Tracing the Post-Communist Elite’s Quality:
The Cases of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Abstract.
In this paper I try to seek out the pre-democratic roots of elite quality by a structured comparison of the three Baltic states using a historical-institutionalist approach. Focusing on the prevalence of state capture in the late 1990s and 2000’, the question is asked why state capture became endemic in the Baltic state of Latvia, while the other two Baltic states of Lithuania and in particular Estonia, although resembling Latvia in a number of relevant structural, cultural and political aspects, basically have escaped that fate. I argue that it were profound differences in the qualities of the political elite dominating the governments after the first independent elections (1992-1993) that affected later developments in a path dependent process. Elite behaviour in these formative period was determined by the presence or absence of two crucial legacies from the pre-democratic period: elite identity grounded in previous moral action and pre-democratic political experience. Through the rising to political power in Estonia of an alternative elite with deep roots in a pre-democratic semi-autonomous society, such resources became embedded in the Estonian political system. In Lithuania, no alternative elite of any dignity formed during Communist rule, but instead the reformed and moderate Communist party, winning 1992’s elections, likewise was equipped with such resources. In contrast, the Latvian Communist party, one of the more repressive ones in the entire Soviet Union, left the political scene during democratization while no previously formed alternative elite existed to take its place. Instead, the 1993’ elections marked the rise to government power in Latvia of a newly formed political elite without any ties back to pre-democratic times, leaving it without both shared identity and political experience.
Introduction

Why is it, that in some post-communist states the parallel processes of replacing Communist one-party rule and the state-planned economy with democracy and capitalism did not generate high levels of state capture, i.e. elite corruption, while in others dangerously close liaisons between politics and various financial interests instead became the established pattern? That is the question to which I would like to provide an answer based on a historical-comparative approach which concerns itself with causal analyses through contextualised comparisons over time (Mahoney & Rueschemayer, 2003, 6).1

In this paper, a comparative case study is undertaken of the three Baltic states who, while showing strikingly different levels of state capture, still demonstrate “sufficient similarity” (Mahoney and Rueschemayer, 2003). The predominance of Western cultural legacy, the crucial role played by popular mobilisation in transition, similar developments into parliamentary democracies with proportional representation and multi-party systems, and the choice to strongly orient themselves towards a liberal economy2 makes such a comparison of the Baltic states even more intriguing.

State capture has been defined as the illicit infiltration by powerful economic actors into the very heart of legislation, regulation, and decision-making (Kaufmann & Hellman, 2000, cf. 2002). The selling of parliamentary votes and presidential decrees to private interests is among the practices falling under state capture, as is the widespread practice of illegal party financing by economically powerful interests. Since political and economic re-structuring went hand-in-hand in the new Baltic democracies as well as in other post-communist societies, the risks of state capture-practices to evolve were particularly high during the 1990s (cf. Keat, 2001, Schoenman, 2001, Frye, 2001, King, 2001).

Analyses of state capture3 among post-communist countries rank both Estonia and Lithuania fairly low (i.e. low level of state capture), along with the successfully democratised states of Central Eastern Europe like Hungary, Slovenia and Poland. Latvia, on the other hand, demonstrates a high level of state capture, almost on par with Russia (Kaufmann & Hellman, 2000). In later surveys the pattern is further confirmed. Estonia ranks clearly best, followed by Lithuania. Latvia, however, ranks behind both Russia and Romania (Hellman & Kaufmann, 2000).

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1 Comparative historical analysis has three defining characteristics: it is concerned with causal analysis, where causes are searched for in processes over time and where structured, contextualised case comparisons are used.
2 It has rightly been pointed out that among the three states, Estonia was the fore-runner and most consequent in liberalising its economy in a shock therapy fashion. Latvia and Lithuania have however not lagged far behind.
3 The World Bank’s analysis is based on a large-scale survey among large and medium-sized enterprises in most of the post-communist countries. The level of state capture is measured through an index which includes six dimensions: parliamentary votes, presidential office, political parties, commercial courts, criminal courts and central banks (Anticorruption in transition, 2000).
The state capture index is supported by the results from a number of other sources measuring more generally corruption, governance and rule of law (cf. Berg-Schlosser, 2004). Previous literature on how to explain the great discrepancies showing between the post-communist countries in political as well as economic fields has been concerned with, among other things, the role played in democratic political life by the old *nomenclatura* (Lane, 1996a, 1996b, Steen, 1997), the institutional legacies from the communist period (Kitschelt *et al*, 1999, Grzymala-Busse, 2002, Ekiert & Hanson, 2003 (eds.)), how transition paths developed (Berglund, *et al*, 2001, Gibson, 2001, Åslund, 2002), and the methods by which the privatization processes were implemented (Gold, 2005, cf. King, 2002). Not least has the beneficial role played by a pre-democratic civil society been emphasised (Åslund, 2002, Gerner, 2003), along with the negative impact for the quality of democracy of a Communist legacy of repression as opposed to a more liberally inclined Communist regime (Kitchelt *et al*, 1999, Gryzmal-Busse, 2002).

The conclusions drawn here is that for political elites to emerge with sufficient integrity to resist the temptations of state capture, they had to carry with them legacies of a shared identity grounded in previous moral action which provided parties and individual politicians with a self-image of “behaving morally sound” (cf. Monroe, 1995, 1996, March & Olsen, 1998), in combination with pre-democratic political experience which facilitated strategic considerations and decision-making in a period of turbulence and uncertainty. Trajectories which were fixed in the years following the first democratic elections have proven to be particularly persistent. After the short window of a few years “new regime structures have been more or less ‘locked in’ in almost all polities” (Kitschelt, 2003, 49, cf. Lewis, 2004).

