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## **Looking Beyond Democratic Façades: Political Elite Culture in Eastern Europe**

“It is ourselves, East Europeans”

### **Abstract**

It is more than twenty years that Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have decided to institutionalize democratic political systems. However, organizations such as Freedom House have noticed a decline of democratic quality in those countries. This paper first argues that the reason for this setback might be a gap between democratic structures and mentalities of political elite members. It then discusses some examples of political elite conduct, and argues that politics in CEE are marked by polarization, confrontation, and scandals. This paper holds that there are considerable deficits in the democratic culture of Central and Eastern European countries, and proposes some features of this culture. It concludes by raising the question whether the region has been really moving towards a more democratic political culture.

### **Introduction: The Democracy-Elite Nexus**

Is democracy in Eastern Europe retreating? Economic crisis, increasing involvement of the state into society, and less interest of ordinary citizens for political processes might be first hints. An overall decline of freedom (i.e. democracy) is established by the Freedom in the World 2010 publication of Freedom House. It states that 2009 marked the fourth consecutive year in which global freedom suffered a decline—the longest period of setbacks in the history of the report. The Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit shows a similar picture. The authors hold that the spread of democracy has come to a halt. In comparing the results of 2008 with 2006, there has been no progress, and economic recession could threaten democracy in “some parts of the world”.<sup>1</sup>

If democracies are “degrading”, what are the reasons for it? Looking closer at the problem of the decline of freedom, reasons might be found in the strength/weakness of political parties (and parliaments), the independence of the judiciary, the power of the media, or the degree of involvement of citizens. A largely ignored aspect might also concern the political elite of a given country. This paper concentrates on the political elite factor, and will undertake a qualitative analysis of CEE political elites. Political elites have an impact on the quality of democracy, as they largely determine and shape the nature of political regimes. In authoritarian regimes, autocrats normally design a system according to their conceptions of power preservation and extension. In democracies, political elites exert power according to the rules of a democratic system, i.e. they submit to a formal control framework.

Here, Russia and Eastern Germany might be considered the extreme poles of a Eastern European spectrum reaching from authoritarian to democratic regimes. The extremes between those regimes are huge. In authoritarian regimes, strong informal provisions of political elites highly structure the system. Those informal relations and their strength go far beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom in the World 2010, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=505> (accessed 15 February 2010), and Economist Intelligence Unit, <http://www.eiu.com/index.asp?rf=0> (accessed 15 February 2010).

strength of the installed formal provisions. As a rule, in authoritarian regimes, elites have set up their own, informal arrangements which also structure formal institutions. Informal rules follow a top-down scheme in which the most influential person (mostly, but not necessarily, the state president) knows and decides everything, knowledge and personal relations are used as a power instruments. In democratic regimes, political elites normally are controlled by formal provisions, and are forced to adapt their informal arrangements. In liberal democratic countries, political elites act according to formal democratic rules and their power networks generally adapt to democratic procedures.

But the relationship between political elites and political systems goes far beyond the above described democratic elites-democracy, autocratic elites-autocracy nexus. The above model relations of political elites and political systems (actor-system relations) leave room for other versions, i.e. democratic institutions becoming stronger and political elites becoming weaker, or vice-versa. Additionally, political elites play different games of submitting and not submitting to formal political frameworks (and using informal arrangements accordingly).

The overwhelming majority of Eastern European states are formally democratic, but if we look behind the formal façade, political elites often play their own games instead of subduing to the formal democratic framework and adapting informal agreements, for example in Albania or Romania. Here, the question of a gap between democratic structures and political elite provisions becomes relevant. Concerning the examples of Albania and Romania: Even if both are very different countries, those political systems are actor (i.e. political elite)-driven; formal democratic institutions exist on paper, but do not function properly. Elites and their informal relations/networks and agreements dominate the political process. Here, one might even state that elites who are only formally democratic dominate formal institutions, and the whole political system. However, elites undertake quite much to “look like a democratic system”. One measure to maintain the democratic façade, for example, is to allow elections. Beyond the façade, however, it is not formal procedures and rules that are important, but informal arrangements between informal power groups and clans. Examples of states where strong informal provisions of political elites highly structure the political system are also Ukraine, or former Yugoslav countries.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, informality as such might be an important feature of Eastern European political systems, and political elite mentalities.

However, the purpose of this paper is to look beyond such clear cases of “defect democracies” where political elites and informality dominate political systems. This paper argues that it is also possible to identify a gap between formal and informal in formally consolidated Central and East European democracies. Here, informal provisions are important and co-exist with a largely institutionalized (and seemingly well-accepted) democratic framework. This paper concentrates on the cases of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic, countries that are considered as consolidated democracies.<sup>3</sup> But those countries are characterized by considerable corruption, informality and questionable elite behavior.<sup>4</sup> Independent agencies, such as anti-corruption bureaus, courts, civil society etc. are contested by the very political elite. Those features question the full institutionalization of democratic regulation and

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Höpken, Wolfgang (2009), Gibt es eine “balkanische” politische Kultur? *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 6, 30–46. Mishler, William and Richard Rose (1997), Trust, Distrust and Skepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Post-socialist Societies, *Journal of Politics*, 59 (2), 418–451.

<sup>3</sup> See the literature on democratic consolidation in Eastern Europe, for example Manfred Merkel.

