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ELITES OF POST-TRANSFORMATION: FROM POST-COMMUNIST ELITES TO POPULIST ELITES

ABSTRACT

This chapter draws attention to the problem of the elite's change in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries after 1989 and underlines its importance nowadays. The authors point out that the systemic transformation was an elite-driven process. Elites were significant agents of control. The text describes different models of elite exchange in CEE countries. In some of them, post-communist elites remained influential. In others, opposition elites seemed to play a dominant role. However, even in the latter case, tensions between different factions of the democratic elite could not have been avoided. They influence the public spheres and policies in each country. It is clear that the process of replacement at the time seemed imperfect and incomplete. The authors posit the question (which is also the main theme of the volume) whether we are dealing with circulation or reproduction when it comes to populist elites. The populists' effort lay in presenting their road to power as circulation. At least in some cases, however, this can be understood as reproduction since the current members of the elite were already in power. These efforts are accompanied by a strong anti-elitism that aims to blur or even conceal the elitist positions of the contemporary power elites. The final sections of the chapter outline the aim and content of the presented volume.

KEYWORDS: elites, Central and Eastern Europe, systemic transformations, circulation and reproduction of elites, populism

The 1990s brought a transformational breakthrough in Central and Eastern European (CEE) societies, ushering in a wave of democratization and freedom. It is widely agreed among scholars that transitions to democracy were elite-driven processes. Social and political sciences have long recognized the importance of elite groups for democratic transition and political change before 1989 (Burton, Higley 1987). It was believed that the path to a stable democracy was through elite settlements and consensual agreements that would guarantee a peaceful transition of power without social revolution. In other words, transitions[1] to democracy were often viewed as an "elite game" or even "elitist democracy." During this process, elites held power in key positions within the state and legitimized the system by influencing the collective imagination. Elites were seen as the primary agent of change, i.e. groups in leading roles making important decisions in areas such as politics. Many studies have favoured a positional definition of elites. It was chosen because of its good arguments. Political elites were

[1] We accept and follow the distinction between transition and transformation proposed by Jacek Wasilewski (2001). He distinguished three phases of socio-political shift in the region: 1) transition, 2) transformation, and 3) consolidation. Each phase requires different elites. Transition is about strategic choices; it is "a relatively brief period between two regimes, during which new rules of the political game are established." In turn, transformation encompasses implementing decisions that have already been made, i.e. the practical processes of crafting democracy and market economy. Finally, consolidation is understood as a stable phase with new rules and patterns (Wasilewski 2001: 134). At the same time, we are aware of the criticism faced by the term "transition" and the paradigm of *transitology* (e.g. Buchowski 2001: 9–20; Burawoy 2001).

considered to be easily identifiable as powerful figures such as prime ministers, politicians, governors, and bureaucrats; to a lesser extent, managers. However, there are also groups that have influence and informal power without holding formal political posts.

For a long time, the general consensus was that successful transitions to democracy occurred in countries where elites had reached a form of compromise in a peaceful manner. This opinion was formulated primarily in reference to Poland (the Round Table Talks), Czechoslovakia (the Velvet Revolution), Hungary, and, to some extent, East Germany. In these countries, the transition to democracy was based on compromise and mutual understanding between the old and new elites. Both groups perceived it as wise and prudent in order to transfer power. Therefore, these countries were shown as examples for those undergoing transformation. It should be noted that this approach followed the minimalist definition of democracy. On the one hand, the elites represented the will of the people. On the other hand, the decisions of these elites—composed of politicians, professionals, specialists, the educated, and those "who know things"—were not to be disrupted by the masses.

This introductory chapter aims therefore to outline the role of elites in the social transformations across CEE, as well as to provide an overview of the most popular stances that were expressed in the scholarly literature on the subject. We consider both issues crucial to understanding the current political conditions in the region. In the following sections, we also convey the idea underlying the entire book. For it is now clear that

elites can be crucial in both democratization and democracy backsliding and populism. Illiberal elites even claim to represent the will of the people, which according to them is true democracy. To understand the current state of democracy, it is necessary to examine the role of the elites in this process. It is also pertinent to address the question about the origins of the contemporary elites, who threaten liberal democracy and undermine the hitherto consensus.