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4. Furthermore, the Danish research programme DEMSTAR has shown that formal decision-makers are considered to be more important than informal ones in Estonia (Drengsgaad & Hansen, 2003, 30). In Latvia, it seems clear that informal actors outside the state play a larger role in politics, in particular in financial areas (Norgaard & Hansen, 2000, 36). DEMSTAR stands for “Democracy, the State, and Administrative Reforms”, a research programme hosted by Århus University in Denmark, focused on the political and administrative development in the post-communist states from a comparative perspective. The project has conducted a large number of elite questionnaires and interviews, reported on in various reports. Among them are findings of particular relevance to the Baltic states. For Lithuania, political parties are assessed to structure decision-making in a genuine manner, with the two political forces of Social Democrats (the former Communist and Social Democratic parties) and the Conservatives. “Viable political parties, including members of the opposition, function at all levels of the government” writes Freedom House in a country report (2003, 375).
Therefore, it is warranted to specifically analyse the historical preconditions for elite behaviour during these particular years. In Estonia, even though the Communist regime was fairly repressive, an alternative elite with roots dating back to pre-democratic “civil society” embodying those qualities rose to power in the elections of 1992. The situation in Lithuania was quite different. Pre-democratic Lithuanian civil society was weak and did not raise an alternative elite of the Estonian kind, although the Lithuanian Communist Party was more moderate and nationalist-minded than its Estonian counterpart. Instead, it was the reformed and democratically inclined former Communist party who won the early 1990s elections. Like the alternative elite in Estonia, this party however possessed both the necessary moral identity and, to a much larger extent than the Estonian government, pre-democratic political experience. Latvia in contrast to its neighbours did not have either a democratically acceptable Communist successor party or an alternative elite formed under pre-democratic times. The Latvian Communist Party was one of the most repressive in the Soviet Union, leaving little room for any grass-root activities to prosper. When civil society was weak during Communism, as was also the case in for example Czechoslovakia, Romania and Ukraine, alternative elites only started to form collectively in the late 1980s, when liberalization and democratization had already started. Such late formation did not provide the new elite with either prolonged “political” experience or a shared history of risk-taking. It instead left them much less equipped to practically or morally handle a sudden rise to political power, while the more experienced Communist parties were mostly discredited by a repressive rule. Hence, political actors who possessed such shared identities and useful experiences which helped them preserve integrity, were either successor parties of previously moderate, as opposed to repressive, Communist parties, as in Lithuania or were parties with roots in mild opposition towards Communism, as in Estonia.
The figure shows four possible legacies, where the cases investigated here represent three of these possible four. The Communist regime could be classified as repressive but anyhow grass-roots activities and soft resistance developed, as in Estonia. In the case of Latvia, the regime was likewise repressive but much more efficient in blocking the formation of a civil society. Lithuania experienced a moderate and native-oriented Communist regime, however without any substantial development of grass-root activities, perhaps as a consequence of the relative appreciation of the regime. Finally, the empty box is best described as a combination of moderate Communist regimes and comparatively developed civil societies, as was the case in Poland, Hungary and Slovenia. The toughest situation considering the quality of elites was faced by the new democracies where the Communist regime had been repressive and soft resistance lacking. There, the Communist parties experiences and identity were thus not resources for any reformed party, and not even a rudimentary “civil society” or semi-autonomous society, had the possibilities of developing which would have provided the new system with in particular moral identity. Even though a repressive regime often coincides with a lack of civil initiatives (in fact, one definition of repressive could be precisely that), the case of Estonia shows that they are not empirically coinciding. Estonia however lost the potentially beneficial experiences which a reformed Communist party could have contributed, while Lithuania likewise faced the founding elections with a strong reformed Communist party but without experienced and morally strong counter-elites. Latvia, however, entered democracy with political actors lacking both experience and a historically formed moral identity.
The elite political cultures established during these constitutive early years have most certainly been challenged by the shifts in the party system and the appearance of new political actors during the late 1990s and the years following, but they have nevertheless remained surprisingly stable as stated before. The reason may be that once a pattern of how to do politics began to emerge under the influence of elite behavior within early dominating parties, other actors began to follow in their footsteps thus relatively quickly creating a collective action situation.

Methodological considerations

The argument briefly presented on the previous pages will be empirically supported throughout the article. The processes investigated here, including not only the formation of civil society and personal networks under Communism but also the internal development within the Communist parties, are mostly of an informal nature. Little written documentation exists which could in retrospect be used to trace events or persons. This has made it absolutely necessary to devote a great deal of time and effort to identify and get access to persons who either took part themselves in organizations, networks, or political parties in all three states, or who could be considered to be reliable “witnesses” to these processes. Therefore, the study is primarily based on personal interviews conducted over the last four years with a large number of persons in the three countries, persons from many different fields and in different positions. The interviews involve key actors as well as personalities who played a more peripheral role in the developments investigated here. Interviews have hence been conducted with former and present politicians, with participants in the three popular fronts paving the way for independence, with representatives elected in 1990 to the first parliaments (Eng: Supreme Councils), and with many activists from the 1970s and 1980s, including a few more outright dissidents. Most of the interviews however were conducted with persons engaged in what broadly be labelled civil society activities. All in all, I have conducted between one hundred to one hundred twenty-five interviews, some of them in English, sometimes with the help of a translator. The majority of the interviews were tape-recorded, but for some, particularly the

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5 A prominent example is the Latvian party Jaunais Laiks (New Era), which in 2002 became the largest party in parliament and formed a coalition government under the leadership of the party leader Einars Repse, the former chairman of the Central Bank. Repse’s, and New Era’s, major ambition was to break corrupt practices and ties in Latvian politics, but in that the party failed greatly, and the government was dismissed in 2004. In Lithuania, the party Darbo Partei (Labour Party), has recently become a leading force in politics, and its leader – the billionaire Viktor Uspaskich – is today (2005) minister of economy in the Lithuanian coalition government. While Repse represented an attempt to improve elite political culture in Latvia, Uspaskich instead blurs the boundaries between politics and business which have been considerably well separated in Lithuanian politics.

6 Lorija Lietavete, Ilona Rauzge and Kristine Bruvere in Latvia, and Jurga Valanciute in Lithuania have all been invaluable research assistants and translators. Without them, it would have been impossible for me to carry out this research. I would also like to thank Prof Daina Bara, University of Latvia, Prof Georg Sootla and Prof
earliest ones from 2001 and 2002, I took notes during the interview either because the interviewee requested that the interviews not be tape-recorded or because I considered it more prudent in the particular situation. There is unfortunately no room to go into details regarding the interviews, and the particular methodological problems encountered by a western scholar doing biographical research in the complex world of post-communism. However, the standard criteria for evaluating historical sources have been used here although the material are most often oral, such as trying to confirm certain more important facts by using several independent sources, and of being aware of the tendency among many interviewees – particularly in a context such as the post-communist one – to modify or even re-write personal biographies so as to suit the present situation better. As one interviewee bitterly put it: “in retrospect, so many heroes appear”.

Communist Rule

The Baltic states did not arise the day independence was re-established in 1991, or when democratic elections were held in 1992 and 1993, respectively. As research on post-communism has progressed, it has become quite clear that the historical past influences the outcomes and choices made during democratic rule. Institutional and historical legacies can of course be specified in numerous ways (Ekiert & Hanson, 2003). The past can refer to not only the more recent Communist period, but also the historical past of centuries gone. It can also refer to the pre-war period, usually characterized by independence and at least partial democracy in the three Baltic states. It has been suggested that researchers in search of explanations for the apparent variations need to look much more thoroughly into these periods (cf. Kitschelt, 2003). But it will suffice for the time being to take a closer look at the Communist period of the Baltic states, with a particular focus on developments which were important to the fostering of democratically useful political experiences, and moral committment either within the ruling Communist party or among alternative elites in formation. In a path-breaking study, Grzymala-Busse (2002) following in the footsteps of Kitschelt (1999), has shown how the substantial differences between the Communist party organizations, their recruitment, and their levels of flexibility in Hungary, Poland, and the former Czechoslovakia contribute to explain their varying capacity to democratically

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1 In all three states, elections to the local Supreme Soviets (Supreme Councils) involving political competition, were held already in 1990, when the states were still under Soviet rule. While these elections could at least partly be considered democratic, I decided to disregard them here since statehood had not yet been declared.

8 Crawford and Lipjhart use the term “successor elite” (1995).
regenerate. Kitschelt *et al* equally convincingly relates the type of Communist regime – bureaucratic-authoritarian, national-accomodative, patrimonial or sultanistic - to the formation and structuring of the democratic party systems (1999). Through studies such as these, the often-used but seldom conceptualized concept of “communist legacy” has been successfully defined and investigated, and the mechanisms by which it influences democratic practices have been clearly worked out and convincingly argued.

