Local Leadership in East-Central Europe: Socio-Demographical Profiles and Value Attainment in Four Towns

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1. Introductory remarks. Theoretical assessments

The social biography of the local political elites can be perceived as "a set of social resources which are transformed in official positions and in influence, positions and influence that are not available those who do not possess such resources. The access to the political class demands the employ with increased ability of the personal resources […]" (Stoica 2003: 107). Moreover, as Harasymiw has aptly observed, "the composition of political elites is relevant to the content of public policies" (Harasymiw 1984: 3), the social background of the members of the local elite being partly responsible for the policy priorities for their community. Hence, the social characteristics of the members of the local political elite constituted, in an initial phase, components of eligibility in the candidates' recruitment and party nomination processes.

Conversely, an analysis of the opinions and attitudes adopted by the local political elite is instrumental and paramount in the description of this group. In reference to the views, perceptions, opinions and attitudes of the local political elite, and starting from the very simple, blunt and plausible assumption that the preferences, the orientations and the values of the leaders matter more than those of the masses, Robert Putnam (1976: 80) identifies four major orientations in the attitudes of this type of elite: cognitive orientations (predispositions based on which individuals interpret the existing reality; *e.g.* the attitudes regarding the social conflict); normative orientations (assessments regarding the way the society should be; *e.g.* the attitudes, ideologically motivated, towards the economical equality); interpersonal orientations (perceptions about the other segments of the political elite); stylistic orientations ("structural characteristics of the beliefs systems of the political elite" – Stoica 2003: 179). Certain values embraced by the representatives of the local political elite can be explained by their social background: for instance, it is expected that those coming from lower class families are inclined to favor

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economic equality. Other values are acquired in the process of socialization (*i.e.* the type of education, the episodes of primary socialization, etc.).

2. Methodological remarks: the case studies, research objectives, questions, and methods

The present research is concerned with the issue of local leadership in the countries of East-Central Europe. Concretely, the intended research started as an attempt to examine, in a comparative manner, the profile and the role of the local political elites in four transitional democracies of East-Central Europe, Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, and the elites' impact on the evolution of the local communities in the developing region of former Sovietized Europe. Focal case studies are four small towns, *Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica*, and *Gyula*, quite similar in terms of demographics (roughly 40.000 inhabitants) and developmental strategies (an economy based on the alimentary industry and on commerce activities, etc.)[1]. Hence, the scope of the research was initially rather descriptive, exploratory; an inductive, observatory process – an inquiry into a range of aspects worth pointing out when dealing with and discussing on the study of political elites. Surely, after the gathering of *data* and after confronting the stark differences among the four towns, the question appears: *what factors determine discrepancies among cases*?

Therefore, two are the principal research questions of interest here: (1) Which are the main socio-demographical features the local political elites of Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula display?, and (2) Which are the values, the perceptions, the orientations, embraced by the members of the local political elites in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula? Which are their attitudes towards key aspects concerning democracy, decentralization and autonomy, and cultural-geographical self-identification?

For pinpointing the elite groups at the level of the four communities, the paper employs the *positional method* of identifying and analyzing the local political elites, by operationalizing the phrase "local political elites" through the following definition: The local political elite is that group comprising those individuals in legislative and executive positions within the local leading, decision-making structure. The resulting population of the empirical research was thusly represented by the members of the Local/ Municipal Councils in Tecuci (19 persons), Česká Lípa (25 persons), Oleśnica (22 persons), and Gyula (21 persons) as they were in 2011-2013. The methods of gathering *data* favored by this paper include: the administration of a standard written questionnaire, document analysis on the minutes of the meetings of the four Councils, and participatory observation during the sessions of the Councils and of their specialized Committees.

[1] The manner in which the four towns were chosen corresponds to an initial selection based on the demographical and economic criteria, coupled with a convenience selection (*i.e.* those administrations that responded to the researcher's call).

