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# Political and Functional Elites in Post-Socialist Transformation: Central and East Europe since 1989/90. An Introduction

*Heinrich Best, Ronald Gebauer & Axel Salheiser\**

**Abstract:** »Politische und funktionale Eliten in postsozialistischer Transformation: Mittel- und Osteuropa seit 1989/90. Eine Einleitung«. After the breakdown of Communist regimes in the East at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s unparalleled societal transitory processes have evolved and reshaped the political world map. Political and functional Elites have played a decisive role in the multi-layered process of societal transformation. Today's Central and East European societies face new challenges that only partly emerged from the socialist legacy. How have representative and functional elites in East and Central Europe *affected* and *been affected* by this transformation? Have they found and embraced strategies of change or have they sought ways of persistence? The emergence, the success or failure, and the survival or replacement of elites is closely bound to these questions. Accordingly, the international research into elite continuity and elite discontinuity addresses issues of recruitment, careers, and analyses the respective socio-political frameworks.

**Keywords:** elites, transformation, Post-Socialism, continuity, elite circulation, social change, Central and East Europe.

This volume of Historical Social Research features a selection of papers on the elite settings, elite change, and elite impact in the course of continued societal transformation. Most of the contributions are based on presentations at the conference "Elite (Dis-)Continuities in East and Central Europe since 1989/1990" that took place at Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena, Germany, on Dec 8-9, 2012, gathering international researchers to share insights on elite structure, careers, assets, attitudes and policies. The conference was hosted by Collaborative Research Centre 580, titled Social Developments After Structural Change "Discontinuity – Tradition – Structure Building". SFB 580 is an interdisciplinary research unit that is closely connected to the Institute of Sociology at Jena University and financed by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

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After the breakdown of Communist regimes in the East at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s unparalleled societal transitory processes have evolved and reshaped the political world map (Best and Wenninger 2010; Kollmorgen 2005; Best 2010a). But democratization and the reintroduction of Capitalism in one hemisphere only told, at its best, half of the story: Capitalist and democratic societies of the West have faced considerable change themselves. The Cold-War era stability has given way to the uncertainty of ambivalent dynamics of global scope, while East and Central European societies still have to *respond to challenges* that have been inherited from Socialism or conditions that are specifically post-Socialist legacies (Best 2007a). For example, this holds true for the development of democracy and the role of political elites (Lengyel et al. 2007).

*Transformation in the Central and East European societies* during the last two decades *has* been a project of elites (Kollmorgen 2005; Best 2010b,c). In fact, due to the swiftness of transition at the beginning of the 1990s, there was a general top-down implementation of *borrowed* institutions that was enforced by elite action rather than there was a bottom-up *institution-making* including negotiations between social actors, a broad popular debate and approval of detailed measures. Often, it was difficult to find ample coping strategies, and certain ways of *wishful thinking* about the “self-healing powers of market economy and democracy” have prevailed. Despite trying to follow Western models, there have been dysfunctional path dependencies, sudden setbacks of growth or the general instability or mismatch of institutions (cf. Linz and Stepan 1996). In addition, recent worldwide crisis and the fallacies of neoliberal markets have fundamentally questioned national and international policies and, last but not least, the model character of Western institutions “imported” to CEE. And this might also question the legitimacy of elites, who themselves have been subjects of the process of transformation in the course of *elite circulation and reproduction* after 1989 (Best, Gebauer and Salheiser 2009; Higley 2000; Higley, Pakulski and Wesolowski 1998; Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley 2000; Best and Edinger 2003; Edinger 2010; Best and Becker 1997). Special interest here is in the development from the *ideologically unified elites* of state socialism to the *consensually united elites* in the democratic societies (Higley 2009).

Since long, Political Science and Sociology have observed a remarkable divergence between elites and masses (that has been continuously growing) with regard to their attitudes, while international elites themselves seem to converge to each other (Best 2011; Best, Lengyel and Verzichelli 2012; Best and Higley 2010; Best 2010d; Best 2009). Latest OECD reports also show a significantly growing social inequality all over Europe, including a deepening imbalance of wealth distribution (OECD 2011). Currently, we can see that societies experience economic hardships and difficulties all over Europe. However, the transformational and post-transformational societies in Central and Eastern Europe

are still burdened with *special challenges* of development which they inherited from the late Socialist systems and which have been imprinted on them in the first period of transition in the early 1990s.

Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, international and national crises have drastically challenged the functioning and legitimacy of market economy, representative democracies, and welfare states. New political and social movements have emerged and ignited discourses on the redistribution of power and the renewal of institutions. Today's East and Central European societies face increasing social inequality, decreasing (inter- and intragenerational) social mobility, alarming demographical change, and dramatic ecological risks. Observing the trajectories of transformation and post-transformation in CEE, a great variety of preconditions, speeds, and paths of developments can be detected (Best et al. 2010; Holtmann and Wiesenthal 2009).