In relation to this body of scholarly work, it becomes clear that the Communist legacy in the Baltic states varies considerably. The Soviet occupation certainly put its mark on these states in decisive and also similar ways, transforming them into republics of the Soviet-Union. They were characterized by successive waves of repression followed by periods of growing liberalization during the almost fifty years that the occupation endured. But the three local Communist parties developed in different directions during the important decades following the first ten years after the second occupation in 1944. These years were filled with terror, forced collectivization, and deportations. After Stalin’s death in 1953, a re-emergence of national cultures began to occur, a development which also affected the internal organization of the local Communist parties. “In this”, Misiunas and Taagepera write in an important passage, “the Latvian regime proved least successful” (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993, 131). The Latvian Communist Party (LaCP), under the leadership of the native communist Eduards Berklāvs, in the last years of the 1950s successively attempted to transform into a more nationalistly oriented Latvian party, involving more native Latvians in top positions, and increasing the use of the Latvian language. This resulted, however, in a severe and far-reaching reaction from the Central Committee in Moscow in 1959, with the ultimate purpose of halting nationalization, which had began to appear as a threat to Russian interests (Levits, 1990, 61, Silde, 1990, 73). Consequently, a majority of ethnic Latvians in the CP were replaced with Russian-born Latvians or simply ethnic Russians with strong loyalty to the central party in Moscow. Berklāvs was imprisoned, and the purge, which continued until 1962, marked the end of a Latvian Communist party with local roots. Instead, the LaCP in the following years turned into one of the most Moscow-oriented ones in the Soviet-Union, and the signs of Latvian nationalism were heavily repressed (cf. Karklins, 1990, 49). The purge also involved the youth organization Komsomol, together with the municipal and rural levels of government. “The pattern of disproportionately low representation of native-born Latvians in leadership positions was paralleled at lower levels” (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993, 146, cf.
Consequently, the entire party structure in Latvia was russified during these years, a process which alienated the party from the ethnic Latvian population. As in Latvia, top positions in the local Estonian Communist Party (ECP), were densely populated by Russians or Russian-born Estonians (“Yestonians”) loyal to Moscow, but the amount of ethnic Estonians was still higher than in the Latvian party. Probably as a precaution against the strong ideological anti-Communism in Estonia which was due to a political culture dominated by individualism and achievement-orientation (Bennich-Björkman, 2005 forthcoming), Moscow had already in 1949-1952 seen to it that the ECP was governed by Moscow-loyal cadres. In the following years the number of native leaders increased somewhat, but “the ECP remained largely an alien organization in which home-grown Estonians formed about one-third of the total membership” (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993, 149).

The contrast between how the Latvian and Estonian Communist parties were turned into bodies primarily dominated by Russian interests, and the development of the Lithuanian Communist Party (LiCP) is quite substantial. For reasons which still need to be revealed, the LiCP was never challenged by Moscow in the same way as the Estonian and Latvian Communist parties in the decades following Stalin’s death. Instead, under the leadership of the talented and popular native Communist Antanas Snieckus, the party was the most successful of the three in forming itself into an indigenously dominated one which successfully promoted native Lithuanian interests during the following decades. “The stability of the top party and government personnel appears remarkable by Soviet standards”, Misiunas and Taagepera conclude (1993, 146). The leadership of the LiCP stayed predominantly in the hands of ethnic Lithuanians, who played their cards strategically, skillful in the both complicated and dangerous interaction with the Central Committé in Moscow. As a result, local Lithuanian interests appeared high on the agenda. Compared to the neighbouring countries, where the Soviet period saw a large influx of immigrating Russians, Lithuania never experienced the same demographical changes, and when independence was re-gained in 1991, the number of ethnic Russians was approximately eight percent, in comparison to Estonia (34 percent) and Latvia (40 percent). Like the Communist parties in Poland and

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9 As Steen shows, (1997), the domination of ethnic Russians in the LaCP continued to influence elite composition after independence and democratization as well. The proportion of ethnic Latvians in the political and economic elite was only 82 percent, as compared to Estonia’s 90 percent and Lithuania’s 96 percent (figures are from 1997).

10 An explanation which has been put forth points to the personal importance of the First Secretary Snieckus, who stayed in position from 1944 to 1974, and his alleged overturn from dogmatic Communist to pragmatic leader, all the while making use of his insights into Kremlin mentality (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993, 206).
Hungary (cf. Grzymala-Busse, 2002), the Lithuanian one thus developed in a moderate as opposed to repressive direction, not allowing for open opposition but nevertheless favouring Lithuanian interests over Moscow ones, dominated as it was by native Lithuanians. During the period of transition starting in 1987, and following an internal period of increased party tension, the Lithuanian Communist Party in a crucial decision of 1989 decided to separate itself from Moscow in order to more openly strive for Lithuanian independence, leaving the party divided into two: one Moscow-loyal and one Lithuanian. Under the leadership of the popular First Secretary Algirdas Brauzauskas, the second secretary Vladimir Berezov, and the native communists Justas Paleckis and Czeslovas Jursenas, the independent party took a clear position for sovereignty.11 This audacious step, taken during a period of intense power struggle with Moscow, in combination with the LiCP’s specific history of moderation and nativization during the decades since the 1950s, strongly contributed strongly to create a shared identity of moral honesty, based on the fact that the party during difficult times had been on the historically winning side, and had risked something for it.

Semi-autonomous and Civil Society under Communism

Not only the local Communist parties developed differently during Soviet time in the three Baltic states. The social sphere outside the party and the state, referred to in the Communist context as civil society in order to indicate its autonomy from the state also differed in the three states.12 The dilemma for many of the new democracies when the Communist regimes fell, in particular for the new states of the former Soviet Union, where party control had been quite effective and civil society particularly weak, was precisely a prominent lack of organizationally and politically experienced “counter-elites”, trained to take initiatives and to prepare for the kind of government that democracy required. In the Communist societies, organizations, including professional ones, trade unions, and youth and sports organizations, certainly existed. But the difference between these societies and most democracies was that under Communist rule, basically all organized activities took place by the initiative or under the aegis of the party, i.e. the state. Organized activities like youth organizations, the Pioneers

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11 Interviews Justas Paleckis, Vilnius, Czeslovas Jursenas, Vilnius, Vladimir Berosov, Vilnius, 2004-09-16, Antanas Beinara-Vicius, Vilnius 2004-09-15, all belonging to the fraction within the LiCP who broke with Moscow.

12 “Civil society” is frequently used in the social sciences to define the broad sphere between the state and the family where collective action takes place, specifically in democratic societies. However, when used in the totalitarian setting, the term takes on a more precise meaning, since associational life was either “official”, i.e. sanctioned by the state, or organized outside the state, i.e. part of a civil society. In the Communist societies, associational life was thus not absent, but associational life initiated in the “civil society” was usually weak (cf. Gibson, 2001) which consequently affects these states even today, when official organizations have mostly disappeared.
and the Komsomol, were strictly controlled by the party through the KGB (security police), as were all other official organizations. To organize outside the state, on one’s own initiative, within the civil society, was thus highly unusual and regarded with scepticism by the authorities, often placing strong pressure on the few activists taking such steps. Even so, there exist traces of organized civil society activities outside the party realm in the former Communist states, although these traces vary in visibility and, I would add, importance. By organized activities I am not referring to outright dissidence, which was often performed by individuals,¹³ but to the pre-democratic existence of loosely formed groups and networks meeting for common purposes (cf. Gibson 2001, Easter, 1996) such as preserving national history, culture, and literature, or forming discussion clubs, which in the context of the time could be regarded as soft resistance to Moscow power in the then-Baltic republics. While not denying the crucial moral importance of courageous individual acts of dissidence or dramatic actions, like the Lithuanian student Romas Kalanta who in 1972 burnt himself to death protesting Soviet occupation, or the long imprisonment of the Lithuanian Catholic activist Viktoras Petkus,¹⁴ such isolated acts have not influenced the trajectories of democracy-building in the way that more continuous and collectively organized activities have done. The focus here is thus on identifying not if dissidence occurred, but whether there actually were persistent enough civil society contexts in the Baltic states which allowed for the formation of alternative elites (alternative to the Communist elite that is).

The environmental protests starting in 1986/87 are often taken as a point of departure in discussions on the role played by the civil society in the Baltic states in bringing an end to the Soviet empire (Hedlund & Gerner, 1993, Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993). But differences between the Baltic states regarding the extent to which unofficial groups and networks were formed often indirect but seldom overtly challenging the regime, or the extent to which collective mobilization initiated from the grass-root level took place are large differences, if the historical perspective is broadened to also include the 1960s and 1970s.