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3. Results

3.1. How elitist is the local political elite in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula?

Following Eldersveld (1989), the present research asks the question of how "elitist" is the local political elite in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula? This does not exclusively refers to the economical status the members of the Local (Municipal) Council display, but also to their general perceptions regarding such democratic features as citizen participation, social mobility, economic equality, etc. and to a level of congruence between their values and perceptions and those of the people they represent, those of the electorate. One major indicator analyzed here is the fathers' occupation of the members of the Municipal Council, in order to further assess the degree of social mobility within the local political elite. Moreover, the social background of a local representative can provide a hint concerning his perceptions towards the poor sectors of the population, towards the socially disadvantaged, etc. In the case of Tecuci, according to the answers in the questionnaire provided by the members of the Local Council, the majority of the local councilors (78.94%) come from a lower or working class-based family. In such cases, their fathers have/ had only a lower to middle educational level (with only four or eight graduated classes, with an elementary education). For Česká Lípa, the Council comprises largely individuals coming from lower and working class families (68%), with a very slight difference from Tecuci. For Oleśnica, the percentage of councilors coming from a lower, working class background is the lowest amongst the four cases, only 65% bearing such ascendancy, comparable to the members of the Local Council in Gyula who records a proportion of 67% of cases of working class background. Hence, there exists a significant degree of social mobility among the current members of the four Local Councils, with 78.94% (in Tecuci), 68% (in Česká Lípa), 67% (in Gyula), and 65% (in Oleśnica) of them coming from poor, less educated families. The application of "independence" model in the case of local political elite in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula demonstrates a predominately ascendant social mobility of the members of the Local Councils. There is no case, among the local councilors in the four cases, of descendingly mobile from a social perspective and only three cases (15.78%) for Tecuci, eight cases (32%) for Česká Lípa, ten cases (45.45%) for Oleśnica, and seven cases (33.33%) for Gyula, of socially immobile. Using Boudon's formula for the calculation of the rate of ascendant social mobility of local political elite,

$$AM = \frac{\sum n_{ij} \times 100}{N}$$

$AM = \frac{16 \times 100}{19} = 84.21$ (for Tecuci), $AM = \frac{17 \times 100}{25} = 68$ (for Česká Lípa),

$AM = \frac{12 \times 100}{22} = 54.54$ (for Oleśnica), and $AM = \frac{14 \times 100}{21} = 66.66$ (for Gyula),

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it resulted that 84.21% of the members of the Local Council in Tecuci, 68% of the members of the Municipal Council in Česká Lípa, only 31.57% of the members of the Municipal Council in Oleśnica, and 41% of the members of the Municipal Council in Gyula are, socially and occupationally, in an ascendant position in comparison to their fathers.

The profile of the local councilor in the four cases is completed by other socio-demographical indicators (*see* Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. *The professional* status *of the municipal councilors in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula*

Occupation	Number of local councilors **(%)**			
	Tecuci	Česká Lípa	Oleśnica	Gyula
Engineer	47.36%	44%		23%
Teacher	21.05%	12%	50% + 8.33% (academics)	46%
Jurist (lawyer, notary public, etc.)	15.78%	12%	8.33%	7%
Physician	5.26%	12%		7%
Welder	5.26%			
Mechanic	5.26%			
Psychologist		4%		
Electrician		4%		
IT Expert		4%		
Architect		4%		
Musician/ artist – painter		4%	8.33%	
Entrepreneur/ businessman			8.33%	
Civil servant			16.66%	17%

Table 2. *The age distribution in the Local/ Municipal Councils of Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula*

Age	**Number of members of the Municipal Council (%)**			
	Tecuci	**Česká Lípa**	**Oleśnica**	**Gyula**
20-29	0%	8%	0%	0%
30-39	5.26%	24%	7.14%	4%
40-49	31.57%	16%	42.85%	51%
50-59	36.84%	40%	28.57%	23%
60-69	21.05%	12%	21.42%	18%
70-79	5.26%	0%	0%	4%
Over 80	0%	0%	0%	0%

Based on the inquiry into the socio-demographical indicators, it resulted that, averagely, the profile of the local councilor would feature the following traits:

The local councilor in Tecuci: a man born in Tecuci, who graduated technical or technological university studies – an engineer –, of approximately 52.4 years old, married, Christian-Orthodox (even though not a devoted practitioner), coming from

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a lower, working class or peasant family (having, as a result, no other relatives involved in politics), but being himself a member of the middle class with an average income of approximately 42,891 lei yearly, involved in local private business in the sphere of commerce and food industry (73.68% of cases);

The local councilor in Česká Lípa: a man born in Česká Lípa, who graduated technological master or advanced studies, a member of the middle class, an engineer of 47.24 years old, married, atheist (even though informally subscribing to the Christian-like moral construct), with a lower or working class background, with no relatives engaged in politics;

The local councilor in Oleśnica: a man born in Oleśnica, who graduated humanist university studies (generally, a teacher), of 50.2 years old, married, Christian-Catholic (and a devoted practitioner), coming from a middle class *milleau*, but with no other relatives involved in politics, himself part of the middle class and former activist in the civil society;

The local councilor in Gyula: a man born in Gyula, a graduate of humanist or social sciences university studies, of 50.1 years old, married, Christian-Protestant (though not a devoted practitioner), coming from a middle class background (the "*petite-bourgeoisie*") and being himself a member of the middle class, with no relatives engaged in politics.

