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Value attainment in local political leadership. Evidence from four towns of East-Central Europe

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt at examining the value configuration and the socio-demographical profiles of the local political elites in four countries of East-Central Europe: Romania, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Poland. The treatment is a comparative one, predominantly descriptive and exploratory, and employs, as a research method, the case-study, being a quite circumscribed endeavor. The cases focus on the members of the Municipal/ Local Council in four towns similar in terms of demography and developmental strategies (i.e. small-to-medium sized communities of around 35,000 inhabitants, with economies largely based on food industry and commercial activities): Tecuci (Galați county, Romania), Česká Lípa (Liberec region, Czech Republic), Targovishte (Targovishtе province, Bulgaria), and Oleśnica (Lower Silesia province, Poland). Hypothesizing that the local elites of the former Sovietized Europe tend to differ in outlook, priorities, and value attainment, as compared to their Western counterparts, the paper considers the former’s attitudes and perspectives in regard to seven values: a series of values customarily connected with the concept of “democracy” (i.e. citizen participation, political conflict, gradual change, economic equality), state intervention in economy, decentralization and increased local autonomy, cultural-geographical self-identification.

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1. Theoretical assessments. On the study of local political elites and their values

“Procedural openness and transparency are not necessarily functional. Of course, outcomes need to be clear as well as division of responsibilities and accountability, but a certain degree of secrecy is not an absolute necessity. At the moment, I am involved in a major governance process: I cannot tell you what kind of process because it is highly secretive. And please, no transparency at this stage because it will inevitably lead to immediate failure! It is also a matter of (…), secrecy – or perhaps exclusiveness of information is a better term – is not such a big issue as such as long as you do not lie to people. And even that is not really a crime as long as you’re acting in the public interest, right?” (van der Wal, 2014, pp. 1030, citing a British elected official)

An analysis of the opinions and attitudes adopted by the local political elite is instrumental and paramount in the description of this group. In reference to the views, perceptions, opinions and attitudes of the local political elite, and starting from the very simple, blunt and plausible assumption that the preferences, the orientations and the values of the leaders matter more than those of the masses, Robert Putnam (1976, p. 80) identifies four major orientations in the attitudes of this type of elite: cognitive orientations (predispositions based on which individuals interpret the existing reality; e.g. the attitudes regarding the social conflict); normative orientations (assessments regarding the way the society should be; e.g. the attitudes, ideologically motivated, towards the economical equality); interpersonal orientations (perceptions about the other segments of the political elite); stylistic orientations (“structural characteristics of the beliefs systems of the political elite” (Stoica, 2003, p. 179)). Certain values embraced by the representatives of the local political elite can be explained by their social background: for instance, it is expected that those coming from lower class families are inclined to favor economic equality. Other values are acquired in the process of socialization (i.e. the type of education, the episodes of primary socialization, etc.).

For the purpose of this paper, a value is defined as an image of objects, events, moods, processes, perceived as right, moral, desirable. A value is generally born at the clash between the social reality and the behavioral predispositions. In this respect, one distinction appears particularly important: the literature differentiates between (a) “completely articulated” values (i.e. those of which the individual is fully aware), that are, as a consequence, manipulable, and (b) “not completely articulated” values (i.e. those of which the individual is more often than not not fully aware), which are, as a result, impossible to manipulate, for they appear as trends. As such, the fundamental values embraced by the political elites are instrumental for further assessing their attitudes, behavior, priorities, preferences. Zeger van der Wal discusses the importance of values adopted by the political elites: “Government elites prioritize and balance public values on a daily basis. How and why they do so is largely concealed from us, except for when memoirs or journalistic uncoverings allow us to listen in on the monologue intérieur of statesmen amidst major moral dilemmas.” (van der Wal, 2014, p. 1031). Clearly, the range of the values embraced can determine corresponding behaviors concerning strategy prioritization of the local political elites for their constituencies, the nature of their interactions with other groups or institutions, the very patterns of recruitment, etc.

The two major scholarly pieces that majorly influenced the present study are Samuel Eldersveld’s Political Elites in Modern Societies (1989) and Virgil Stoica’s Cine conduce Iașul? (2004). The former constitutes a series of three lectures sprung out of the empirical inquiries conducted in the late 1970s in Ann Arbor (Michigan) among the political activists of the town. The latter is a remarkably compelling and extremely close to exhaustiveness study of the local elite in Iași (Romania) after 1989; the research is focused on the mayors succeeding in the leadership of the city, on the municipality’s functionaries and on the members of the Local Council, without actually discriminating among these three clusters.