<sup>4</sup> The above question has been examined by the author during a research project on the four East Central European countries: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

democratic control of politics. Such institutional defects have inspired analysts to characterize CEE countries as democracies without democrats.<sup>5</sup>

The problem here is: If political elites outweigh democratic institutions in certain aspects, a democratic system gets less stable. In situations that generate instability (for example social, financial or economic crises), democratic regimes could be prone to turning to less or non-democratic regimes.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to show the gap between democratic structures and political elite conduct. The paper discusses exemplary cases of CEE elite conduct. It assumes that political elites try to outweigh political institution, and that elite readiness to submit to a democratic system is not very pronounced in the most cases. Here, a democratic framework co-exists with political elites who have a non-democratic background and socialization. It is necessary to keep in mind that democratic dissidents established the democratic frameworks in CEE countries in general, but that they were gradually replaced by second level post-communist political elites.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, democratic behavior patterns cannot be considered as established among CEE political elites. Instead, political elites seemingly aim at preserving and extending their power by not fully sticking to democratic regulations. Accordingly, democratic structures do not go hand in hand with democratic elites. This paper argues that problems of democratic quality (in terms of high corruption for example) have to be analyzed regard to political elite conduct. This means to examine questions of political culture, moreover, the deficits of political elite culture in CEE, and to identify the different dimensions of Central East European political cultures.

### Looking Beyond Consolidated Democracies

In certain countries the degree of democracy is declining: those are not only defect democracies, but also consolidated democracies such as Central East European countries, namely Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic. This paper points to a possible explanatory factor: the political elites.

Formally, a consolidated democracy has the following features (and Linz/Stepan consider them the minimal conditions before “speaking of democratic consolidation”): a state, a completed democratic transition, and free and contested elections, and democratically governing rulers.<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the last point “democratically governing rulers” will be decisive. Linz/Stepan characterize non-democratic regimes as following:

*“If freely elected executives (no matter what the magnitude of their majority) infringe the constitution, violate the rights of individuals and minorities, impinge upon the legitimate functions of the legislature, and thus fail to rule within the bounds of a state of law, their regimes are not democracies.”(p. 1)*

Here, the authors name the consequences of non-democratic behavior, but do not explicitly point at the persons standing behind the institutions. However, non-democratic elites stand

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<sup>5</sup> Pehe, Jíří (2009), Life Beyond Communism: Democracies without Democrats, *Transitions Online*, 10.13.2009. Gallina, Nicole (2008), *Political Elites in East Central Europe*, Leverkusen: Budrich UniPress.

<sup>6</sup> This aspect is rather ignored both in elite and democratization theory.

<sup>7</sup> Szelényi, Ivan and Szonja Szelényi (1995), Circulation or Reproduction of Elites During the Postcommunist Transformation of Eastern Europe: Introduction, *Theory and Society*, 24 (5): 615–638 and Szalai, Erzsébet (1990), Az új elit, in Szalai, Erzsébet (ed.) *Gazdaság és Hatalom*, Budapest: Aula Kiadó, 169–177.

<sup>8</sup> Linz, Juan J and Alfred Stepan (1996), Toward Consolidated Democracies, *Journal of Democracy*, 7 (2): 14–33.

behind those rights violations. Here, the authors postulate a maximal definition of rights violation to denominate regimes as not democratic. But what about countries, where this process of violation is less explicit, but system-inherent? Can they still be considered consolidated democracies?

*“By a “consolidated democracy” we mean a political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase “the only game in town.” Behaviorally, democracy becomes the only game in town when no significant political group seriously attempts to overthrow the democratic regime or to promote domestic or international violence in order to secede from the state”. (p.1)*

The problem here is that there are countries, namely in Eastern Europe, that have accepted democracy as the only game in town formally. This acceptance concerns mainly the formal institutions of democracy. Elites also do not seek to overthrow the formal institutions of democracy, but undermine it by their actions, i.e. informal institutions. In this sense, one should ask if informal institutions do not fall under the rules of the game? Wouldn't it be appropriate to include them also into requirements for consolidation?

Exemplary requirements for the consolidation of democracy, according to Linz/Stepan, are:

*First, the conditions must exist for the development of a free and lively civil society. Second, there must be a relatively autonomous political society. Third, throughout the territory of the state all major political actors, especially the government and the state apparatus, must be effectively subjected to a rule of law that protects individual freedoms and associational life. Fourth, there must be a state bureaucracy that is usable by the new democratic government. Fifth, there must be an institutionalized economic society. (p. 2)*

The formal structures are subjected to the rule of law, but the informal structures of the very “rulers” and their officers are not mentioned explicitly. The argument here is that such informal factors are very important to establish and to maintain a democratic system. The exclusion of the factor “informality”, which contains a broad complex of human conduct, might be the reason why most authors neglect informal structures / political elites as important factors for the stability and quality of a democratic system.

What is this factor about? Informal institutions include behavior codes, values, and certain traditions that cannot be described by formal democratic regulations. Assuming that there are different forms of relationship between formal and informal institutions<sup>9</sup>, informal structures might also run contrary to formal institutions. In consolidated democracies, the relationship between formal and informal institutions is supposed to be complementary, moreover formal and informal institutions reinforce each other. Formal institutions have a strong backbone of accepted regulations and supporting actors. In Eastern European countries, political elite conduct shows that the support-base for democratic formal institutions can be very weak, while the support-base for rather non-democratic informal structures might be very high. The danger might be real in the long run that informal structures undermine formal institutions, and even a democratic system.

But where do such informal structures come from? This paper argues that such structures are rooted in the mentalities of political elite members, and overall mentalities of political elite members compose the existing political elite culture. The constellation of values and traditions that reflect and reinforce informal structures may be characterized as political elite culture. In this sense, Central East European political elite culture consists of certain informal institutions.

