overall survey of ECE politics, with the issue of political elite behaviour as an overarching theme. It asks how political elites and their value code are characterised. This includes the question if the democratisation of the institutional framework led to a democracy-compatible behaviour of the political elite. I analyse the way East Central

European political elites have developed in relation to the democratic institutional framework, i.e. examine political elite development in ECE after 1989 and concentrate on important features of political elite conduct. I identify four important fields of elite impact: Elite composition and competition, elite cooperation on the domestic scene, the political elite influence on institutional developments (e.g., lustration, media, justice), and also the political elite commitment to further European integration.

My work argues that political elite behaviour in ECE does not correspond with the democratic framework in place. Political elite acts are expressed most vividly by political elite attempts to undermine democratic legislation, involvement in organised crime and political corruption. So, the decisions and structures of the highest political representatives, the so-called power elite, are worthy of being observed more closely.

Here, the question arises which factors could explain elite conduct. This monograph sees elite fragmentation as a possible explanation for ECE difficulties. In consolidated democracies a gradual elite circulation leads to a different composition of the elite which is characterised by so-called elite unity. Here, elite develop strong relations and a sense for cooperation, in spite of the political competition for governing power. In contrast, non-consolidated or recent democracies are characterised by fragmented elite that are composed of different groups not sharing values, but having sentiments of mutual mistrust. Accordingly, this book argues that ECE political elite fragmentation is responsible for the quality of elite-institutional relations.

Those insights provide the background for the analysis of political structures. The elite lack interaction ties and an interaction code based on the necessity for cooperation. Thus, political elite fragmentation signifies the serious split between different political elite groups, characterised by mistrust and non-cooperation or worse, a “trench-mentality”. In this regard, the monograph presents the most important characteristics of political elite conduct in a first step. In a second step, it outlines how political elite fragmentation affects political institutions, namely the work of the political parliament and the government, legislative regulation (for the example of lustration), the judiciary and the media. Thus, political elite fragmentation has two dimensions: on the one hand, the serious split between political elite groups, and on the other hand, the non-accordance of the political elite as a whole with the democratic institutional framework.

The main argument of this book is that there is a serious gap between political elite behaviour and the principles of formal democratic institutions (e.g., parliaments, justice and police apparatus). This gap could be seen as a direct outcome of elite fragmentation. Democratic institutions are based on cooperation, communication, trust, accountability, and transparency and express the complete set of European norms. ECE Political elites base their behaviour on values that stand diametrically opposed to those characteristics.

Apparently the elite and institutional systems function according to two different standards. If this would be the case, we could speak of two different systems, an elite system and an institutional system. The result of which would be a gap between political elites and democratic institutions. An interesting question would be then how those different parallel and even contrarily functioning systems affect ECE political developments.

The fact that political institutions have been shaped by political elites in the critical moments of state reform (in particular in the field of police and justice reform) has influenced the quality of the democratic regimes. In fact, political elites have potentially slowed down democratic developments. This last point can be seen in the context of ECE elite strategy of adapting to the democratic framework formally, but outweighing it informally with their methods. This relationship between the institutional and the elite system led to a configuration that unilaterally favoured political elites.

If those political elites have used weaknesses of the institutional system to enforce their own egoistic political (party) goals and to defend single political leadership positions, this has worked in detriment to the whole democratic system and even enlarged the elite-institution gap. This means that the more political elites have gained self-consciousness with successful “undermining actions” of the state the more the democratic institutional fundamentals have lost power potentials vis-à-vis political elites. In the context of elite Europeanness such a development can be also understood as “negative Europeanisation” as the elites endanger the fundamentals of a democratic political regime.

The Case Studies

Elite impact in the form of elite fragmentation affects both domestic and international issues. Namely affected are the fields of elite composition and competition, elite cooperation on the domestic scene, political elite influence on institutional developments and also international integration issues. Those fields can be additionally understood as dimensions of the elite-institution gap. An interesting research question here was how those aspects materialise within case studies of the four ECE countries.

