

Roxana Marin



The Role of Local Political Elites in East Central Europe

A Descriptive Inquiry into
Local Leadership in Six Transitional
Democracies of the Region

Roxana Marin

The Role of Local Political Elites in East Central Europe

*To the memory of my grandmother, Ștefana,
and my grandfather, Toader*

Roxana Marin

The Role of Local Political Elites in East Central Europe

A Descriptive Inquiry into Local Leadership in
Six Transitional Democracies of the Region

Budrich Academic Press
Opladen • Berlin • Toronto 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Barbara Budrich Publishers. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.
You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
Die Deutsche Bibliothek (The German Library)

© 2021 by Budrich Academic Press GmbH, Opladen, Berlin & Toronto
www.budrich.eu

ISBN 978-3-96665-031-1
eISBN 978-3-96665-973-4
DOI 10.3224/96665031

All annexes are available for free download on the publisher's website:
<https://doi.org/10.3224/96665031A>

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Das gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme
Ein Titeldatensatz für die Publikation ist bei Der Deutschen Bibliothek erhältlich.

Budrich Academic Press
Stauffenbergstr. 7. D-51379 Leverkusen Opladen, Germany
www.budrich-academic-press.de
86 Delma Drive. Toronto, ON M8W 4P6 Canada

Jacket illustration by Bettina Lehfeldt, Kleinmachnow, Germany –
www.lehfeldtgraphic.de

Technical editing by Anja Borkam, Jena, Germany – kontakt@lektorat-borkam.de
Printed in Europe on acid-free paper by Books on Demand GmbH, Norderstedt, Germany

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	7
Abstract	12
Introduction. Theoretical assessments on political elites	15
Brief Literature Review of the Territory of Local Leadership	30
Brief Digression on the National Elites in East-Central Europe: Elites Effectuating Change	36
Methodology: the Scope, the Questions, the Sampling and the Sampling Methods	54
The Local (Municipal) Council: General Presentation	63
a) Theoretical overview on local government systems	63
b) Local Councils in Romania	77
c) Municipal Councils in the Czech Republic	79
d) Municipal Councils in Poland	82
e) Bodies of Representatives in Hungary	86
f) Municipal Councils in the Slovak Republic	89
g) Local Councils in Bulgaria	92
The main functions of the Local / Municipal Council: Organizational Chart and Budget in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, Gyula, Targovishte, and Levice. The Committees of the Local / Municipal Council	96
a) Organizational chart of the local administration of the municipality	96
b) The Committees of the Local / Municipal Council	97
c) The adoption of the local budget	104
Social Biography of the members of the Local / Municipal Councils in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, Gyula, Targovishte, and Levice	114
How “elitist” is the local political elite in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, Gyula, Targovishte, and Levice?	115
Patterns of Recruitment	132
Interactions with other groups and institutions. Networks of interactions	163

Values embraced by the local political elite	186
Priorities of the local political elite	197
Representativeness of the Local / Municipal Council	208
a) Nationality	213
b) Gender	215
c) Educational level	216
d) Age	219
e) Religion	221
f) Matrimonial status	224
g) Place of birth	226
The paradigmatic case of Poland: Local Political Elite in Oleśnica: recruitment, priorities, values, socio-economic outlook (A comparison to the local political elites in Tecuci and Česká Lípa) ..	230
Concluding Remarks	252
Explanatory trajectories: the “legacy of the ancien régime”	256
Explanatory trajectories: the level of administrative decentralization ..	264
Practical exercise: Explaining interactions and priorities of the local political elites by the two variables	285
Limitations and contingencies of the research	294
An attempted typology of local political elites in ECE	297
References	303
A Typology of Local Political Elites in East-Central Europe	337

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Radu Carp, PhD, for his support and pertinent observations throughout the three years of the PhD programme. I would like to extend my gratitude to the accompanying committee which supervised my work, Prof. Dragoş Petrescu, PhD, Senior Lecturer Alexandra Iancu, PhD, and Prof. Laurenţiu Ştefan, PhD. I would like to especially present my deepest appreciation, for his constant guidance in the preparation of this book, to Prof. Laurenţiu Ştefan, from whom I embraced the passion for the study of political elites, who significantly inspired my desire for doing research in political science, and who constantly contributed to my work ever since I started inquiring into the membership of the Local Council of my birth town, in December 2011. Moreover, during the research workshop “Building an Effective Research Design in the Social Sciences” he initiated and coordinated during October 2014 and January 2015, his pieces of advice contributed decisively to my book, along with the precious observations of other colleagues in the workshop, among whom I mention Irina Ionescu, PhD.

During June 2014 and September 2015, I was given the opportunity of a scholarship through the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), under the contract no. SOP HRD/159/1.5/S/133675, at the Romanian Academy, Iaşi branch. During this period, I worked within the research group “A guverna / a fi guvernat. Ipостaze ale raportului dintre stat şi cetăţean” [*To govern / to be governed. Hypostases of the report between the state and the citizen*]. Firstly, the scholarship provided me the possibility to reach a larger audience with my research topic, as it financially supported and encouraged the publication in international scientific reviews and the presentation in international conferences of the main findings of the field work. Secondly, it facilitated the discussion of parts of my book with colleagues in the PhD programme and with more experienced researchers. I would like to thank them and to the two tutors of the research group, Associate Prof. Ruxandra Ivan, PhD, and Researcher Vasile Pleşca, for their constant support and help throughout the scholarship.

During March 2015, I was given the opportunity of a one-month CEEPUS study trip at the University of Wien. There, within the research group of the Institute for Social Ethics at the Faculty of Catholic Theology, the productive observations received from another research field significantly improved my preliminary findings and gave a new perspective on the research, from a new prism. I thank Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel, to Yaroslav Gerbut, PhD, and to Christoph Tröbinger, MA. Secondly, the study trip to Wien represented a terrific time for improving my bibliographical notes, the Library of the University in Wien being in itself quite impressive. I thank to Prof. Radu Carp, PhD, for selecting me as a beneficiary of a CEEPUS scholarship.

I also like to thank those members of the Political Science Department of the University of Bucharest who constantly supported me and who gave me the first impulses to engage on this path: Prof. Mihai Chioveanu, PhD, Senior Lecturer Silvia Marton, PhD, Prof. Cristina Petrescu, PhD. Their example of guidance and support for a student at the very beginning of his / her work is particularly illustrative.

I would like to thank the several translators who consistently helped me with the translation of the questionnaire and with other subsequent translations of other pieces employed in the empirical research: Ilona Kovács (University of Pécs), Dariusz Piwonski, Agata Nowak, and many others. My gratitude goes especially to Associate Prof. Katarzyna Kobielska, of the University of Wrocław, who helped extensively with the gathering and translation of data for the Polish case and who suggested the case of Oleśnica in the first place. These translators provided me with the immense opportunity to learn more about the local and national particularities of the towns and states discussed below first hand.

I have greatly benefited from talks and debates with colleagues about the topics covered in this book. Hence, I thank the anonymous reviewers of my articles submitted for publication and to countless participants in the conference panels in which I have presented my work. These debates and reviews occasioned my ability to seriously update and rework parts of my study. I thank Dragoș Dragoman, PhD, for his suggestion to and support in publishing with Budrich Academic Press, throughout my teaching time at the “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu.

I am terribly indebted to my family for moral and financial support and patience throughout my eight years spent in the University. Special thanks go to my sister, Emanuela, who proved an immense patience during this time.

This PhD thesis has been awarded the “Best PhD Thesis” of the University of Bucharest, and the “Best PhD Thesis in Social Sciences”, in December 2016, by the Senate of the University of Bucharest. The author received a grant of 16.500 lei (approximately 3,500 euro).