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<sup>9</sup> Lauth, Hans-Joachim (2000), Informal Institutions and Democracy, *Democratization*, 7(4): 21–50.

Even if political culture is normally attributed to ordinary citizens,<sup>10</sup> this paper holds that political elites also dispose of certain agreed codes, and of an own political elite culture. An elite-based view on political culture could include overall features of elite conduct, attitudes toward policy-making in general; but also the separation into different relationships toward political actors and institutions, i.e. attitudes toward the “political other”, toward citizens, or toward control and independent institutions.

The following section of this paper shows selected cases of CEE political culture. This means that it highlights the main features of elite conduct on a case study basis. As it is an first attempt to systematize the topic of political elite culture, this paper will firstly concentrate on the task to deduct overall features of political elite conduct. An important pillar of political elite culture are the characteristics of intra-elite and extra-elite relations. Overall elite conduct is treated here under the aspect of elite relations toward “the others”.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Example of East Central Europe: Political Elites vs. Democratic Structures**

Before presenting (selected) examples of political elite behavior of consolidated Central Eastern European democracies, and showing deficits of democratic culture, it is necessary to clarify the following points:

Firstly, much of political science has moved beyond the behaviorist focus on the effects of history, culture, and values on political behavior, and focuses on a rational choice approach of political behavior (i.e. to maximize own interests, for example through new institutionalism approaches). However, this leaves culture and history out of consideration.

Secondly, the political culture approach itself does focus on history, national traditions, values and conduct. And, it largely ignores political elites and concentrates on “ordinary citizens”, i.e. the society as a whole.<sup>12</sup> However, what is true for overall political culture patterns might be also true for the rather narrow section of political elite culture.

Third, obstacles to establish a democratic political culture might be rather huge, such as elite/social persistence, national/regional traditions, economic crises, social inequality, inefficient and ineffective political institutions. Overcome political culture in this sense might be reinforced by the above obstacles. Political culture is therefore considered as persistent, more persistent than newly established democratic institutions.

Fourth, a democratic political elite culture would accept control and independent agencies, and act according to the rules of a democracy: This means to accept majority decisions, to be ready for transparent discussions, the exchange of information, and the principle of cooperation. An interesting question is whether those categories apply to CEE, and how elite relations toward “the others” can be characterized. For each of the four CEE countries Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic the paper puts forward a qualitative example for what is considered an important pillar of contemporary political elite culture.

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<sup>10</sup> A citizen-based view involves mass attitudes toward politics; the extent of participation in political affairs; perceptions of efficacy and alienation from politics.

<sup>11</sup> An interesting future research question is which conduct features are applied to which groups, and if a systematization of features is possible (for example, „the populist instrument“ is one that is preferably used to impress citizens, but „historization“ is a scheme that applies both for intra- and extra-elite relations).

<sup>12</sup> See Pollack, Detlef (2006), *Political Culture in Post-communist Europe: Attitudes in New Democracies*, Alsdershot: Ashgate.

What the paper does not, and leaves for future research, is to weigh the described features in categories that assess the quality of the respective democracies.

### **The Example of Slovak Elites: National Populism**

In the case of Slovakia, the paper discusses national populism as an exemplary feature of the political elite. Other aspects have been equally important, such as the harassment of independent judicial structures (for example the Special Court in Pezniok) or independent media. The former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico (2006–2010) can be considered in some respect a model for political elite conduct. One aspect of political elite conduct was the attitude toward the media. Under his rule, new media legislation was passed that consisted of limiting the investigative power of the media. In this context, a doubtful instrumentalization of political and independent institutions occurred to harass media, on the one hand; on the other hand, informal structures were strengthened as they could count on less investigative power of the media.<sup>13</sup>

This section, however, concentrates on national populism as an important element of political elite culture in Slovakia. Prime Ministers in Slovakia have been characterized by professional arrogance and according (national) rhetoric. The autocratic governing Vladimír Mečiar resorted to them, also Robert Fico tended to nationalist populism.<sup>14</sup> This maybe was also to conceal strong informal networks, and to compensate the little effects of democratic policy-making. An important component of Slovak populism was that it went hand in hand with populist and nationalist policy-making, notably anti-Hungarian slogans.

A special feature of the political elite in the country has been the existence of a Hungarian political elite minority (none of the other three CEE countries has a similar minority party seeking political influence in parliament and government). The Slovak Hungarians that were represented through the Hungarian Coalition Party MKP had often been used as a welcomed coalition partner. Often, this went hand in hand with anti-Hungarian rhetoric within the governing elites.<sup>15</sup> Political elite opposition to the autocratic Vladimír Mečiar government had for some time concealed the Slovak-Hungarian cleavage that impeded constructive policy-making. The government led by Robert Fico marginalized the MKP and Hungarian political elites as the party of the Hungarian minority MKP was politically excluded for the first time after the 1993 independence (and even more with the election result of 2010, where the Most-Hid party gained more votes, but brought back Hungarian representation into the top political echelon). The lack of a Hungarian representation during the Robert Fico government provoked an overall party-competition between Slovak parties who was the better Slovak. In this sense, Slovak nationalist policy-making could be regarded as a result of overall political elite and political party populism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Beata Balogová and Michaela Stanková, Advancing from Fighters to Journalists, *Slovak Spectator*, 21 Apr 2010, [http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/38598/2/advancing\\_from\\_fighters\\_to\\_journalists.html](http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/38598/2/advancing_from_fighters_to_journalists.html) (accessed 10 June 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Javůrek, Tygr cení zuby, *Respekt*, 31 December 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Marián Klenko, Prezidentovo ticho v slovensko-maďarských vzťahoch, 17 October 2007. <http://www.hzds.sk/?mod=zpravy&par=prezidentovo-ticho-v-slovensko-madarskych-vztahoch&menu=30> (accessed 20 March 2010).

