

Political Elite Research in Central Europe: Contemporary Situation, Perspectives and Risks^{*}

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Abstract: *The research of elites in Central Europe is becoming increasingly popular, with the most visible progress achieved in the sphere of research issues. A shift is occurring from researching the theory of elite consolidation, their integration and circulation to analyzing elites as the actors of modernization and post-industrialization. The goal of the current text is to present research conducted by an academic department of the Philosophical Faculty of Palacky University, putting special emphasis on the description of the research process. Placing it into a broader framework of research conducted in the Czech Republic opens the space for us to search for possible causes of the payback problem.*

Keywords: *elites research, Czech legislative elites, return questionnaire*

Introduction

The period after 1989 brought new research challenges and opportunities for research in the Social Sciences. The issues closely linked to the process of democratic consolidation and its actors moved into. Not only the increasingly more popular

^{*} *This text was implemented with the financial assistance of the 2010 Student Grant Contest, project number FF_2010_057.*

public opinion poll, but also studies aiming at (among other, political) elite find their place in the academic research.

Central Europe is of interest for researchers not only from the point of individual political systems, but also as a region suitable for comparative analysis. The early 1990s saw the appearance of a demand from foreign “clients” to conduct wide qualitative research, which would allow for international comparison.¹ This “fascination” with the post-Communist area still persists among foreign scientists, however, it should be pointed out that the absolute majority of such research is being conducted by domestic research teams without cooperation with foreign researchers.

The aim of our text is to present research entitled *Political Elites in Central Europe. Case Studies of the Visegrad Four* implemented by the research team of the Department of Politics and European Studies of the Philosophical Faculty of Palacky University in Olomouc as well as to put into context the already conducted research of elites in the Czech Republic after 1989. The resulting will thus be an overview study, which will not have the ambition of comparing the received data (which is not even possible due to not completely identical variables). However, their added value lies in the possibility to show the challenges and stumbling blocs of the research process, which has to be undertaken by each researcher.

Basic characteristics

The research for *Political Elites in Central Europe. Case Studies of the Visegrad Four* is a work outcome of a research team of the Department of Politics and European Studies of the Philosophical Faculty of Palacky University in Olomouc (DPES). The leading researcher of the team is Mgr. Dana Hellowá, an internal doctoral student at DPES. The guarantor of research is doc. Pavel Šaradín, a senior lecturer of DPES. The team of young researchers includes two other students of doctoral program as well as the students of our MA program. The project, which has research as its integral part, is financed by Student grant contest of the UP for 2010. The project lasted for one year and was finished on 28 February 2011.

The rationale of the project was the aspiration to react to the current developments and the existing political situation in Central European states also known as the countries of the Visegrad group (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovak Republic). All four are considered to be consolidated democracies. Although differing in a number of aspects, they can be compared along several lines and lend themselves to a coherent comparative research. The definitive factors for the choice of cases are: geopolitical position (location in Central Europe and membership in the European Union), historical factors (experience with non-democratic regimes)

and the systemic processes which took place in the countries after 1989 (transition, transformation and consolidation).

The research was conducted through the questionnaire-based polling of parliamentary deputies of the upper and lower chambers (in the cases of the Czech Republic and Poland). The choice of the respondents is based on the positional theory of elites, which was borrowed by the researchers from Michael Burton and John Higley (see below). The collection of data took place between June and September 2010 as well as January and March 2011. During this phase the researchers encountered some problems, which will be described in a separate chapter.

Thematically the research can be split into four larger spheres. The first one is political leadership, i.e., attempts to analyze leadership style, the relations between the members of parliamentary groups to their leadership or the attitude of deputies towards the increase in the number of women in politics and political parties. The second category of questions is related to ascertaining the degree and the manner of communication between politicians and voters.

The advent of new media (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) should be and is indeed reflected also in political communication, along with the degree of penetration of modern technologies to the efficient management of the state affairs (e-government). The third area of research was the issue of political consulting. The phenomenon that affects the functioning of parties and party competition is growing in importance also in the Czech Republic and therefore cannot be left out of contemporary research. Lastly, the fourth area is the attitude of political elites towards European integration. As proven in a number of studies, after the year 2004 a trend of negative Europeanization is increasingly more visible in the new member states and this position is primarily shaped by societal elites (see Gallina 2007). Therefore, there is a need for primary research in this sphere.

The central goals of the research are formulated as follows:

- To find out which means of communication and strategies are used by the respondents/political elites towards the voters;
- To find out the attitude of respondents/political elites towards EU membership;
- To find out the attitude of respondents/political elites towards the phenomenon of political consulting;
- To find out what leadership capital respondents/political elites possess in the process of modernization.