First, it is important to see elite fragmentation in East Central Europe within a strong path-dependent link. Negotiated transitions in ECE guaranteed a peaceful transition on the one hand, but on the other hand helped the former communist parties to turn to an acknowledged pillar of the democratic party system (with the exception of the Czech Republic so far). The grade of elite continuity has been surprisingly high, and a serious political elite change hardly possible. Therefore, after 1989, old elites have co-existed with new elites. One consequence was that values connected to old elites (such as strong top-down policy-making) became

dominant in the new elite system and elite representatives hardly changed their old values codes.

If ECE adaptation of European values would have based on a cultural-historical understanding, then ECE political leadership naturally would have incorporated capabilities for consensus and readiness for cooperation in daily politics. However, the analysis of political elite conduct clearly speaks against these features. Hereby I identify four broad categories of elite conduct. Outstanding are low morals and intransparency. Top-down and authoritarian relationships dominate within political parties and the government. Additionally, the political other is perceived negatively and not trusted. Finally, emotional values are of much importance, in particular, concepts of nation and identity. These components of elite conduct determine both emotional and content-based policy-making. They are expressed in national populism, the personalisation of politics and communist/anti-communist cleavages or political polarisation. Interestingly, those patterns are persistent both in old (communist-based and communist-opposition based) and new political elites. Ultimately, this political elite code based on separation and exclusion has led to elite fragmentation that questions the Europeanness (i.e., the adaptation of European norms) of ECE political elites.

The case studies analysed political elite politics and conduct in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary after 1989. They aimed to illustrate specifically the two dimensions of political elite fragmentation and the different dimensions of the elite-institution gap, i.e. the political elite overweigh in regard to the institutional framework. The first part concentrated on elite composition, notably elite fragmentation. It focused on the first dimension of elite fragmentation and described its evolvement, and thus the pre-requisites for the elite-institution gap. The second part outlined main characteristics of political elite conduct respectively and included the second dimension of elite fragmentation--the non-accordance of the elite with the political system which is already an expression of the elite-institution gap. The third part concentrated on the domestic scene and practical political outcomes of the elite-institution gap. Here, the case studies considered how political party leaders weakened the institution of political parties and how the relationship between the government and the opposition affected the institution of the parliament. Additional emphasis was on the relationship between political elites and executive agencies, in particular police and justice (including lustration) agencies, as well as the media. Another, fourth aspect included the European scene. The monograph concentrated on the emerging gap between formal provisions and verbal commitments for EU integration and current political elite rhetoric.

As the dimensions of elite fragmentation and the political elite-institution gap are determined by special characteristics of ECE political elite systems, the work emphasised certain aspects of the gap differently. For example, in Poland and in Hungary, clashes

between “new” and “old” elites have decisively influenced government stability and political party structures. In the Czech Republic, the relationship toward the communist party and the elite relationship with the judicial system have been of relevance. In Slovakia, authoritarian tendencies and their influences on the political system and legislation have been important.

In more detail, the case study discussion first concentrated on the serious split between political elite groups (and the first dimension of elite fragmentation). For example, the analysis made clear that in the Czech Republic, elite fragmentation was of a different nature than in the other three post-communist countries. The political system tolerated a quasi-non-reformed communist party, but it was not accepted as a coalition party on the national level. In contrast, the communist parties in Poland and Hungary were reformed and managed to become mainstream and important governing parties (in Slovakia the former communist party turned into a smaller co-governing party). The post-communist parties transferred the fragmentation between old and new elites on the very governing levels. Important features of political elite fragmentation included, for example, the political polarisation between old “communist” and new “democratic” elites in Poland. Elite fragmentation has been determined by belonging to the old or new elite to a great extent in the 1990s and in the 2000s, even if more general political party cleavages have become relevant, such as in the Czech Republic.