<sup>16</sup> See Petőcz, Kálmán (ed.) (2010), National Populism and Slovak – Hungarian Relations in Slovakia 2006–2009, [http://www.foruminst.sk./index.php?p=a\\_forum\\_kisebbsegkutato\\_intezet\\_kiadvanyai&t=a&xp=&publ\\_id=406&link=publ/egyeb/populizmusang/populism,,&MIId=&Lev=&Ind=1&P=index,hu](http://www.foruminst.sk./index.php?p=a_forum_kisebbsegkutato_intezet_kiadvanyai&t=a&xp=&publ_id=406&link=publ/egyeb/populizmusang/populism,,&MIId=&Lev=&Ind=1&P=index,hu), (accessed 20 June 2010).

Policy-making in Slovakia had the tendency to play the national card, including the exclusion of political actors on the basis of ethnic affiliation, hardly accepting certain autonomous decision-making of the Hungarian minority. National populism has been dominated by ethnic questions, and question is if exaggerated importance has been given to Slovak-Hungarian quarrels? In fact, the issue has been well-suited to draw away attention from structural problems of the country (pension system reform, independence of the judicial system etc.). The necessity for Slovak nationalism, and its according “selling” was one of the few areas on which the majority of the political elites consented. This took mostly the form of disputes on the use of the Hungarian language and the status of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Here, a non-accordance between conduct and formal institutions emerged particularly from the fact that the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages had been accepted, but on a national scale language acts contradicting international legislation were incorporated.<sup>17</sup>

Slovak national populism had an international aspect as the Hungarian political elites in Hungary were not ready to accept that another state decided the fate of Hungarians living in neighboring states. Therefore, minority regulation in Slovakia has to be seen in the context of the struggles between Hungary and Slovakia on the status of the Hungarian minority and language in Slovakia. This means that the according acts and regulations of the state of Hungary have also be included into an analysis. For example the grant of the recently (re-)elected Prime Minister Victor Orbán of Hungarian citizenship to all Hungarians living in the states neighboring Hungary.<sup>18</sup>

### **Hungary: Exclusion of the Political Other**

Both Slovakia and Hungary have used instruments of national populism in the struggles between Hungary and Slovakia on the status of the Hungarian minority and language. Hungarian elites consent on the importance of the nation, and are mostly united in their nationalism. For example, the state president László Sólyom has caused turmoil with his visits to countries with a strong Hungarian minority in 2009.

What has been regarded a special feature of the Hungarian political elite is the extreme polarization of political elites, mostly along party cleavages. Confrontation has been an important feature of political elites and party politics in Hungary since the transition to democracy. The confrontation between Hungarian political elites entered a stage of extreme polarization by the year 2000, at the latest. After that, the country was in a permanent state of political campaigning between members of the *Fidesz* and the socialist party MSZP, and two ideologically divergent camps emerged.<sup>19</sup> Namely, the right-wing radicalized, with the *Fidesz* turning from liberal to nationalist-conservative. The informal “war” between the two political camps led to a veritable formal deadlock. The strength of the Hungarian polarization stood in sharp contrast to the consensus-oriented constitution requiring a two-thirds majority on most legislation. Those formal provisions would not be strong enough to outweigh politicians determined to lead a veritable political war and prevent legislation from the other political

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<sup>17</sup> Michaela Stanková, Slovakia and Hungary Clash again over Language, 8 July 2010, [http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/35906/2/slovakia\\_and\\_hungary\\_clash\\_again\\_over\\_language.html](http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/35906/2/slovakia_and_hungary_clash_again_over_language.html) 8 Jul 2009 (accessed 15 May 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Michaela Stanková, Cross Border Row over Dual Citizenship, 24 May 2010, [http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/38952/2/cross\\_border\\_row\\_over\\_dual\\_citizenship.html](http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/38952/2/cross_border_row_over_dual_citizenship.html) (accessed 30 May 2010), and <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/hungary-citizenship-law-fuels-slovak-resentment-news-494553> (accessed 30 May 2010)

<sup>19</sup> Bozóki, András (2005), Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Politics of the New Right in Hungary, *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 1, 17–28.

camp.<sup>20</sup> Political polarization in Hungary led to political blockage, and ultimately to the (re)election of the Fidesz-leader Victor Orbán in April 2010. However, the principles of his MSZP predecessor differentiated little: Ferenc Gyurcsány's political instruments included not only populism and polarization, but also false promises and morally dubious behavior, and culminated into the famous "lie speech".<sup>21</sup>

Victor Orbán's competences have to be seen less in the formulation of rules, neither in the proposals of regulation based on principles of cooperation and transparency. He instead has focused on emotional-based politics, i.e. making a political show and playing the national card. In this regard informal codes were much more important than agenda-setting skills. As a result, government efficiency wasn't enhanced, and the practical outcome of Hungarian politics hasn't been particularly impressive. Analysts consented that it was mainly Victor Orbán who had strengthened authoritarian and anti-parliamentarian tendencies, and his understanding of political leadership was likely to curb democratic achievements. Bozóki emphasized that the loyalty structure developed by Victor Orbán was based on personalization and clientelism.<sup>22</sup> The most obvious form of personalized politics was a return to kinship as a criterion for career advancement. This means that Hungarian politics have been based on purely informal codes which outweighed democratic correctives, and supported politics that aimed at excluding the political, social and ethnic other.