Theoretical background of elite research

In the early 20th century the research of elites in Western Europe was primarily related to the classical theories of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfred Pareto and Robert

Michels. In their works they regarded the cohabitation of elites and democracy as more or less impossible. This antagonistic relationship was rooted in the attitude of the examined elites, which were tightly-knit and excessively close to allow for the circulation between the democratic elites and the masses. Pareto even speaks about a plutocratic circle, where the military and demagogic plutocracies are alternating and this circle is impossible to breach (Best, Higley 2010: 1–2).

After World War II this skepticism was gradually overcome and we can see a shift in the position of Joseph Schumpeter (theory of democratic elitism). The “reconciliation” between democracy and elites happened in the works of modern theorists, in particular Michael Burton and John Higley, who approach the elites as a purely functional concept without preexisting normative assumptions. Currently we are seeing a re-definition of elites on the basis of their positional definition. The members of the elite can be said to be everyone, “who takes the top position in large or otherwise influential organizations and movements, and who participates in or directly influences political decision-making. Defined in this way, political elites embrace not only the so-called “power elites” of top business, government and political leaders, but also the holders of power in parties, professional organizations, trade unions, the media, interest groups, church and other influential and hierarchical socio-political organizations and movements. It can be argued that all these people participate in, or directly influence political decisions, even if it predominantly means the ability to block or amend decisions.” (Higley and Burton, in Wasiliewski 2001: 133).

All modern sociological research, which understands an elite as a social actor (just like the public) stems from the definition of elites operationalized in this particular way (see, e.g., Potůček, Musil, Mašková, 2008). The research works further only with the elites participating in the political decision-making. From the perspective of the authors, these are not just the persons occupying the highest positions in a hierarchical institution or organization, but also the elites at the aggregated level, which means the members of the executive and legislative branches of government.

The Size of the Research File

A research file was created based on this definition of the political elite. It included a single group of respondents, i.e., all members of national parliaments, including upper and lower chambers, of the Visegrad Four countries. The file included a total of 1377 respondents with an important distinction based on the respondents’ country of origin.² The file reflects the functional period which in the case of Poland started in 2007, while in the Czech Republic, Hungary and the Slovak Republic after the elections of 2010. We are aware of the limits of such research, which does not allow completing the temporal comparison for each separate country. On the other

hand, the research will present a comparison of data from a clearly defined region in a certain period of time. It is also possible to approach this research as a basis for further research conducted with the same logic in the follow-up to parliamentary elections in selected countries.³

The Technique and the Process of Data Collection

The survey method was used to conduct research. A printed questionnaire comprised 71 questions divided into four clusters (see above). Closed questions or statements, which provided the answers indicating the degree of consent and alternative answers constituted the largest category. Filling-in the questionnaire was estimated to take about 15 minutes. Two options were selected for the distribution of the questionnaire. In the case of Hungary, the questionnaires were delivered personally by the researchers to the parliamentary registry, while for each deputy one single questionnaire was specifically prepared. It was confirmed that the questionnaires were delivered to the actual recipients (however, based on the return rate, we can raise doubts whether all of them were indeed delivered), because the first completed questionnaire arrived to us within two weeks. The return was supposed to be enhanced by another measure. At the second stage, the members of parliament were contacted directly by e-mail with a repeated request to complete a questionnaire. In the case of the deputies from Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, the distribution was done in a different way. In all three cases the Office of the Parliamentary or Senate club was contacted to arrange a personal meeting. During the meeting the envelopes with questionnaires were handed for each member of the parliamentary club with an accompanying letter. At the same time the Office was asked to collect and send back the questionnaires to our address. Also in these cases the deputies were reminded about the questionnaires by sending e-mails to their working addresses. As it is the data from the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech parliament that is crucial for the comparison with other surveys in the next section, let us introduce it with several sentences. The transfer of a set of questionnaires was carried out before the fifth regular session of the parliament in September 2010. Despite the assurances of providing assistance with the distribution and collection of questionnaires from the majority of parties, the questionnaires were sent by the individual deputies themselves (except for the Communist Party, where the questionnaires were sent by the party's assistance). By 31 December 2010 we had received 43 completed questionnaires, what constitutes the very low 15 % return rate (out of 281 deputies and senators). In the course of February 2011 we organized an additional round of questionnaires collection, which should be completed by 30 March 2011. It takes the form of contacting individual deputies by phone.

Return Rate

While developing the research design, we set the return quota at 20 to 25 %. We realize that the representativeness of the research dealing with deputies and senators, given the small data file comprising dozens of cases, may be questioned.⁴ On the other hand, in the introduction we have highlighted the risks of carrying out such research, particularly the lack of support from an external expert firm and the limited financial resources. As it turned out, our fears were not unfounded. However, despite this fact, we will try to use these data as auxiliary data.

