

**Gallina, Nicole:**  
*Political Elites in East Central Europe:  
Paving the Way for “negative Europeanisation?”*

Budrich UniPress Ltd. Opladen & Farmington Hills MI 2008, 231 pp. ISBN 978-3-940755-18-6

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Despite the never-fading topicality of the subject, any study of modern political elites simultaneously presents a methodological challenge and becomes an exercise in mapping the still-volatile field of research. In her book, “Political Elites in East Central Europe: Paving the Way for ‘Negative Europeanisation?’”, Nicole Gallina successfully addresses both these issues to argue the case that political elite fragmentation does not allow for the consolidation of democratic political systems in four East Central European states: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

Although the book has 8 chapters, it can be viewed as made up of two rather autonomous parts — the theoretical-analytical and case-study blocks. In the former, which encompasses chapters 1 to 3, Gallina lays down the theoretical

foundation for approaching the problem of political elites and deliberates on its major aspects in the East Central European region over the last two decades, namely elite change, its formation and behavior as well as the intricate relationship between post-Communist political elites and the newly-established democratic institutions. The latter block, made up of chapters 4 to 7, provides the bulk of empirical data on political elites in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary from 1989 to the late 2000s and outlines the peculiar features of elite-related developments in each of them.

The author self-avowedly assumes a pessimistic view of the new political elites in the region. Her central contention is that the lack of consensus among the ECE political elites regard-

ing the fundamentals of democratic political systems — which Gallina calls elite fragmentation — remains a major obstacle in the way of the four East Central European states towards consolidated democracy. Arguing for the path-dependent linkage in explaining the failure of regional political elites to democratize, the author starts with the assertion that during the period of political transition the old Communist elites were not debarred from the new political system. Thus, the forced co-existence of the old and the new elites simultaneously undermined the attempts to reform the Communist elite value-system (leading to non-transparency, a “trench” mentality, lack of accountability etc.), deepened the cleavage between the political left and right and resulted in rapid public disheartening about politics in general and political elites in particular.

Thus, one issue dominating the early stages of post-Communist elite transition was how to successfully implement lustration procedures, which determines the formation of the new elites and the degree of its continuity. Despite the importance of this policy measure, Gallina does not address it in the theoretical part of the study. Rather, she analyzes its significance and desirability on a case-by-case basis when dealing with specific ECE states. This approach has its advantages, namely, it accounts for the unique conditions in every country and allows the reader to compare the actual experience of lustration in every country as well as trace its impact on the future developments. However, not address-

ing the fundamentals of this procedure, including its rationale, the criteria to assess its efficiency and the best practice, restricts our ability to systematically assess and compare the potential need for and actual benefit of lustration in the four former Communist states. Besides, unlike in the cases of populism or Euro-skepticism, the author is tentative in providing her perspective on lustration. This fact, though explicable by the controversial character of this policy measure, makes the need to introduce formal criteria and provide a non-ECE outlook on lustration (the experience of former East Germany would be suitable here) even more compelling.

Despite the poor outcomes of the early attempts to create a post-Communist political elite free from the ills of its predecessor, the process of European integration presented another major opportunity for East Central European elites to democratize. However, Gallina's analysis of the impact of European integration on elite transformation in ECE proves that, despite becoming a major driver behind successful institutional reforms, its impact on the political elites in the region has proven to be perfunctory. This is explained by the fact that Europeanisation did not provide either the necessary incentives for elite transformation or clear-cut criteria to evaluate the progress of the four countries in this sphere. Building on that assumption, Gallina traces how the regional optimism and idealism towards the European Union characteristic of East Central European elites throughout the 1990s degenerated

into a calculated national-interest driven approach of the mid- and late 2000s.

Speaking about the institutional transformation in the region, Gallina claims that the post-Communist elites, new only in their names, have become a major hindrance for the consolidation of democratic institutions. According to her, elite fragmentation is a two-faceted process: apart from the sharp antagonism between various power-holding groups, it also signifies the disparity between the political elites and the institutional framework. Gallina asserts that political institutions in the region underwent profound transformation and can be called democratic. However, the fact that the post-1989 elites professed values and practices different from those of the reformed state institutions, resulted in a natural clash between the two. One of the cornerstones of Gallina's argumentation is the hypothesis that the discrepancy between the largely unreformed political elites and the liberalized and Westernized democratic institutions ended up in elites subverting and draining power from the democratic institutions. The result was the corruption of the institutions by the elites and further dilution of democratic political systems in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

One further aspect which deserves special mention is Gallina's treatment of the issue of populism. In contrast to the analysis of lustration procedure, the phenomenon of populism is painstakingly dissected in the theoretical part with particular patterns of its East Central Euro-

pean version identified and illustrated in the case-study section. Thus, populism as a tool of political elites in ECE proves to be among the best elaborated notions in the study, which is a true *rara avis* even in the best research on political leadership and elites.

However, there is an important aspect of elite transformation in the ECE region which seems to be missing in the author's analysis, which is the influence of Anglo-Saxon (primarily American) political leadership and elite patterns in the four East Central European countries. Numerous studies reveal significant differences in elite mentality and behavior in the US and continental Europe, which provides a vast explanatory potential for the post-1989 elite transformation process. The general pro-American sentiments of the right-wing parties and politicians in the region may be useful not only in understanding their visions of the past (concerning such issues as nationalism and national identity), but, more importantly, can account for both the political and economic grounds of their Euro-skepticism, a confrontational model of party political strife and certain aspects of elite behavior analyzed by Gallina. For example, such phenomena as bitter inter-party strife or uncompromising approaches of political opposition in cases where the ruling party loses mid-term or local elections reflect the typical conduct of British and American political elites. However, despite briefly stating the possible impact of American values on the attitudes of the ECE political elites in the case-study part (e.g. p. 115), the author

does not expound on that. Thus, the issue of Anglo-Saxon impact will be the most probable focus of further research on the process of post-Communist elite transformation in the region.

However, the need for a broader perspective is not limited to reviewing the impact Anglo-Saxon elite attitudes had in East Central Europe. No less important for understanding elite transformation in the region, and its future dynamics in particular, is that a number of important aspects of elite fragmentation in ECE can be found in traditional liberal democracies, for example the growing personalization of politics, populist trends, elite polarization along right-left lines and Euro-skepticism. Gallina does acknowledge that fact and states numerous provisos like the one that particular

features of East Central European elites “were also common in Western political systems but did not reach a comparable aggressive stage and similar outcomes on elite fragmentation.” (p. 97). This acknowledgment necessitates either an overview of particular elite fragmentation features in Western European democracies or a subtler analysis of elite fragmentation depth illustrating that the situation in the newly-democratized states is indeed graver than in the rest of the European Union. Unfortunately, the absence of those makes drawing parallels, and thus understanding the actual scale of elite fragmentation in East Central Europe, problematic for anyone but those familiar with the internal dynamics of Western European and American political elites.