### **Poland: Scandal Politics and its Effects**

Scandal politics largely characterized Polish policy-making after the first democratic years. Elites have been ready to influence formal regulation by informal means. Namely, the Rywin affair of the SLD government coalition (2001–2004) shattered the post-communist political system. In 2002, members of the post-communist party SLD apparently were ready to pay 17.5 Mio Dollar to influence a new media law to their favor. This scandal has shattered Polish politics since then, and revealed the gap between corrupt political elites and the principles of a democratic political system. This affair demonstrated that elementary procedure rules could not be guaranteed in the new democracy, and that the Polish justice and police organizations were unable and unwilling to contain widespread political corruption. Scandal politics of the post-communist party prepared fertile ground for populist, right-wing forces to step in. The right-wing political forces, the Civic Platform PO and the Law and Justice party PiS, could gain in power in claiming a different understanding of politics, and presented themselves in sharp contrast to the old left-wing political elites.

This gave hope among theorists that an accelerated elite replacement would lead to a change in overall political behavior with more transparency and responsibility. But, instead of focusing on formalizing and institutionalizing democratic, formal rules and procedures, the PiS-led government of Jarosław Kaczyński (2006–2007) concentrated on emotion-politics. For the first time, the step-by-step transition to democracy, and the negotiated transition of the early 1990s in Poland were questioned. Belonging to the new (non-communist) political elite was made a precondition for continuing in a political power position. This belonging was rather exclusive, though, as it only included PiS-affiliates. The new leadership aimed at founding a Fourth Polish

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<sup>20</sup> János Székely, Horší než pat, *Respekt*, 29 July 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Excerpts: Hungarian lies speech, *BBC News*, 19 September 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Europe/5359546.stm>, ac.

<sup>22</sup> Bozóki, András and Eszter Simon (2006), Formal Institutions and Informal Politics in Hungary, in Meyer, Gerd (ed.): *Formal Institutions and Informal Politics in Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary, Poland, Russia and Ukraine*, Barbara Budrich Publishers: Opladen&Farmington Hills, 145–194.



Republic (*Czwarta Rzeczpospolita*) replacing the established and corrupt Third Republic (1989–) with its fragmented, discredited elites. The new republic should have been dominated by unified, non-communist political elites.<sup>23</sup>

The demand for a Fourth Republic signified that the Polish negotiated transition and post-1989 politics had failed (and ultimately also the new democratic system). Even if some formal rules were considered, the focus was on emotion-politics. One pillar of the reform-government was a revised view on former historical interpretations of important events, such as the 1981 martial law (incorrect), and the role of former *Solidarność* leaders (overestimated). Politics included a sharp anti-communism and moral relativism. The overarching theme was to draw a sharp line between the right-wing conception of elite behavior and the previous center-left-wing understanding of political elite comportment. The “emotional” part included to offer a moral purification of Poland, to strengthen patriotism, and to visualize the new state by a strong leader(ship).

Within this conception informality had to be weakened in the sense of the deactivation of old networks, the *układ*. If old political elites had failed to liberate the Polish state and society from informal-based politics, corruption and the post-communist spoils system, the new elites would succeed in depowering informality. However, those pretensions contradicted significantly with their two-facedness. The PiS-government spoke of the strengthening of formal practices, but based politics strongly on informality. And, the government could not succeed in depowering the old informality with another, new informality. The results of the new informal practices, concentrating on identity politics and national traditions, were the radicalization of politics and an instrumentalization of political institutions (for example the Institute of National Remembrance IPN). In the end, the attitudes of the political elites continued to be the main problem of Polish politics and there was little change in political culture.

As a result, the above government lost power to the second right-wing force PO in 2007. Since then, a less pronounced focus on emotion-based, informal politics has characterized governing.<sup>24</sup> The overall result is the strengthening of content-based and formal policy-making. This does not mean that informal practices have diminished. And a scandal such as the *afery hazardowa* has still been possible. But, here, one visible result of formal-based politics has been the quick and very determined tackling of this scandal which meant to dismiss the involved politicians.<sup>25</sup> Overall, the governing of Donald Tusk has brought a focus on contents, and less emotion.

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<sup>23</sup> Expressed by Jarosław Kaczyński, *Gościa Niedzelnego*, 17 April 2006: “Jeśli teraz pojawi się rewolucja moralna, będzie zupełnie inna od tego, co znamy. Są znaki, że przemiana rzeczywiście może nastąpić.”

<sup>24</sup> Accordingly Donald Tusk said to the *Time* magazine: „I spent an important part of my life participating in conflicts. But for me conflict was not the main principle.“ He is led by the task to heal the ideological divisions and to get the country moving forward. See: Adrew Purvis, *Remaking Poland*, *Time*, 9 April 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1729145-2,00.html#ixzz0sz06trRV> (accessed 10 June 2010).

<sup>25</sup> See Zuzanna Szybisty, *Afera hazardowa. O co chodzi?* 1 October 2010, [http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/Wiadomosci/1,80708,7099027,Afera\\_hazardowa\\_\\_O\\_co\\_chodzi\\_.html](http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/Wiadomosci/1,80708,7099027,Afera_hazardowa__O_co_chodzi_.html), and [http://www.tvn24.pl/0,10640,1622867,,szef-cba-na-wylocie-schetyna--czuma--szejfeld-dodymisji,raport\\_wiadomosc.html](http://www.tvn24.pl/0,10640,1622867,,szef-cba-na-wylocie-schetyna--czuma--szejfeld-dodymisji,raport_wiadomosc.html) (both accessed 20 June 2010).

