ABSTRACT

The present study is a comparative examination of the impact of diverse levels of administrative and fiscal decentralization has on the outlook of local political elites in East-Central Europe, namely: (a) the local elites’ degree of isolation; (2) their attitudes towards increased decentralization, and (3) their level of satisfaction as inhabitants of the towns they govern. After establishing a conceptual framework, which includes taxonomies of decentralization and of the local administrative organization, the present study concentrates upon three case-studies, meant to illustrate a range of hypotheses about the manner in which the dynamics of decentralization produce significant changes in the outlook (i.e. from contacts and interactions to attitudes regarding decentralization proper) of the local political elites.

KEY WORDS: decentralization, local political elites, East-Central Europe, power relations

1 INTRODUCTION

The problématique of the decentralization of public services towards the local communities has represented a perennial preoccupation on the agenda and within the programmes of the post-communist governments, while its legislative realization and, further, the implementation of such a policy have generated remarkably diverse – here and there, controversial – outcomes: on the one hand, observers and decision-makers praise the benefits of “local autonomy” and independent public policy at the local level, accompanied by a more meaningful citizens’ participation, on the other hand, contestations are voiced through the prism of what is seemed to be a gradual “impoverishment” of the small-to-medium sized municipalities, in the absence of the financial support provided by the state budget.

This paper is supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract no. SOP HRD/159/1.5/S/133675. The preliminaries of the present paper have been presented at the 3rd edition of the Transylvanian Political Science Conference (February 21-22, 2014, Cluj-Napoca), and at the 18th edition of the Annual Conference of Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA) (October 24-26, 2013, Pilsen, the Czech Republic).
The question of decentralization is much more conspicuous in periods of crisis, as it puts a considerable pressure on the financial situation of the local communities which, in a decentralized and devolved administrative system – hence in the absence of the significant sums recouped from the state budget –, find themselves forced to collect appreciable taxes in the local budget from a population increasingly impoverished by the effects of economic fluctuations. In this sense, the degree of de facto decentralization is probably the most relevantly illustrated by the average proportion from the local budget of all the administrative-territorial units on the area of a state, ensured out of its own, independent sources, by the municipalities themselves: within those states with a decentralized administrative tradition, the budgetary proportion resulting from the collection of taxes from within the local community can constitute up to 60% of the total of the municipality’s budgetary revenues (e.g. Poland); on the other hand, in countries administratively centralized, the municipalities are exposing serious problems in the management of local finances, collecting under 30% of the budgetary revenues, while the rest of the income emanates from the state budget. This is the case of Romania as well, where the successive attempts of decentralization failed to prepare the small communities (i.e. the communes, the small-to-medium sized towns) in efficiently collecting and effectively administering the local taxes. Meanwhile, after the 1989 momentum, the local communities have been entrusted with increasingly broad administrative attributions (e.g. the administration of schools and hospitals, the management of public security, social welfare, etc.), without the improvement of the capacity of collecting taxes in an autonomous fashion.

Such municipalities confronted an impoverishment of the local political elites’ abilities to initiate and implement local development projects (particularly, in the sphere of infrastructural development and of economic growth through investments and attraction of private capital); such a circumstance has the unfortunate “merit” to constitute itself into a fertile soil for unprofitable public venue, for the exercise of personal influences at the local level, for corruption and the perpetuation of “patron-client”-styled relations (cf. Grzymała-Busse 2007).

In this context, the present paper attempts to address the puzzle of defining and operationalizing the notion of “decentralization”, and to further discuss the impact of this process, in practice, on the outlook of the local decision-makers. As will be shown in the following sections, there has been a general neglect in the literature regarding the effects of decentralization on local leadership in the still young democracies of East-Central Europe, the focus being shifted instead towards infant democracies outside Europe (China, India, Latin America, etc.).

2 THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF “DECENTRALIZATION”

“Administrative decentralization” points to “the existence of some local public persons, appointed by the territory’s community, with their own attributions, who directly intervene in the management and the administration of the community’s problems, including local autonomy” (Apostol Tofan 2008, 253-255), a definition which poses the problem of the degree of decentralization that is actually favourable to a democratic construct and to an efficient administration, considering different factors (e.g. the traditions and the history, the area and the population of the state, the dispersion degree of the inhabitants, the economic conditions and the political context, etc.).
Equally dilemmatic remains also the convenient operationalization of the concept of "decentralization". Adverting on the major discrepancies between "administrative decentralization" and "political decentralization"; from a legal perspective, Dana Apostol Tofan (2008, 255) distinguishes between (a) "territorial decentralization", i.e. "the existence of some elected authorities, at the level of the territorial-administrative units, authorities that dispose of general material competence"), and (b) "technical decentralization" or "decentralization through services", i.e. "the existence of some moral persons of public law, that perform specific public services, distinct from the bulk of public services provided for by the state authorities".