Parts or chapters of this book have been published as:

- Review for „Heinrich Best, John Higley (eds.), *Democratic Elitism: New Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, Brill, Leiden, 2010”, in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XII, no. 1, March 2012, pp. 108-117 (ISSN 1582-4551).
- Review for „Conor O’Dwyer, *Runaway State-Building: Patronage Politics and Democratic Development*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore (Maryland), 2006”, in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XII, no. 1, March 2012, pp. 122-127 (ISSN 1582-4551).
- Review for „Fredrik Engelstad, Trygve Gulbrandsen (eds.), *Comparative Studies of Social and Political Elites*, Elsevier Science, Oxford (UK) & Amsterdam (The Netherlands), 2007 (“Comparative Social Research”,

- vol. 23), 267 pp.”, in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XII, no. 2, August 2012, pp. 344-357 (ISSN 1582-4551).
- “Democratic Elitism at the Local Level and Local Governance in East-Central Europe. A Comparative Assessment on the Elites of Tecuci (Romania), Česká Lípa (the Czech Republic) and Oleśnica (Poland)”, in Stelian Scăunaș, Vasile Tabără și Eugen Străuțiu (eds.). *Political Science, International Relations and Security Studies. International Conference Proceedings, the VIIth Edition, Sibiu, 24-26 May 2013*, Department of International Relations, Political Science and Security Studies (Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu), Sibiu, 2013, pp. 29-56 (ISSN: 2343-7774).
 - Review for “Jan Abbink, Tijo Salverda (eds.), *The Anthropology of Elites: Power, Culture, and the Complexities of Distinction*”, Palgrave Macmillan, New York & Basingstoke (UK), 2013, in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XIII, no. 3, October 2013, pp. 565-578 (ISSN 1582-4551).
 - “Incomplete Modernization and State Socialism in East-Central Europe. A Framework of Analysis of Post-Communist Local Political Elites”, in Daniel Dumitran, and Valer Moga (eds.). *Economy and Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Territory, Population, Consumption. Papers of the International Conference Held in Alba Iulia, April 25th-27th, 2013*, LIT Verlag, Wien (Austria), Zürich (Switzerland) & Berlin & Münster (Germany), 2013, pp. 363-379 (ISBN: 978-3-643-90445-4).
 - “Decentralization in East-Central Europe and its effects on the outlook of local political elite”, in Vasile Alcaz et al. (eds.), *Conferința Științifică Internațională a doctoranzilor. Tendințe contemporane ale dezvoltării științei: Viziuni ale tinerilor cercetători*, 10 Martie 2014. Teze, Academia de Științe a Moldovei & Artpoligraf, Chișinău, 2014, p. 130 (ISBN 978-9975-4257-2-8).
 - “Dynamics of decentralization in East-Central Europe. Definition, taxonomy, applications”, in Nicolaie Georgescu and Mircea Cosma (eds.), *Papers of the Sibiu Alma Mater University Conference, Eight Edition, 27-29 March 2014, Sibiu*, Volume 1, Editura *Alma Mater*, Sibiu, 2014, pp. 122-129 (ISSN 2067 – 1423).
 - “Profilul elitei politice locale în Europa Central-Estică. Aplicație pe membrii consiliilor municipale din Tecuci, Česká Lípa și Oleśnica”, in Cristina Manolache, Anamaria Elena Gheorghe, Roxana Marin (eds.), *Tineri Cercetători: Abordări Multidisciplinare. Revistă studențească în domeniul științelor sociale*, Vol. I, No. 1, Aprilie 2014, pp. 34-55 (ISSN 2344-6455).
 - „Descentralizarea în Europa central-estică: conceptualizare și operaționalizare. Definiție, taxonomie, aplicații”, în Cristina Manolache și Anamaria Elena Gheorghe (eds.). *Sesiunea națională de comunicări științifice în domeniul științelor sociale Tineri cercetători: Abordări multidisciplinare. Culegere de abstracte*, Școala Doctorală de Știință Politică

- (Univrsitatea din București), 13 decembrie 2014 (ediția a II-a), pp. 44-45 (ISSN 2344-6455).
- “The Dynamics of Decentralization in East-Central Europe. Application on Four Municipal Councils” in *Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, Year I, No. 1 (February 2014), pp. 153-173 (ed.: the International Association of Law and Related Sciences – IALRS) (ISSN 2392-6112; ISSN-L 2392-6112)
 - “Local Leadership in East-Central Europe: Socio-Demographical Profiles and Value Attainment in Four Towns” / „Leadership local în Europa Centrală și de Est: profile socio-demografice și forme ale împlinirii valorice în patru orașe”, in *Philologica Jassyensia*, Year X, No. 1 (19) (Winter 2014) (Special Issue: Proceedings of the International Conference *Perspectives in the Humanities and Social Sciences: Hinting at Interdisciplinarity*, 1st ed., Iași, May 23-24, 2014), pp. 715-726 (ISSN 1841-5377, ISSN online 2247-8353, ISSN-L 1841-5377)
 - “Value Attainment, Orientations, and Quality-Based Profile of the Local Political Elites in East-Central Europe. Evidence from Four Towns”, in *Symposion. Theoretical and Applied Inquiries in Philosophy and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 2015), pp. 95-123 (EISSN 2392-6260; ISSN-L 1584-174X)
 - “La construction du profile de l’élite politique locale en l’Europe Centrale et Orientale”, in Iulian Boldea (coord.), *Identities in Metamorphosis. Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue. Studies on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue. Proceedings of the International Conference Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue. Political Sciences, Sociology, International Relations Section*, Vol. 2, Arhipelag XXI Press, Târgu-Mureș, 2014, pp. 154-169 (ISBN: 978-606-93691-9-7)
 - “Patterns of Recruitment at the Local Level in East-Central Europe”, in The Alpha Institute for Multicultural Studies (ed.), Iulian Boldea (coord.), *Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity: Studies and Articles. Proceedings of the International Conference Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity*, 3rd edition. Section: *Political Sciences and International Relations*, Vol. 3, “Petru Maior” University Press, Târgu-Mureș, 2014, pp. 344-356 (ISSN 2069-3389)
 - “Instances of decentralization in East-Central Europe: operationalization, taxonomy and applications on local political elites’ outlook”, in *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Winter 2014) (Thematic Issue: “*Peace Building and Development*”), pp. 99-125 (ISSN 1582-456X)
 - “The Local Political Elites in East-Central Europe: Between the Legacy of the Past and the Decentralization of the Present”, in Jădăneanț, Alexandru, Claudia Turșie, Ciprian Nițu, and Claudiu Mesaroș (eds.), *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences Vol. 183 – Proceedings of the International Symposium on ‘Ideologies, Values and Political Behaviors in*

- Central and Eastern Europe*, 12th ed., 6 December 2013, Timișoara, Elsevier B.V., Amsterdam (the Netherlands), 2015, pp. 30-39 (ISSN: 1877-0428)
- “Value Attainment in Local Political Leadership. Evidence from Four Towns of East-Central Europe”, in Jădăneanț, Alexandru, Claudia Turșie, Ciprian Nițu, and Claudiu Mesaroș (eds.), *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences Vol. 183 – Proceedings of the International Symposium on ‘Ideologies, Values and Political Behaviors in Central and Eastern Europe’*, 12th ed., 6 December 2013, Timișoara, Elsevier B.V., Amsterdam (the Netherlands), 2015, pp. 30-39 (ISSN: 1877-0428)
 - “Rețelele de putere, contactele și interacțiunile elitelor politice locale din Europa central-răsăriteană”, în Ruxandra Ivan și Vasile Pleșca (coord.), Academia Română, Filiala Iași (prin IDSRC – doc postdoc POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133675) (ed.), *A guverna / a fi guvernat. Ipoteze ale raportului dintre stat și cetățean*, PRO Universitaria, București, 2015, pp. 189-218 (ISBN: 978-606-26-0343-4)
 - “Types of Local Government Systems and Types of Local Political Elites: An Application on ECE”, in Cristina Manolache and Anamaria Elena Gheroghe (eds.), *International Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference (IIDC 2015). Book of Abstracts*, Romanian Association of Young Scholars (RAYS), September 25th-26th, 2015 (1st edition), pp. 121-122 (ISSN 2457-7944)
 - “The Impact of Socio-Demographical Profile and of Passive Representativeness of Local Political Elites on the Construction of a Typology of Local Political Elites of ECE”, in Liviu-Adrian Măgurianu and Simona-Roxana Ulman (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Conference ‘Humanities and Social Sciences Today. Classical and Contemporary Issues’ (Iași, 2015). Social and Political Theory*, PRO Universitaria, București, 2015, pp. 177-198 (ISBN: 978-606-26-0415-8)
 - “Accounting for moral superiority of elites. Political elites caught between normative and descriptive approaches”, in Proceedings of the International Conference ‘European Union’s History, Culture and Citizenship’, 8th edition, Pitești, 8th – 9th May 2015, C.H. Beck Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015, pp. 799-822 (ISSN 2360-395X, ISSN-L 2360-1841)
 - “The Profile of Local Political Elite and Strategy Prioritisation at the Local Level in ECE Countries. Case Studies: Tecuci (Romania), Česká Lípa (the Czech Republic), Oleśnica (Poland), and Gyula (Hungary)”, in *Federal Governance*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (June 2015), pp. 60-88 (ISSN 1923-6158)
 - “Power networks, contacts, and interactions of local political elites in East-Central Europe”, in Iulian Boldea (coord.), *Globalization and National Identity. Studies on the Strategies of Intercultural Dialogue: Sociology, Political Sciences, and International Relations*, Vol. 3, Arhipelag XXI Press, Târgu-Mureș, 2016, pp. 386-402 (ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7)

Abstract

The present book is concerned with the issue of local leadership in the countries of East-Central Europe. Concretely, it is an attempt to examine, in a comparative fashion, the profile and the role of the local political elites in six transitional democracies of the region, Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria, and the elites' further impact on the evolution of the local communities in the developing region of former Sovietized Europe. This research project constitutes actually the continuation of the analysis undertaken in the preparation of the Masters' final thesis, as it develops on the research elaborated in the period December 2010 – May 2012 for the Municipal Councils in Tecuci (Romania) and Česká Lípa (the Czech Republic). In the period October 2012 – February 2013, the analysis on the local political elites in East-Central Europe has been continued for Poland, with the focus on the case of the city of Oleśnica. In the period October 2013 – January 2016, the field work has been completed with three similar towns in Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. Consequently, the emphasis is put on the small-to-medium-sized communities, those municipalities of around 30,000 – 40,000 inhabitants in the said region, largely similar in regard to economic activities and developmental strategies (an economy based on food industry, commerce activities and investments in infrastructure). Therefore, for further exploring the *problématique*, the book proposes, as focal case studies, six small towns in these six countries, quite similar in terms of demographics (roughly 40,000 inhabitants) and developmental strategies (*i.e.* an economy based on the alimentary industry and on commerce activities, etc.): Tecuci (Galați county / *judet*, Romania), Česká Lípa (Liberec region / *kraj*, Czech Republic), Oleśnica (Lower Silesia voivodeship / *województwo*, Poland), Gyula (Békés county / *megye*, Hungary), Targovishte (Targovishte province / *oblast*, Bulgaria), Levice (Nitria region / *kraj*, Slovak Republic).

