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Assessing Socialist Past and Sociodemographic Present

The Composition of Political Elites in Central and Eastern Europe from 1990 to 2020

ABSTRACT Since the mid-2000s, there has been no study of characteristics of political elites at large in East Central European countries. Accordingly, an assessment of long-term trends is not possible beyond narrow case studies of elite sub-segments. This research note introduces a new dataset covering officeholders for 3,277 position/years in six countries (the Czech Republic, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine) for seven reference years from 1990 to 2020. It points to results about broad development trends of political elites concerning sociodemographic characteristics and elite continuity. These include a high degree of sociodemographic homogeneity of elites across countries and time. Concerning the role of the old elites of the socialist regimes, there are considerable differences between the countries, caused among others by different approaches to lustration.

KEYWORDS political elites, post-socialism, lustration, sociodemographics, gender

At the core of research about political elites are questions related to the composition and recruitment of those social groups commanding political power and economic wealth in modern societies. These aspects, as opposed to elite viewpoints and belief systems, are regularly addressed on the basis of larger datasets offering numerical assessments next to biographical overviews. Prominent examples are the WhoGov dataset, covering cabinet members in all larger countries worldwide for five decades (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020); the dataset of the Global Leadership Project, offering biographical information “on a wide array of leaders in most countries of the world” (Gerring et al. 2019, 1079); and the



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EurElite project, which was devoted to the comparative study of representative elites across Europe (Best and Edinger 2005; Semenova, Edinger, and Best 2014).

Concerning communist East Central Europe, the sociodemographic composition of political elites was an established topic of research. This was partly due to the fact that related data were nearly the only ones readily available to academic researchers. In a broader analysis of social differences among larger elite strata in Central and East European socialist societies, David Lane (1982, 159) summarized that “the ideology of state-socialist society has, perhaps marginally, enhanced the status of the workers as a social group, the extent of income differentials has been minimized and sex differences have been reduced.” More recently, a dataset on 787 candidates and full members from the ruling politburos of nine communist regimes across Eastern Europe has been added to this line of research (Matthews 2023).

In the 1990s, broader empirical studies on the elite for post-socialist countries focused on elite change in relation to a perceived transition to democracy. When Carothers (2002) summarized the by then popular perception of “the end of the transition paradigm,” highlighting that many countries were not moving on to consolidated democracies, but were stuck in a “gray zone,” interest in larger patterns of elite change waned. In the case of consolidated democracies, like those in East Central Europe, attention switched to political parties and interest groups (see e.g. Semenova, Edinger, and Best [2014] or Landgraf and Pleines [2015]). In the case of hybrid regimes, like those in Russia and Ukraine, elite studies were restricted to those subsections of the political elites that were deemed to be especially influential—most prominently business elites; in the case of Russia, also elite members with an army or secret service background (earlier, Kryshantovskaya and White [2003, 2009]; more recently, Rivera and Rivera [2018] or Soldatov and Rochlitz [2018]). As a result of this fragmentation, broad comparative research on post-socialist elite change so far mostly covers only the first decade after the end of socialism, thus missing the chance to examine long-term developments.

In this context, the new dataset “Characteristics of Political Elites: Long-Term Trends in Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe” offers the opportunity for an examination of long-term change among political elites in post-socialist countries of East Central Europe. The focus is on the impact of state-organized selection processes (including elections and appointments) on elite composition over three decades from the first post-socialist elites (i.e., those in power in the early 1990s) to the elite composition in 2020. To allow for a broad comparison, the dataset includes countries with different degrees of political competition.

The dataset lists incumbents of a predefined sample of political elite positions in selected reference years indicating sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, professional background, membership in specific social groups—such as the wealthy, business, academia, or military/secret service) and their role during socialism (old elite, dissenters, newcomers after socialism). These characteristics of a given cohort of political elites (i.e., of those who are in power in a reference year) can be compared over time and between countries.