All these developments and dynamics are primarily elite-generated, but, in turn, they tend to lead to important changes in the local elites' outlook, strategy prioritization, value orientation, and attitudes (Mitra 1991, 390-413; Shawkat Ali 1987, 787-799; Crain & Rosenthal 1966, 169-195). Moreover, different degrees of decentralization and diverse forms of decentralized policies are prone to determine variations in the local elites' profile, behaviour or attitudinal patterns (Yates 1973). Conversely, Paul Carnegie contends that, generally, structural and "institutional reform requires a modification of elite behaviour, however slightly" (2008/2009, 518).

Concretely, decentralization needs the simultaneous fulfilment of the following prerequisites: the existence of a local community with its own necessary material means (i.e. a local budget), the existence of local decision-making bodies elected by the community (not by the central authorities, which otherwise exert some sort of administrative endorsement for the limit between local problems and those of general interests not to be breached.) (Fesler 1968, 370-379).

The different types of decentralization bear as fundamenta different criteria: organizationally, (1) "vertical" ("the power dispersion to bottom on the chain of authority"), and (2) "horizontal" ("the transfer of some responsibilities to particular organizations outside the central administrative structure"); structurally, (1) "functional" ("the recognition of some autonomy of the institutions and public services situated at the local level"), and (2) "territorial" ("the recognition of some autonomy of the local communities" per se). Generally, decentralization is defined as comprising two steps (Stoica 2003, 65-66): (a) "de-concentration" (in its turn, being either of "vertical structure", with an "unintegrated local administration", or of "prefectorial structure", with an "integrated local administration"), and (b) "devolution" ("the power transfer from the central government to the regional institutions", as an intermediary stage between the central governance and the local one. Devolution can be either "administrative" ("the regional institutions only implement the policies decided upon at the centre"), or "legislative" (i.e. "the establishment of elected regional assemblies, invested with political responsibilities and with a certain fiscal independence, a situation which confer them a high degree of maneouvure and decision-making in their area of responsibility") (Heywood 1997).

Most recently, Jean-Paul Faguet (2012) refers to "decentralization" from two dimensions, bearing in mind the example of Bolivia: "First, it [decentralization] encompasses reforms such as deconcentration, devolution, and delegation that in incentive terms are fundamentally different [...] Second, the word conceals

---

2 Understood as federalism – "the most profound form of decentralization", a "major constitutional option, often associated to some exceptional historical circumstances". For more details on this topic, see Frège 1991, 38.
great variation in the extent to which reform is effectively implemented across different countries” (Faguet 2012, 2).

Similarly to Triesman (2002), in a well-documented contribution on the evolution of the concept, Pollitt (2005) presents a quite rich typology of decentralization, which contains, most notably, the distinctions between (a) “competitive” (i.e. authority parcelled out on the basis of competition) versus “non-competitive” decentralization (i.e. authority parcelled out on the basis of allocation); (b) “internal” (i.e. “authority parcelled out within an existing organization”) versus “external” decentralization or “devolution” (i.e. “authority transferred to other [possibly new] organizations”) (Pollitt 2005, 375).

There is a constant concern within the literature regarding the new administrative developments, especially decentralization, and their impact on the outlook and orientations of the local/ regional political elite. Such a concern has been focused primarily on Latin America, South Asia (Beard, Miraftab, and Silver 2008; Smoke, Gómez, and Peterson 2006; Burki, Perry, and Dillinger 1999; Escobar-Lemmon 2003; Bardhan 2002; Garman, Haggard, and Willis 2001; Falleti 2005, etc.), and Africa (Cottingham 1970), while the topic has been generally neglected for the developing democracies of East-Central Europe.

Dora Orlansky (2000, 196) discusses the impact of decentralization upon the power-sharing between the central and the local administrative layers and upon the extent of political power and responsibility local elites are expected to exert. Discussing a series of examples from Africa and South Asia, Devarajan et al. (2009, 118-119) refer to the dangers of elite isolation with the increase in decentralized communities and to shifts in delivery of public services once with the process of decentralization. Quite interestingly, Merilee S. Grindle (2007, 63-105) introduces the example of decentralization in Mexico, concluding that proper fiscal and administrative decentralization can result in high levels of political competition and satisfaction with the living in the town, both at the level of the local elites and the community. It becomes apparent that local leadership modifies its outlook and prioritization strategy in the context of change of administrative organization leading to increased decentralization. Jonathan Rodden (2004) presents the impact of different forms of decentralization upon the city management, but, most importantly, upon the degree of elite isolation and passive representation. Finally, opposing two main approaches in reference to the impact of decentralization policies – the “liberal-individualist” and “statist” approaches –, Aylin Topal (2012) describes forms of elite isolation after the proper implementation of decentralization policies and differences of agenda setting of local elites as response to increased decentralization. The fashion in which the elites' outlook, value orientation and strategy prioritization actually modifies is partially elaborated in the present paper, with a special focus on particular municipalities in three countries of East-Central Europe: Romania, Czech Republic, and Poland.