3.2. The attitudes and orientations of the local councilors in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula

The present research evaluated the attitudes of the local political elite towards four values referring to the fundaments of the democratic construct and quantified by question no. 9 in the administered questionnaire: citizen participation; gradual, innovative change; the importance of the political conflict; economic equality. The attitudes of the members of the Local Councils towards the state intervention in economy were also taken into consideration, while a sixth value referred to local autonomy and decentralization, two processes permanently on the agenda of the post-communist governments. The attitudes towards state intervention in economy and local autonomy and decentralization were quantified through attitudinal intensity scale (I strongly agree with – I agree with – I partially agree with – I disagree with – I strongly disagree with – Don't know/ don't answer).

According to the answers delivered by the local councilors, within a democracy, the most valued features are those of citizen participation (with an average level of acceptance of 47.83%), and gradual change (an average level of acceptance of 20.6%). Economic equality and conflict avoidance pose some interesting problems to the value orientations of these elites. Firstly, there is a clear rejection of economic equality among the local councilors of Tecuci, which can be translated by a syndrome of total detachment, expressed rhetorically, from the *ancién régime*. Secondly, for the local councilors of Tecuci and Oleśnica, conflict avoidance is significant, which would hint to a monolith behavior inside the Council.

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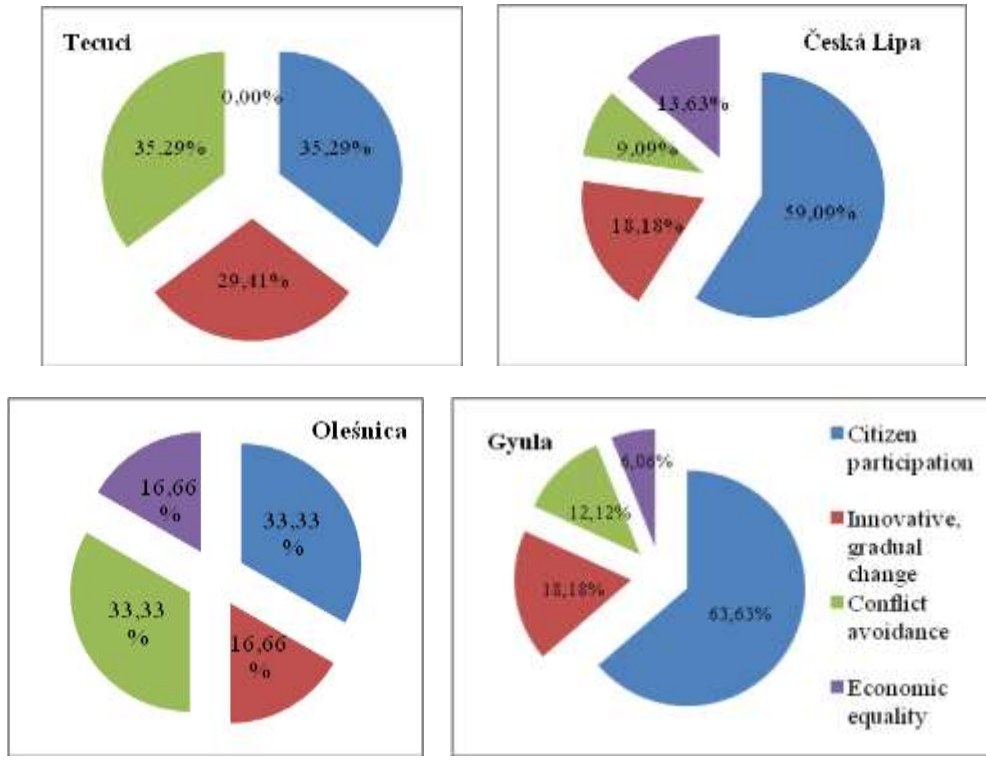

Graphs 1, 2, 3, 4. Values orientation of the municipal councillors in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula (Q9: "Which of the following characteristics do you value the most in a democracy?").