The proposed inquiry employs mainly the positional method in 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. Therefore, the empirical part of the present research uses as its samples the members of the Local (Municipal) Councils in Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Oleśnica, Gyula, Targovishte, and Levice (the compositions of the six decisional forums in the period 2011-2015, for some modifications did happen from the composition of the Councils, as they were constituted after the local elections of 2008 and 2012). For Tecuci, the Local Council includes nineteen persons, for Česká Lípa, the Municipal Council is formed of twenty-five members, for Oleśnica, the Municipal Council comprises twenty-one members, for Gyula, the Municipal Council counts

fourteen members, for Targovishte, the Local Council encompasses thirty-three members, for Levice, the Municipal Council numbers twenty-four members, with various political affiliations, with very different occupations, of different ages, enjoying different degrees of popular support and prestige, but of largely similar social *status* and with resembling social backgrounds and political trajectories.

The main argument put forward by this study is that, similarly to the national level, at the local level, the responsibility of the ruling elite is major in the governance of the community, since the regional and local development in the six countries is dependent on the efficient administration of funds, which is presently exclusively the prerogative of the political elite. Viciously caught in a perennial transition to democracy – at different stages and various levels of democratic consolidation and economic development – the six countries of East-Central Europe discussed here (*i.e.* Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria) depend heavily on their elites more than ever in their pursuit of democracy. The national political elites of each of these countries – either governing or oppositional – became central in the communist breakdown and the inauguration of democratic transition in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Equally, either central or local, these elites can fasten or ease the overall political and socio-economical development of their countries. It is this researcher's firm conviction that an account on the characterization of these groups at the local level – through the means of analyzing Municipal Councils – can provide an insight into the actual development, the opportunities and the future evolution – generally on short term, the period of a mandate – of the communities they govern. Therefore, the social background and the characteristics of the local elites tell something about their personal and political interests and aims. The main contention put forward by the intended study on local leadership is that the social background and an inquiry into the values, interactions, and beliefs of the local elite are particularly telling and instrumental for the elite's priorities, its personal and political interests and aims, for its behavior as leaders of their communities.

Since the scope of the research bears a rather descriptive, explanatory nature, the first section of the book introduces a theoretical basis in understanding the role of the Municipal Councils on local politics and development, by generally presenting the main functions and the workings of these forums in the countries under observation here (Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, and Bulgaria, respectively); a separate discussion on the local budget is inserted. The next six sections are dedicated to the six cases selected and follow the inquiries into: (1) the social biography of the members of the six Municipal Councils under scrutiny; (2) patterns of recruitment of these local elites and the importance of the local branches of the main parties; (3) interactions of the members of the Local Councils with other groups and institutions (and the subsequent power networks and formal and

informal linkages); (4) values and principles embraced by the local political elites in the six analyzed cases; (5) priorities of the local political elites in the six selected Municipal Councils, and (6) representativeness of the Local (Municipal) Councils in the six towns, in the context in which the Municipal Council is, after all, an instance of legislative representative government (with a special emphasis on passive representation). The structure of the study is largely the result of the observations drawn from an empirical endeavor conducted among the members of the six Councils in the period December 2010-August 2015, in the preparation of the MA and PhD theses.

Introduction. Theoretical assessments on political elites

“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.” Dwaine Marvick (1968: 273-282)

When engaging in an argumentation, rarely does an issue present itself which cannot be best illustrated by one of Aesop’s fables. Abiding by this principle, the contemporary understanding of the concept of elites, as rendered in the writings of many scholars, receives a fair portrayal within such a tale where reason and guile are left to have their moment. The fable entitled “The Fox and the Lion” proceeds with its moral as follows:

“When first the Fox saw the Lion he was terribly frightened, and ran away and hid himself in the wood. Next time however he came near the King of Beasts, he stopped at a safe distance and watched him pass by. The third time they came near one another, the Fox went straight up to the Lion and passed the time of day with him, asking him how his family were, and when he should have the pleasure of seeing him again; then turning his tail, he parted from the Lion without much ceremony.” (Aesop, as cited in Gibbs 2002: 216).

Expressed in fuller form, this fable offers a brief account of the first instance from which the concept of elites departed as well of its last and present condition. Owing to its close ties to other concepts beset in the field of political science, the concept of elite rose and counted its gains once with political science, remaining largely true to itself. As such, it is advisable to set about this short journey which oversees the implications that the concept of elites bore across time, with a general definition provided by one of the elitists and summarized here by S. J. Eldersveld:

“In all regularly constituted societies [...], the ruling class or rather those who hold and exercise the public power, will be always a minority and below them we find a numerous class of persons who do never, in any real sense, participate in government but merely submit to it. These may be called the ruled class.” (Eldersveld 1989: xv)

As phrased above, all early elite theorists consent that it is particular to each and every at least moderately complex societies that power and privilege are set aside for those few ones addressed as elites. It is they who accrue the greater part of that which has been laid for grabs. This fact stems from the early days of humanity, when the wretched ways of a yet debased social and political order distinguished between master and slave. In order to salvage his life, the weaker opponent of those days of yore, admitted to his limits revealed to him

by his thereafter master. He then wept and begged for his life, bowed and began praising his master, as accustomed to all subjects in front of the triumphant, the powerful and the grand heirs. Rejoicing in their victory, those distinguished by birth and riches thrived upon those of infinite lesser breeding and earthly possessions. In the words of Sidney Hook, “all political rule is a process [...] by which a minority gratifies its own interests [...] the masses who have fought, bled, and starved are made the goat” (Hook 1939: 562-563).

In this initial landscape, Ancient philosophers made the first attempts in accounting for the immanent division of power, influence, privilege and morals. Books III and VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* contain the Aristotelian perspective in regard to the normative approach on the political elite. Aristotle constructs here the cornerstone of the normative direction in the definition of the “political elite”, in which this group of powerful, influential “few” represents the ones possessing a series of special, distinguished qualities. Among these qualities, “*arete*” of the *dianoia* [thought] becomes of paramount importance for the ones in leadership, for the potentates in the *agora*. Indeed, these patricians, these potentates are (or should be) the bearers of “*arete*”, of mere virtue, of some form of intellectual excellence. Aristotelian “virtue” tends of overlap with the Platonian “virtue”, in the sense that “*arete*” would always constitute a faculty, a capability of the soul, not of the mind. Paradoxically, “*arete*” is the halfway, the median between virtue and vice, the “*aurea medicritas*”; therefore, the leading ones, in Aristotelian *imaginarium*, should have the capability of finding a middle ground between virtue and vice, hence excelling in moderation, in *equilibrium*. The measure in which the elite is able to reach “*eudaimonia*” [“happiness”] is an aspect not discussed by the Greek philosopher, though one might hypothesize that, since “*eudaimonia*” is defined as the “activity of soul in accordance with *arete*, or [...] in accordance with the best and most complete *arete*” (Aristotle, Bartlett, & Collins 2011), the leading few might be prone to acquire *eudaimonia*. In a nutshell, it appears sure for Aristotle that the political elite is to possess moral and intellectual prominence, is to consist of men of distinguishable virtue.

However, precisely because the slave alone has performed for ages the real work, thus renouncing his immediate delight, it grew in him the ability to open the world (Sloterdijk 2000/2002: 41). The skills which he acquired meanwhile his master indulged in the outcomes of foreign labour and abandoned himself to the working hands of others, paved the road of the subject’s emancipation from the stale authority of unjustified rule. Removed of that “certain material, intellectual, or even moral superiority” (Mosca 1939: 35) over those they govern, as the latter grew in intellect and skill, the ruler ceased to be so, and the ruled knew of a different destiny. As a consequence of the Enlightenment, this concept of leadership was deprived of part of its content, namely blind faith in the ruler’s arbitrary decisions. Among many, Napoleon was one to remark upon the new political reality and the opportunities it offered: “the idea of

equality, from which I could expect nothing other than rise, had for me something seductive” (Von Falkenhausen 1941: 104). From heretofore, it is precisely this equal ground from which men of greater ambitions and higher expectations rose above, and that rising distance is the measure of their power and the sign of them being an elite.