3 THE LEVEL OF DECENTRALIZATION IN ECE COUNTRIES AND ITS IMPACT ON LOCAL LEADERSHIP: A DISCUSSION

As a repercussion of the implementation of decentralization policies, the role, the prerogatives, and the attributions of the Municipal Councils and of the institution of the mayor increase exponentially. Therefore, the local political elite of decentralized communities are subject to the new context presupposed
by decentralization, and they changed accordingly. The distribution and the amplitude of attributions at the local level, related to the central authority, should also be considered in the discussion regarding the typology of local government systems and these systems’ impact on elite outlook and attitude orientation. Such typologies have been instrumentally utilized by the literature for the purpose of explaining differences in “recruitment patterns, professionalization, the position of mayors in local and multi-level governance arrangements (or horizontal and vertical policy networks), the interpretation (or notion) of democracy, problem definition as well as attitudes and opinions towards decentralization or centralization and reforms (‘modernization’) of the public sector (“new public management”)” (Heinelt & Hlepas 2006, 21-42). This is particularly the reason why a short inquiry into the taxonomical diversity of local government systems is perceived as necessary at this point (see Table 2).

In the existing literature, the *de facto* degree of decentralization has been measured employing a series of complementary indicators: (1) the level of proclivity towards decentralization (Dunn & Wetzel 2000); (2) the share of subnational government to the public consumption or to the GDP level (IMF 2001); (3) other qualitative indicators, such as: government credibility, social capital (de Mello 2000), soft or hard budget constraints (Janos Kornai 1979, 1980, 1986), levels of corruption, administrative capacity (Gargan 1981), the magnitude of bureaucracy, etc.

The *de facto* degree of decentralization and its effective measurement represent a cumbersome topic for both political scientists and policy-drafters. Thus, besides the pieces of legislation establishing the functioning of the mechanisms presupposed by the said administrative process, additional markers and indicators should be equally considered, in order to determine the manner and the extent in which the legal framework is put into practice, is implemented and developed in the field. Probably the most commonly employed form of operationalizing the concept of “decentralization” is the one currently utilized by the World Bank and the IMF in the issuing of their annual reports (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: The proportion of subnational share of general government expenditure (expressed as percentage from the total national budget)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Order &amp; Safety</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bulgaria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Czech Republic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hungary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poland</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romania</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Slovakia</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International Monetary Fund, Government Finance Statistics Yearbook, IMF, Washington, D.C., 2001. The data is selected only for the countries of East-Central Europe, former satellites of USSR.

4 Methodology: Applications on Three Case-Studies

The present study bears, as its prime scope, the exemplification of the theoretical considerations discussed above, regarding the level of decentralization of the administrations of the East-central European states, and

---

3 Along a series of domains of considerable interest at the local level (infrastructure, education, healthcare, public security, transportation, social services (including housing and unemployment relief), cultural and recreational activities, etc.), it evaluates the extent to which they are dealt with nationally, regionally and locally. This evaluation is constructed primarily based on pieces of legislation, bylaws, internal regulations of different administrative and executive bodies, as well as on some empirical endeavours undertaken by the World Bank and the IMF expertise.
their impact upon the outlook of the local political elites. This paper’s intention is to contribute to the existing literature and provide information regarding the modification in elite outlook and attitudinal patterns after a decentralization policy was implemented and has produced its effects. For achieving its objective, the present endeavor employs the positional approach in identifying and analyzing the local political elites, alongside the case-study as the main research method, using as populations the members of the Municipal/Local Councils in three small-to-medium sized towns (approximately 35,000 inhabitants), similar in terms of developmental strategies (i.e. food industry and service development, with commercial dominant), localized in three countries of the region: Tecuci (Galati county, Romania), Česká Lípa (Liberec region, the Czech Republic), and Oleśnica (Lower Silesia voivodeship, Poland).4

For the purpose of accounting of differences in elite outlook, interactions, attitude orientation varying upon different forms and levels of decentralization, the paper assumes that the fashion in which the concept of “decentralization” is operationalized and instrumentalized in studies concerning the “local-central” relations has been frequently founded on a de jure, rather legalist, perspective. Undoubtedly, the legislation represents an important indicator for establishing a series of traits or different levels of decentralization to be subsequently identified and measured throughout the region. Nevertheless, the legislation in each case has presented and continues to present significant contingencies in actual implementation, triggered mainly by the autonomous administration of local finances. The present paper employs the World Bank/IMF averages indexes of sub-national share of general government expenditure in the operationalization of “decentralization” (See Table 1); the paper adds to these indexes three thresholds: (a) a significant level of administrative and fiscal