From the analysis of two values – citizen participation and conflict avoidance –, it results that the members of the Local Councils in Tecuci and Oleśnica could be characterized as "populists" (accepting citizen participation as a mark of democracy, but avoiding political conflict); the members of the Municipal Councils in Česká Lípa and Gyula are largely "democrats" (accepting both citizen participation and political conflict as features of democracy) (*See* Table 4).

Table 3. *The features of local leadership, according to its attitudes towards state intervention in economy and economic equality*

		State intervention in economy	
		Acceptance	Rejection
Economic equality	Acceptance	Statists-egalitarianists	Anti-statists-egalitarianists
	Rejection	Statists-anti-egalitarianists	Anti-statists-anti-egalitarianists

Table 4. *The features of local leadership, according to its attitude towards political conflict and citizen participation*

		Political conflict	
		Acceptance	Avoidance
Citizen participation	Acceptance	Democrats	Populists
	Rejection	Pluralists	Authoritarianists

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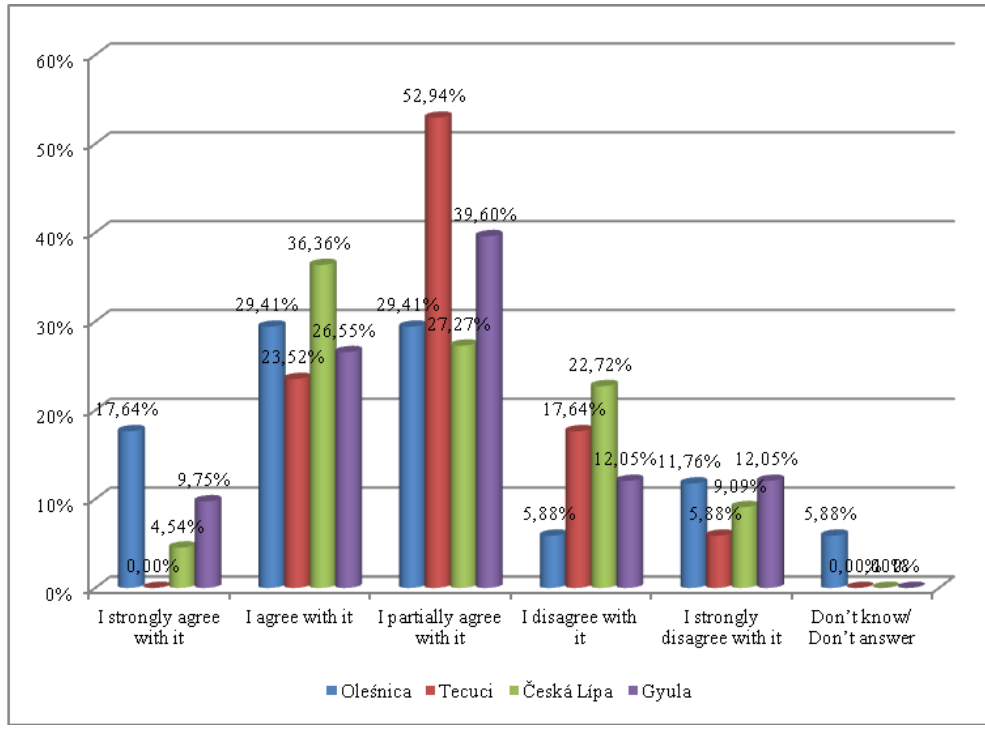
The answers provided in the questionnaire by the members of the Municipal Councils in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, and Gyula, in respect to the state intervention in economy and to the prospects of further decentralization and local autonomy, sketch: (a) a local leadership in Tecuci who is very enthusiastic about decentralization (sometimes, without actually being aware of the whole *palette* of responsibilities that increased decentralization generates), but quite undecided to the idea of the interventionist state (partly because the political elite coincides with the economic elite, and locally, it becomes easier to act as private entrepreneurs, though enjoying the state subsidies); (b) a local leadership in Česká Lípa who presents a real skepticism in respect to an already significantly decentralized distribution of power, and generally favorable to the state intervention in economy, particularly in times of crisis; (c) a local leadership in Oleśnica who is much in favor of both the protectionist state and of increased decentralization and local autonomy (with significant proportion of respondents being "strongly in favor" of the two); and (d) a local leadership in Gyula who generally holds a positive stance towards increased decentralization and its benefits, and a rather cautious stance regarding the state intervention in economy, partly because of the government's attitude in respect to the most recent financial crisis.