In this research note, we now continue with a short description of the new dataset. Afterward, we point to insights to be gained from an analysis of the dataset by highlighting two research areas with selected results based on descriptive statistics: the socio-demographic profile of elites and the issue of elite continuity after the end of the socialist regimes. Although there is a relatively high rate of elite turnover, the new elites are drawn from a narrowly defined group with similar sociodemographic backgrounds.

THE DATASET

The dataset offers an overview of the composition of a broad sample of political elites in six larger countries of Central and Eastern Europe with differing degrees of political competition over three decades. Countries included in the dataset are (in alphabetical order) the Czech Republic, East Germany or the GDR (five East German regions, i.e., federal states in East Germany created in 1990), Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. For reasons solely related to feasibility, the study examines only a limited number of points in time, moving in five-year steps from 1990 to 2020.¹ The dataset is accompanied by an extensive documentation of data collection, with a length of over 50 pages, which includes country appendices, documenting all decisions related to the selection process. It is available in open access as Chorna et al. (2022).

As the dataset covers elites in political decision-making in highly formalized societies, it employs a functional approach to define elites. Accordingly, elites are those who perform a specific function in the political regime. In line with this approach, specific members of the elite are identified using a positional approach.² The dataset includes only positions assigned via state-organized selection processes (i.e., either democratic elections or appointments by state bodies). Accordingly, only journalists at state or public media and only the top management of state-controlled firms are included. As the army does not play a distinct role in the politics of the countries covered by the dataset, military positions are not included. Military leaders are included when they assume relevant positions (e.g., as minister of defense). Moreover, for each elite member included in the dataset, a background in the military or the secret service is indicated if given.³

For each country and each reference year,⁴ the dataset covers the following institutions and positions: president and head of the presidential administration (not

1. Our only reason for deviation from five-year steps is either (only for 1990) that the country did not yet exist or (for all later years) there was an ongoing transition of power. If positions are either vacant or filled by acting or deputy officeholders, we want to include the more permanent officeholders of relevance for the next years. The reference year has then been moved one year into the future (e.g., 2006 instead of 2005 has been selected for Poland and Ukraine).

2. See also Hoffmann-Lange (2018).

3. Thus, elites with a military background are not hidden in the dataset. In the extreme, they account for a share of 20% in one country-year (Russia in 2005), as elaborated later in this article.

4. Since the GDR is composed of five German regions rather than being a nation-state, the corresponding institutions and positions at the regional level have been chosen. This includes, for example, the federal parliaments, regional party leaders, and regional business associations. If the general description of an institution or position did not apply, it was not taken into account. This concerns only the Central Bank, the State Audit Chamber, and the

TABLE 1. Elite Study Dataset: Number of Persons Covered

	1990/92/93	1995	2000	2005/06	2010/11	2015/16	2020	Total
CZ	54	58	51	57	55	60	62	397
GDR	126	130	133	137	143	149	155	973
HU	62	66	68	69	59	60	65	449
PL	61	62	58	65	61	68	69	444
RF	68	87	81	64	76	80	78	534
UA	68	67	69	71	66	71	68	480
Total	439	470	460	463	460	488	497	3,277

in parliamentary systems), national government (prime minister and all ministers), lower chamber of the national parliament (head of parliament, heads of parliamentary factions and major committees⁵), leaders of political parties which are represented in parliament, the chairpersons of the highest national courts, the head of the Central Bank, the head of the Supreme audit institution, governors as heads of the executive at the regional state level (in Russia and Ukraine, only the ten and five most populous regions, respectively), mayors of the five largest cities, heads of state/public TV stations, heads of the five state universities with the highest number of students, head of the national Academy of Science, the CEOs of the five largest state-controlled companies. The resulting dataset includes the officeholders for 3,277 position-years and 2,141 persons (i.e., different officeholders). Table 1 gives an overview by country-years.

In comparison to most datasets on political elites, which focus narrowly on the national state executive and/or legislature, our dataset offers a broader picture of political elites including regional actors and actors from important national state institutions outside government. This makes, for example, the high degree of sociodemographic homogeneity, which we will demonstrate below, all the more striking.