## The Example of Czech Republic: I am the State

Transparency International has continuously criticized Czech political elites for their acting and wide-spread political corruption. For example, political parties have been considered not being transparent in their working and financing. Reports underlined that the roots of corruption in the Czech Republic had to be searched within the political elites and the political parties themselves.<sup>26</sup> This underlines the importance of informal (and arrogant) acting in the country. The following paragraphs will show some aspects of informal practices in elite conduct, and describe how formal regulation is hindered.

In the Czech Republic, high officers or political elite representatives are regularly accused of corruption. Among them have been for example a police president (who warned key suspects ahead of their planned arrest), general prosecutors (backing corruptive politicians and intimidating witnesses), high politicians (taking bribes from businessmen or criminals).<sup>27</sup> The political party elites function without many contacts to society, but with close relations to economic interests and businessmen. It can be said that political representation is considered as a closed business. The high occurrence of informal practices among political elites (for example to promise certain public tenders beforehand to clients) go hand in hand with corruption. The relevance of the problem is underlined by the fact that in all major corruption cases, high political representatives were suspected to be involved.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the corruption topic was regularly a pretext to blame the other political side for shortcomings on anti-corruption policy.

High-level political corruption is based on corrupt networks that reach into the Czech government. A frequent cited example has been the case of the politician Jirí Čunek (member of the Christian and Democratic Union/Czechoslovak People's Party KDU-ČSL). He was accused of serious corruption, i.e. taking bribes and receiving social benefits (and anti-human politics in deporting 36 Roma families from his town), but insisted in remaining and managed to stay in his political functions, and moreover did not face consequences despite causing a nationwide scandal. His case points not only to the problem of an "isolated elite", but also to the problem of a corrupted bureaucracy/judiciary as the general prosecutor did everything to hinder any investigation.<sup>29</sup> The Vice President of the Highest Court, Pavel Kučera allegedly stated that "the stability of the government is more important than judicial independence."<sup>30</sup> The above case was exemplary, and underlined the existence of veritable "justice mafia" in Czech Republic, i.e. a highly dependent judiciary (and police) acting on the demand of political elite requirements.

Political corruption in the Czech Republic destroyed the façade of a rule of law based state. To maintain the façade, governments installed independent police agencies and loudly proclaimed their will to adapt a strong anti-corruption legislation. But the legislation was never adopted and the investigative agencies were hindered in their investigations and even

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<sup>26</sup> Lothar Martin, Transparency International kritisiert tschechische Politik wegen laxer Haltung zur Korruption, *Radio Prague*, 27 September 2006.

<sup>27</sup> See the weekly *Respekt* that gives a good overview of the usual scandals. Also, Ulrich Schmid, Tschechien – Hochburg der Korruption in Ostmitteleuropa? *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14 September 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Till Janzer, Regierung will stärker gegen Korruption vorgehen, in *Radio Prague*, 19 June 2007.

<sup>29</sup> *Radio Prague* 7 August and 6 November 2007. Jaroslav Spurný, Detektiv Šošovička jednal fér, *Respekt*, 1 October 2007. See also [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/ministryne-kovarova-znovu-otevre-kauzu-cunek-aby-ocistila-justici-1pv-/krimi.asp?c=A090818\\_110012\\_krimi\\_jw](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/ministryne-kovarova-znovu-otevre-kauzu-cunek-aby-ocistila-justici-1pv-/krimi.asp?c=A090818_110012_krimi_jw) (accessed 10 June 2010).

<sup>30</sup> See all the details concerning political pressure on the judiciary in Jaroslav Spurný, Tomáš Sachr, Ondřej Kundra, *Vláda v pasti justiční mafie*, in *Respekt*, 17 May 2008.

abolished. No wonder, criminal-political networks were and are widespread.<sup>31</sup> The election of the new parliament in May 2010 underlined the widespread effects of political corruption for the Czech case: the little known party VV was elected into parliament onto the anti-corruption ticket (besides any other palpable party program), and the established, but highly corrupted, parties faced a significant decline in support.<sup>32</sup>

The above cases have been chosen as exemplary features of political elite conduct in different CEE countries. Slovakia stands exemplarily for national populism, Hungary for political polarization, and the Czech Republic for political elite personalization (in the sense of elite-centrism). Most of those single features are also relevant for the other countries. So, Poland has shown all of those features, too, but has managed to contain them under the guidance of Donald Tusk. This shows the importance of responsible top political representatives. In this sense, political elite culture in Central East Europe sets the basis for either strong institutions (based on formal rules), or strong elites (based on informal structures). In general, the relationship between political elites and democratic institutions can be regarded as distorted, this means that political elites do not subordinate or respect formal democratic provisions. The next paragraph tries to name the underlying reasons for this. It names the most important features of political elite codes in Central and Eastern Europe.

## **A Mental Mapping of Eastern Europe**

Piotr Sztompka sees the hurdles in achieving a fully consolidated democratic system in the persons, not the structures. He speaks of the longevity of certain features of the old political system on the grounds of “civilizational incompetence”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Almond/Verba hold that a participatory and democratic political system requires a political culture consistent with it.<sup>34</sup> Even if Almond/Verba concentrate on civic culture and “normal” citizens, their insights also apply for political elites. So, Central and Eastern European countries would have problems with the quality of their democracies if political elites would dispose of a culture code not being compatible with principles valid in democratic systems (transparency, cooperation, information etc.).