ELITE TRANSFORMATION BETWEEN CIRCULATION AND REPRODUCTION

In countries undergoing transition and transformation, the crucial problem concerned the replacement of elites. Scholars related this problem mainly to political elites, in line with the common belief that democratic positions of power correspond more closely to the official hierarchy. As we mentioned, there was also a certain pragmatism in it—political elites are easier to capture and operationalize. Since we do not have space here for a detailed description, we only briefly mention this problem. There were two main approaches competing at the time: reproduction vs circulation (replacement). According to the elite reproduction approach, "revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe did not affect the social composition of elites. This is because the old nomenklatura elite has managed to survive at the top of the class structure and is now becoming the new propertied bourgeoisie." According to the elite circulation stance, "transition to post-communism resulted in a structural change

at the top of the class hierarchy: new people are recruited for command positions on the basis of new principles" (Szelényi, Szelényi 1995: 616).[2]

However, this binary approach did not fully reflect the complexity of the situation at the time. Therefore, some researchers of elites argued for the implementation of a more nuanced perspective (Burton, Higley 1987: 295; Higley, Pakulski 1999). The partially free or free elections and subsequent transformations reshuffled the parliamentary constellation and in most cases gave way to free political competition and peaceful transformation of governments. Yet, the process was uneven across CEE countries. As a result, according to Higley and Pakulski (1999), who studied this issue at the beginning of the systemic changes, two overlapping matrixes can be distinguished among the patterns of elite games in post-communist countries. The first matrix refers to (1) elite circulation. It can run along the lines of classic circulation or replacement vs reproduction of elites. In the latter case, "existing elites change their ideocratic colors and positional locations in order to survive, or where there is a 'revolution of the deputies,' in which second-echelon persons ascend to the top positions" (Higley, Pakulski 2012: 299).

[2] There is still contention among various scholars over the usage of the terms "communism" and "socialism," and consequently "post-communism" and "post-socialism" (or "postcommunism" and "postsocialism"). Communism as envisioned by Karl Marx was never achieved. However, there were—and still are—communist parties. Hence, one can speak of post-communist elites. Socialism, in turn, was achieved at least declaratively (Leonid Brezhnev announced its realization in the preamble to the 1977 Soviet constitution, for instance) and certainly existed in its *real* form. The contention also seems to run along disciplinary boundaries. Whereas in political studies and sociology, scholars tend to focus on communism (e.g. the journal *Problems of Post-Communism*), anthropologists prefer to describe socialism (e.g. Hann 2002; Verdery 1996). Since the authors who contributed to this volume use these terms rather interchangeably, we have not imposed any guidelines in this respect.

The second matrix refers to (2) elite unity (strong or weak) vs elite differentiation (wide or narrow). An example of strong elite unity and wide elite differentiation is a ***consensual elite*** in a consolidated democracy. An example of weak elite unity and narrow elite differentiation is a ***divided elite*** characteristic of an authoritarian regime. Higley and Pakulski (2012) also mention a ***fragmented elite*** (weak unity and wide differentiation) in an unconsolidated democracy or a short-lived authoritarian regime and an ***ideocratic elite*** (strong unity and narrow differentiation) in (post-)totalitarian regimes.

This theoretical framework aims to encompass all the changes of the CEE elites in post-communist regimes and illustrate the differences between them in the countries of the region. Circulation was the classic pattern observed primarily in Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic during the first years of transformation, wherein the Polish, Hungarian, and Czech elites were also consensual. As such, those countries were set as models of success for others. In contrast, Russian elite circulation during the post-Soviet era showed a strong reproduction pattern, which was also evident in Ukraine. Elites in those countries were also fragmented since former apparatchiks and technocrats formed "parties of power." Fragmented elites and reproduction of circulation characterized Bulgaria and Slovakia, while Romania, Serbia, and Croatia saw the emergence of divided elites involving quasi-replacements. It has also been observed in Romania, Serbia-Montenegro, and, with some reservations, in Belarus or generally in those countries that came into being after the collapse of the Soviet Union. How can this

be explained? “Reproductive circulation” or “quasi-replacement circulation” is typical when one clique in the old communist party displaces the dominant clique and thus greatly truncates the democratization process. In these countries, the communist party-state was solid and entrenched in every sphere of social life and there was no dissident opposition.