For each officeholder, personal information has been collected via desktop research.⁶ Personal information is used to understand the sociodemographic background of

Academy of Science. Full details are provided in the country appendix “GDR” of the Documentation of Data Collection at Discuss Data; see Chorna et al. (2022).

5. Major committees are the central committees responsible for (1) interior policy, (2) foreign policy, (3) economic policy, (4) state budget/finances, and (5) social policy. If two committees on one topic seem of equal relevance (e.g., if there is a committee on economy and trade and another one on economy and industrial policy), both are selected and the number of people included is extended to six or more.

6. The completeness and accuracy of all data have been controlled in four rounds. It has been ensured that for each country the functions of the researcher (“supervisor”), data collector, and data controller have been separated to improve intercoder reliability. The preregistration of the study design has been archived at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/ZRWP3>. The sources for the biographical information about these political elite members have been saved in 4,833 files with a combined size of 7GB. A full description of the data collection including the country appendices has been published as Chorna et al. (2022).

a person; it is not meant to present the life course of a person. The variables covered are listed in Table 2. As information on nationality or ethnicity was not available for a large share of officeholders, this aspect could not be covered in the dataset.

A central topic of the dataset is how many of the post-socialist elites of a specific year have been leading supporters of socialism or members of the opposition against the socialist regime. The main variable for this is “role under socialism/status.” This can be “elite,” “regime follower,” “opposition,” “opposition follower,” “dissident,” “none,” or “unclear.” Any person who has held any leading political position (including at the local level) during socialism in the Communist Party (or—if applicable—a “block party”) or the state executive is coded as “elite.” Such a position implies responsibility for personnel (i.e., leading an administrative division) and decision-making powers related to political affairs. Any person who held ordinary positions without any responsibility for personnel or decision-making powers (including mere active party membership) receives the status of “regime follower.” Any leading member of an opposition movement under socialism (before any agreement about a power transition)—that is, a person with a position in the movement’s hierarchy—is coded as “opposition.” Active ordinary members of opposition movements are coded as “opposition followers.” Individual outspoken critics of the socialist regime outside any organized structure, for example, artists, are coded as “dissidents.”

It is important to note that the role current elite members had under socialism is not always easy to establish. In several cases, published biographies start just with the end of socialism—even in the case of people who were already over 30 at that time. Moreover, secret activities for the socialist regime may not always have been revealed. In this context, it is also relevant that available information about pro-regime activities is much more comprehensive in some countries covered in the dataset than in others. In the Polish case, the *Biuletyn Informacji Publicznej* offers a rather exhaustive list of people linked to the socialist regime, which has been used for our dataset, while at the other extreme, in the case of Russia, this issue has never been addressed in a systematic way. Still, the fact that the issue was not addressed systematically also meant that elite members had fewer reasons to conceal their past affiliation. Moreover, for the dataset we have also consulted bibliographies already published during socialist times.

SOЦИОДЕМОГРАФИЧ ПРОФИЛЕ

In studies covering the sociodemographic composition of political elites in post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe only the gender aspect received broader attention (see Galligan and Clavero 2008), while other sociodemographic characteristics were largely ignored. However, the dataset presented here includes a broader range of categories and also a broad range of elite members. Concerning age, in the early 1990s, the mean age for all six countries covered in our dataset was in the range 47–52 years. By 2020, the range had changed to 50–57 years. At the same time, the fact that the average elite members are in their 50s in 2020 means that they were in their 20s in the 1990s. Accordingly, the share of elite members who were under 18 years old when the socialist

TABLE 2. Variables Covered for Each Person in Elite Dataset

Family name/rest of name (includes family name at birth if different)

Sociodemographic characteristics

Gender (f, m, t, d)

Year of birth (yyyy)

Formal (learned) profession: as indicated in biographies, plus respective profession (category) according to typology of occupation profiles by US Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Diplomatic service" has been added due to its prominence in sample. Moreover, relevant categories for self-employment have been added in an inductive approach (namely, "businessperson, entrepreneur," "professional politician," and "philosopher").