The discussion suggested that elite fragmentation was shaped by more fundamental elite understandings of political competition within a democratic political system (and thus illustrated the second dimension of elite fragmentation). In Slovakia, fragmentation and disunity were expressed by an unstable party system and erratic political elite cooperation with the ready inclusion of non-democratic actors in governing coalitions for the sake of power preservation. Most notably, fragmentation included the general unwillingness to bargain with the political opposition. Hungary was exemplary in this case: Political elites had organised practically in two blocks, and political confrontation prevailed. Nevertheless, the period of the coalition treaty in the Czech Republic (1998-2002) proved that the non-cooperation ideology did not exclude back-door agreements, which opened the way for political corruption on both sides.

Further, the work highlighted main features of each political elite system, emphasising characteristics of political elite fragmentation, such as national populism in Slovakia that goes hand in hand with anti-Hungarian slogans. Neither Slovakia nor Hungary have managed to move away from past-attached identities, which have a decisive influence on the nature of elite bargaining, and fragmentation. In Poland, elite disruptions are significantly determined by the relationship toward the communist past and political elite involvement with the communist regime. In East Central Europe, the general impact of elite fragmentation is such that provisions, in particular on the communist past, are usually ruled out on the basis of non-cooperation. Regulations of the political opposition are ignored or attacked. This feature is

prominent in Hungary, where political elites reject the legitimacy of the other side.

Institutions within a democratic system are formally placed above elites and should determine elite behaviour formally, but this requirement is not guaranteed throughout ECE political systems. The very serious problem of the non-accordance of political elites with the institutional framework, i.e. the political elite-institution gap, is relevant in all four countries analysed. In this context, two subchapters of the case studies outlined practical outcomes in the sense of important domestic features and the international aspect of the political elite-institution gap. The political elite-institution gap was in particular relevant when concerning the legislative prosecution of the communist past and decommunisation.

Regarding lustration, it can be generally stated that a veritable discussion of the communist past including the prosecution of former collaborators and communist agents has been difficult for ECE countries, especially for Hungary and Poland. The Polish lustration process revealed serious political elite fragmentation and fundamental political elite-institutional differences, with political elites crafting lustration legislation to their advantage (either lax or harsh prosecution, with hard prosecution so far being an episode). Lustration efforts and attitudes toward the communist past were largely dominated by political elite necessities for publicity and polarisation of the issue. An example was the celebration of the twenty-year-anniversary of the first partially free elections in Poland in 2009. The leader of the liberal elite Donald Tusk celebrated the anniversary in Kraków and Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the conservative elite, in Gdańsk (stating that 1989 was for those being against lustration and decommunisation). The attitude toward communism-investigating institutions can be called ambiguous. Such, the work of the Polish IPN has been criticised constantly by political elites: On the one hand, left-wing politicians and post-communists demanded its dismissal; on the other hand, right-wing politicians required a radicalisation of both prosecution and the lustration law. A look at the political scene in Slovakia and the Czech Republic showed similar political acceptance problems with their respective institutions that were investigating communist crime.

The political elite-institution gap was also relevant when concerning the relationship of the political elite with the ECE judicial sector. For example, Czech governing elites impeded judicial processes against the minister for regional development, Jiří Čunek, in 2006-2008. In fact, the influence of political elites on judicial and executive agencies has been decisive. One of the most startling cases took place in the Czech Republic. It was the arrest of the innocent Yekta Uzunoglu and his detainment for 13 years without a judicial process. This case reached well into the political realm, even if based on a pact between criminals and police forces for economic interests. Only personalities such as Václav Havel or Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg would speak out against the treatment of Yekta Uzunoglu, which was clearly against the rule of law and individual civil rights.

Regular corruption and judicial scandals were only one example, but a very clear one, of the fact that something went wrong during the transformation process. They underlined that political institutions hardly coped with the rapidity of the systemic change. Much more agility has been shown by individuals acting within these institutions, who rely on informal and corrupt structures that are more powerful instruments than democratically oriented consensus processes. The former, core values of the old communist system, were much more a guarantor for political elite wishes and power ambitions to become true.