---

4 Employing the most similar design systems, the selection of the cases follows a certain pattern determined by the accessibility of the populations under scrutiny and by this researcher’s capacities and capabilities in respect to the populations. The study has been initiated in Tecuci (December 2010), the author’s hometown, the place in which the capacity of reaching the subjects of this endeavor is considerable, while the accessibility of documents resulting from the daily activity of the Local Council increases significantly. Subsequently, the decision was made to embark on a comparative approach (July – August 2011), stationed on the region of East-Central Europe, with the next Municipal Council inquired to be that of one town located in the Czech Republic, since the country – though sharing with Romania the experience of almost half-a-century of state socialism, the repertoire of problems the democratic transition and market economy immanently trigger, and confronting the same general paradigm of “East-Central Europeness” – has positioned itself, during the years following the communist breakdown, better politically and economically, as compared to Romania, hence bearing elites who have more comprehensively internalized the democratic values, norms and “rules of the game”. The selection of the town of Česká Lípa among the Czech towns was partly the result of random convenience sampling, based, firstly, on the selection of those towns in the Czech Republic comprising 30,000 – 42,000 inhabitants and basing its economic developmental strategy on agro-alimentary industry and trade, commercial activities (i.e. the two main characteristics of Tecuci to be primarily isolated in other cases); twenty-two towns fitted this initial profile. Secondly, e-mails were sent to the Mayor’s Office, the Information Office, and to the municipal councilors of each of the initially selected towns; the e-mails contained a short presentation of the research and its results on Tecuci, the proposal for collaboration to the research, by the filling in of the questionnaire attached and the access to the Municipal Council’s documents, and the motivation of taking into consideration the said towns. This approach resulted in responses received from four communities: the collaboration in the view of answering the questionnaire and providing the necessary documents was possible and continued with the representatives of the municipality of Česká Lípa. The Polish case was considered differently: the town of Oleśnica and its Municipal Council have been chosen due to their proximity to the city of Wroclaw, where this researcher spent the period September 2012 – February 2013. The populations on which the questionnaire was administered counted: 19 local councilors for Tecuci, 25 municipal councilors for Česká Lípa, and 21 municipal councilors for Oleśnica. The similarity of the three cases, in terms of demographics and developmental strategies, was perceived as paramount for the study, regardless of the fact that rejoinders would arise from the degree of representativeness of the three towns for their own country. On the other hand, indeed, the representativeness of each town for its country might significantly impact on the very agenda setting and on the decisions on development strategies.
decentralization describes the countries whose average sub-national share of general government expenditure is higher than 50%; (b) a standard level of decentralization is specific for those countries with an average local and regional share of general government expenditure is higher than 30%, but lower than 50%; and (c) a low level of decentralization characterizes the countries with a sub-national share of general government expenditure lower than 30%.

With the assistance of a pre-eminently quantitative research (the administration of a written questionnaire), and qualitative one, as well (document analysis on the national pieces of legislation and on the Councils’ decisions, participative observation), considerations have been detailed regarding: (a) the local elites’ interactions with other groups, and (b) the perceptions towards key-aspects of the consolidating democracies of the region: decentralization and local autonomy, the level of satisfaction as one of the inhabitants of the town.

Therefore, the main research question of the study is:

What is the impact of the specific level of decentralization in each country on the outlook and priorities of the local political elites in the three cases?

From the utilization of the specific research methods, a series of tendencies are observable, which the present study associates and correlates with the degree of administrative decentralization of the three systems of local government discussed here (cf. Marin 2013a, 29-56; Marin 2013b, 363-379). From the analysis of the chosen cases, the hypotheses are the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** The more significant the level of decentralization, the more isolated the local political elite becomes. Thus, it establishes preponderantly local relations, and closes its access to the central administration/elite, while presenting a higher degree of localism in cultural-geographical identification.

**Hypothesis 2:** The higher the level of decentralization in the system of local government, the more reserved, realistic the attitude manifested by the local political elites towards the benefits of the decentralization panacea.

**Hypothesis 3:** The higher the level of decentralized administration, the more satisfied the political elite feels as inhabiting the town which it represents.

### 5 Results

5.1 Hypothesis 1: A localized and isolated political elite

It is important to note that the local elite of Oleśnica – the most decentralized community – is the most localized group, as compared to the other two cases, in terms of the networks of power and interactions with elite groups at the

---

5 The thresholds were established taking into consideration the average index of decentralization for the region of East-Central Europe (33%): an average, standard level of decentralization would be place around the value of 30% of the budget expenditure as sub-national share. Equally, a sub-national share of the total budget expenditure that is exceeding 50% is to be considered significant, high.

6 See Graph 1: The interactions of the local political elites, the comparative graphical representation of the results of the administered questionnaire (Q8) on the municipal councilors of the three communities.
national level. None of the members of the Municipal Council of Oleśnica establishes contacts with members of the central administration; only 2.63% of the respondents in the Polish case have interactions with political representatives at the level of the voivodship (regional). The frequency of interactions with other local elected officials is similar: 2.63% of the councilors in Oleśnica establish such relations, the lowest percentage among the three cases analyzed: 11.11% in the case of Česká Lípa and a more robust 19.51% in Tecuci.