This newly found equality is the reason why men began preoccupying themselves with their *status* among the rest and voicing indignation at the superiority of others. The elitists wrote of the conscious, cohesive and conspiring groups, Mosca’s “political class” and Michels’ “oligarchs”, with deference and compliance. Mosca stressed the advantage of numbers in out-organizing and out-witting the larger masses, Pareto rooted the unrestricted social mobility as the prerequisite for the rise of those most adept at using force and persuasion, and gifted with inherited wealth and family connections. Michels postulated that through and through and without omission, elites will surface all large organizations, as a necessity of the inner workings of any functioning body of people. Together they grounded the thought that elites are incessantly placing themselves above the majority and that “democracies are divided into the wielders of power and those who are subject to it and have little power of their own” (Etzioni-Halevy 1997: 44). Within this framework, the concept of elite was tantamount to a detractor of democracy, and consequently of the better virtues of others. In agreement with the elitists, Weber supports the view that even in a democracy the *demos* itself never governs. Nevertheless, Weber and Mosca ascribe certain merits to democracy for counterbalancing the leverage of the bureaucracy, a second peril to the autonomy of the *demos*. However, the fact remains that, according to the elitists,

“political rule involves organization and all organization no matter how democratic its mythology, sooner or later comes under the effective control of a minority elite; the history of societies, despite the succession of different political forms, is in substance nothing but the succession of different political elites; democracy is a political form that conceals both the conflicts of interest between the governing elite and the governed and the fact that these conflicts are always undemocratically resolved in favour of the former.” (Hook 2008: 240)

Skepticism about the contingencies of ethics among the political elite imbued even the Weberian readings that conceive politics founded on the “principle of small numbers” and imagined, in turn, the “leader democracy” (Roth & Wittich 1978/1920: 41-71, 1111-1155, 1414, 1459-1460). Pareto, few years before him, did not imagine: he rather described a “demagogic plutocracy” (as opposed to “military plutocracy”), as a dangerous compromise between elites and democratic ideals, in which the former retain prevalence over the later through “deception, demagoguery and bribing” (thus, everything but moral stances!), giving only the appearance of democracy to the masses (Finer and Mirfin 1978/1902: 142). In effect, political elites are “persons at or near the top of the ‘pyramid of power’” (Putnam 1976: 14), “persons with the ‘organized capacity

to make *real and continuing political trouble without being promptly repressed*” (Higley and Burton 2006: 7 [italics added]).

Defenders of democracy took offence at the slight odds which this most lauded regime was offered. Liberty and equality were brought to the fore, as universal suffrage was deemed the foundation of all sound government for it ensured that the general will shall be expressed and popular sovereignty will be entrusted to its chosen representatives. However, the rationale that elites, thus dignified under the name of representatives, are decided by the will of the people is somewhat inexact. In this respect the argument is forced into the direction of representation and the accompanying “mandate-independence controversy”, which has become an ordinary and familiar subject of discussion. The controversy resides in deciding whether the representative is to do what his constituents urge him to do or what he thinks best.

The beginning and the first half of the 20th century advanced the shift, not only towards an “over-consciousness” of the power gap between elites and the masses, but, paradoxically enough, the acknowledgement of the fact that political elites were, as an intrinsic rule, deprived of any moral prominence over the led masses, they actually eluded any moral stance of excellence and prevalence¹. Therefore, probably, the veritable transmutation within the *academia* in respect to the moral overview on the political elites and the fashion of defining this group through the lances of ethic excellence and intellectual preeminence is to be found at the beginning of the last century, with the triptych of Italian “elitists” Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels. Paradoxically, though the newly-emerging perspective on the moral dimension of the constitution of the elite is – especially to the latter two – descriptive *par excellence*, daringly honest in the field of sociological research – though quite feeble in the sphere of empirical inquiry –, the exegetes, the observers, the critics hurried to express innumerable rejoinders, labelling – more or less justifiably – the descriptive approach to elites as inseparably intertwined with the prematurely and dangerously rising fascist-corporatist movement in politically infant Italy. Yet, the three prominent sociologists were observers *tout court*. The realities within the group of power- and influence-holders had irrefutably changed since Aristotle and, in addition, the realities of the polity *per se* and its expectations from the leading ones suffered transformable mutations. These modifications in the people’s, citizens’ expectations had to be voiced out in the very fashion in which the relationship between the political elite and morality was to be constructed. The descriptive line of thinking about elites has been courageously and vigorously continued and embraced in the 1950s, with the publication of C. Wright Mills’s *Power Elite* (1956), a painful radiography of

1 It might be argued that the premises for this grim, coldhearted perspective on political elites are to be found on the Italian soil once more, with the Machiavellian depiction of the Prince, the philosophical cornerstone of modern politics. See Machiavelli, Skinner and Price (eds.) 1998/1505.

the American potentates at the middle of the century. Definitely and evidently enough, what conspicuously lacks from these descriptions is the moral dimension of the political leadership, which became diluted under the weight of sociological considerations regarding the corruptible nature and the mundane qualities of the political elite. Fair enough, attempts to rejuvenate elitism as moral and intellectual prominence have been unceasing from Machiavelli and his *virtu* onwards, particularly in the 19th century.

Suffice it to say that democracy eludes the overbearing power of elites solely within the first instance of representation where representatives heed their constituents' wants and interests with deference and devotion. With all honesty of purpose, each representative championing the interest of his district, even against the interest of other districts, ensures that democracy prevails by disallowing for any faction that may form itself. Where interests are multiple and diverse it is "less probable that a majority will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength and to act in unison" (Madison 2003/1787: 45).

The other side of the argument is led by Edmund Burke whose address to the people of Bristol makes the most compelling argument. To Burke, the representative remains as with the Federalists a spokesman for the interest of the district, with the slight difference that "he owes his constituents a devotion to their interests, rather than to their opinion" (Pitkin 1967: 144). His case is argued most eloquently in the ensuing passage:

"Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole-where not local prejudices ought to guide but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member, indeed; but when you have chosen him he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament."²

Fair enough, at this end of the argument, elitism is somehow rejuvenated, as the mandate of the representative is thus relieved of a strict accountability to the grievances and demands of his constituents. The political elites retreat within the Parliament under the panache of more qualitative representation, and govern from this enclosed, higher ground, in an Enlightened fashion, those whom they can barely distinguish from the distance. If democracy is to rely upon the responsiveness of the elected to their electors, given the previous *scenario*, the decisions of the government may tend to reflect the wants of the

2 The famous address of Edmund Burke to the electors of Bristol (Speech to the Electors of Bristol, 1774), in Browne 1993: 67-82. The mandate of the representative, of the political leader, is thus relieved of a strict accountability to the grievances and demands of his constituents, pointing out the superior qualities of the leading few once more.

governors, more so than those of the governed and popular sovereignty may be abandoned by the wayside, only to be picked up again upon securing a subsequent mandate.

As the debate lingered on, the concept of elite was again revisited, once with Schumpeter's minimal, procedural, instrumentalist concept of democracy (Schumpeter 1942). Democracy was defined as a limited political regime in which power is achieved through competitive elections. To his mind, due to the development of mass democracy, popular sovereignty as depicted in all classical works became inadequate. "A new understanding of democracy was needed, putting the emphasis on the aggregation of preferences, taking place through political parties for which people would have the capacity to vote at regular intervals" (Mouffe 2000: 1). Schumpeter impresses upon his readers the banished thought of the elitists; modern times disavow notions like "common good" and "general will" which they replace with pluralism of interests because only self-interest is held to move and stir any individual who is engrossed only with his own pursuits. Drawing on the elitists' appraisal, individuals are not motivated to act by the moral belief that they should pursue the interest of the whole and consent to the general will, but by more narrow preferences and interests. These preferences are to be voiced and heeded by political parties in their struggle for gaining the votes. Schumpeter manages to rebalance the gains in favor of the descriptive, "a-moral" (one might be inclined to label it) perspective, by eloquently pleading for an elite that seems rather selfish in nature, manipulative towards its voters, displaying no moral, superior stance in reference to the masses.