Norms-adaptation in East Central Europe has ambiguous results in general. It is positive in establishing general formal legislation and regulations, but is implicitly declined if interfering in the realm of political elites. This applies to the domestic and also the supranational framework within which the ECE states are functioning. When analysing the elite sphere, it becomes obvious that both national and supranational topics have been instrumentalised in order to secure power and gain votes.

Under such circumstances, European Union incentives to ensure commitment toward the integration project and governance can work only partially. First, commitment had been achieved with the EU integration perspective and later EU finance. However, if the latter was sufficient for the population and was expressed in high-EU support, it was not for the political elite who seemingly want both financial support and self-determination, i.e., non-interference in areas that are associated with ECE national elite power. These feelings have been most relevant in Poland: Polish political elites most evidently had problems in accepting abstract concepts and European political formalism. Those problems have been somewhat compensated by national rhetoric and both national- and interest-based policy-making.

The relations of political elites toward Europeanisation and European institutions have highly depended on the time period and the status of elites (government or opposition). Thus, in the first years after communism, the EU and its influence were regarded and politicised on as positive. Elite attitudes changed with pre-accession negotiations and ECE accession in 2004. Polish and Czech political elite representatives have presented their views on the European Union and Europeanisation prominently. Both have been ready to play the *enfant terrible* in order to gain attention and support. This sometimes failed, such as in Poland, where elite reluctance did not always match with popular sentiments.

Hungarian and Slovak stances on Europe have been less widespread, both in academic literature and European media. European integration generally has been less instrumentalised and not seen to endanger national sovereignty such as it has been in Poland. The questions of geopolitical identity, territoriality, and history are discussed separately and are constant elements of political discourse and political argument in Hungary and Slovakia. In Poland, those issues are rather connected to Europeanisation and European Union influences on "Polishness." Within this setting, the Czech Republic has an

intermediate position with the political elite, readily politicising on the EU but not drawing much on the national factor. However, all four countries had in common the fact that EU integration was first seen as positive for reintegration into the European political scene, as well as potentially connected to a loss of national identity and self-determination.

Czech political elites, namely Václav Klaus, have continually showed their readiness to combat Europeanisation, especially when it came to integrationist measures. Here, they preferred to use formal legal instruments (e.g., requiring a Czech Supreme Court decision on the constitutionality of the Lisbon Treaty). In general, Euroscepticism in the Czech Republic, as in other ECE countries, has been instrumentalised in order to obtain political power and realise personal interests.

Comparing the grade and presence of Euroscepticism in EU countries, political elite scepticism in the Czech Republic is more pronounced than in Slovakia or Hungary, which present little evidence for overt political elite scepticism. Both the Czech Republic and Poland have turned to rejectionist rhetoric and politics at the EU level in fundamental EU integration issues and questions of power distribution. Slovakia and Hungary take a more silent, and if necessary, lobbying approach (particularly Hungary in the issue of minority policy). Overall, political elites and citizens in the Czech Republic are among the most sceptical, with an emerging Eurosceptic political party culture on the conservative political spectrum. This could also be said of the Polish conservative political spectrum. The difference is the more rationalised discussion in the Czech Republic, while the Polish debate is somehow more emotionalised and connected to the fate of the nation.

The Europe issue has been predominantly used in daily political struggles, for example in Poland, where President Lech Kaczyński initially refused to sign the Lisbon Treaty (to annoy his political rival, the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk) in spring 2008. In those cases, ostensibly, European issues have been just used as political instruments as in Western European countries. However, those politics are going hand in hand with claims of self-determination that are not only evoked in order of instrumentalisation and politicisation, but also based on the deep determination to preserve national originality. This, however, is instrumentalised to contain the political elite codex and to avoid political elite change. The Hungarian case in particular underlines the very strength of political elites in following their own agenda, outweighing political institutions both on the supranational and national levels.

Even if the EU itself has problems of democratic legitimacy, Western political elite behaviour on the EU level mostly matches with the institutional fundamentals of their respective European nation states. This means that political elites are well aware of the necessity to adapt fundamentals of political elite functioning to the democratic framework and to accept judicial independence, for example. This lesson still has to be learned by ECE political elites.