Graph 5. *The attitudes of the local councillors in respect to the state intervention in economy (Q10: "How do you perceive state intervention in economy?")*



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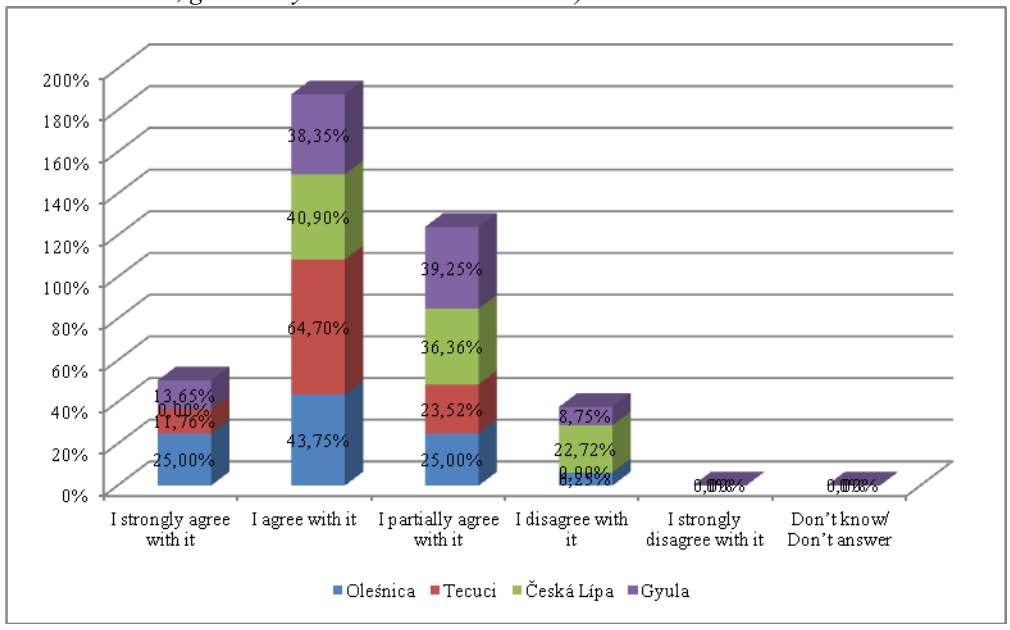
Graph 6. *The attitudes of the local councilors in respect to the prospects of increased decentralization (Q11: "How do you think about greater local autonomy and decentralization, granted by the central authorities?")*



From the analysis of the two value orientations – state intervention in economy and economic equality –, it results that: the members of the Local Councils in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, and Gyula could be coined "statists-anti-egalitarianists" (largely accepting the state intervention in economy, particularly in times of crisis, but rejecting economic equality as a mark of a working democracy); the members of the Municipal Council in Oleśnicacould be labeled as "statists-egalitarianists" (accepting both the protectionist state and economic equality as a feature of democracy, hence the general idea of the "welfare society") (*See* Table 3).

4. Concluding remarks and tentative explanations

> If we know how the participants [to the political game] got there, where they came from, by what pathways, what ideas, skills and contacts they acquired or discarded along the way, then we will have a better understanding of political events.[…] [K]nowing their abilities, sensitivities, aims and credentials, we are better able to anticipate what they say and do, and to evaluate elites, institutions and systems performance (Marvick 1968: 273-282).

The present study 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 of the countries under scrutiny, and (2) the "legacy" of the former communist regime, expressed through the type of "elite political culture" (Jowitt 1999). Thusly, the study proposes and favors 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:

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- *"Predominantly elitist"* (*e.g.*Tecuci), corresponding to a former "modernizing-nationalizing", "patrimonial" communist dictatorship, followed by "elite reproduction", and low levels of administrative decentralization and local autonomy, presently; characterized by a significant degree of "elite distinctiveness";
- *"Democratic elitist"* (*e.g.*Česká Lípa), corresponding to a defunct "national-accommodative" communist dictatorship, followed by "elite circulation", and high levels of decentralization and local autonomy, in the present;
- *"Predominantly democratic"* (*e.g.*Oleśnica and Gyula), corresponding to a former "bureaucratic-authoritarian", "welfare" communist dictatorship, followed by "elite circulation", a tradition of administrative decentralization, and significant levels of local autonomy, nowadays.