From the above examples it might be possible to deduct that attitudes and behavior patterns cannot and have not changed from one day to another with the establishment of a democratic system. Assuming that values and norms are socially based, they might continue independently of institutional and even elite changes. Examples are executive structures in Eastern Europe. The police or the judiciary adapted formally to democratic norms, but underlying codes and networks have resulted in weak rule application and overall weak judicial systems when it comes to enforce the rule of law in the top echelons of society.

Therefore, it is worth asking which important aspects of political elite culture determine the behavior of CEE elites. Political psychology argues that a direct (psycho-)analysis of the personality of certain elites is not possible. Only the public and documented appearance of politicians can be a topic (in an ideal way through the selective analysis within a research

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<sup>31</sup> Jaroslav Spurný, ČSSD a organizovaný zločin, *Respekt*, 26 May 2006. Details for all important corruption cases under: <http://www.bezkorupce.cz/> (accessed 30 June 2010).

<sup>32</sup> See the IRI Report: <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/czech-republic-post-election-watch-may-2010-parliamentary-elections> (accessed 1 July 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Sztompka, Piotr (1993), Civilisational Incompetence: The Trap of Post-Communist Societies,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 22 (2): 85–95.

<sup>34</sup> Almond, Gabriel A and Sidney Verba (1963), *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Countries*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

group), with the interview being an exception.<sup>35</sup> In fact, behavior codes of political elites have rarely been presented (see e.g. Sztompka for the whole post-communist realm), as it is tricky to link direct behavior with underlying attitudes. But, on a documented appearance of political elites, it could be possible to embark on the adventure of a political elite mental mapping. The above case studies have summarized the documented appearance of selected top elite representatives, and they are the underlying “material” for the following proposal of a CEE mental map.

The first aspect has and should have to do with power, as top representatives of society, including political elites, are always persons in power positions. Thus, for democratic representation and policy-making, the political elite concept of power is revealing. From the above cases, it is possible to say that the ways how CEE top political elites try to generate and maintain political power can be called personalized, private, and relies heavily on personal proximity and friendships.

Within this concept of power, **power based strongly on authority/hierarchy** plays an important role (if not the most important role). Power is expressed in top-down and authoritarian thinking of political elites not only toward the public (“the masses”), but also within political elite relations. The conviction of elite superiority is observable not only toward the public and fellow elite members, but also toward formal regulations of the political system. Elite members act as if they are allowed to secure and to expand political power without being responsible to anybody. Here, it is necessary to underline that a culture of bureaucracy supports hierarchical thinking and ignorance. In this sense, political power (including state authority, bureaucratic conduct rules and informal networks) are considered as being outside social control. However, elites still try to “satisfy” ordinary needs claiming to “secure the needs of the public”. For example, they defend free medical care and place a high burden on state budgets.

This last sentence has to do with another important point which is **double standard policy-making**. On the one hand this means to uphold a façade of spending for public needs, on the other hand this means head-in-the-sand politics. Urgent problems are ignored, for example the budget problems in Hungary. Lack of attention signifies that the problem is not urgent, the incumbent expecting his political successor to solve it (or expecting that the problem will be solved from alone). Double standard policy-making means that structured road maps to solve problems are not presented, but the façade is maintained that such programs are in work, or hardly before application. The anti-corruption programs in the Czech Republic are a good example for this policy: Political elites have preferred to offer few binding promises, delayed important decisions, or concealed reality. Double-standard policy-making has also the aspect of concealing information or the spread of (be it false or not) information on state security involvement or corruption of politicians. Here, one might even term this conduct a “culture of lying” (see the “lie speech” of then Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány).

Third, emotional issues are important in politics, especially concepts of nation, history, and identity. Different perceptions toward national events might decide upon the rise and fall of political parties and single policy-makers all over the region. This has to do with the **“historiography” of the mind**. This means a strong orientation on history of politics, and the whole society. Political elites use historical concepts of nation and identity, and are often expected to do so by a significant part of the population. Abstract myths play an important

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<sup>35</sup> Busch, Hans-Joachim (2007), Psychoanalyse und Politik – Psychoanalyse von Politikern. Nachfreundsche Entwicklungen und Probleme einer psychoanalytischen Psychologie. *Freie Assoziation*, 2, 19–29.

role as a positive counterpart to the negative image of the (real) state and its (reform) activities. An example is the idealization of the well-functioning Czechoslovak democracy in the interwar years. Here, it is important to know that within the historiography paradigm, the communist past is still largely left out. In the context of national traditions and identity, post-1989 CEE political elites present themselves as autonomous, having nothing in common with the old regimes. Instead, they rely on the instrument of national populism, mostly referring to historical events or myths of former Empire (especially Hungary). Such efforts can also be interpreted as a proof that elites have tried to free themselves from recent history. In this sense, historiography excludes the discussion of present challenges and does not offer future oriented concepts. Drawing on historical legacies prevents individual citizens (and elites) from bringing in innovative concepts, and supports passivity.