Final comparison

In the wake of 1989 Central Europe saw an unprecedented surge in elite research, especially in the context of the process of democratization, in which the elites (not just political elites) seemed to play a unique role. Transition, transformation and consolidation, all three phases of democratization (Wasilewski, J. 2001), ascribed specific functions to the elites, both at the institutional level and in terms of social processes, especially during the transformation of the masses of population into civil society. We can agree with some authors, who claim that it was the elites who determined the form and pace of democratization in the post-communist area (Wasilewski 2001; Higley, Lengley 2000). Elites and their role in this process have become one of the issues in any research in Central Europe during 1990s. The theory of John Higley, which classifies elites on the basis of two categories: their degrees of unity and diversity,⁵ was tested in numerous sociological studies as well as MA and PhD theses.⁶

In the Czech environment the concept of democratizing elites proposed by Jack Wasilewsky⁷ was primarily built on by Pavol Frič, who further develops and complements this approach. Along with fulfilling the mission of joining the European Union (EU), the researcher postulates the emergence of “new”, the so-called catching-up elites, which are primarily facing the challenges of post-industrial modernization. Among the new tasks fall the securing of a high quality of life, socio-cultural modernization, and successful integration into the global competition (Fric 2008: 180–181). Another aim is also to define a strategic position within the EU, particularly in relation to the deepening of integration (both before and after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty). The qualitative and quantitative research questions include the attitudes of Czech political elites towards the EU and to the possibility of promoting national interests within the EU.

The issue of leadership is gaining increasing visibility, while it is being theoretically based on the modern concepts of a neo-charismatic leader. It primarily focuses

on the area of leadership capital defined as the ability to formulate and enforce a vision as well as by the level of mobilization of followers to implement this vision (Frič 2008: 178)

The aim of this final comparison is to highlight the research in the Czech Republic, which in their hypotheses reflect the above-mentioned issues. In order to conduct at least a minimal comparison of our fundamental research it is essential to do it not only content-wise, namely, undertake thematic analysis, but also provide information on the method of data-collection and the return rate of completed surveys. We don't assume that by means of calculating exact percentages we can fully reflect the reality and the challenges of this phase of research, but we can start a debate on the causes of low return rate of our research. Our starting point would be a brief recount of research carried out at other departments in the Czech Republic.

After the split of Czechoslovakia and the establishing of a new parliament of the independent Czech Republic, two questionnaire-based research efforts were conducted in 1993. Only one of them was implemented by a domestic team lead by Lubomír Brokl.⁸ 136 out of 200, or 68 % of deputies took part in the research. The interviews were done by professional inquirers. In the center of the research was the personality of a deputy (social and demographic questions); his political career; relations and the frequency of contacts with the voters; evaluation of the importance and fulfillment of certain functions and activities of the parliament (Linek 2005).

Between the years of 1993 and 2007 the researchers from the Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences managed to implement six more research projects⁹ with the goal of the questionnaire investigation being to track certain variables in time and conduct a comparative analysis of the received data (Mansfeldová, Linek 2009). Despite the expected suppositions the number of variables did not increase with time. However, the research projects differed from each other thematically. Tomáš Lacina identified at least twelve spheres, while in the last years the number of questions increased with the attitudes towards the EU or the existence and the prerogatives of the Senate (Lacina 2008). We should add that all the research projects were conducted by a professional agency. In the case of the 1993 "Brokl research," it was the firm *Factum*, later on *Sofras-Factum* (2000). The last research of political elites — deputies of the lower chamber, was conducted from October 2007 to February 2008 with 136 interviews, which equals 68 %¹⁰. This research was implemented without the support of an external firm.

We should not overlook the research which did not originate directly from the Institutes of the Academy of Science of Czech Republic. These projects are even more important for our overview and argumentation, both from the perspective of facilities and personal as well as financial coverage. On the other side it appears that the implemented research differ from each other both in research design, primarily by the method of sorting information, as well as by the technique of data collec-

tion. This fact limits our ability to compare them. However, they still belong to our overview.

Between the years 2003/4 and 2007 the Center for Social and Economic Strategies at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University headed by Pavel Frič conducted two research projects aimed at elites and another two targeting the general public. The topics of the research moved from the meager following of the ways and circulation of elites to the analysis of leadership capital. The analysis of data was based on the assumption that every person holding the position of power is confronted by the need to fulfill a leading role (Frič, Bednářík 2010). The first research "*Elites and modernization*" (implemented in 2003/2004) by the method of selective inquiry included 143 representatives of political elites (it is necessary to underscore that included were not only legislative, but also power and party elites). The collection of data was conducted by the agency STEM, which did the questionnaire-based polling with the assistance of trained inquirers. Thematically the research touched upon primarily the questions of the role of the elites in the process of modernization, their attitude towards Europeanization and the leadership style (transformative vs. transactional style) (Frič, Bednářík 2010: 177–8). The second research project entitled "*Elite-public relations*" aimed at elites and their perception of democracy and stability was implemented in 2007 with 111 respondents from among political elites, 38 of these can be characterized as parliamentary elites (34 %). This time the research was based on a combination of quota-based and random choice of respondents (inquirers received a list with randomly selected positions). For each category of elites a quota of 150 respondents was set. The minimum rate of return set at 65 % was successfully achieved, although the set quotas could not be achieved (the political elites proved to be problematic from the viewpoint of achievability) (Frič 2010). This research was also conducted by an external agent.