2. Methodological remarks: the case studies, research objectives, questions, and methods

The present research is concerned with the issue of local leadership in the countries of East-Central Europe. Concretely, the intended research started as an attempt to examine, in a comparative manner, the profile and the role of the local political elites in four transitional democracies of East-Central Europe, Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Bulgaria, and the elites’ impact on the evolution of the local communities in the developing region of former Sovietized Europe. Basing the case selection on the logic of the most similar design systems, focal case studies for the study are four small towns, Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, and Targovishtë, quite similar in terms of demographics (roughly 40,000 inhabitants) and developmental strategies (an economy based on the alimentary
industry and on commerce activities, etc.)

Hence, the scope of the research was initially rather descriptive, exploratory; an inductive, observatory process – an inquiry into a range of aspects worth pointing out when dealing with and discussing on the study of political elites. Surely, after the gathering of the data and confronted with the stark differences among the four towns (in terms of the elites’ socio-demographical profile, of value-orientations), the question about the factors, the independent variables that might account for both these differences and similarities, was inevitably raised.

Therefore, the principal research questions of interest here are:

1. Which are the main socio-demographical features the local political elites of Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Targovishte display?, and

2. Which are the values, the perceptions, the orientations, embraced by the members of the local political elites in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Targovishte? Which are their attitudes towards key aspects concerning democracy, decentralization and autonomy, and cultural-geographical self-identification?

For pinpointing the elite groups at the level of the four communities, the paper employs the positional method of identifying and analyzing the local political elites, by operationalizing the phrase “local political elites” through the following definition: The local political elite is that group comprising those individuals in legislative and executive positions within the local leading, decision-making structure. The resulting population of the empirical research was thusly represented by the members of the Local/ Municipal Councils in Tecuci (19 persons), Česká Lípa (25 persons), Oleśnica (22 persons), and Targovishte (31 persons) as they were in 2011-2013. The methods of gathering data favored by this paper include: the administration of a standard written questionnaire, document analysis on the minutes of the meetings of the four Councils, and participatory observation during the sessions of the Councils and of their specialized Committees.

3. Results:

3.1. The attitudes and orientations of the local councilors in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Targovishte concerning democracy

The present research evaluates the attitudes of the local political elite towards four values referring to the fundamentals of the democratic construct and quantified by question no. 9 in the administered questionnaire: citizen participation; gradual, innovative change; the importance of the political conflict; economic equality. The attitudes of the members of the Local Councils towards the state intervention in economy were also taken into consideration, while a sixth value referred to local autonomy and decentralization, two processes permanently on the agenda of the post-communist governments. The attitudes towards state intervention in economy and local autonomy and decentralization were quantified through attitudinal intensity scale (I strongly agree with – I agree with – I partially agree with – I disagree with – I strongly disagree with – Don’t know/ don’t answer).

According to the answers delivered by the local councilors, within a democracy, the most valued features are those of citizen participation (with an average level of acceptance of 40.8%), and gradual change (an average level of acceptance of 22.515%). Economic equality and conflict avoidance pose some interesting problems to the value orientations of these elites. Firstly, there is a clear rejection of economic equality among the local councilors of Tecuci and Targovishte, which can be translated by a syndrome of total detachment, expressed rhetorically, from the ancien régime. Secondly, for the local councilors of Tecuci, Targovishte, and Oleśnica, conflict avoidance is significant, which would hint to a monolithic behavior inside the Council.

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2 The manner in which the four towns were chosen corresponds to an initial selection based on the demographical and economic criteria, coupled with a convenience selection (i.e. those administrations that responded to the researcher’s call).
Graphs 1, 2, 3, 4. Values orientation of the municipal councilors in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, and Targovishte (Q9: “Which of the following characteristics do you value the most in a democracy?”)

From the analysis of two values – citizen participation and conflict avoidance –, it results that the members of the Local Councils in Tecuci, Tecuci, and Olešnica could be characterized as “populists” (accepting citizen participation as a mark of democracy, but avoiding political conflict); the members of the Municipal Councils in Česká Lípa are largely “democrats” (accepting both citizen participation and political conflict as features of democracy) (See Table 2).

| State intervention in economy | Acceptance | Rejection |
|------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| Economic equality            |            |           |
| Acceptance                   | Statists-egalitarianists | Anti-statists-egalitarianists |
| Rejection                    | Statists-anti-egalitarianists | Anti-statists-anti-egalitarianists |

Table 1. The features of local leadership, according to its attitudes towards state intervention in economy and economic equality

| Political conflict | Acceptance | Avoidance |
|--------------------|------------|-----------|
| Citizen participation |            |           |
| Acceptance         | Democrats  | Populists |
| Rejection          | Pluralists | Authoritarianists |