Interestingly, controversial discussions are possible around the categories of “old” and “new” elites, as an additional feature of double-standard politics and regional historiography. Inter-party confrontation can take place when discussing history, current political issues, etc. In Hungary, the quarrels between the socialist party MSZP and the Fidesz have been an example for this behavior that can be called a “**culture of conflict**”. However, those categories have not been “invented” to discuss recent communist history, but to demonize the political enemy. The French political scientist Jacques Rupnik wrote in 2006 that the legacy of communist political culture still adheres to the image of the political opponent as one with whom it is impossible to argue or negotiate but who is an enemy.<sup>36</sup> In this overall setting, compromise and cooperation is hardly possible and trust among political elites barely existent. By inventing categories of “old” and “new” elites, adversaries supposedly can be more easily controlled and assessed. If elites who are ready to compromise and cooperate discredit themselves, the political instruments that are available and accepted are conflict and “hate-politics”. Within this situation, it is only a small step to participate in corruptive and anti-democratic practices. The non-acceptance of election results, appeals to the highest court or no-confidence votes to oust regularly elected governments have thus been common instruments. For example in Poland, no-confidence voting was notorious, taking place on a quasi-yearly basis before the Tusk-government.

The above four aspects of political elite culture support personalization, polarization and populism in daily politics. Selected aspects of those features have been described in the case studies, and might be considered a direct outcome of the above “elite conduct code”. This code strongly backs informal relations, not only with its emphasis of hierarchy and double-standards, but also with the “emotional” aspects of history/identity and creation of enemies. The most visible outcome is the personalization and polarization of politics. The problem here is that such culture codes stand diametrically to democratic institutions and according democratic practices.

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<sup>36</sup> Rupnik, Jacques (2006), The Return of Post-Communism, *Project Syndicate*; <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/rupnik5/English> (accessed 20 April, 2010).

## **Conclusion: The Consequences of Political Elite Conduct**

This paper argues that the four above presented aspects of political elite culture run counter to the aspects of democratic culture. Therefore, there are considerable deficits in the democratic culture of Central and Eastern European countries, and political culture is still marked by the above visible personalization, polarization, intolerance and confrontation.

In this respect, the important influence of the factor “political elite” on democratic quality has been underestimated. Instead of a political power concept based on purely hierarchic categories, a democratic power concept would require balanced cooperative-hierarchic structures; open and transparent policy-making instead of double-standards, at least concerning important legal issues; a disconnection of politics with history; and a culture of cooperation. Of course, Western European countries also face a decline of political culture and some of the above mentioned problems. In Eastern European countries, however, a democratic culture has never been realized, and the gap between democratic structures and mentalities of political elite members never closed. The political systems started with this gap, and the non-willingness to close it (what also might have been the case in some Western European countries, such as Spain).

What has been the purpose of this paper, however, has been to point to a “democracy problem” in Central and Eastern Europe which is in its essence a political culture problem, as there are considerable deficits in the democratic culture of Central and Eastern European countries. Therefore, politics in CEE countries are still marked by personalization, polarization and confrontation, and national populism.

Considering the consolidation of a democratic system this paper has argued that consolidation should be understood more widely as a merger between political elite attitudes and the democratic institutions of the political system. Even if consolidated formal democratic frameworks can be run by rather undemocratic elites, as the last twenty years have proved, the question remains open how long democratic political institutions will confront the respective (rather undemocratic) political elites and their cultures of conflict. This paper urges to include the actor-dimension into assessments of democratic systems, and questions of political culture into discussions on democratic quality in CEE in order to point at one of the most relevant aspects of political system stabilization: the political elite.

Here, it is necessary to underline that the culture problem is not only a political elite problem (as political culture concerns the whole society). This means that the problem concerns the vast area of state relations with human beings living of, within, or beyond the “system”. More generally, the idea of a political culture problem can be described as an overall problem of CEE societies. Those societies are characterized by the blurring of public/private. This means that only “privatized” objects are internalized, otherwise they are rejected, both by political elites and citizens. Therefore, political elites have privatized them, i.e. consider themselves as the only persons who are competent and have the social power to deal with them.

Privatization on the one hand means proximity if it is my own good, but on the other hand distance if it is not mine. This means also that abstract concepts of state and democracy are hard to grasp emotionally. If democracy and the state take all the features of privatized goods, they are close to the elites, but the created distance toward the citizens or CEE populations is hard to minimize. The importance of personalized relations in CEE to generate trust does help to establish relations with individuals, but not with social groups, leave alone the whole society, and the democratic system.

In CEE, personal and private ties are the prerequisite for establishing trust, closer relations and cooperation. What is normal for intra-human relations is also valid for extra-human relations, i.e. relations with human beings with abstract institutions (and their representatives who are not understood as human, as long as the relationship has not been privatized and personalized). Political culture thus builds on close ties with persons that are well acquainted to each other.

The problem is that this political culture concept runs contrary to modern state concepts which highly rely on the institutionalization and the depersonalization of power structures. In post-1989 East European countries, this seems to be the major problem. Political elites in Central and Eastern Europe have provoked institutional inefficiencies, because they stick to above conduct which is not fully suitable with formal (democratic) structures. For example, democratic institutions have to face strong personal networks or constant political battles, and the instrumentalization of political institutions. The state as a concept is distant, the “peer” group or persons with (political, economic) power, personal ties are close. For a “turn-around” it would be therefore necessary to deprivatize relations, and to depersonalize them. Or put differently, it would be necessary to reduce the distance toward formal institutions and to generate more proximity.

This could be achieved with more responsible behavior, including a conduct change and explicit commitment to democratic principles. However, such changes cannot be realized with the old personnel. Only if new personnel and social groups generate enough pressure (in form of protest or numerical majority) it will come to a change of political elite codes, conduct, and a reducing of the gap between informal and formal institutions. For this to achieve, it would be necessary to show both political elites and citizens more commitment in developing a democratic political system. In the context of weak public influence and civil society, the main promoters of change are most probably the very political elites. In the context of growing public frustration with the democratic systems, only a reformed political elite (culture) supports democratic regulation, and wins the hearts of ordinary citizens.