Selected research and the project implemented by us have several common features, while they also differ in some basic aspects. All of them are based on quantitative questionnaires with the number of questions lying in-between 71 and 108. Thematically the research projects were aimed at the carrier of political elites (integration/social diversity), their attitude towards the institutional structure of the state, relations towards the voter from the perspective of means of communication, the ability to lead and the stance towards the EU.

The fundamental differences are more numerous and they can help illuminate the reasons of the low rate of return in our research. The primary difference is the technique of data collection. Apart from our project all other research projects were based on the so-called face to face method of data collection. This means that the filling-in of the questionnaires was initiated by professional inquirers, who approached either all or pre-selected deputies. Important is the size of the team, when data collection was conducted by ten to fifteen inquirers, the majority being external specialists

(Linek 2005, Seidlová 2001, Frič 2010). We can hypothesize that there is a causal relationship between the existence of an external body and a higher return rate in two senses. Firstly, the very existence of external inquirers is the guarantee of better results while contacting the deputies (higher professionalism). Secondly, the more external inquirers, the higher the return rate (in the sense of the size of the team of inquirers). This is not a law, however. According to Pavol Frič, the process of data collection in 2007 was by far not ideal and the quota was not fulfilled (Frič 2010). Because of the lack of information about other research projects (it is often the sensitive issue of the experience of each team) we can only guess about their particular problems.

We cannot claim that the method of data collection which we have chosen is *a priori* wrong. It is, however, very clear that it can potentially cause a lot of problems. Another challenge is the reliability of persons asked to distribute and collect the questionnaires (mostly the heads of the offices of the Clubs of deputies). A much more acute problem is the unwillingness of particular respondents to answer (for example, to a received e-mail). We could come up with more challenges; however, the presented list would suffice to create a clear impression about the research and research process.

Conclusion

The goal of the current overview was to place the research conducted at the Department of Politics and European Studies at the Philosophical Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc into a broader context of the research of Czech elites after 1989. We aimed not only to describe the methods or variables, but also uncover the factors which influence the return rate. Without a deeper analysis of standalone data it will be probably impossible to make definitive conclusions. However, we can already claim that the key factor seems to be the method of data collection. This allows us to further work within the boundaries, which will allow them to retain their relevance.

Notes

- ¹ As early as 1994 company STEM spol. s.r.o. conducted research of societal elites in Czech Republic and Slovakia. The contracting authority was a person/institution from the United States. Despite the fact that identical research was conducted in all the countries of the Eastern bloc, the Czech researchers were never included its results (hereafter Konvička 2002: 7).
- ² Czech Republic – 281 members of lower and upper chambers, Hungary – 386 members of parliament, Poland – 560 members of both chambers, Slovak Republic – 150 members of parliament.

- ³ In particular, there is an opportunity for follow-up research in 2014 and 2015, logically, with maintaining the maximum number of the same variables.
- ⁴ For example, Adéla Seidlová issues a similar warning in her article *Výzkum poslanců a senátorů Parlamentu ČR* (Seidlová 2001).
- ⁵ Based on these two categories the elites are classified consensus (strong unity and wide diversity); fragmented (weak unity and wide diversity); ideocratic (strong unity and weak diversity) and divided (weak unity and weak diversity). The process of circulation is also a part of the model, which is often a pivotal part of modern elite research after 1989. For more information about the model, see Higley, Lengyel 2000.
- ⁶ It is reflected, for example, in the research of the so-called political ways.
- ⁷ The role of elites is dependent on the stage at which the democratizing society finds itself at a certain moment in time. Based on that Wasiliewski divides elites into transitional, transformational and consolidating.
- ⁸ The same batch of questions was used for the research of elites in the Slovak parliament. The research was done together with prof. Kees Niemöler from the Center for Election Studies of the University of Amsterdam and was financed from foreign sources.
- ⁹ All research teams did the questionnaire-based polling with the assistance of trained inquirers.
- ¹⁰ The authors recognized that the return was lower than in the previous projects. They ascribe it the method of data collection, namely the number of inquirers involved.

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