¹³ The definition of dissidence and dissidents in the Soviet setting is a topic in itself which I will not go into here. Suffice it to say that a commonly used way of identifying dissidents is to refer to persons who have been imprisoned one or several times on political grounds, or who overtly protested the system through clear political actions (cf. Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993, 251).

¹⁴ Many more individuals and actions could of course be mentioned; in Estonia, Tunne Kelam, Lagle Parek and Mart Niklus are, for example, prominent names. But since this article is not devoted to writing the history of Baltic dissidence in general, but instead focuses on the issue of explaining present democratic characteristics, this question is not addressed here.
In contrast to Central Eastern Europe, the room for both outright dissidence and the more loose forms of regime opposition were more limited in the Baltic states. A fact which, however, may have facilitated the formation of informal networks in the Baltic states is their size. Estonia with 1.5 million, Latvia with 2.4 and Lithuania with 3.5 million inhabitants all constitute societies where intellectuals and potential oppositionals rather easily have contact with each other. At the same time, they were republics of the Soviet Union, and furthermore, republics where Moscow could expect resistance because of nationalist sentiments and cultural and linguistic estrangement. Political opposition, for that reason and also because the question of nationalism had been of great importance for the still-young Baltic states at the time of Soviet incorporation, often became a resistance dressed in cultural terms, focusing on issues of national heritage like literature, monuments and, of course, language.

In Lithuania, the Catholic Church furthermore channelled sentiments of opposition (cf. Lane, 2003). A mild form of regime resistance thus took place within the Baltic states, but was played out in a sort of tacit negotiation between the activists and the authorities, primarily represented by the KGB, where the activists often balanced on the edge of what was allowed. Estonia stands out among the three as exceptional in the manner that clearly organized networks with overt cultural, historical, and nationalistic aims were formed already in the early 1970s (cf. Ruutsoo, 2002, 110-116). While a few but less persistent and organized activities at least partly outside the Communist party, can also be found in Lithuania in the 1960s and 1970s, no such collectively formed groupings or networks surfaced in Latvia until the period of perestroika in the mid 1980s, when official Soviet policies began to open up and allow for more grass-root activities. Hence, Estonia was the state among the three were the possibilities of an alternative elite to form were the greatest. In contrast, despite singular events, civil society in both Lithuania and in particular in Latvia remained much too weak and immature to allow for such a development.

To substantiate my conclusion, what follows below is an admittedly brief empirical description of the most visible and important expressions which contributed to the formation

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15 Until the beginning of the 1950s, “forest brothers” still operated in the woods, resisting the Soviet army with weapons in hand (cf. Laar, 1992).
17 It is of course risky and difficult to state with complete certainty that something as nebulous and informal as networks did not exist, since traces of them are mostly undocumented and need to be reconstructed through personal information. However, although I have conducted interviews with a large part of the Latvian political elite, often explicitly asking for eventual information about such activities, the result has so far stayed very meagre in comparison to, in particular, Estonia.
of a civil society under Communism particularly in Estonia. The purpose is to show that an alternative elite actually was formed successively during the 1970s and 1980s. This elite, in the later democratic transition, came to play a decisive role.

**Estonian formation of an alternative elite**

In 1974, a so-called “Book lovers campaign” was centrally initiated from Moscow with the intention of improving reading habits in the Soviet republics. This official act by the authorities, if used in the right manner, provided a sanctioned opportunity to organize. For a small group (the initiators were highschool friends from Tartu) it constituted the signal to start a book-lovers club in the capital, Tallinn, called “Tõru” (English: acorn, Swedish: ekollon). They were all representatives of the political generation of the thaw, “who matured politically in a liberalized ideological and cultural environment begun by Khrushchev after Stalin’s death, and ended by the invasion of Czechoslovakia” (Aarelaid-Tart, 2000, 108). Officially presented to the authorities as a “Book lovers society”, Club Tõru started to meet regularly every month, a pattern which persisted for over twelve years, without any break or direct interference from the KGB. Within this context a surprisingly stable organizational platform was thus established. The regulations of admission were strict. Only trusted friends were admitted, proposed by at least two other members, a precaution taken to keep the number of members down so that the constant risk of infiltration by the KGB was minimized. Besides the surprisingly early establishment of the Club18, the endurance of the Tõru is a striking feature.

Its external attributes were highly symbolic, expressing both the dreams as well as the identities to which the initiators wanted to relate. The name “Tõru” signified the small acorn which would eventually grow into a mighty oak, a birth process symbolizing Estonian nationalism. The physical setting of the club’s meeting was to be a fireside club, representing informality, honesty, and a British life-style – the very opposite of the official, double-faced, Soviet state.19 Since fireplaces were rare in Estonia at the time, the solution was to meet at a fireside lodge outside of Tallinn. In the club’s regular meetings, Estonian culture, heritage, and history were discussed, and guests were invited with particular knowledge of these respective areas. Excursions arranged by the Club to different geographical parts of Estonia were made, so as to familiar the members with Estonian geography. Outright political

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18 Earlier literature has acknowledged the presence of a civil society in Estonia starting somewhere around 1980 (Gerner, 2003, 160, Ruutsoo, 2002), but the important (though admittedly not strictly in the civil society realm) activities of Club Tõru seems to have gone unnotized.

19 The connection to Britain was not random. Trivimi Velliste, one of three founders, was an English linguist.
activities in the sense of ideological discussions or criticism of the Communist rule were thus never practiced, and it is not correct to regard Club Tõru as an anti-communist group.20 But since it aimed at educating intellectuals about, as well as restoring and preserving these expressions of Estonian history and culture, the club’s focus was nevertheless implicitly challenged the official Soviet all-union doctrine.

According to the founder, Club Tõru now and then attracted the interest of the KGB, but was never officially banned or forced to close down. The challenge for the authorities lay not in the Club’s interest in any political or aggressive nationalism, but instead in its willingness to promote and even disseminate knowledge about Estonian cultural history, a nationalism which in the particular context of the all-Union Soviet became politically sensitive. The initiators were a small group of friends, but through its regular and long-lasting activities, Club Tõru grew into a larger social network, tied together by the quite cautious soft resistance of the Club, the ideas of Estonian nationalism, and the personal bonds which grew over the years. Persons active in Club Tõru have also later found their way into political posts in democratic Estonia, such as the founder Trivimi Velliste, who became foreign minister in the first democratic government from 1992, and who today is a prominent member of the Estonian parliament. Club Tõru represents an important first manifestation of collective Estonian mobilization under Communism, paving the way for later steps towards civil society.21

In 1975, a so-called home-town movement (Estonian: Kodulinn) aimed at preserving, cleaning, and educating young citizens about their home-town, started among high school students in Tallinn. The initiator Tiina Mägi was a tv-journalist interested in architecture and national history, but Kodulinn became also an official organization. Mägi was not inspired by outright anti-communist ambitions, but instead by a strong desire to care for the often-neglected parts of the Hanseatic old town in Tallinn, mainly through practical work.22 The work the participants of Kodulinn carried out together, for example cleaning up old churchyards and grave-stones in the heart of the city, and renovating facades of century-old buildings which had been left to fall into decay, simultaneously became a way by which the young, rather desillusioned “Brezhnev” generation (Aareleid-Tart, 2000) of Tallinn