Overall, the members of the Municipal Council in Oleśnica are the most isolated group in terms of the networks of power and elite interactions, hence being the most circumscribed elite group among the three cases, only 5.26% of the local councilors establishing contacts with other groups transcending the limits of their constituencies, as opposed to 31.68% for Tecuci and 12.69% for Česká Lípa.

The increased isolation with the Czech and the Polish local political elites is to be explained through the prism of the more and more significant degree of decentralization, hence confirming the first hypothesis: in both the Czech and the Polish cases, the local elite focuses primarily on the immediate issues their communities face, linking their interests to those of the groups acting within these communities, while the contacts with elites outside the town they represent become increasing sporadic and improbable. On the other hand, the most important relations the local political elite in Oleśnica entertains within the community are those with the neighborhood groups – 39.47% of the responses – and, more significantly, with the civic and reform groups – 21.05%. Comparably, the percentage – and thusly, the importance – assigned to the relations of elites with the neighborhood is the highest in the Polish case and, overall, the highest among all types of groups considered here and among all three cases, discrepantly higher as compared to the Romanian (12.19%) and the Czech (only 7.93%) cases, a situation which points to the closeness between the members of the Municipal Council and their immediate constituency.

Such type of relations, though they may appear trivial and insignificant in the entire political dynamic, bears a particular role especially in the process of re-election of the local leaders in small-to-medium communities, particularly in the case of extramural selection of elites, as it is the case of Polish local elites. Such an interaction is non-mediated, immediate and probably the simplest form the local leaders can establish with their constituency. The Polish local elite seem to have understood this key aspect the best. Regarding the local councillors’ interaction with close friends and supporters, such contacts should be cumulatively discussed with those with the neighbourhood: 49.99% for Oleśnica, 29.26% for Tecuci and 20.62% for Česká Lípa.

To a considerable distance from the value assigned to the relation with the neighbourhood groups, the increased frequency of the links between the Council and the civic and reform groups represents a conspicuous and telling feature of good local governance and of democratic development at the community level: the Polish percentages in this area are similar to the Czech ones (21.05% to 25.39%) and dissimilar to the Romanian case (only 4.87% of the municipal councilors’ contacts).

---

7 Although acknowledging the limitations sprung from the small number of units of analysis in the selected populations, the paper expresses the results of the administered questionnaire as percentages rather in order to illustrate trends and main orientations in the responses gathered than to assign clear statistical value.
The repercussions of the dominance of those groups among the municipal councillors’ links are twofold. On the one hand, it suggests a profound isolation of the members of the Council to their immediate constituency, with the almost complete neglect of the networks of power at the central or regional level (possibly explainable through an increased degree of decentralization after 1998 that determined intrinsically a local elite more focused, almost circumscribed to the community they represent, due to the increased authority and capacity to actually implement changes, rather than pushing and negotiating for them with the central administration). It is among these groups that the Municipal Council extracts grievances, problems to be dealt with, issues to be solved. On the other hand, the conspicuous prominence of this type of contacts, rather informal and non-formalized, non-institutionalized, is prone to generate a general absence of critique in respect to the political performances of the municipal councillors and to bear the seeds of phenomena located at the margins of political structure – particularly recurrent in the political compendium offered by East-Central Europe –, such as patronage and clientelism. While, indeed, the growing frequency of relations with neighbourhood groups, with close friends and supporters is instrumental in taking the pulse of the local demands and expectations, these forms of interactions are, at the same time, unlikely to produce criticism directed towards the performances of the Municipal Council and, more often than not, the local councillor has to respond somehow to the unconditional help and support he receives from these groups, strategically placing individuals belonging to such groups within the local administration apparatus. Clientelistic practices of this fashion are rather commonplace for Tecuci, where the political elite largely coincides with the economic one; frequently, members of the parties represented in the Council are seen to colonize the local administration, generally undertaking petty jobs, but secured with the very incumbency of their “patrons” in the Council.

Expectedly, the “consensual” type of relations dominates among the interactions with close friends, supporters and neighbours. Yet another aspect appears problematic in this form of interaction: the 50% of the contacts with supporters, friends, sympathizers and alike is by no means compensated, counterbalanced by the poor 23.68% describing the frequency and importance of the contacts established by the councillors with two other groups, generally perceived to voice criticism towards the situation of the town, the situation of particular social groups in the composition of the town and towards the political performance of the local elite: the unions (2.63%) and the civic and reform groups (21.05%). Finally, the interactions with the business groups might constitute another source of “contestation” and criticism at the local level towards the political elite of the town. The political elite in Tecuci tends to confound itself with the economic one and the local leadership of Oleśnica is quasi-synonymous with particular segments of the civic and reform groups.