Wealthy (yes, no): if person was a multimillionaire (in euros or US dollars) at any time.

Private business (yes, no): if person has been either owner or manager of private business full-time prior to political career.

"Siloviki" (yes, no): if person has background in military/secret service, meaning at least 10 years of professional service.

Academia (yes, no): if person has been working as employee at academic institution (university, research institute) after completion of first doctoral degree (which in some case countries is/was called *kandidat nauk*).

Role in socialist system

Status (elite OR regime follower OR opposition OR opposition follower OR dissident OR none OR unclear)

If elite or opposition: most important institution/position.

Governance level (local OR regional OR national)

Party membership (acronym of party OR none OR not available)

Position in party: indicates highest position occupied during socialism with original title of that position.

Governance level (local OR regional OR national): indicates governance level of institution/position given in preceding column.

Additional information: if any further information is relevant to understanding role of person during socialism, it is added here (e.g., expulsion from party or informal collaboration with secret service).

Reference years (1990–2020)

Institution/position (only if institution and position belong to predefined sample covered in dataset); if person is fully retired, "retired" is indicated in both columns; if person is deceased, "deceased" is entered in both columns).

Political camp or party (country specific: name of party or coalition bloc) OR neutral (= no party affiliation) OR unclear.

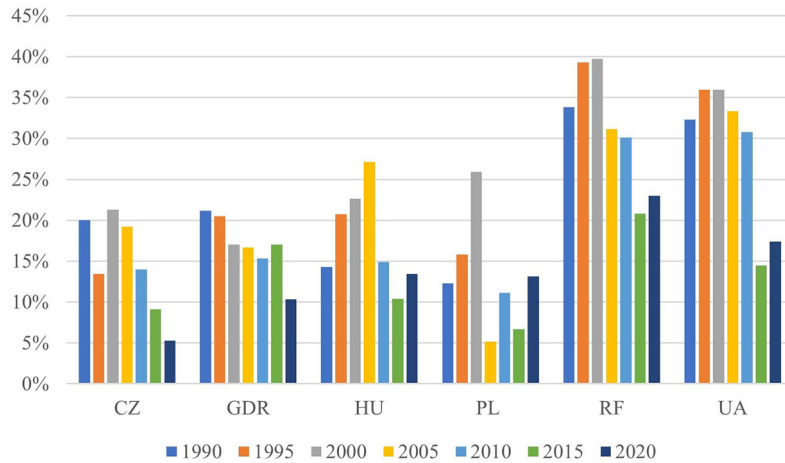


FIGURE 1. Share of engineers, percent. Source: Authors' dataset.

regimes collapsed (reference year 1989) has been constantly rising since around 2005 and in 2020 reached over 50% in the case of Ukraine and, at the lower end, 25% for Hungary and Russia.

The rather high average age of elite members also means that a large number of elite members covered in the dataset has already retired or died. In the extreme, the share of those retired or deceased among all people from one country included in the dataset, which covers 30 years, reached 50% in 2020 in the case of Hungary, while the values for the other countries are substantially lower. It must be noted, though, that for many elite positions, retirement is not officially announced but is the result of failure to keep or regain an elite position. Accordingly, the actual share of “retired” can be higher.

A high degree of homogeneity across countries is also visible in the case of “learned profession.” Engineers, lawyers, business and finance administrators, and scientists (life, physical, and social sciences) are the only four professional groups achieving a share of more than 10% in any country sample in any year. In Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, these four professional groups account for more than 60% of the full elite sample in all reference years. The highest annual value is around 80% in all four countries. In the Czech Republic, their share has declined after 2000, falling from around 60% in the 1990s to 35% in 2015. In the East German regions, the share of these four professions remained rather stable in the range from 45% to 53% throughout the period under study. The dominant role of engineers, especially in Russia and Ukraine, can be seen as a legacy of the technocratic policies of the planned economy (see Figure 1).

Accordingly, the long-term trend is an unsteady decline. Conversely, the share of the legal professions has been on an unsteady rise in all cases except Hungary (see Figure 2).