Table 2. The features of local leadership, according to its attitude towards political conflict and citizen participation
3.2. The attitudes and orientations of the local councilors in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, and Targovishte towards decentralization and state intervention in economy

Measuring the perceptions of the local elite towards larger local autonomy and decentralization is instrumental because it provides an insight into the acknowledgement of various levels of authority in the leadership of the community. The largest palette of attributions belongs to the Municipal Council which undertakes the regulation tasks in most of the spheres of the community life, including social services, public improvements, education, healthcare, cultural and recreation activities. Inversely, there is a side effect to a more comprehensive and extended decentralization: larger local autonomy and decentralization means primarily an effective say of the municipality on the local budget; as a consequence, it lies in the capacity of the local municipality to properly collect taxes and to efficiently administer the budgetary revenues thusly collected in order to actually effect changes in the various domains of competence under its direct supervision. With greater decentralization come greater authority and the ability to have a tremendous say in the conduct of the community’s affairs, but, conversely, it also comes a great deal of responsibility in handling the ever-increasing problems the community confronts with. Balancing the advantages with the drawbacks of decentralization and autonomy at the local level, the members of the Municipal Council of Olešnica position themselves somewhere in between the enthusiasm of the local elite in Tecuci (100% approval of greater decentralization, with a core of 64.7% approving and another 11.76% strongly approving decentralization) and in Targovishte (93.53% general approval), and the rather cautious pragmatism of the local elite in Česká Lípa (experienced in both the good points and the disadvantages decentralization presupposes, with 77.26% approving or partially approving and another 22.72% disagreeing with larger local autonomy and decentralization). The Polish local political elite displays a sense of realism, properly understanding the mechanisms encapsulated by decentralizing a greater range of responsibilities in the local authority’s sphere of competence, as 43.75% of the municipal councilors generally agree with decentralization. The acceptance of the Polish elites towards decentralization is significantly less than the cases of Tecuci (64.70%) and Targovishte (58.06%), but slightly higher than the Czech case (40.9%). Relevant, as well, in Olešnica, the municipal councilors display the highest proportion of strong acceptance of decentralization and the perspective of autonomous entities in the Polish administrative arrangement: 25% of the respondents, as opposed to none in the case of Česká Lípa, 16.12% for Targovishte, and only 11.76% in the case of Tecuci. Decentralization worked its charms in Poland, while being partially contested in the Czech Republic and unaccomplished and high problematic in Romania and Bulgaria. In Olešnica, decentralization produced positive effects and a more suitable management at the local level; consequently, the attitudes of the local elite towards it mirror generally the experience this elite has had with the reality of increased devolution and growing array of authority and responsibility.

The answers provided in the questionnaire by the members of the Municipal Councils in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, and Targovishte, in respect to the state intervention in economy and to the prospects of further decentralization and local autonomy, sketch: (a) a local leaderships in Tecuci and Targovishte who are very enthusiastic about decentralization (sometimes, without actually being aware of the whole palette of responsibilities that increased decentralization generates), but quite undecided to the idea of the interventionist state (partly because the political elites coincide with the economic elite, and locally, they become easier to act as private entrepreneurs, though enjoying the state subsidies); (b) a local leadership in Česká Lípa who presents a real skepticism in respect to an already significantly decentralized distribution of power, and generally favorable to the state intervention in economy, particularly in times of crisis; (c) a local leadership in Olešnica who is much in favor of both the protectionist state and of increased decentralization and local autonomy (with significant proportion of respondents being “strongly in favor” of the two); and (d) overall, a local leadership who generally holds a positive stance towards increased decentralization and its benefits, and a rather cautious stance regarding the state intervention in economy, partly because of the government’s attitude in respect to the most recent financial crisis.
Graph 5. The attitudes of the local councilors in respect to the state intervention in economy (Q10: “How do you perceive state intervention in economy?”)

Graph 6. The attitudes of the local councilors in respect to the prospects of increased decentralization (Q11: “How do you think about greater local autonomy and decentralization, granted by the central authorities?”)