In elite studies, besides comparing the institutional frameworks and historical conditions, it is necessary to focus the medium-to-long-term change of social structure, as well as the establishment, consolidation and setback of influential societal groups in transformation. How have representative and functional elites in East and Central Europe *affected* and *been affected* by this transformation? Has the reconfiguration of elite systems in post-socialist CEE rather been characterized by social innovation or restoration? Have the elites found and embraced strategies of change or have they sought ways of persistence? And how do elites react to newly arising social problems? The emergence, the success or failure, and the survival or replacement of elites is closely bound to these questions. Accordingly, this volume focuses on *elite continuity and elite discontinuity in the context of societal change* observing both past and current post-socialist developments and, thus, combining historical and contemporary perspectives.

*Tetiana Kostiuhenko* (Kiev) analyses elite continuity in Ukraine, focussing on personal network structures and strategies. Key actors, survivors, returners and newcomers are analyzed with regard to their positions in the political elite and the accumulated social capital.

*Catalin Augustin Stoica* (Bucharest) explores the post-communist transition to market economy and the rise of "Political Capitalism" by privatization and democratization in Romania. After a retrospective of Romania's political and economic history under Ceaușescu's rule, the ambivalent ways and outcomes of the transformation are discussed with regard to political culture, economic crisis, the relationship of elites and masses expressed at the national ballots, and the legacy of the 1989 revolution.

*Adam Frane and Matevž Tomšič* (Ljubljana) portray the political elite and societal development in post-communist Slovenia. They argue that a "symbiosis of the managerial and state (national) types of capitalism has come to an end and it may be questioned whether the state-led model of capitalism will survive in the next few years."

*Elena Semenova* (Jena/Moscow), in her study on post-Soviet elites, asks if the concept of *nomenclatura* has survived in Russia and to what extent elite reproduction and elite circulation have taken place. Her theoretical approach is the concept of path dependency, investigating the conservation of structural burdens and personal continuity as challenges of democratic elitism in contemporary Russia.

*Diana Digol* (Florence) researched into the recruitment patterns and propopographical traits of the diplomatic elites in post-communist Europe, a small and distinctive functional group in the cross-section between political and functional elites, who are of special interest concerning their role in international relations and politics. Characterized as subject to profound elite circulation in the young democracies of CEE, a new and 'westernized' diplomatic elite was established at the entry level of the diplomatic service at the beginning of the 1990s, that is portrayed here with regard to regional and family backgrounds, gender, education, qualifications, language skills, ministry and CD careers, and more.

*Luca Kristóf* (Budapest) presents the research on Hungarian elites throughout two decades of post-socialist transformation. In her contribution, Luca Kristóf briefly discusses the approach of elite continuity as introduced by Gabriella Illonszki (2003) that differentiates between *personal, social and structural elite continuity*, underlining the *linkage between elite configurations and the political system*. In Hungary, overall elite circulation was greater than in countries like Russia or Poland, while the economic elites still realized high reproduction rates. Many of those who were newcomers in the political elites after 1989 remained in positions until the second decade of the 21st century which is partly due to delayed generational change: Characteristically, elite transformation in Hungary has been accompanied by tendencies of social closure (family background: share of blue-collar backgrounds decreasing) and opening (share of women increasing).

*Axel Salheiser* (Jena) focuses on East German elites before and after 1989/90. His article provides a summary on the societal and political framework of elite reproduction, circulation, or exclusion in various societal sectors of the GDR and the Eastern federal states of Germany in the wake of German Unification. Besides a more general discussion of the elite system in transition, and the change of criteria of elite recruitment, empirical evidence based on statistically matched processed-generated mass data and survey data is used to evaluate to which extent former socialist cadres could convert their *social and cultural capital* (Pierre Bourdieu) and maintain or regain elevated social statuses after the introduction of liberal democracy and market economy.

*Ronald Gebauer* (Jena/Potsdam) continues the inspection of career paths of East German elites by applying longitudinal analysis (Event History Analysis) of statistically matched data. He argues that even though setbacks or a temporary disruption of careers were frequent, East German elites hold a striking

share of back comers, rather than newcomers. Thus, our understanding of career continuity should be opened for forms of *returning into position* or *re-climbing the career ladder* as special career paths of post-socialist elites.

In another article in this volume, *Ronald Gebauer and Stefan Jahr* (Jena) discuss the case of those East German MPs who share a political past as delegates in county or district assemblies of the GDR and the *Volkskammer* parliament with regard to their social profiles and attitudes towards democratic leadership.

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