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20 One of the founders is eager to emphasize that the purpose of Club Tõru never was oppositional, but that it served the purpose of being a meeting place for young men with intellectual interests who wanted to meet for discussions. However, as is often the case, the ideas regarding the Club and its aims probably varied between the persons participating, something which need not be a problem as long as not explicitly discussed.
21 Information about Club Tõru emanates from one of the three founders, Trivimi Velliste, interviewed in Tallinn, 2004-02-20. Trivimi Velliste is today a member of the Estonian Parliament, Riigikogu, and was also one of the initiators of the Estonian Heritage Society.
highschool students recovered Estonian history, and learned to care about and value the specifics of Estonian (and Tallinn) culture. Thus, though the purpose was not primarily to protest Soviet or Communist rule, the aims of cultural preservation and historical engagement became again an indirect challenge to the major Soviet idea of an all-Union identity, where nationalism played no part as proclaimed by the authorities. In that sense, Kodulinn and Club Tõru resembled each other. The common work and the sense of community established among the students within the Kodulinn movement contributed to an awakening or in certain cases a strengthening of a national consciousness among the students. The high school student Mart Laar, who in 1992 became the first prime minister of independent Estonia, participated in the Kodulinn movement as a student in Tallinn. In 1978, the same Mart Laar started his studies at the history department at Tartu University (Tartu is the major university town of Estonia) as one in the “class of 1978”. The Tartu history department during the Soviet times was considered the most “oppositional” at the university, and professors, like Sulev Vahtr and Helmut Pirimäe were not members of the Communist party, which was otherwise a common feature for professionals, not least of most university professors, in high official positions. As Laar writes:

An der historischen Fakultät der Universität Tartu herrschte ein Geist, der die Sowjetunion mit ihnen Restriktionen schlichtweg ignorierte und ein Leben als freier Mensch in einem freien Land heraufbeschwor. Diese Gesinnung war den hervorragenden Lehrkräften zu verdanken (Laar, 2002, 21).

What the academic history discipline in Tartu provided in particular was a setting in which some of the nationally-minded professors could alert their students also to Estonian history dating back before 1940, thus challenging the official picture established by the Soviets. The history class of 1978, which studied together for five years and graduated in 1983, became something of a political generation in itself. An informal network under the leadership of three prominent students in the history class quickly formed. The leading students were Mart Laar, Lauri Vahtr (son of the history professor Sulev Vahtr), and Heiki Valk. All belong to the disillusioned “Brezhnev generation”, formed politically during the years of “economic stagnation and increased ideological control in 1969-85” (Aarelaid-Tart,

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24 The studies were organized as programmes where the students followed a curricula which spanned over five years. While freedom of choice and individual deviances were minimal, the programme structure at the same time meant that the group of students became closely knit. They also all lived in special dormatories.
2000, 108), and they were all quite pessimistic about the Estonian future in the Soviet Union, yet felt that there was nothing to lose; things were already as bad as they could get. Action was needed. Laar brought to this group the ideas of the Kodulinn-movement from Tallinn, and soon the three initiated a similar movement in Tartu. However, it was not an organization with registered members, a practice associated with Communist official policies, but simply a “movement” without official recognition, initiated and maintained by the students themselves. It was simply called Noor Tartu (English: Young Tartu) (Laar, 2002, 22). In the Communist context, what was unique about Noor Tartu was its non-official status. This was the first Estonian collective mobilization truly emanating from the grass-roots and staying there, neither formed nor taken under the wings of the Communist party. That is also one of the reasons why suspicions against the movement grew within the KGB. 

Noor Tartu, like Kodulinn in Tallinn a home-town movement, concerned itself with similar assignments such as cleaning up old cemeteries and grave-stones, thereby officially doing community service while simultaneously, and in the long run of more importance, contributing to the restoration and preservation of Estonian history. The students participating in Noor Tartu renovated a cellar donated to them by the Tartu museum on the Ülikooli street in central Tartu, very close to the main university building, which provided a permanent spot for meeting regularly for several years.

At the most, the group consisted of between thirty to forty active students, the core being the history class of 1978 mentioned above, from which many of the students participated actively. But in contrast to both Club Tõru and Kodulinn, even though community service was prominent, the leading persons of Noor Tartu were more clearly driven by anti-communist aspirations, even though Soviet power had not yet begun to crumble and perestroika lay years ahead. Noor Tartu was an instrument, for some of its participants, for channelling regime resistance in a more deliberate way than had been the case with either Club Tõru or Kodulinn. “Already in 1979 the group was very targeted against the Komsomol: there were democratic procedures and elections and huge discussions of democracy.” For others, Noor Tartu did not predominantly represent an attempt to resist Communist power, but primarily offered

26 Noor Tartu deliberately alluded to the Estonian nationalistic movement in the late nineteenth century, Noor Eesti.
27 Interviews have been conducted with the three leading figures, and with several “ordinary” participants in order to deepen and nuance the picture of Noor Tartu. Madis Kanabik, Tartu, 2004-02-19, Kärt Jenes-Kapp, Tallinn, 2004-02-22, Mart Kalm, 2004-09-27, Rūnno Vissak, Tartu, 2004-02-19, and Eero Medijainen, Tartu, 2004-02-19.
community and the opportunity to come together for social reasons and a shared purpose.\(^{29}\)

*Noor Tartu* was closed down by the KGB in the beginning of 1984.

The *Noor Tartu*-movement is an example of an early grass-root activity entirely outside the realm of the Soviet state, challenging the authorities through its emphasis on historical and cultural activities aimed at restoring Estonian collective memory. The strong anti-Communism uniting the leaders Laar, Vahtr, and Valk, separates it from its predecessors, even though *Noor Tartu* should not be considered solely oppositional. It definitely served social purposes as well.

In 1986, when perestroika had already started, officially allowing and even encouraging initiatives from outside the Communist party, the *Estonian Heritage Society* (Estonian:        ) following in the footsteps of *Kodulinn* and *Noor Tartu*, was founded. Trivimi Velliste from *Club Tõru* played a leading role, but its roots also go back to the *Kodulinn* movement, and to *Noor Tartu*. The movement was built around a large number of local societies in small towns and cities, involving many thousands of participants, and fulfilled the purpose that had been launched by the home-town movements of preserving and restoring Estonian history and culture. The Heritage society has been compared in some respects to a political party and definitely played an important role in the nationalist movement (Misiunas & Taagepera, 1993:314).\(^{30}\)

But as the above description shows, the *Estonian Heritage Society* represented not the beginning but rather the end of a chain starting at least in 1974, and over the years growing in visibility, consciousness, and, I would add, anti-communism.

Tartu University played a particular role in the growth of the nationalist-minded Estonian movement, and it is no exaggeration to say that the university’s role as an independent intellectual centre became decisive for Estonia’s political transition. In the history department, the students learned about Estonian history, and as regards the informal dissemination of critique and knowledge from the radical professors, we can only speculate.

There was, however, another section of the university which by many has been described as developing into a cradle of free thought successively during the 1980s. This was the department of journalism under the leadership of the liberal-minded Communist and sociology-professor Marju Lauristin, who after independence was minister in Laar’s first


\(^{30}\) Interview Marju Lauristin, 2001-03-01. Laar writes in his memoirs that the movement “rief zu einem neuen nationalen Erwachen auf” (2002, 28).
government between 1992-1995, and has been a long-time member of the Estonian parliament. In fact, the journalism department could be considered to have had an even larger direct influence on transitional political developments in Estonia, since several of the students, such as Jüri Luik, Indrek Kannik, and Tiit Prühli advanced into powerful political positions. The history and journalism students furthermore lived in neighbouring houses in Tartu, thus socially turning them into a small geographical island of “liberal thought”.

In 1988, a group of journalism students, among them Jüri Luik and Indrek Kannik, who later became ministers in the Laar government after 1992, decided to arrange an informal seminar where social science literature, copied from the West, was to be discussed and debated. Clearly future-oriented topics, such as the choice of liberalism or social democracy for Estonia were on the agenda, as were economic theories of development – although no one present was a trained economist.31 While the activities of Tõru, Kodulinn, Noor-Tartu, and the Heritage Society all focused on rebuilding national consciousness by reconquering Estonian history, culture and language, in this Tartu-seminar political and economic alternatives for a democratic Estonia had now come into focus. In less than ten years time, great changes had taken place.