Therefore, the concept of political elite has arrived at the admission that within representative democracy, each elite is to be confirmed by popular vote. However, the conditions under which the vote of the people is expressed, pose some objections to democracy itself. Firstly, as stated above, "there can be no guarantee that these decisions as well as the discretionary powers they entail will be carried out in the same spirit as that in which they were authorized" (Hook 2008: 242). This is mainly the case of the Burkean elite who think of themselves as being unbound to the views of their constituents and who take pride in following only their conscience and principles. Therefore, what the representative thinks is of paramount importance. However, the followers of the mandate theory are not to be exempt of weariness towards their devotion. Secondly, "we can never be sure that consent is freely given, that is not in bondage to ignorance, rhetoric, or passion" (Hook 2008: 115). Democracy frequently receives such blows, as the speech of a gifted demagogue can override the better judgment of people. Similarly, passions may cloud their mind, just as indecision and disregard may mislead their vote. Lastly, and in close connection to the previous two factors, the vote of the people is usually guided by the political parties' selection of candidates. The electorate is limited in expressing its preference by the initial, prevailing preference of the party. Non-

partisan municipalities necessarily fall outside this category. Thus, it may be concluded that popular legitimization appears to be less of a democratic safeguard when facing the pervasive influence of elites. In order to safeguard the many led, a revitalization of the Aristotelian virtue should have taken place in contemporaneity.

A great number of scholars accuse a rampant crisis of legitimacy affecting Western democracies. This crisis is closely connected to the manner in which political elites are easily legitimized by popular vote following the recommendation of political parties. Therefore, a short comment on the influence that political parties possess within the process of legitimizing political elites is needed. Needless to say that if each voter were to vote for the candidate whom he saw fit to be his governor, then we would most likely be faced with a wide scattering of votes. Therefore, it was found necessary to coordinate and organize the votes of the people because, if left untutored, they would never come to an agreement on a given candidate. "If his vote is to have any efficacy at all, therefore, each voter is forced to limit his choice to a very narrow field, in other words to a choice among the two or three persons who have some chance of succeeding; and the only ones who have any chance of succeeding are those whose candidacies are championed by groups, by committees, by organized minorities" (Etzioni-Halevy 1997: 56). This prerequisite for an efficient, working election restrains the liberty of choice of the voters to a number of eligible candidates endorsed by different kinds of organizations among which political parties.

A candidacy endorsement is not without previous reflection and deliberation. In order for a political party to nominate a candidate for an upcoming election, the soundness of the candidate is brought to bear. The ritual of candidate selection is "the predominantly extralegal process by which a political party decides which of the persons legally eligible to hold an elective public office will be designated on the ballot and in election communications as its recommended and supported candidate or list of candidates" (Butler, Penman, and Ranney 1981: 75). There are various aspects attached to candidate selection and many issues to consider before putting forth a nomination. Important to bear in mind is the fact that parties enjoy a degree of centralization, meaning that they have party agencies present at the national, regional and local levels. Candidates are usually elected by local party agencies, under supervision by the national or regional agencies. Just as frequent, candidates are selected by national agencies at the suggestion of regional and local agencies. The process of selection can therefore be top-bottom, and just as easily bottom-top. There is however such a thing called "placement" known for stirring resentment among local selectors, when the national leaders take the liberty of suggesting the nomination of candidates whom they support against the preference of local agencies. Instead, the national and regional agencies have the power to refuse their support to a locally selected candidate and even deny him

the use of the party's label, if they disagree with the nomination of the respective candidate. However, any veto practice may render the party divisive and therefore, the national leaders "rely instead upon the local selectors' discretion to avoid choosing candidates that would have to be vetoed".

Another thing to consider during the selection is how many candidates will be enlisted and in what constituencies. This allocation *calculus* will ensure that a balanced number of candidates will be put forth in each constituency, because "too many will spread the party's votes so thin that all its candidates will lose and too few will waste the party's votes and keep it from electing as many candidates as its voting strength permits" (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 83). However, being included in the list of nominations does not secure a mandate to any candidate. The number of seats won by the party during the election is distributed according to the list, starting with those at the top and ending with those placed at the bottom, until the number of seats is exhausted. Chances are that only the upper part of the list will assume incumbency, while the rest, though victorious, cannot share in the seats. Hence, "positions on party lists are almost as important as their presence on them" (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 84).

Hence, on the background of increasing accusations regarding a rampant crisis of ethics and morality (deontologically understood) affecting the political leadership, the recent, largely empirically scholarly, emerged in order to reconcile somehow the dispute between those voicing the downfall of morals among politicians (that is, professionalized political elite) and thusly asking for moral and intellectual prominence and virtuous qualities, and those boldly pointing out that, with the virtually unrestricted access of individuals in politics, the moral and intellectual quality of elites became inherently decadent. Based on vast and almost exhaustive quantitative research on political elites (conducted especially in Western, highly developed, democracies), this "neo-descriptive" direction is set up to measure the impact of values – either moral, political, social, etc. – on shaping the existing tableau of the "leading few". Moreover, this approach tends to consider aspects that were previously neglected (e.g. commenting on the influence that political parties as "selectorates" or "gate-keepers" possess within the process of recruiting, selecting and legitimizing political elites, considering the importance of preference aggregation in shaping the form of the elites). As such, the overbearing presence of parties and their intricate system of selection and appointments expand to the very outskirts of the political society in which they dwell. Political elites are daily recruited and groomed so to occupy their higher political standing once with the coming of elections. Very little is left to odds, much is thought ahead. The tightly woven system of nominations is solid proof of the capacity of the leading minority to organize itself better than the heavy and robust masses. Political elites spare no effort or wit in achieving incumbency. Popular sovereignty is professed as both political parties and elites are clothed in skins

of humility and reserve towards the word of the people. "The vast machinery of party politics convey to most citizens the belief that minorities finally chosen to govern have been selected by procedures which permit an acceptable measure of popular control" (Prewitt 1970: 110). Upon sober reflection, everyone will be made sensible to their inconsequence within the process of determining the candidates whom they will later entrust with the right to present the person of them all. Democracy is given the backseat in politics because men regularly consent to authorize all the actions and judgments of one man or an assembly of men at the biased advice of political parties.

In these sentiments and in fully descriptive vein, political elites go to the extent of fully organizing themselves in order to secure a popular mandate which they obtain in violation of popular sovereignty. Michels was among the first to argue openly that any "system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy" (Michels 1962: 364). The inconsistency of leadership with democratic values is owed to the idea and the content of leadership itself. When closely examined, the skills, talents and other qualities embodied by our leaders discriminate against the average citizen, less gifted with those attributes and who is refused the opportunity of being the governor and not the governed.

All researchers who ventured in the field of political elites agree that:

"Legislators are far from being an average assortment of ordinary men. Almost everywhere legislators are better educated, possess higher-status occupations and have more privileged backgrounds than the people they represent." (Loewenberg, Patterson, and Jewell 1985: 18)

Aspirants to political leadership find their chances have improved considerably if they are possessed with private wealth, sufficiently large to fund their electoral campaigns in entrepreneurial political systems, or simply to secure them a higher education. This rationale applies to candidates from both parts of the ideological spectrum, and it remains as true for conservatives as for socialists. The reason is rarely snobbery because these people "are more likely to speak and write well, they are more likely to look healthy and well dressed" and "to work in occupations with flexible hours" (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 102) leaving them sufficient time for leadership duties. As a rule, when this above-average socioeconomic and educational status is attributed to a member of the male sex, this man will embody the general definition of an eligible candidate. The most disadvantaged aspirants to national or even local leadership are by far women. Statistics show that 41 percent of the women who served in the American Congress before 1979 were given the seat vacated by their recently deceased husbands. Therefore, "lawmaking remains essentially a man's game" (Loewenberg, Patterson, and Jewell 1985: 21).

The nature of the profession that the candidate is practicing is of equal importance, lawyers and people with verbal jobs, alongside businessmen being the most frequent incumbents of all legislatures. These elites are more apt for

legislative roles owing to the skills which they acquired in their instruction and experience, not quite to their moral outlook. Also, these professions may be thought to encourage an interest in political activity.

As can be deduced from previous comments, being member of a party is a valued asset and almost a vital one outside nonpartisan municipalities. Equally valuable is having occupied the same position for which one is running once more. Incumbents are preferred to non-incumbents because of their experience. These political elites are familiar to the electorate, to the party, to the campaign funders and “they already wear the mantle of the elected public official” (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 98). Being guided by the lights of experience and having the weight of precedence to justify its measures, the leadership of an incumbent is favoured by the majority of electorates. Similarly, another attribute of political elites is their local connections, which make them known and trusted throughout their constituency. Unlike an outsider, a local is “more likely to have contributed work and money to the local party and thus to have earned its candidacy” (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 100). It is worth mentioning that affiliations either to an interest group, say labour union, religious laymen’s league, farmer organization, or to a certain faction of the party to which the political elite is member, emphasize his *status* and make him a true commodity for his party, but it might cast a shadow of morality in the front of the electorate, as well.