As already mentioned, that was not the case in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Hungary. The democratization processes in Budapest, Prague, and especially in Warsaw were driven by the opposition elites. Researchers have claimed that the elites took the path of “classic circulation” in countries where the communist party-state was always incomplete (Poland) or had gradually eroded (Hungary, Slovenia, and, with reservations, the former Czechoslovakia). It is worth adding that the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland encountered an incomplete “classic circulation” that gradually gave way to the old elites rooted in the previous system. It also goes without saying that in some countries, post-communist leaders tried to present themselves as the new elite, as if the circulation pattern had taken place. Meanwhile, the fact that they still maintained or had regained power had more to do with elite reproduction. Sometimes, the new-old elite consisted of the same faces, and other times, the new faces were recruited from the same milieus (as in the case of the former communist parties). In the latter case, a second echelon or a new generation of the same faction came to power.

THE DOMINATED FRACTION OF THE DOMINANT CLASS

The above picture becomes even more complex when we examine the various forms of power in relation to the capital available. If we accept Bourdieu's (1986) thesis on the forms of capital, we may notice that the nature of a true elite lies in its ability to convert different forms of capital. Through conversion, elites are able to maintain power and influence over the social transformation they create or use to their advantage. Therefore, some scholars believed that the conversion of political (social) capital into an economic one was an important social process after 1989, despite (or independently of) circulation. One researcher put it bluntly: "To present the major finding, as an East Central European pattern, in a nutshell: There was an elite circulation in politics, but elite reproduction in the economy" (Bozóki 2003; see also Szelényi, Szelényi, Kovách 1995).

Variants of this mechanism have been observed among elites in some countries. They shared (or were forced to share) power with oppositional elites to retain influence and private wealth. Above all, it was a case of "political capitalism" created by the former nomenklatura, who did not oppose the process of systemic transition but used their political power to gain wealth and power as well (Staniszkis 1991). Researchers of elites have also paid attention to the various elite fractions, such as lobbies, families, and (in)formal relationships between economic and political actors. Others have tried to track informal networks or detect corrupt activities and connections of the elites

(e.g. shadow elites). The political transformation contributed to the emergence of such groups operating at the intersection of politics and economics. According to another view, the communist elite had to come to terms with the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the loss of power. However, the effect was to a certain degree the same, as they were able to convert their power into another sphere. It was a shift from politics to the economy—an example of the successful conversion of political capital into economic capital (Hankiss 1990). Yet another perspective assumes that transformation was a process in which the winners comprised different types of elites united by a common cultural capital. The main argument put forward by Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley (1998) posits that the most influential elite group—the "dominated fraction of the dominant class"—was a coalition of class fractions and the elites ruling them; it consisted of former communist technocrats and members of the dissident intelligentsia. They exercised "power principally on the basis of knowledge, expertise and the capacity to manipulate symbols, in short, 'cultural capital'" (Eyal, Szelényi, Townsley 1998: 61). Their position enabled them to convert one capital into another, according to the prescribed purpose. This has been named the theory of post-communist managerialism because the managers embedded in cultural capital (i.e. the managerial elite rooted in both communist technocrats and the former intelligentsia) became the new power elite.

This shows that the role of democratic elites was not limited to the exercising of political power. In some countries, it was members of the intelligentsia who held political and managerial

positions after 1989. More importantly, the intelligentsia elites played the role of authority, understood as a hegemony. Their influence and importance went beyond the immediate holders of power in any political sense. Therefore, research in CEE countries has also focused on intellectuals, cultural elites, or the intelligentsia, and their role in the transformation.

This helps to understand why, in former communist countries, the power elites either facilitated or at least did not oppose the coming changes. It may be argued that the more cultural capital they had, the more open they were to circulation and consensus with oppositional elites. Their cultural capital helped them find a common language and brought them closer to the oppositional elites than to their older colleagues from the party (Eyal, Szelényi, Townsley 1998). Moreover, younger generations of party members were often recipients of Western scholarships (such as Fulbright). They shared, or at least tried to present themselves as if they did, the same values and orientations as the liberal opposition. Aleksander Kwaśniewski famously said that before 1989, he had been a reader of the Paris-based *Kultura*, edited by Jerzy Giedroyć, a magazine forbidden in communist Poland and smuggled by dissidents into the country. These factors facilitated elite roundtable negotiations, aided democratic changes, and eased the reconstruction of political regimes. As a result, consensual elites emerged and partially replaced (or were co-opted to share responsibility, according to a more critical view) the previous ones in a relatively broad and peaceful ("velvet") manner. In general, the transformations across CEE were negotiated.