Finally, Tartu university life saw the official re-birth of the oldest Estonian student association, where social ties important for the subsequent political formation were knit. Eesti Üliõpilaste Liit (EÜS) (Eng: Estonian Student Association), was restored in 1988, and revived traditions inspired by German student traditions that dominated the student corporations during the first Estonian republic in the 1920s and 30s.32 Prominent characteristics of the corporations were the focus on codes of conduct, honour, and the social obligations towards fellow members. Following this tradition, the code of honour within the EÜS was consequently strict, and mutual obligations of loyalty towards fellow members were demanding. Ethics played a leading role in the student association as well as nationalism, and “if corrupted you immediately got expelled from the organization: socially among the student friends a very terrible fate”.33 The core group of people active in the Tartu seminar of journalism, as well as the history students also found themselves in the EÜS during these years. The core group of Tõru, and even Noor Tartu however, represented another and older, generation.

32 What is today Estonian territory was for many centuries ruled by the Baltic-Germans. Even though the former Baltic-German elite was detested during the independent inter-war years, German influences still continued to exercise a certain influence (Bennich-Björkman, 2005 forthcoming).
33 Interview Mart Laar, Tallinn 2001-05-02.
When the Estonian *Rahvarinne* (Popular Front) was founded in June 1988 by the moderate Communist Edgar Savisaar, as an attempt to mobilize popular participation in favour of increasing Estonian autonomy, Estonia looked back at a comparatively prolonged history of informal mobilization. The Popular Front organized liberal-minded Communists as well as non-partisans, but an alternative, nationally oriented, and more outspokenly anti-Communist movement existed parallel to the *Rahvarinne*, gathering together many of the individuals from the 1970s and 1980s who had been participating in the networks just described. Their organizational contributions were the Citizens committees and the Citizens Congress, the latter an alternative parliament to the Estonian Supreme Soviet (or Supreme Council). These persons never joined the Popular Front in contrast to Latvia, but instead established parallel organizations (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 1997, 89-90). One of the major issues for this movement quickly became the heated question of citizenship.

I stated above that Estonia is exceptional among the Baltic states and in the Soviet Union, in respect to the early and surprisingly organized “cultural opposition”, the roots of which can be traced back at least to the early 1970s. Particularly important was the personal and ideological overlap of the different clubs, movements, and later more formal organizations, linking them together and contributing to form an alternative elite of certain maturity and preparedness. Many of these people had taken risks together. They had fought, in different ways, for what they believed to be morally right, and furthermore, they had gained at least a minimum experience of organizational and political work.

**Networks and Semi-Autonomous Society in Latvia and Lithuania**

Latvia and Lithuania have (as far as I have been able to discern through the numerous interviews with former dissidents, activists, and political actors active before transition, during it and during the democratic years) no equivalent to the Estonian informal networks and collective organizations just described, either in scope or in continuity. That is, however, not to say that there were no dissidents, protest activities, or underground activities during the Communist time (cf. Krickus, 1997, 37). In Lithuania, two “forces”, one underground and one official, incarnated resistance – again understood in a broad sense – towards the regime. During the 1970s, the so-called *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* was distributed underground, i.e. as a *samizdat* publication, behind which stood three Catholic dissidents of the pre-war generation, among them the earlier mentioned Viktoras Petkus. But the

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34 Also see interview with Viktoras Petkus, Vilnius, 2004-03-08.
35 Interview Arvydas Sliogeris, Vilnius, 2005-02-03.
Catholic Church was forbidden, and the activities were scattered and clandestine. However, in Lithuania a movement developed which was specifically active in the late 1960s and until 1971, based on ideas of reviving the rural and ancient roots of Lithuanian culture, slightly resembling the ideas of Tõru and Noor Tartu. The movement was called Romuva, and grew up around a small group of philosophers and linguists at Vilnius University around 1965, under the leadership of Jonas Trinkunas. From the start, the group formed around a common interest in India, spurred by the visit of an Indian lecturer but foremost by the kinship between the ancient Lithuanian language and Sanskrit, which both belong to the unusual group of Indo-European languages. Studying Indian culture and history, thus also provided a bridge to Lithuanian cultural roots. Successively, the focus on Lithuania and its cultural heritage grew, and Romuva became an official organization. But the activities of the movement, which included collecting documents and utensils from rural villages, celebrating pagan rituals – paganism being the more genuine Lithuanian “religion” since Lithuania was among the last countries in Europe to become Christianized -, pushed the limits of what could be allowed by the authorities. As in Estonia, searching for national Lithuanian roots in ancient history and by excursions to the Lithuanian rural parts was a form of soft resistance. However, unlike the case in Estonia, this was not with anti-communist overtures, which were practically absent in the Lithuanian case, but instead by challenging the idea of an all-Union Soviet identity.

The leading persons were Jonas Trinkunas, Arvydas Sliogeris, and Vaclovas Bagdonavicius. In 1971, Trinkunas was interrogated by the KGB, and forbidden to continue his activities within the Romuva. He lost his job at the university, and although he finally returned to the movement, 1971 marked the end of its more regime-challenging activities. Even though Romuva could have paved the way for networks similar to those in Estonia, it was disarmed too early to actually play any substantial role for developments in the late 1980s. Aside from the Catholic resistance and the Romuva, who opposed each other since Romuva rejected Christianity as not being authentically Lithuanian, the major oppositional force of outright political character in Lithuania was a few small, but not interconnected, networks of university students forming around socialdemocratic ideas in the 1960s and 1970s. As post-graduate Lithuanian students at Moscow university between 1965-1969, Dobelis Kirvelis and a few of his friends became interested in the ideas of social-democracy, and met to discuss

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37 Interview Vaclovas Bagdonavicius, Vilnius, 2005-02-02.
these ideas over the years they spent in Moscow. Likewise, in Kaunas, Vytenis Andriukaitis, whose father had been an active social-democrat during the first Lithuanian republic, initiated an underground social democratic organisation with the participation of several other students. This was, however, not a club for personal meetings. Instead literature, and documents were circulated to persons in the network. But even though these groups, and perhaps others, existed, they were scattered, never met in person, and basically had no knowledge of each other. When the Lithuanian Social Democratic party was officially re-established in 1989, these small “streams” came together. However, the social democratic “movement” did not at all constitute the continuous and personally overlapping chain of networks which was found in Estonia. I stated above, that Romuva was never anti-communist. Nor was the social democratic movement, which reacted and condemned Lithuania’s lack of independence, although it was not ideologically particularly critical. This perhaps seems surprising, but actually reflects a profound difference between Estonia and Lithuania regarding the extent to which Communism was ideologically accepted, a difference that also persists today.

The establishment in Lithuania of Sajudis, the Lithuanian Popular Front, even if firstly orchestrated by Moscow, marked thus something more or less completely new in the Lithuanian context, since it became the vehicle for large-scale popular mobilization. The philosophy department at Vilnius University played a crucial role in the formation of Sajudis. Several in the so called initiative group (35 persons) of Sajudis had a background in philosophy. This includes Alvyrdas Juozaitis, Bronislavas Kuzmickas, and Petrus Genzelis. In this respect, a prominent university milieu again came to play a certain role, not in the phase of liberalization as Tartu did in Estonia, but in the process of democratization. In both Lithuania and Estonia the humanities – history, journalism, philosophy – constituted that platform. Early on, persons with stronger nationalist sentiments such as Vytautas Landsbergis joined the movement and quickly rose to leading positions which for some was highly disturbing.