Homogeneity is also expressed in an overwhelming dominance of men (see Figure 3). Except for the GDR, the share of women in our sample was well below 20% in all years covered. Until 2005 it remained below 10% for all five countries, while in the East German regions it rose from 10% in 1990 to 25% in 2005 and 35% in 2020.

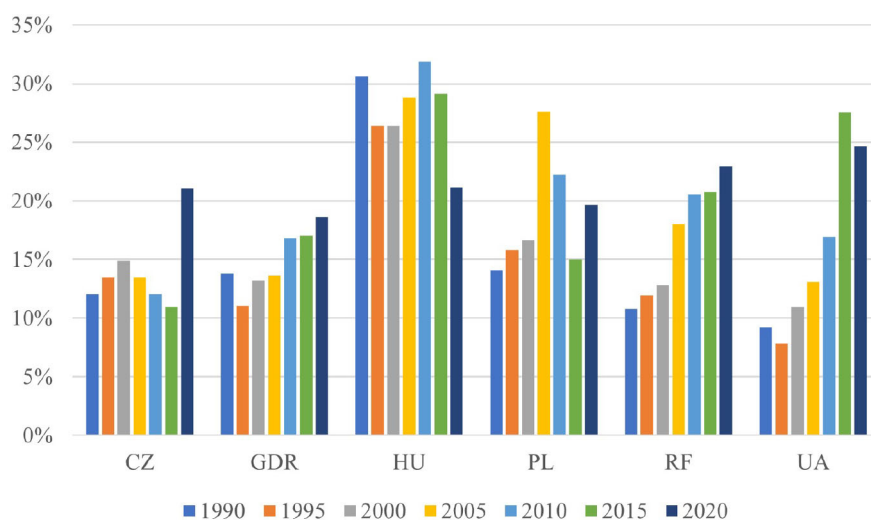


FIGURE 2. Share of legal professions, percent. Source: Authors' dataset.

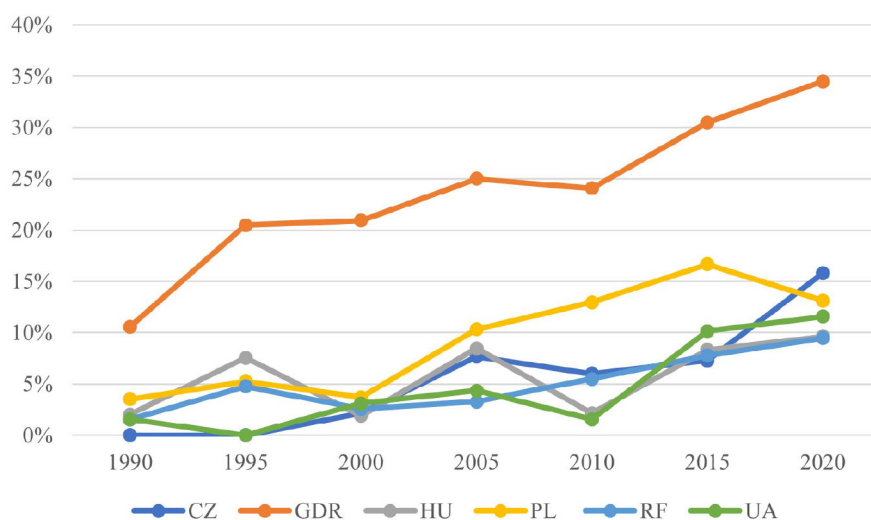


FIGURE 3. Share of women, percent. Source: Authors' dataset.

In summary, there is a high degree of socioeconomic homogeneity between the countries and within countries over time. Political elites, even in a broad definition, are dominated by men in their 50s from very few professions. Moreover, changes have been slow despite a considerable degree of elite turnover, as analyzed below.

ELITE CONTINUITY AFTER THE END OF SOCIALISM

The dataset also addresses the question of elite continuity after the end of socialism. So far academic research has focused on lustration rules, their implementation, and related

public debates, whereas the impact of lustration on the composition of political elites has been largely ignored. The dataset presented here offers the chance to provide a first systematic assessment.