Together, all assets listed above render the candidate for political leadership more commendable than his peers who may lack them, but may cherish ethical positions instead. With these differences in mind, if one is to conclude if democratic principles and ethics – as commonly defined as incontestable human attributes – are at work in present-day societies, inductive reasoning seems to have fallen down to a certain extent. Indeed, one may reason that “elites don’t believe in democracy. They pretend to be interested in the public and engage in deceptive patterns of behaviour in appealing for public support. Hence, they assume a passive public, and they are not really accountable, responsive, nor egalitarian” (Eldersveld 1989: xv-xvi).

Generally, in the field of political elite studies, two intellectual and research directions are customarily distinguished: (1) the normative theories on elites, and (2) the descriptive elite approach. Chronologically, the normative approaches precede the descriptive ones, for they are inclined to identify elites on the basis of their excellence (or “*arete*”), furthermore, on their moral stance or virtue. Pareto, the pioneering name in the descriptive tradition in studying elites, is actually in between the two approaches: the elite was formed either by those who are the best in their field of activity – namely, politics –, who excel in the realm in which they work or by those who are more or less circumstantially, but always temporarily, ephemerally in top decision-making positions in the hierarchy of power, those being in possession of “residues” of “combinations” or “persistence of aggregates” (Finer 1966/1916). The descrip-

tive manner was, starting from Pareto and the Italian “elitists” Mosca and Michels at the beginning of the 20th century, happily and exhaustively embraced by the contemporary scholarly, but most prolific oeuvres written in this fashion appeared in the context of a new “elitist” wave of studies, overwhelmingly empirical ones, at the end of the century: Higley’s numerous books (most important, those co-authored with Dogan (1998), Pakulski and Wesolowski (1998) and Lengyel (2000)), Mattei Dogan’s *Elite Configurations at the Apex of Power* (2003), Etzioni-Halevy’s *Classes and Elites in Democracy and Democratization* (1997), Hoffman-Lange’s compelling study on elites in FRG (1987: 27–47), Scott’s *The Sociology of Elites* (1990) and the countless studies conducted by Eyal, Szélényi and Townsley, separately or in co-authorship (*Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: The New Ruling Elites in Eastern Europe*, 1998) on “transformative” and “revolutionary” elites in East-Central Europe. These largely empirical inquiries appear in the special context of a decade after the communist breakdown and, consequently, treat extensively the process of elite transformation in transitional societies, in the new democracies. Their contribution to the overall scholarly production in the field of elite research is irrefutable, since the focus, the interest of research shifts from the Western democracies to the mutations in East-Central Europe, opening new paths of scientific endeavor for a region constantly in development. In this climate, C. Wright-Mills’s *Power Elite* (1956) appears as an enclave for the descriptive tradition in Western developed democracies in the middle of the 20th century. In the center of the normative “preoccupations” remains the issue of the “quality of elites”, i.e. excellence, which is somehow intrinsic, inherent in the very definition of “elites”; the moment in which the “quality of elites” becomes problematic is the transition between normative and descriptive approaches, when the collocation “the quality of elites” starts to pose serious problems of definition and operationalization: what is, in effect, this “quality”? Is it a moral one, denoting an elite that is ethnically superior, acting for the supreme “good” and being in itself of special “fabric”, axiologically righteous and virtuous? Is it a professional, technocratic one, linking the *status* of “political elite” to a certain degree of efficiency, performance, proper decision-making, good governance? Eventually, is it the representation constructed by a group of individuals able to seize and retain political power, a public image in the face of the masses in order to consolidate power? In his attempt to answer this series of pressing preliminary questions, György Lengyel quoted his compatriot and forerunner István Bibó, when discussing “quality of elites” as degree of “social sensitivity”, defined as both “*caritas*” and “a wide sense of culture-creating, needs-refining sensibility” (Bibo 2004/1942, as cited in Lengyel 2007: 6). To this, Lengyel adds predictability, accountability, replaceability – but only if one inquires on elites as a fully-fledged, comprehensive, unified, largely homogeneous group. If analysed as heterogeneous, fragmented, well-differentiated, easily distinguishable islands of political power forming an all-

encompassing group under the banner of “political elites”, the three features mentioned above might tell too little or close to nothing about the “quality of elites”, about what makes a political elite actually an “elite”. For the author of this study on local political elites, what seems of paramount importance in the definition of “political elites” in contemporaneity particularly in East-Central Europe are the capacity to negotiate, to alternate between conflict and consent, the willingness to compromise, the inclination to political and social dialogue, the ability to cooperate for the benefit of the community or for the “general good” and problem-solving capabilities. Providing for “the people”, insuring sustainable well-being for the population and social justice for the masses are seen to be inscribed in the series of tricky preconditions a group in leading position should fulfil in order to become a “political elite”; the trickiness of these prerequisites lies in the fact that they borrow significantly from the normative stance and in the impossibility of comprehensively operationalizing and measuring the degree and fashion in which these conditions are fulfilled. This type of preconditions lacks instrumentality in the empirical study of elites. Eventually, although traditionally it has been distinguished between normative and descriptive perspectives on the definition and the problematic interpretation of the group of political elites – with the former retaining a significant emphasis on the moral dimension of the “leading few”, while the later vigorously refuting it – the recent empirical efforts showed a certain degree of reconciliation between the two main trajectories, juxtaposing and combining the ethical model of political elites, with additional, supplementary model of thinking about elites (technocratic, political, pragmatic, gender).

Famously, Tom Bottomore aptly details on the infant steps of the word “*élite*” on the soil of social sciences: “The word ‘*élite*’ was used in the seventeenth century to describe commodities of particular excellence [...]. In the English language the earliest known use of ‘*élite*’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is in 1823, at which time it was already applied to social groups. But the term did not become widely used in social and political writing until late in the nineteenth century in Europe, or until the 1930s in Britain and America, when it was diffused through the sociological theories of elites” (Bottomore 1964: 3), consecrated by the “neo-Machiavellians” or the classical Italian “elitists”. Eventually, in contemporaneity, the elite studies favored a “functionalist theory of stratification”³, according to which present-day “knowledge society” and its constant developments and subtleties present some complexities manageable only by a certain type of elite: the “meritocracy” model of power, presently fashionable in the literature consecrated to elites introduces the reader with a political elite who is highly skilled and experimented in public administration and government business, who is recruited based on some performance parameters out of a narrower and narrower pool of candidates, who

3 The phrase defining a new line in the elite theory is customarily associated with Davis and Moore 1945: 242-249.

is “talented” or benefits from a certain likeable or favorable “cultural capital”⁴, but who becomes, consequently, more and more alienated with “the mass”, the citizenry, widening the gap between the rulers and the ruled. In a literature review of social and political elites, from “neo-Machiavellians” to the contemporary debate, Patrick Akard differentiates between the conception of “functional elites” (specific to a certain area, institution, context, or activity, what Keller coins as “strategic elites” (Keller 1963)) and “political (ruling) elites”, exerting “societal-level power” (Akard 2000: 2623); the latter are the focus of this endeavor.

Surely, the selection of “the chosen” (from the French “*élire*”) is the prerogative of either “God, nature, or public esteem” (Girvetz 1967: 30). The “elitist paradigm”, the elite theory, has developed considerably after the empiric studies and the theoretical recalibrations conducted under the guidance of Higley, Burton, and Best, among other Western sociologists and political scientists. The efforts of the Italian “elitists” have been surpassed, for, as Field and Higley rightly put it, “to advance elitist hypotheses today it is not enough merely to argue, as Pareto, Mosca and Michels could, that elites always or usually exist and that they are probably of decisive importance. In addition to this, it is now necessary to refute the widely held assumption that values such as equality, liberty and freedom are universal and objective. Probably only by making this refutation can contemporary thought be brought to see the importance and the propriety of elitist assumptions.” (Field and Higley 1980: 3) Hence, the “elitist paradigm” is presently much more than the *problématique* of “[h]ow to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor” (Foucault 1991/1978: 87).