FIGURE 1: THE INTERACTIONS OF THE LOCAL POLITICAL ELITES

---

8 The very low frequency of interactions with the civic groups, but, more so, with the unions bears, actually, a twofold explanation. Part of the explanation lies in the very fact that unions and the civic groups are essentially weak at the local level, with virtually no voice and impact on policy making and agenda setting. For the endemic weakness of unions in Romania (and in East-Central Europe, generally), see Ghebrea 2007, 379-394.
The geographical identification of the local political elite\(^9\) 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 councillors 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 Oleśnica 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 Oleśnica; 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. Regional identification\(^10\) is featured by only 15% of the councilors. The national identification remains strong, even though hardly compensating for the powerful localism: 15% identify culturally and geographically primarily with Poland, considering the “national interests” taking precedence over the local ones. In comparison with the results for the Romanian and the Czech cases, the Polish case presents a more dispersed range of sources of identification, a multilayered and multifaceted one. At least six layers of geographical and cultural identification are acknowledged and given due consideration by the respondents: there are, firstly, a native source of identification, and a local per se identification; secondly, there are complementary, regional sources of identification, the county/province (the powiat), and the region (the województwa); thirdly, there is an almost inherent national source of identification; and fourthly, there is an additional “European identity”. The scheme appears significantly reduced, compressed, in the other

---

\(^9\) See Graphs 2, 3, 4: The cultural-geographical identification of the local political elites, the comparative graphical representations of the results of the administered questionnaire (Q13) on the municipal councilors of the three towns.

\(^10\) The territorial-administrative division specific to the Polish administration, labeled powiat is somewhere in-between the municipality (the gmina), and the region (the województwa, the voivodship).
two cases: in Tecuci, only four types of cultural-geographical identification are considered by the councilors (the native, the local, the regional and the national ones), while, in Česká Lípa, the matrix includes four sources as well, though slightly different from the ones considered in the case of Tecuci, due especially to different forms of administrative organization of the territory between the two (native, local, provincial, regional). Part of the discrepancies among the three 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 Oleśnica, 72.72% in Tecuci, 92.29% in Česká Lípa; it results that, as a matter of fact, the local elite in Oleśnica 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. Among the three Local Councils, the Romanian local elite is the more inclined towards a national identification (18.18%) in stark opposition to the Czech elite that acknowledged no such source of identification (testifying once more to the extremely localized character of the elite in Česká Lípa). 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%.

**FIGURES 2, 3, 4: THE CULTURAL-GEOPGRAPHICAL IDENTIFICATION OF THE LOCAL ELITE** (Q13: Which of the cultural and territorial entities do you identify yourself with firstly?)

5.2 Hypothesis 2: Attitudes towards decentralization

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 Oleśnica 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 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)\(^\text{11}\). 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 case of Tecuci (64.70%), but slightly higher than the Czech case (40.9%). Relevant, as well, in Oleśnica, 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 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. A very thin proportion of 6.25% of councilors in Oleśnica bluntly state that they disagree with the projects of decentralization and local autonomy, being largely disappointed with the feasibility and the efficiency of these projects; this disapproval is totally absent among the local councilors in Tecuci, but quite present among the councilors in Česká Lípa (22.72%). In Oleśnica, 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.

**FIGURE 5: THE LOCAL POLITICAL ELITES’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS DECENTRALIZATION**

---

\(^{11}\) See Graph 5: The local political elites’ attitudes towards decentralization, the comparative graphical representation of the results of the administered questionnaire (Q11) on the municipal councilors of the three towns.
Hypothesis 3: Satisfaction with the life in the town

The satisfaction of the municipal councillors of being inhabitants of the municipality they represent might constitute an indicator of the fashion in which they evaluate their political performance in managing the town’s problems. Not surprisingly, the unrestrained enthusiasm of the members of the Municipal Council in Oleśnica transpires in the evaluation of the satisfaction felt by inhibiting the town: an impressive 47.05% of the councillors feel very satisfied living in Oleśnica and another equally impressive 52.94% declare they are satisfied inhibiting the town. Actually, the entire Council concentrates around higher degrees of satisfaction of living in Oleśnica. This enthusiasm is unparalleled by any of the other two cases: although the members of the Councils in both Tecuci and Česká Lípa show high levels of satisfaction as inhabitants of their communities (fairly satisfied is characteristic for 58.82% of the councillors in Tecuci and for 72.72% in Česká Lípa), cumulatively it is the Municipal Council of Oleśnica that accounts for the highest percentage of very satisfied elites in respect to the outlook of their community. Comparatively, there is no councillor to be very satisfied of living in Tecuci and a feeble 4.54% very satisfied of being part of the community in Česká Lípa; the degree of satisfaction of inhabiting Oleśnica is more than ten times higher than that in the Czech case. In the case of the Local Council of Oleśnica, there is also an almost unnoticeable difference between those very satisfied and those fairly satisfied (5.89%), whereas in the case of Česká Lípa and Tecuci, the difference impressively climbs at 68.18% and 58.82%, respectively. A reasonable proportion of dissatisfaction in respect to being an inhabitant of the town is inherent within the Municipal Councils of Tecuci (29.41% of the councilors) and of Česká Lípa (22.72%); the Romanian case further displays a sentiment of profound dissatisfaction among the elite inhabiting the town (11.76%), in contrast to the other two cases, in which no such strong dissatisfaction is encountered within the elite groups. The strong satisfaction of the Polish local elite towards inhabiting the town and towards the conditions, advantages, benefits and privileges the town can offer is intimately correlated with their assessment of the positive direction in which the town is heading and with their evaluation of their own political performances in crucial, focal areas and sphere.