As a result of negotiated transitions, most elites linked to the old regime were not prosecuted for past crimes. Instead, “successor parties” from the old regime emerged in all countries included in the dataset. Their relative success created an important political cleavage that was often exploited by populists. In some countries included in our dataset, relatively strict lustration laws⁷ were implemented early on, especially in the Czech Republic and the GDR (Letki 2002; Williams, Fowler, and Szczerbiak 2005). Hungary pursued an intermediary approach, with strong lustration efforts under right-wing governments alternating with much weaker policies when the socialists came back to power in 1994 and 2002 (Appel 2005). Poland did not implement a formal lustration law until 1999, although informal policies were sometimes used earlier (Appel 2005). Ukraine started to implement serious lustration efforts after the Euromaidan protests in 2014, with the replacement of state officials targeting both elites from communist times (until 1991) and those active under the Yanukovych presidency (2010–14) (Oliinyk and Kuzio 2021; Zabyelina 2017). Russia did not undertake any serious lustration efforts at all (Nuzov 2014), a development in line with the lack of any serious state-led policy in Russia to deal with the country’s Soviet past (Nelson 2019).

When looking at active membership in the Communist Party (or an affiliated “block party”), our dataset shows a sharp contrast between the post-Soviet and the East Central European countries (see Figure 4). In the 1990s, over two-thirds of the elite members in Russia and Ukraine had been active members of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. For both countries, this share stood at close to 90% in 1992, indicating the rise to power of lower rank elites instead of a takeover by counter-elites. In the three East Central European countries, the share of former active members of the communist parties is much lower. In the five East German regions, restrictions introduced by the German state and the large influx of elites educated in West Germany led to a reduction of the share of former GDR elites.

Moreover, the effects of the heterogeneous implementation of lustration laws are clearly reflected in the dataset. When looking at the role played by socialist elites after 1991, we see a fast decrease in the Czech Republic and the GDR, a somewhat intermediate picture in Poland and Hungary, strong evidence for lustration in Ukraine after 2014 but not before, and no evidence for lustration in Russia. An important implication of differences in lustration policies is the role the members of the old security services were able to play in the new elite. Lustration policies in Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were specifically targeted at former members of the security services and the secret police (Appel 2005). As a result, until 2015 they never gained a share of more than 3% in our dataset.

7. See Weiffen (2019) for a concise overview of the related concept “transitional justice.” For a comprehensive overview of lustration laws, see Paczkowski (2023).

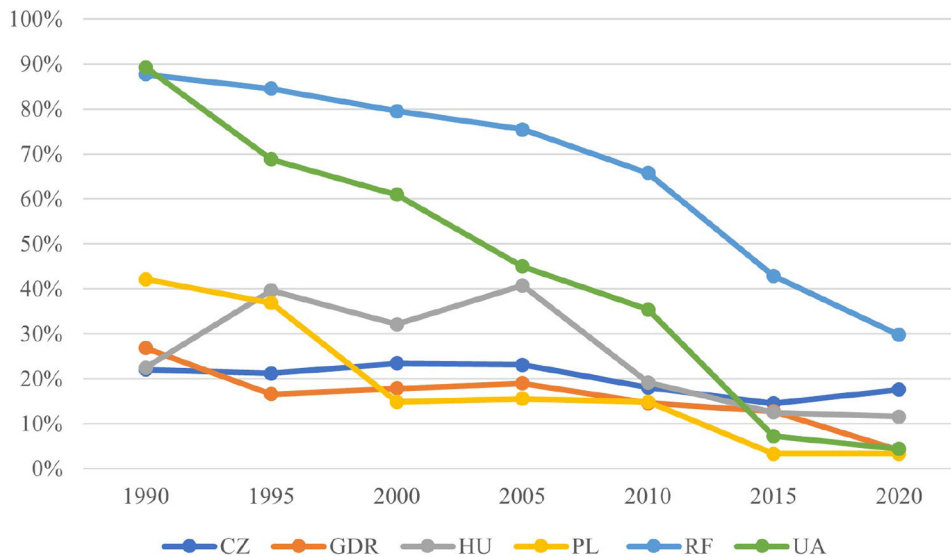


FIGURE 4. Active party membership during socialist regime, percent. Source: Authors' dataset.