However, a strong argument is that the EU itself is not perceived as democratic by almost all of its members. Why then accuse the new members of not sticking sufficiently to democratic conduct? Subduing political elite conduct under weak domestic institutions might be, in fact, a disadvantage if political elites aim at national strength vis-à-vis autonomously acting supranational institutions. For East Central European elite and public, (European) bureaucracy is even more connected to control and potential dangers than in Western Europe. As a consequence, East Central Europeans fear a loss of identity and originality when confronted with bureaucratic measures from Brussels. The old members could improve the reputation of the EU by showing more commitment for the new members, for example in their struggle with the faded Soviet imperia, be it Estonian problems with historical legacies or Polish agricultural exports to Russia. ECE political elite might question the sense of membership in an organisation that cannot be relied on when facing foreign threats. Political elite reform induced by supranational instruments is aggravated by the fact that patterns of political division and political elite power differ in ECE, not only between countries, but also between different governments and time periods, even if certain patterns of political elite conduct remain largely the same. Years of shared historical experience and governance, a common path of transition from communism, and continuing similarities in ECE political institutions do not guarantee equal development and simultaneous political elite reform. Political behaviour--cooperation and polarisation--varies according to the relevance of economic, social, or foreign policy factors.

This does not, however, exclude a specific Europeanisation path for each ECE country. In fact, Europeanisation should also be understood as a powerful means to weaken nationalist political movements and to set boundaries for populist governments. This claim is of special importance, accounting also for populist and nationalist developments in the 2000s. To illustrate this point fully, one has to point again at one of the most palpable outcomes of ECE elite fragmentation: It is the fact that political leaders provoke sharp political confrontations and political instability. Block thinking places the political adversary in a state enemy category. This is visible in all four countries in question. Mutual respect of different political party representatives and opinions is nonexistent; even leaders of the same party lack this respect. Thinking is based on terms of power and influence (and a strong patron agent imagination). In the Western European world, of course, politicians also play the democratic game and strive for power and influence, but most of them are cautious about elite relations and form a de-facto united elite. Most Western societies, especially Scandinavian countries that build on political consensus, hardly understand the vigor of political argument in ECE.

As ECE political elites are at odds with each other--both within and between the different political parties--governing is highly unstable. This is visible in the unstable governments in the Czech Republic or the polarised politics of Hungary. In the context of elite fragmentation,

it is important that ECE political institutions are consolidated in general, but political processes that are based on and determined by political elite conduct are not. Political processes in ECE are volatile and barely consolidated, and result in low political efficiency and responsiveness. This can raise doubts about the working of the whole political system.

However, there might be a way to counter this threat as some countries in fact do have signs of elite consensus. For example Poland is the only country where an all-elite consensus and cooperation are observable, namely when it comes to the necessity to secure Polish interests internationally. Accordingly, political instruments are adapted in order to enforce Polish interests on both the domestic and international levels. Here, Polish political elites are ready to cooperate within supranational structures and throughout the domestic political landscape. This readiness is less observable in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Elite consensus is not existent in Hungary at its most fundamental level: Political elites outdo each other in nationalist rhetoric and mobilisation at the expense of effective lobbying for their interests on the international scene.

Interest-based political measures are possible in Hungary, though, and concern the case of securing rights of ethnic Hungarians. But in its very fundamental conception, interest-based politics on the EU level only underline the deep political elite gulf in Hungary. Interest-based cooperation is also possible in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic, when it comes to historical legacies considering the very conceptions of the Slovak and the Czech nations, namely the Beneš-decrees and the compensation of ethnic Germans and Hungarians. This fundamental difference remains: Polish (Slovak, Czech) political elites adopt unitary positions when it comes to securing the interests of the nation and its identity, while the Hungarian elites do not allow "the other" to interfere in their internal struggles on identity and nation. Such, Hungary could be state most threatened by its elite, and recent political developments on the domestic scene and with the neighbor Slovakia do not allow a very optimistic view on political elite change and democratic state development in Hungary.

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