From the analysis of the two value orientations – state intervention in economy and economic equality –, it results that: the members of the Local Councils in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, and Targovishte could be coined “statists-anti-egalitarianists” (largely accepting the state intervention in economy, particularly in times of crisis, but rejecting economic equality as a mark of a working democracy); the members of the Municipal Council in Olešnica could be labeled as “statists-egalitarianists” (accepting both the protectionist state and economic equality as a feature of democracy, hence the general idea of the “welfare society”) (See Table 1).
3.3. The geographical identification of the local councilors in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, and Targovishte (the local political elites’ degree of isolation)

The geographical identification of the local political elite was considered in order to correlate it with the level of localism and isolation of the ruling groups of small-to-medium communities. Stronger links and power networks formed and maintained at the local level suggest localism and, subsequently, a more pronounced focus on the local priorities and, conversely, an isolation with respect to the national concerns. Similarly, it might be hypothesized that a geographical identification inclined towards localism (i.e. the cases in which the local councilors identify primarily with their native municipalities, with the town they presently represent or with the region which they inhabit) is prone to generate an emphasis on local problems, perceived as taking precedence over the “national interests”. Considering these observations, the Municipal Council in Olešnica expectedly exposes a high degree of localism, as 50% of the members of the Council identify first and foremost with the municipality they politically represent and govern, the town of Olešnica; another 15% of the councilors bear a particular attachment towards the native town/village, thus making localism in geographical identification a characteristic pertaining to 65% of the Council. Part of the discrepancies among the four cases in respect to the cultural-geographical identification springs from the very administrative arrangements of each country under scrutiny. But the differences lie also in the degree of openness each elite group inquired here actually display. Indeed, the level of localism is dominant for all cases, though quite dissimilar as numerical value: 65% in Olešnica, 72.72% in Tecuci, 86.1% in Targovishte, 92.29% in Česká Lípa; it results that, as a matter of fact, the local elite in Olešnica is the least isolated, which would, to a certain extent, stand against the isolation of the same group when considering their overwhelmingly local connections and networks of power. All in all, the average level of localism among the three cases is 76.67%, that of regionalism mounts to 11.87% of the entire population comprised in the three Municipal Councils, while that of nationalism is 11.06%.

Graphs 7, 8, 9, 10. The cultural-geographical self-identification of the local political elites in four ECE countries (Q13: “Which of the cultural and territorial entities do you identify yourself with firstly?”)

4. Concluding remarks and a tentative taxonomy

“If we know how the participants [to the political game] got there, where they came from, by what pathways, what ideas, skills and contacts they acquired or discarded along the way, then we will have a better understanding of political events.[…] Knowing their abilities, sensitivities, aims
and credentials, we are better able to anticipate what they say and do, and to evaluate elites, institutions and systems performance.” (Marvick, 1968, pp. 273-282)

A series of observations are worth pointing out:

- The local political elites in Tecuci and Targovishte are rather statist-anti-egalitarian, which appears rather as a paradox in respect to the outlook of the defunct communist regime, a “modernizing-nationalizing” dictatorship (Petrescu, 2010), a “patrimonial” one (Kitschelt et al., 1999): the image of the state as prominent in socio-economical realm is preserved, while a rejection of economic equality is strongly affirmed, exactly in opposition to the aspirations of the former leadership.

- In the Czech Republic (as former Czechoslovakia) until 1989, the “theme” of the regime was the same, but the “variation” was a “bureaucratic-authoritarian” (Linz & Stepan, 1996), “welfare” communist dictatorship. Conversely, in Česká Lípa, the elites tend to be more inclined to a “welfare-state” approach in conducting local policies, somehow admitting the social benefits of the former regime, without holding a nostalgic stance: this is probably the reason why they fit into the category of “statist-egalitarians”, since a significant proportion of them are concerned with the social problems of the community they represent (especially unemployment) and they still cherish economic equality as an indispensable value in democracy.

- The local councilors in Oleśnica display an inclination towards the protectionist state, although paradoxically the Polish variant of state socialism, “national-accommodative” (Kitschelt et al., 1999) communist dictatorship, was the less restrictive in socio-economic and political terms and the most market-oriented one; the statist-egalitarian perspective among the political elite in Oleśnica is to denote a reminder of the more permissive type of communist regime Poland experienced.

- All in all, it is notorious that the four countries whose local elites are here under scrutiny suffered a regime change in their recent history, which marked a somewhat consistent process of “elite circulation”, for the Czech and the Polish cases, and a persistent “elite reproduction”, for the Romanian and the Bulgarian cases. Transiting the Councils from Tecuci, Targovishte, Česká Lípa to Oleśnica and back, one can observe two monolithic-like elites, highly homogeneous in terms of bio-demographical features, values, priorities and patterns of recruitment, cherishing party loyalty, political experience and collegiality (team spirit) especially (Tecuci and Targovishte), opposing a more heterogeneous elite group, demographically more diverse, with different values and cultural standards (Oleśnica), with an in-between case (Česká Lípa), where a monolithic type of elite in terms of education, family background and occupational status is pondered and counterbalanced by a constant concern with the problems of the immediate constituency and by meaningful involvement in civic and reform groups.

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