The very incontestable reality that power has ceased to be regarded as unified, monolithic, unilateral, is being highlighted by American psychologist William A. Gamson, who differentiates between “authorities” (i.e. those who can make binding decisions in a particular social system”, the rulers, the political elite), and the “potential partisans” (i.e. “those who are affected by the outcome of a particular decision in some significant way”, the ruled). This is not to say that the power system is a static one, for “power” is to be analyzed symmetrically, bilateral: (a) “power” as “authorities acting on potential partisans (social control)”, “targets of influence” and “agents of control”, and (b) “power” as “potential partisans acting on authorities (influence)”, or “agents of influence” or “targets of control”, whose influence is exerted under the form of either “constraint” (i.e. “the exercise of influence by threat of deprivation”) or “inducement” (i.e. the exercise of influence by “the promise of indulgence” (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950: 97, as cited in Gamson 1968)). Subsequently, one

4 One should not overlook the very fact that “talent”, “cultural appreciation”, “prestige” are part of the very difficulty in operationalizing and measuring the rise of the “new (i.e. meritocratic) elite”.

can easily remark that power is exerted on both sides, on that of the ruler and on that of the ruled, although preeminence of the former is acknowledged. For a pluralist as Dahl, the “ruling elite” is “a controlling group less than a majority in size that is not a pure artifact of democratic rules. It is a minority of individuals whose preferences regularly prevail in cases of differences in preference on key political issues. [...] [T]he composition of the ruling elite must be more or less definitely specified.” (Dahl 1958: 464) Following Dahl, in a historical-political account on “power” seen as a “dispositional concept”, Steven Lukes equates a “ruling elite” with a group of individuals verifying the three “tests”: (a) “[t]he hypothetical ruling elite is a well-defined group”; (2) “[t]here is a fair sample of cases involving key political decisions in which the preferences of the hypothetical ruling elite run counter to those of any other likely group that might be suggested”; (3) “[i]n such cases, the preferences of the elite regularly prevail” (Lukes 1974; Lukes cites extensively from Dahl 1958: 466). Once with the integration and pluralism of power, elite manifestations embrace different features, facets, and forms. Famously, Mannheim differentiates between: (1) the “organizing and directing elites” (i.e. those groups of individuals in power managing concrete aspects of leadership, immediate goals and programmes), and (2) the “more diffuse and informally organized elites” (Mannheim 1940/1935) (i.e. those groups of individuals in power managing more abstract matters of leadership, such as spiritual, cultural, artistic, or moral problems). But one of the most profoundly constructed classifications of elites belongs to Suzanne Keller, who differentiates among four types of elites, based on the four “functional problems which every society must resolve”: (1) “goal attainment” (i.e. “the setting and realization of collective goals”), (2) “adaptation” (i.e. “the use and development of effective means of achieving these goals”), (3) “integration” (i.e. “the maintenance of appropriate moral consensus and social cohesion within the system”), and (4) “pattern maintenance and tension management” (i.e. “the morale of the system’s units – individuals, groups, and organizations” (Keller 1968: 27)). Keller’s resulting four types of “strategic elites” are: (1) “elites of goal attainment” (or the current, existing political elite); (2) “elites of adaptation” (the economic, military, scientific, diplomatic elites); (3) “elites of integration” (elites exerting moral authority, from priests, philosophers, spiritual leaders, to educators, teachers, and first families); and (4) “pattern-maintenance elites” (elite charged with “keep[ing] the society knit together emotionally and psychologically”, from celebrities, artists, writers, actors, pop stars, to top figures in sports and recreation and entertainment) (Keller 1968: 27 [addition mine]). This web of functions is generally applicable for industrialized societies, in which the four types of “strategic elites” operate more and more independently of each other. The very formation of what Keller coins “strategic elites” is a historical process, during which firstly the “ruling caste”, then the “aristocracy”, afterwards the “ruling class” succeed each other in different ages of government. Eventually, “strat-

egic elites” come to denote, in Keller’s vocabulary, “those elites which claim or are assigned responsibilities for and influence over their society as a whole, in contrast with segmental elites, which have major responsibilities in subdomains of the society” (Keller 1968: 26), consequently having “the largest, most comprehensive scope and impact” upon society.

Indeed, the preservation of the ruling class and its very self-identification are dependent upon the moderation of the pressures exerted from *populous*, from the popular masses. Hence, Frank Bonilla aptly contends that “[a]t issue here is a fundamental feature of self-image among elites and a keystone of any ideology or theory of political development. As a result of the consolidation of elite power in countries where democracy has survived longest, such groups have come to be widely regarded as the most genuinely dynamic and innovative force and as the guarantors of continuity in national systems. In this view the vital functions of *the gifted*, *the expert*, and *the entrepreneurially able* require that they be shielded from mass pressures.” (Bonilla 1970: 256 [italics added]) Canonically, one can discern from here the paradoxical position of elites in democracy, with regard to the scrutiny of the citizenry. Quite clearly, in opposition to any pluralist-tailored assertion, “elites comprise fairly closed units, and [...] inequalities in the distribution of power (the resources that facilitate the exercise of power) tend to be cumulative, meaning that resourceful agents are better equipped to increase their power and their resources for exercising power than those who are deprived of resources.” (Dyrberg 1997: 43)⁵ This is the typical, canonical presumption of the reproduction of power, consonant to Lasswell’s “agglutination” model of political elites, detailed below.

With this knowledge in mind we will now turn our attention to the small constituencies of Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, Gyula, Targovishte, and Levice, as we will attempt to restate by means of example all which was said above. This unerring test of all arguments will shed further light upon the broad issue of political elites by looking into the ways and manners in which the local leaderships of Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, Gyula, Targovishte, and Levice are made manifest and the implications it entails.

The intention to study local political elites through the prism of Local and Municipal Councils is motivated by the general study of patterns of government at the level of small-to-medium-sized communities and by the inquiry in the role played and the features displayed by the elites of these type of communities, with a special emphasis on the transitional space of East-Central Europe. Particularly in the context of a marked tendency towards increased devolution and decentralization, the local political elites acquire a specifically important set of new prerogatives.

5 Studying historical conceptualizations of power, Dyrberg emphasizes Foucault’s “nominalistic and presuppositionless conceptualization of power that is both epistemologically and ontologically coterminous with power as ‘the ability to make a difference’.” (p. 116)

Brief Literature Review of the Territory of Local Leadership

“Power” is an “ability”⁶; as holders of power, the political elite bears the ability to decide over the community. If the *ouvres* of the “Italian elitists” were equally empirical to the ones undertaken in the 1970s, when the elite studies reached a climax, only with the latter, political elites were employed as a means to identify the specific characteristics of national political institutions; this new line of analysis has been labeled “the second generation of empirical studies” (Czudnowski 1983: 243-255), with a special significance for the study of local representative bodies, for instance.

The literature dedicated to the study of local political elites is impressively reduced: the bulk of this literature derives from the broad study of political elites and consequently dates from the 1970s, once with the climax reached by the elitist empirical studies. In this respect, the most frequently quoted, the renowned *oeuvre* pertains to Robert Dahl who constructed its poliarchic model on the study of the municipality of New Haven. Among the most prominent studies on the slippery and feeble soil of local political elites, the mentionable titles are the pioneering works authored by Robert Staughton and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (1937)⁷, undertaken in Muncie (Indiana). Despite the anthropological overload of their volumes, it is important to bear in mind that the two American scholars were among the first to endeavor in such an inductively-driven urban inquiry, and the first to consider the impact of economic changes and development strategies on various segments of the town’s population, including the leading *strata* of the community, on these segments’ values and behaviors. Lynds’ work is equally significant for it paves the way for Dahl’s future observations, stressing on the relevance of power – even in the very confined, narrow space of a small town – and on the place of economic notables in Muncie, the “businessmen”, on their conspicuous influence upon the political leadership of the town and on the entire activity and life of the urban community. From the prism of these conclusions, when discussing the “Middletown Studies”, Nelson Polsby (1963: 14) labels them as “Marxist” (for they contend that property among the means of production provides for absolute power within a municipality) and the

6 “Power” as “ability”, as external to the “subject”, as “influence” and “decision-making”, is a standard reference in behaviourist studies. See, for prominently, Ball 1975: 211-222.

7 Even though predominantly anthropological, the so-called “Middletown Studies” are indeed groundbreaking for the study of the local political elites, as well, as they are the first empirical undertakings to consider the importance of local leadership on the developmental strategies of a town.

representatives of the “stratification theory” in elitist studies, for they ultimately reach the conclusion that the local elite is the one that possess political power – usually springing from other form of power exerted at the local level, e.g. economical –, as an instrument for governing the community in accordance to its own vernacular interests. Illustrative for the cases selected here (particularly for the Romanian case), although they stress on the “net separation” between the economical institutions and the political ones, even at the local level, the Lynds do acknowledge the immanent interdependence between the two institutions and leadership, since “those that dominate from an economic standpoint the community exert their control on the political problems, as well, only to avoid the too accentuated increase in taxation or a too strong involvement in their own affairs [by the political leadership]. Otherwise, they are totally disinterested in the political life.” (Lynd and Lynd 1937: 129) This assessment might appear yet too hazardous, taking into consideration the frequency and the intensity of interactions and network formation between the political and the economic elites; a series of tentative evaluations somehow antagonizing with Lynds’ conclusion are drawn from the present study, but, while the American study is focused on Muncie in the 1920s and 1930s, the present study is extremely contingent on Tecuci, Česká Lípa, Olešnica, Gyula, Targovishte, and Levice in 2010-2015, making hence opposite views and results virtually irreconcilable for the simple fact that the two studies are circumscribed to particular instances, settings and time frames, with no pretence to exhaustive generalizations. As a matter of fact, the Lynds’ studies on “Middletown” and their feeble conclusions in respect to the connections between economic and political elite at the local level (dominantly in urban areas) opened the way for similar, more mature and more meaningful empirical endeavors oriented towards the analysis of the said connections and of their impact on the developmental strategies and the general profile of the urban communities; notable in this sense is William Lloyd Warner’s study on “Yankee City” (Newburyport, Massachusetts)⁸, the hypothetical urban center dominated by entrepreneurs, businessmen, freelancers and liberal professionals, who managed to forge a sort of “class consciousness” and who virtually ousted any