5.3 Hypothesis 3: Satisfaction with the life in the town

See Graph 6 The local political elites’ level of satisfaction with the living in their town, the comparative graphical representation of the results of the administered questionnaire (Q15) on the municipal councilors of the three communities.
of competence at the local level (e.g. public improvements, infrastructure, healthcare, education, cultural & youth & sports activities, social services and public security). Moreover, the confidence and the enthusiasm of the local political elites in Oleśnica are revelatory for a dynamic community. There is also some form of local pride among the members of the Municipal Council that nurtures in this enthusiasm, a propensity towards localism and immediate proximity that stresses on the achievements and the accomplishments the community registered through local governance after the initiation of the decentralization process after 1998.

**FIGURE 6: THE LOCAL POLITICAL ELITES’ LEVEL OF SATISFACTION WITH THE LIVING IN THEIR TOWN**

![Graph showing the level of satisfaction of local political elites in different towns.](image)

*Source: Results of the administered questionnaire; author's own collected data*

### 6 A TENTATIVE TYPOLOGY OF LOCAL ELITES FACING DECENTRALIZATION

Three types of local political elites appear distinct from the study of the Municipal Councils in the three case-studies. Quite clearly, the different levels, types and experiences of decentralization in East-Central Europe have generated seemingly different "elite outlooks", different strategy prioritization, different manners of interaction with other groups, etc. For better accounting for the future research and for the resulting differences among the cases, this paper advances a threefold classification of local political leadership, constructed employing mainly two explanatory trajectories, one of the being discussed at some length here: (a) the level of administrative-fiscal decentralization specific for each country under scrutiny, and (2) the "legacy" of the former communist regime, expressed through the type of "elite political culture" (Jowitt 1999). Thusly, the study favours the differentiation among three types of elites, underpinned on the specific content of elite political culture and on the set of attributions provided by a certain degree of decentralization (See Table 2): (1) "predominantly elitist" (e.g. Tecuci), (2) "democratic elitist" (e.g. Česká Lípa), and (3) "predominantly democratic" (e.g. Oleśnica) (cf. Marin 2013a, 29-56). The logic of this distinction is that different levels of decentralization and the specific inheritance of the ancien régime influence the gap between the elites and their constituencies, creating specific types of local "elite distinctiveness".
## Table 2: A Typology of Local Political Elites in East-Central Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Local Political Elite</th>
<th>Level of Decentralization</th>
<th>Type of Local Government System</th>
<th>The &quot;Legacy&quot; of the Ancien Régime</th>
<th>Degree of (geographical) Isolation</th>
<th>Strategy Prioritization</th>
<th>Patterns of Recruitment</th>
<th>Attitudes Towards Decentralization</th>
<th>Attitudes Towards Democracy</th>
<th>Quality-Based Portrait</th>
<th>Level of &quot;Elite Distinctiveness&quot; and Representativeness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Predominantly Elitistic&quot;</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>(1) vertical power relations:</td>
<td>Patrimonial, &quot;modernizing-nationalizing&quot; communism</td>
<td>Significant, still low at elite level</td>
<td>Culture, social services, public improvements + low political responsibility</td>
<td>Intramural selection; the dominance of national/ regional selectorates</td>
<td>Unrestrained enthusiasm</td>
<td>&quot;statist-anti-egalitarianists&quot;; &quot;populists&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;ethical&quot; + &quot;political&quot; models</td>
<td>High, but standard level of passive representativeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.a) &quot;mixed&quot;15; (1.b) &quot;Southern&quot; hybrid16; (1.c) the &quot;clientelistic/patronage model&quot; (&quot;support&quot;)17; the &quot;market-enabling model&quot;18; (1.d) the &quot;Central-East European type&quot;19.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) horizontal power relations:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.a) accentuated &quot;dualistic&quot;20.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.b) &quot;consociational&quot;, (2.e) the &quot;semi-presidentialism&quot; (&quot;dualism&quot; + &quot;consociationalism&quot;, with majoritarian traces)21.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Democratic Elitist&quot;</td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>(1) vertical power relations:</td>
<td>&quot;Bureaucratic-authoritarian&quot;, &quot;welfare&quot; communism</td>
<td>High, including at elite level</td>
<td>Social services, culture, public safety + high level of political responsibility</td>
<td>Intramural selection; the autonomy of local selectorates; localized political movements, mergers, splinters</td>
<td>General approval, but realistic (reserved) stance</td>
<td>&quot;statists-egalitarianists&quot;; &quot;democrats&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;ethical&quot; + &quot;pragmatic&quot; models</td>
<td>Pondered by high level of dedication to the community; very low passive representativeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.a) &quot;fused&quot;; (1.b) &quot;Northern&quot;-styled; (1.c) the &quot;economic-development model&quot; (&quot;partnership&quot;), the &quot;market-enabling model&quot;; (1.d) the &quot;Central-East European type&quot;.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) horizontal power relations:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.a) moderate-to-weak &quot;dualistic&quot;;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---