In Latvia, a more organized club for the protection of the environment was established as late as 1986 by biologists, among them the former prime minister (2004) Indulis Emsis

39 Interview Dobelis Kirvelis, Vilnius, 2005-02-03.
40 Interview Vytenis Poyilas Androkratis, Vilnius, 2004-09-17.
43 See interview Vytautas Petkevicius, Vilnius, 2005-02-02, who holds the view that Landsbergis betrayed the original ideas of Sajudis, and was an infiltrator working for Russian interests.
It was called *Vides Aizsardzibas Klubs* (VAK) (Trapans, 1991, 28). There may have been an informal network preceding the VAK in time, as the journalist Clare Thomson writes in 1992 that: “the core of the Green Movement was in existence at least a decade ago when a small group of artists and intellectuals used to meet secretly in private flats where they discussed forbidden topics such as Latvian heritage and the restoration of churches and other historical monuments which Stalin had destroyed” (Thomson, 1992, 175, cf. Gibson, 2001 on the “apartment society”). In my own interviews, however, I have not been able to confirm the existence of the network as described by Thomson. In contrast to the situation in Lithuania, the Latvian Communist regime was repressive and non-indigenously oriented, which can contribute to explaining the lack of even soft resistance before the mid-1980s. The dangers were too obvious. When *Tautas Fronte*, the Latvian Popular Front, was founded in October 1988, as in Lithuania it truly marked the era of something new. It gathered persons of all convictions who were intoxicated by the new freedom and the opportunity to act collectively. In contrast to both Lithuania and Estonia, individuals educated in the humanities did not play such a crucial role in Latvia. But the Popular Front most certainly engaged, broadly speaking, the intelligentsia – journalists, artists, writers – as well as more technically skilled natural scientists.

In sum, Estonia differs greatly from the other two Baltic states regarding the extent to which civil society formed itself already under Communism, producing a number of interconnected groups and persons who, when democratization started, possessed some previous experience and a strong enough moral identity so as to constitute an actual alternative elite. That, in my view, was Estonia’s good fortune. In contrast to Lithuania, which lacked alternative elites but instead was blessed with a moderate and reformed Communist party, Estonia’s rather repressive Communist party did not have either a usable past or a moral identity which could benefit them in democratic governing. However, the third state, Latvia, entered the democratic era with no an experienced and reformed Communist party. The Latvian Communist party had the most repressive background of the three states; nor did it have a previously formed alternative elite. Both of these conditions proved to be great democratic disadvantages. That a Latvian alternative elite with roots in pre-democratic times did not exist is, however, not to say that no powerful successor party entered the stage when independent elections were held in 1993. Such a Latvian party most certainly existed, but it started to form

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44 Interview Indulis Emsis, Riga, 2003-10-20.
later, in the aftermath of the elections to the Supreme Council in 1990 and over the following years. Nevertheless, it succeeded in gaining government power in 1993.

**Dominant Parties in the First Independence Governments**

The elections in 1992 (Estonia and Lithuania) and 1993 (Latvia) were the first after independence. While the 1990s elections were dominated by the-then still vibrant Popular Fronts, these next elections already saw a large number of mostly newly formed or re-established\(^{45}\) political parties running for parliament. The elections resulted in governments (although all of them coalition ones), dominated by particularly one party in the three Baltic states, *Pro Patria* in Estonia, *Latvijas Cels* (Eng: Latvian Way), and the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDDP). *Pro Patria* received 28.7 percent of the seats, *Latvia’s Way* 36 percent, and LDDP (the reformed communist party) in Lithuania 54 percent (Kreutzer & Pettai, 1999). The winner in Estonia was the nationalist movement, the roots of which were described above. In 1991, before the election campaign started, the Estonian *Pro Patria* party was founded. The party leader became the key person from *Noor Tartu* and the *Heritage Society* Mart Laar, and the party rested on Christian-Democratic ideas and Estonian cultural nationalism nourished throughout the many years of the movements in the 1970s and 80s. The background of *Pro Patria* could be traced to some of the Tartu networks mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the party – as well as the government – rested on a core of persons defining themselves as intellectuals rather than pragmatists. The party, and even the entire government coalition, was equipped by the beneficial resources that the experiences described above implied as well as, and quite importantly, the moral fervour created by the soft resistance towards russification, communism and occupation which constituted the common history on which many looked back. *Pro Patria* was a merger of several smaller Christian-Democratic parties and groups in Estonia, all of which started to form around 1988-1989. As Laar describes it, the CDU in Germany played a rather crucial role in the process of uniting these different groups before the founding elections in June 1992 (Laar, 2002, 70-72). In September 1992, the party gained almost 29 percent of the seats in the Estonian parliament, the *Riigikogu*. During the following two years *Pro Patria*, with the support of the nationalist *Estonian National Independence party* (ENIP) and the *Mõdukaads* (social democratic orientation) played a crucial role in leading Estonia’s transition to democracy and capitalism.

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\(^{45}\) By re-established, I refer to the fact that they were parties which had existed already in the independent inter-war states (cf. Lewis, 2000, ch.2).
The Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDDP) won a landslide victory in the 1992 elections. Under the leadership of the highly popular Algirdas Brauzauskas, and with the support of the former *Sajudis* wing of pragmatists gathered in the *Forum for the Future*, it was actually possible for this reformed Communist party to return to power and completely wipe out the popular front *Sajudis* from the political scene. Brauzauskas was a pragmatist, but also a liberal reformer and a politician who had encouraged Lithuanian independence. With respect to financial assets and organizational experience, clearly the Democratic Labour Party had substantial means at its disposal which could not be paralleled by any other actor. But besides that, the party with its history of moderation and Lithuanian-orientation, as well as its reinforced identity of a moral risk-taker fighting for Lithuanian independence, was well equipped for the task of governing the new state during the first four years of turbulence, privatizations, and unsettled power conditions. In 1996 however, the Democratic Labour Party lost power to the former *Sajudis*, which had re-created itself as the Homeland Union (Conservatives).

I will focus the rest of this section on Latvia which had neither an experienced and reformed Communist party nor an experienced and morally imbued alternative elite. To understand the difficulties of the ruling party *Latvijas Cels* during these politically formative years, we have to consider that party’s particular background and formation. Therefore, the particularities concerning the formation of the party will be spelled out, since they are of great importance in understanding why the Latvian elite culture started to develop in a direction which disencouraged elite integrity.

**The creation of *Latvijas Cels***

Strange as it may seem, *Latvijas Cels* was not officially founded until after the elections to the first post-independence parliament in September 1993. During the elections, it was an electoral alliance running for office. The party has been described as a kind of political machine, enrolling individuals keen on political power rather than being motivated by ideological commitments (Lieven, 1993: 301, cf. Nissinen 1999:130). Such a description is too simplified, but as we will see contains a grain of truth.

The roots of *Latvijas Cels* date back only one and a half years before the establishment of the party in 1993, meaning that neither political experience nor a moral identity formed through soft resistance was part of the party’s legacy. The need to form what was seen as a “modern and European” party emanated from the initiative of a number of deputies linked to the

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Economic Commission and the Commission for Foreign Affairs in the Supreme Council. The first important step was to set up a political club – Club 21. Inspired by the visit in late 1991 to a liberal political club in France, the founders, the two journalists Indulis Berzins and Janis Krumins, wanted to create something similar in Riga. At least one other person was also quite involved from the start, although his role as a founder is more uncertain: Valdis Birkavs, a lawyer elected to the Supreme Council, a member of the legislative commission there, and later chairman of the Latvijas Cels and prime minister. The club was not open to everyone but was based on admittance through the suggestion of other members.