In Russia, however, the security services were able to reconsolidate already during the second half of the 1990s, even before Putin came to power (Soldatov and Rochlitz 2018; Taylor 2011). Putin then placed many of his former associates from the secret service into high-level positions in Russian politics—in our dataset, increasing the share of elites with a secret service background from 10% to 20% between 2000 and 2005, a development that has been widely documented in the literature (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003; 2009). Interestingly, and so far not addressed in the literature, these so-called *siloviki* continued to gain political influence although the share of elites with a secret service or military background started to decline in Russia from 2005 onward.

As younger people rise to power, the share of active members of the former communist parties tends to decline over the decades. The only exceptions to this pattern are Hungary in the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, when the Socialist Party was in power, and the Czech Republic with a slight increase prior to 2020. In Ukraine, the lustration law introduced in 2014 combined with a larger elite turnover after the successful Euromaidan protests seems to be the cause of a sharp drop in elite members with an active pro-regime role in the Soviet Union. As a result, in 2020 in Ukraine as well as Poland and East Germany, the share of active members of the communist parties before the end of socialism had declined to less than 5%, while it stood at 12% in Hungary and 18% in the Czech Republic. Russia is a clear outlier in this respect with a share still standing at 30%.

Among post-Soviet elites in Russia and Ukraine the share of those who had been visibly opposed to the Soviet system never stood at more than 4% in our dataset, as in the Soviet Union any opposition had been marginalized and as the new elites were arising from the ranks of the old elites (see Figure 5). Again, the picture is completely different for the three East Central European countries, where the opposition formed a counter

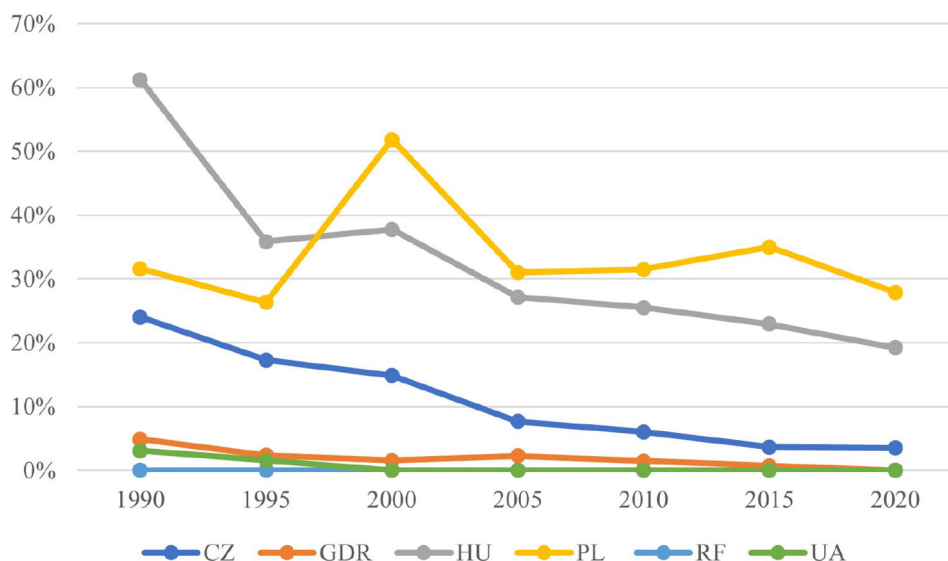


FIGURE 5. Visible affiliation with opposition during socialist regime, percent. Source: Authors' dataset.

elite that won the first free elections. As a result, in the early 1990s, at least a quarter of elite members (and over half in the case of Hungary) had been visibly affiliated with the opposition against the socialist regime. While there is again a long-term downward trend due to the rise of younger people into elite ranks, electoral politics seem to play a role in a few cases. In Hungary, the rise in supporters of the old socialist regime described above is also visible in a reduction of the numbers of opposition members. In Poland, the victory of the Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS)—the umbrella organization for supporters of the oppositional *Solidarność* movement—in the 1997 national elections leads to a peak (slightly above 50%) in the number of elite members with a visible past as opponents of the socialist regime.