8 William Lloyd Warner’s study on “Yankee City” includes five volumes: Warner, W. L. & Lunt, P. S. (1941). *The Social Life of a Modern Community*. Yankee City Series, Vol. I. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press; Warner, W. L. & Lunt, P. S. (1942). *The Status System of a Modern Community*. Yankee City Series, Vol. II. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press; Warner, W. L. & Strole, L. (1945). *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*. Yankee City Series, Vol. III. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press; Warner, W. L. & Low, J. O. (1947). *The Social System of a Modern Factory*. Yankee City Series, Vol. IV. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press; Warner, W. L. (1959). *The Living and the Dead: A Study in the Symbolic Life of Americans*. Yankee City Series, Vol. V. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press. See also the abridgement of the series, under the title Warner, W. L. (1963). *Yankee City*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

trace of autonomy from the political institutions. Surely, such a stance is too vehement and radical, since it implies the blunt reality that, at the local level, the economic elite is the one that ultimately governs in town. Notwithstanding his categorical positions, Warner and his work on “Yankee City” are to be kept in mind when endeavoring in the thin and narrow field of local political leadership at least from two perspectives: firstly, his observations are heavily utilized and partly confirmed – albeit in a nuanced form – by the present research, which point to the pertinence and contemporaneity thereof; secondly, he employs a singular method, that of an “index of evaluated participation” (i.e. the construction of a scale comprising the expertise’s evaluation of the “prestige” enjoyed by key-individuals within the community, and their placing on the social hierarchy), quite similar to Hunter’s method (presented below and further utilized, as well, in this study), which stresses and manages somehow to operationalize the concept of elite “prestige”⁹. Soon after Warner’s “Yankee City” studies had known scholarly recognition, Floyd Hunter advanced a resembling work, conducted in “Regional City” (different researches in Atlanta, Georgia) among the members of the local upper class. Hunter’s findings are strikingly similar to Warner’s: as in “Yankee City”, in “Regional City”, “the businessmen are the leaders of the community [...], as they actually are in any town. The wealth, the social prestige and the political machinery are functional to the wielding of power by these leaders.” (Hunter 1953: 81; see also Hunter, Schaffer, and Sheps 1956) In confronting dilemmas of “prestige” and “reputation” of local notables, Hunter contends that “their visual influence [and virtual recognition] is transformed into power”. Yet again, the study is diverged towards the economic portions of the ruling class, while the local political elite is completely overshadowed by the magnitude of the reputation the businessmen possess. The emphasis on the predominance and preeminence of the economic elite on local decision-making and on its “caste” behavior are furthered in Delbert Miller’s inquiry into “Pacific City”, although this time the scholar minds about the political decision-makers, as well, mentioning their role as mere “counterbalance” for the interests of local big business (Miller 1985: 9-15, esp. 13-15). If C. Wright Mills is central for the “positional method”, Warner and Hunter are exemplary for the “reputational method”, Robert Dahl’s *Poliarchy* and *Who Governs?* (1961) are the referential works for the “decisional method”¹⁰: the research in New Haven (Connecticut) revealed that those who hold the political power are essentially that quite exclusive group of

9 Actually, Warner’s scale and Hunter’s method of accounting for elite “prestige” lie at the fundament of the “reputational method”.

10 Ivor Crewe identifies three “research traditions” in the study of power: the “reputational” tradition (whose object of study are the “images of power”), the “structural” tradition (called here “positional”, whose object of study are the “positions of power”), and the “decisional” tradition (whose object of study are the “agencies of power”). See: Crewe 1974: 9-54.

individuals who take a decision, i.e. who initiates a proposition and who subsequently validates or opposes it. Definitely, the scope of Dahl's study is laudable, as his primary intention was to provide a rejoinder to both Marxist and elitist interpretations on local politics and to somehow "rehabilitate" the traditional image and model of the American democracy – even at the local level – as veritably democratic and integral, hence refuting Mills's, Warner's and Hunter's "invitations" to perceiving national and local elites as some sort of complotistic and clandestine caste. Dahl's elites are factionalist, fragmentary, placed in a continuous fight for the control over society (similar to the struggle between "lions" and "foxes" in Pareto's accounts); it is their meeting and their subsequent negotiations in the decision-making process that actually matters in describing elites. Surely, these factional leaders and groups do agree on the very basis of the "rules of the democratic game" and on the accountability of the citizens, making "poliarchy" probably the best "approximation" of democracy. On the other hand, the observations drawn from the small town of New Haven conclude: the central position of the Mayor, who participates to decision-making in all spheres of competence; the extreme specialization of the elite group; the absence of economic elites in the process of decision-making at the local level (with the partial exception of decisions taken in the sphere of urban development), etc. Notwithstanding the importance of and the central role played by these works in the general scholarly evolution of the local elite studies, quite unfortunately, few of them concentrated their attention and interest in the composition of the Municipal Council as legislative centers of power at the local level, particularly within small-to-medium sized communities. In opposition to Hunter's "ruling-elite" model, to Mills' "power-elite", to the "stratification model" advanced, for the local level, by Lynds, W. Lloyd Warner, to the "mass-society" theory put forward by Mills, Vidich and Bensman, and Warner and Lowe, are all to be the expected targets of theoretical – but, most importantly – empirical attack by the "pluralist" theories, whose *spiritus rector* is Robert Dahl, and whose major achievements are linked to such notions as "decentralized power structures, fragmented causation, [and] complex systems" (McFarland 1969: 32). But, the pluralist "drive" is, in itself, particularly heterogeneous. Andrew McFarland identifies two "major chains of reasoning" (McFarland 1969: 32-33) in the pluralist vain: (a) the "community-power" studies (e.g. Dahl, Nelson Polsby, Aaron Wildavsky), studies that are characterized by a virulent and unmediated attack on the then widely embraced and canonical "power-elite" theory; and (b) the "group-process" theory (e.g. A.F. Bentley, David Truman), a milder attack on "oversimplification" and "insufficient empiricism" (Bentley 1908).

Apart from the canonical Western studies on local political elites, from Lynds' to Warner's, one should not overlook the empirical efforts, started in the first years of democratic transition in East-Central Europe and in other countries of the "developing world". One of the most important ones has been

undertaken by “The Democracy and Local Governance Research Program”, resulting in two extended and systematic studies including national reports on the local political leaders’ perceptions on internal globalization of their localities, on democratization dynamics, and on the general evolution of the localities (Jacob, Ostrowski, and Teune 1993; Jacob, Linder, Nabholz, and Hierli 1999).

The two major scholarly pieces that majorly influenced the present study are Samuel Eldersveld’s *Political Elites in Modern Societies* (1989) and Virgil Stoica’s *Cine conduce Iașul?* (2004). The former constitutes a series of three lectures sprung out of the empirical inquiries conducted in the late 1970s in Ann Arbor (Michigan) among the political activists of the town. The latter is a remarkably compelling and extremely close to exhaustiveness study of the local elite in Iași (Romania) after 1989; the research is focused on the mayors succeeding in the leadership of the city, on the municipality’s functionaries and on the members of the Local Council, without actually (or always) discriminating among these three clusters.

The population of this research was constituted by the local political elites in ECE middle-sized towns (i.e. with a population ranging from 25,000 inhabitants to 250,000 inhabitants). Broadly, the present study will focus on seven main topics: (1) the Local (Municipal) Council as a group of local political elites and as an instance of political power at the local level (general presentation and main functions); (2) the social biography of the members of the six Local (Municipal) Councils under scrutiny; (3) patterns of recruitment of these local elites and the importance of the local branches of the main parties; (4) interactions of the members of the Local (Municipal) Councils with other groups and institutions (and the subsequent power networks and formal and informal linkages); (5) values and principles embraced by the local political elites in the six analyzed cases; (6) priorities of the local political elites in the six selected Local (Municipal) Councils, and (7) representativeness of the Local (Municipal) Councils in the six towns, in the context in which the Local Council (Municipal) is an instance of legislative representative government. In order to account for the various differences and discrepancies and the equally challenging similarities among the six cases, the present endeavor favors two main tentative explanatory trajectories, namely (1) the present level of decentralization specific to each of the countries whose municipalities are the case-studies here, and (2) the “legacy of the *ancien régime*”, peculiar to the six countries of the former Sovietized Europe; two separate sections are dedicated to the development of these two independent variables. A final section proposes and develops on a typology of local political elites, which distinguishes among (1) “predominantly elitistic” local elites, (2) “democratic elitist” local elites, and (3) “predominantly democratic” local elites, in the attempt to systematize and generalize the observations drawn from the six cases, and to add