Even though the stories told about Club 21 can be rather spectacular, the purposes behind the club were fairly concrete and down to earth. Latvia needed a political party with internationally feasible ideas, the founders believed. Club 21 was the means by which to create a platform to realize this aim. Club 21 was established in February 1992 after a Christmas greeting had appeared in the newspapers in December 1991, signed by twenty-one people.

Krumins’ own description of the atmosphere in which the ideas of the Club were first conceived indicates that both he himself and Indulis Berzins, as intellectuals, were disappointed at the low level of political skill and education that they met among other delegates to the Supreme Council: “They were not ready for political life – they were from the countryside, not so educated”. Hence, the long-term goal from the start was to establish a political party, but since ‘party’ had a bad ring to it at the time the purpose of the club was not openly declared, even if, as Krumins puts it, “some of them understood”. The number of the founding members at the February meeting was 63 (= 21 x 3). The opening of in February 1992 was as theatrical as the rules of entrance: there were statutes and a law (of one sentence) which were read aloud from a tribune by the founder Indulis Berzins.

Basically, the Club served three purposes. First, it offered a social arena in which a new and integrative network could be formed, the basis for a modern, Western and open party, which should be able to promote progressive Latvian politics. “The people invited to the club were like-minded people: tolerance, democracy, market economy” as Valdis Birkavs says.

49 Interview Janis Krumins, Riga 2001-10-27.
50 Interview Janis Krumins, Riga 2001-10-17.
51 However, one of the key persons in the Club and later in Latvia’s Way, Andrejs Pantalejvs, downplays the role of Club 21 as a deliberate basis for a future party. Interview in Riga, 2003-10-21. Interview also Edvins Inkens, Riga, 2004-09-28.
Secondly, *Club 21* provided input, the importance of which however is uncertain, regarding ideas and experiences from the West on democratic, economic and administrative issues. Foreign experts were occasionally invited to the club, such as ambassadors and notable representatives. Thirdly, the club served as a national think-tank, gathering together like-minded people of a liberal and Western-oriented nature to discuss future alternatives for Latvian political and economic development.

Who was invited to *Club 21*? The declared aim was to integrate society, not to exclude groups or individuals. Such an ambition must be regarded against the particular demographic Latvian background, which was a multiethnic society, but one in which citizenship questions quickly became politicized. A modern party, the founders believed, rested on ethnic diversity, pluralism and tolerance; this was the idea guiding the founders as they recruited members. *Club 21* rested on three “whales” explains Krumins and Berzins. Political entrepreneurs, the intelligentsia, and last but not least, the (new) economic entrepreneurs (business). While the political entrepreneurs formed the core of *Club 21*, people from the cultural field, the “intelligentsia”, were invited since they enjoyed a high reputation in Latvia. The third group, however, is more interesting in this context. Why were the economic entrepreneurs, the new capitalists of Latvia invited to what was a political club aimed at party formation? They were brought in to guarantee financial support to projects and to support the future party, states Krumins and Berzins. In other words, the pragmatic attitude of the founders of *Club 21* made them see the new entrepreneurs as useful allies in their political efforts. That was a gross miscalculation, and one which I believe was grounded in the lack of both strategic experience and moral identity. The decision to base *Club 21* on economic entrepreneurs along with the politicians and the intelligentsia was a choice of great consequence for Latvia’s future political development. It opened up direct avenues of pressure for entrepreneurs into the political parties, primarily through *Latvia’s Cels* but soon through other parties as well. In addition to their economic influence, these entrepreneurs could hence rely on personal ties and friendship connections formed not least in the Club in demanding favourable treatment from ministers and others (cf. Nørgaard and Hersted Hansen, 2000). This showed already when *Club 21* was still active (it closed down unofficially in 1994/95). As the first euphoric feelings of independence started to fade, the idealistic motivations of working for a common cause gave way to more egoistical ambitions, and as privatization proceeded onward, the economic entrepreneurs increased their strength and power. “The business people started to

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make this lobby in the Club 21. To the Club came prime ministers, Godmanis, then
Gorbunovs etc - business people wanted to use this possibility and lobby for themselves, not
for the interests of the Club. I had control from the beginning over the business people but
they wanted to lobby for themselves”, recalls Krumins in a somewhat disillusioned manner.

When the party Latvijas Cels was established in September 1993, it rested on three
pillars. Club 21 was the most important one, and the core of the party consisted of members of
the Club. This is true for Indulis Berzins, Valdis Birkavs, Māris Gailis, Anatolijs Gorbunovs,
and Ojars Kehris, among others.54 Through the Club 21 network close ties between politics
and economics moved into the party sphere. Soviet era Communists like Anatolijs Gorbunovs
formed the second and not so important pillar of the party, while émigré Latvians returning
from abroad to help build an independent Latvia formed the third.
The late formation of Latvijas Cels in the turbulent period when state and capitalism-building
had already started, and the fact that it, and the leaders, lacked roots back in time which could
have provided strategic and organizational experience and a common history of moral
honesty, meant that the the core group behind the party were really political novices. They
were quite inexperienced in both power-plays and strategic decision-making but at the same
time were not imbued by the identity of representing the morally honest line which could have
served as a contraint on action. This unfortunate combination, rather than any malevolence of
the leadership of the Club and the later party, led to unwise decisions and miscalculations
regarding, in particular, assessing the relations and development in the power balance
between politics and business. Once the pattern of ties between the leading political party and
business interests was forming, coinciding with the politically constitutive phase, it became
endemic in Latvian political life, and contributed to successively aggravating the problem of
elite integrity.

Conclusions

In the Baltic states, the political elites governing in the formative, first years after democratic
elections differed profoundly. During this period, the political society was formed, and the
identity and experience of the leading political forces became particularly important in
moulding the trajectories taken. I have shown, that what matters is not primarily doing away
with the Communists, even if that may seem desirable to some. Consequently, for a state to be

54 Personal fax information from Andris Berzins (LC), former prime minister, for information regarding LC
persons also active in Club 21.
governed by an alternative elite is not a necessary blessing, either. Latvia, where a successor party definitely came to power in 1993, even today is plagued by the greatest problem of state capture, and I may add elite openness defined as the proportion of female political representation (cf. Matland, 2003), while Lithuania where the reformed Communist party returned to power in 1992, has been able to maintain rather high levels of elite integrity, despite recent severe challenges. In Estonia, the alternative elite rising to power, however, in contrast to Latvia created a political system where elite integrity has been reasonably well upheld. A shared moral identity and pre-democratic political experience have been pointed out as the core characteristics of the two parties which actually made it: Pro Patria in Estonia and the Democratic Labour Party in Lithuania. Political and organizational experience should never be underestimated, and clearly the Communist parties in all the post-communist countries were the ones which possessed that. But not all experience, as Gryzmala-Busse so insightfully points out, is useful in democratic politics. The Communist parties with a moderate tradition behind them, were much better equipped than their more repressive counterparts. The LDDP in Lithuania was such a party, and combined it with the moral identity gained by nationalism and separation from Moscow. While Pro Patria in comparison to LDDP necessarily had much less organizational experience, and no experience whatsoever of governing, the movements, discussions and mobilization activities during the 1980s anyhow provided the new government party with certain resources in that field. However, its strongest asset was the unanimous moral identity and the collective history upon which the party could look back. It was a morally bound political actor, bound by its past and the actions which had been taken then. Latvijas Cels, although dominated by what Åslund would consider liberal reformers (2002), did not have any of these characterstics. Nor, I may add, did other political parties in Latvia.

55 The scandal with the former president Paksas, who suffered impeachment because of alleged connections to Russian organized crime in 2004, has been one such challenge. Accusations against present members of parliament of taking bribes is another, and an affair with KGB reserve lists yet another.
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*Interviews (see footnotes in the text).*