Overall, it is telling for the character of the negotiated transitions in East Central Europe that the share of active supporters of the old regime is in many years higher than the share of the opposition against the old regime. There is no clear trend in the relation: that is, the old elites are not really losing power rapidly, but instead the balance depends on election results and the issue loses relevance over the decades with the rise of younger people into leading elite positions—by 2020, less than a third of all elite members in any country have had any visible role in the socialist past; in Ukraine and East Germany, that share is down to less than 5%.

The swift changes in the numbers are also indicative of a rather high rate of elite turnover (see Figure 6). Here it is important to note that the larger part of the elite positions covered in the dataset are not directly related to the results of national elections. However, on several occasions less than 15% of the elites covered in a reference year had already been in office five years earlier. For the three East Central European countries, the average for this figure stands at around 15% until democratic backsliding sets in. In

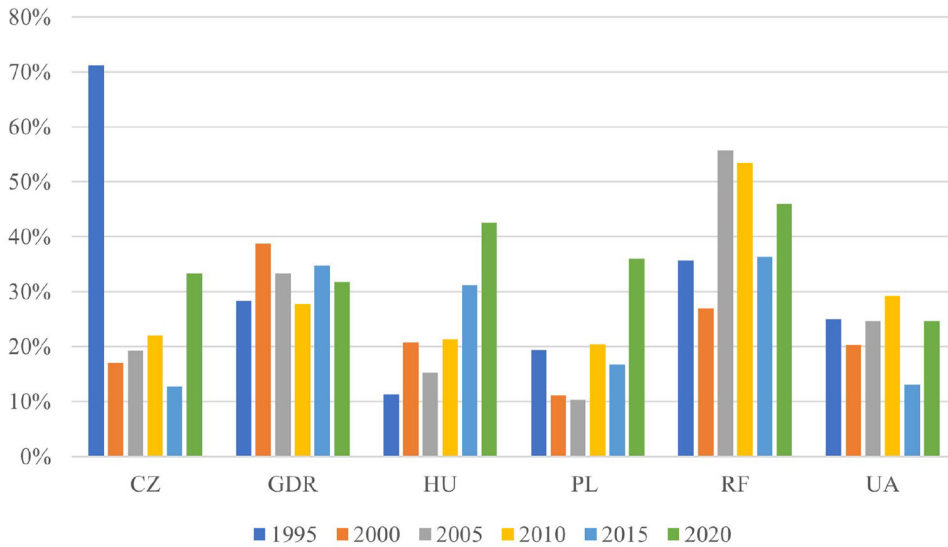


FIGURE 6. Share of repeated officeholders (previous reference year), percent. Source: Authors' dataset.

Ukraine, the figure is slightly higher at around 20%. In Russia, after authoritarian consolidation under President Vladimir Putin, the share of elite members already in office for at least five years increased to close to 50%. In Hungary and Poland, it moved toward 40% when democratic backsliding started. Thus, turnover decreases substantially when authoritarianism increases.

CONCLUSION

While there was a huge academic interest in post-socialist elite change in the 1990s, there have been no broader elite studies for East Central European countries since the mid-2000s. Instead, the still rather large number of elite studies has focused on sub-segments of the elites, mostly covering only one country and one point in time. In contrast, the dataset presented here aims to provide an overview of elite change over the last three decades in several countries. As demonstrated in this research note, analyses based on the dataset can focus on sociodemographic characteristics as well as the role in the preceding socialist regime. Moreover, the dataset allows for a comparison of present-day democratic regimes, authoritarian backsliding, and fully authoritarian regimes.

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