14 One might raise the criticism that fitting the three East-Central European cases of decentralization into the existing, Western-typed typologies is a rather procrustean task, since such cases are rather "hybrid", "catch-all" ones (see, for instance, Swianiewicz and Mielczarek 2005, 13-78). However, the present attempt is founded on the need for particularizing the three cases and tentatively pinpointing the discrepancies between them.

15 Bennett 1989; Bennett 1993, 28-47.


17 Goldsmith 1992, 393-410.

18 Heinelt and Hlepas 2006, 27.

19 Hesse & Sharpe 1991, 603-621.

20 Wollmann 2004a, 150-165; Wollmann 2004b, 639-665.

### Predominantly Democratic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vertical Power Relations:</th>
<th>Horizontal Power Relations:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Dual; Northern-styled; Welfare-STATE Model; Market-Enabling Model; Central-East European Type.</td>
<td>(2) Accentuated Dualistic; Consociational; Semi-Presidentialism (Dualism + Consociationalism, with Majoritarian Traces).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- "National-Accommodative" High
- Extramural Selection
- Cautious Enthusiasm
- "Statists-Egalitarianists"; "Populists"
- Low, with significantly low passive representativeness, pondered by "social sensitivity"
Clearly, the level and the manner of decentralization process undertaken in each of the three East-Central European countries (Romania, Czech Republic, and Poland) have generated different outcomes in the local elites’ attitudes, prioritization, and interactions. More significant levels of administrative and fiscal decentralization indicate a more responsible, pragmatic local elite, though largely isolated to the central authorities and skeptical, cautious, regarding the edulcorated image of the benefits of decentralization. Conversely, a low level of decentralization is prone to determine an elite who is prepared to acknowledge political responsibility only for those “soft” spheres of policy-design and implementation at the local level; they seem impotent to act effectively locally in such domains as economic and infrastructural development, for instance. Yet, the impact of decentralization on the “impoverishment” of small-to-medium-sized towns – as are those studied here – remains an open question, worthy of proper and comprehensive consideration.

The envisaged study proposes a more encompassing approach, extended to the cases of other countries of former Sovietized Europe (Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia), employing the tentative typology proposed by the paper, hence further testing its validity. The features, definitions and types of decentralization differ greatly from one instance to the other. It is particularly this diversity that entails differences in the local “elite (general) outlook”, i.e. its attitudes, priorities, value orientations, interactions, profiles, degree of representativeness, patterns of recruitment, etc. Indeed, the contention this paper advances refers precisely to the impact of the degree of decentralization upon the general portrait of the local political elite. Three such impacts are discussed here, namely the impact of the level of decentralization on: (a) local elite’s interactions, (b) local elite’s attitude towards decentralization itself, and (c) local elite’s satisfaction with the life in their town. Nevertheless, these differences in the local elite’s “outlook” in East-Central Europe cannot and should not be traced back to the level of decentralization alone. Due to the limitations of this study, other, equally important, independent variables explaining the variations for the selected cases, are not considered (e.g. the “legacy of the former regime” and different “elite political cultures” (Jowitt 1999), patterns of recruitment, the “system” variables, such as the characteristics of the political and the party systems, the tradition of “decentralization”, etc.), variables which remain instrumental in accounting for the results. The paper acknowledges also other significant limitations, such as: matters of representativeness and significance in the case selection (the actual limits of “the most similar systems” research design); the shortcomings in generalization and statistical analysis, due to the small number of units of analysis; the limits of comparison, due to the actual relevance of the selected cases, and those sprung from the employ of the questionnaire as the main method of data collection; the operationalization of “decentralization” using exclusively one indicator, etc. While being aware of the important limitations, this endeavor might contribute significantly to the existing literature on the effects of decentralization on the portrait of the local leadership in East-Central Europe. Further research on other countries and regions undergoing processes of decentralization or democratization (e.g. Latin America, south-east Asia, India, etc.) might add a comparative note on the present endeavor.

REFERENCES
*** Law No. 215/2001 on Local Public Administration (Romania).
*** Constitutional Act No. 294/1990 Col. (the Czech Republic).
*** Law of March 8, 1998 on Local Self-government (Poland)


Wien (Austria), Zürich (Switzerland) & Berlin & Münster (Germany): LIT Verlag.