"Predominantly elitist" are those elites characterized by a significant degree of "elite distinctiveness", *i.e.* perceiving themselves, as a group or individually, as separate from the bulk of the town's population, as part of a special, superior caste of notables and local potentates, hence prone to favor the clear gap between the rulers and the ruled; enjoying considerable levels of prestige and reputation, this type of local elites display however a sense of reluctance in effectively dealing with the community's main problems, on the basis that power at the local level is insufficient to allow the leadership here to implement change. Therefore, it might be concluded that the "predominately elitist" local leadership corresponds to those communities presenting low degrees of decentralization and local autonomy. Additionally, the "predominantly elitist" local elites are tightly linked to a "political" model, for their recruitment is almost exclusively intramural, all those comprising the local leadership being party members and benefiting from the otherwise indispensable support of the party, whose local branches are highly dependent of the central one. Interestingly, the "predominantly elitist" groups are those that most closely approximate the Aristotelian *desideratum* in their construction, conception and self-perception: they tend to adhere to an "ethical" model of the ideal local councilor, at least declaratively cherishing moral attributes that would provide them with some sort of moral superiority as prime marks of distinctiveness in respect to their constituency, to the population of their community.

"Democratic elitist" are those elites whose traits and profiles point to some form of *aurea mediocritas* between a sense of distinctiveness and the prestige they enjoy within the community, on the one hand, and the effective and meaningful dedication to their community's developmental plans, on the other hand; as such, though they form a "caste" of notables within the town and are hardly representative to the population of the establishments they lead, in socio-demographical terms, they can act decisively for the benefit of their town due to a considerable degree of local autonomy and decentralized prerogatives, responsibilities and attributions. The local councilors of the "democratic elitist" sort remain still largely dependent on the support of the political parties, but the local parties appear independent in respect to their central branch; occasionally, "democratic elitist" type corresponds to intramural recruitment of locally-established parties, splinters or other quite

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localized political movements and organizations, responding to extremely specific needs and demands or describing relatively strong political localism and allowing for factionalism and decentralized, territorialized "back-bencher"-ism. In addition, the "democratic elitist" groups overlaps on a rather "pragmatic" or "technocratic" model of the local councilor, as the most cherished attributes of the leadership come to be the professionalism of the local leadership, its capacity in decision-making, policy designing and problem-solving.

"Predominantly democratic" are those elites featuring a sense of identification with the masses, with the ordinary citizens of the community they happen to represent temporarily, a dominating "social sensitivity" that would determine their propensity towards social security and welfare strategies in local leadership; this type of local elites are juxtaposed to a tradition of decentralization and devolution mechanisms that permit them to identify and to implement policies responding to the needs of the town. The "predominantly democratic" type of local elites is probably the closest to the population it represents in terms of passive representation, for it may include persons of lower education, or people previously involved in directly advocating for the interests of some segments in the community (pupils, women, unemployed, workers, etc.). These local leaders are usually quite familiar to the problems their town confronts with, being especially concerned with social issues (*e.g.* unemployment, social benefits, housing, etc.). The methods of recruiting elites in this context are highly inclusive, but the actual specificity of these elites is the extramural fashion in which they are selected, as their political affiliation is futile if existent; the role of the party in the recruitment process, either local or central branches, is virtually insignificant. Consequently, the "predominantly democratic" local elites correspond to rather "pragmatic" and "moral" profiles, while the "political" model is virtually absent in their case.

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Local Leadership in East-Central Europe: Socio-Demographical Profiles and Value Attainment in Four Towns

Leadership at the local level in East-Central Europe represents a quite under-studied topic in the field of elite theory. Identifying, analyzing the outlook of the local political elites is particularly significant in the recent drive towards increased decentralization and local autonomy. The present paper constitutes an attempt at critically and comparatively examining the profile and the value attainment of local leadership in the countries of former Sovietized Europe. Concretely, this empirical inquiry discusses the socio-demographical profile and the attitudes towards key values for the members of the Municipal/ Local Councils in four small-to-medium sized towns in East-Central Europe: Tecuci (Galați county, Romania), Česká Lípa (Liberec region, the Czech Republic), Oleśnica (Lower Silesia voievodship, Poland), and Gyula (Békés county, Hungary). The study employs the positional approach for identifying and analyzing the "local political elites", using the case-study inductively and explanatory, through largely quantitative research methods: the written questionnaire, document analysis, and participatory observation. Founded on the results of the four cases, the present endeavor advances a threefold model of local leadership, pondered mainly by (a) the existing level of decentralization characterizing each country, and (b) the "legacy" of the former communist regime, through the features of each "elite political culture": (1) the "predominantly elitist", (2) the "democratic elitist", and (3) the "predominantly democratic" local political elites.

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