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## Converging Representative Elites in Europe? An Introduction to the EurElite Project

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**Abstract:** This article provides an overview of the aims, the research design and the activities of the EurElite project, a project devoted to the comparative study of representative elites across Europe. Through investigating long-term trends in the composition of parliaments and member recruitment, the scholars involved in the EurElite activities attempt to identify the degree and patterns of convergence among national deputies on the continent. With the inclusion of democratically elected legislators from about a dozen post-communist countries, a new dimension has been added to the question of convergence: elite integration across Europe, i.e. between the elites in the new democracies and those in Western Europe. The scope of the research also encompasses the study of the European Parliament as the site of the possible emergence of a supra-national elite in Europe. The article also provides information on the structure and variables of the (key) data set and its regional/temporal coverage.

*Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, 2005, Vol. 41, No. 3: 499–510

As early as in the mid-1960s the seminal works of Stein Rokkan highlighted the need for comparative research not only on national building but also on elite recruitment and formation in (at the time primarily Western) Europe. In the two decades that followed impressive progress was made in fields like electoral studies and party system development leading to a number of genuinely comparative studies. While some major data collection also took place in many countries, elites remained a white spot on the Rokkanian map of comparative research. It was that observation which spurred the imagination of some leading European scholars from in the fields of both sociology and political science. Using the initiative of an ECPR meeting in Rimini in the late 1980s, Heinrich Best (Germany), Maurizio Cotta (Italy), Kjell Eliassen (Norway) and Mogens Pedersen (Denmark) started working on an integrated database on representative elites in (Western) Europe.

With organisational help from the ECPR and with the support of an Exploratory Grant (1996–99), later the fully-fledged Network (2001–4) of the European Science Foundation, this group of researchers made every effort to collect existing national da-

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ta sets, to integrate them in a single database, and then to go beyond the scope of descriptive and case studies in their analyses of parliamentary representatives in Europe. Many more scholars have joined these efforts over the years, thereby paving the way for a virtually European database that covers almost a dozen Western European and – over the course of EurElite's 'Eastern enlargement' – a growing number of Central and Eastern European countries. Like other social scientists this group of researchers is standing on the back of giants: Mattei Dogan, Erwin K. Scheuch, Lewis J. Edinger, Giovanni Sartori, Moshe Czudnowski, Robert D. Putnam are just some of the scholars whose works have been sources of inspiration and orientation.

While the funding of network activities came to an end in the autumn of 2004, the scholars involved in the EurElite project have agreed to continue in their joint effort and even to extend research activities to new areas (see Section III). This text introduction to EurElite is intended to provide a brief overview of the basic goals of the project (Section I), the structure of the integrated database (Section II), and selected activities (Section IV).

### **Research design: comparative – interdisciplinary – inter-temporal**

The goal of the EurElite project is to bring together, in a joint research effort, political scientists, sociologists and historians who from an empirical perspective have studied the patterns of transformation of the political elites of European nation states. It is the researchers' belief that the comparative study of similarities and differences in the personal characteristics and in the recruitment and career patterns of European representative elites will provide powerful tools for obtaining a better understanding of the processes of political mobilisation, institutionalisation and democratisation taking place within European nation states. At the same time it will offer an opportunity to evaluate to what extent the process of European integration is able to rely on the convergence of diversities.

The basic goal of the EurElite project has been to pool existing datasets, improve them where they are deficient, and develop a series of comparative studies on the long-term transformational trends of representation and leadership in Europe. This database, though still limited in its regional scope and incomplete with regard to some important indicators, has been used successfully to increase our understanding of the variations in the processes of democratisation and political professionalisation. It became clear that beyond country variations there were also important elements of convergence across Europe.

The project focuses on parliamentary representation, which forms "the intersection point of two sets of relations: on the one side, relations with society (the input side), on the other side, the decision-making processes of democracy and their outcomes (the output side)"<sup>1</sup> [Best and Cotta 2000: 9]. The characteristics of legisla-

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<sup>1</sup> Best, H. and M. Cotta. 2000. *Parliamentary Representatives in Europe 1848–2000. Legislative Recruitment and Careers in Eleven European Countries*. Oxford: OUP.

tors are viewed as traces of complex and multi-layered recruitment processes involving selectorates, electorates and contenders, with their respective norms, values, interests and opportunities. The approach adopted by the researchers adopted is structural: they look at patterns of embeddedness and interconnectedness that link legislators with certain sectors of society and polity, while leaving out the immediate records of legislators' attitudes and behaviour. These latter aspects, however, are indirectly present in the study, in that positions in society are structural parameters reflecting past and directing future political action.

The research is embedded in a conceptual framework for studying legislative recruitment, which combines a supply and demand model of the recruitment process with assumptions about fundamental changes in the parameters that have determined the 'recruitment-function' since the middle of the 19th century. The key concepts used in this dynamic model are the inherently contradictory processes of 'democratisation' and 'professionalisation'. They are contradictory because, while democratisation refers to opening up the channels for political participation and legislative recruitment to more social groups (or rather political groups, as in the case of CEE countries), professionalisation refers to the process whereby those recruited tend to establish area-specific standards and routines, which increase the insider-outsider differential. In this research project the assumption is that increasing levels of both democratisation and professionalisation will be found in all the countries studied.

The project aims to improve the level of understanding of the complex interrelations between change in society, changes in the formal structures of opportunity for parliamentary recruitment (like electoral laws), patterns of parliamentary representation, and systemic policy outcomes (including regime discontinuities). The focus on European polities, West and East, limits the study to a historical and geopolitical context, which, notwithstanding the deep divisions that have existed during most of the second half of the 20th century, has been deeply intertwined and is now heading for political integration. On the other hand, a degree of diversity has developed that past research would have perceived as 'abnormalities'. The project's inter-temporal and international comparisons should make it possible to identify the sources of this variety and to explain why the diverse paths of development of European polities are now converging. The research focuses on:

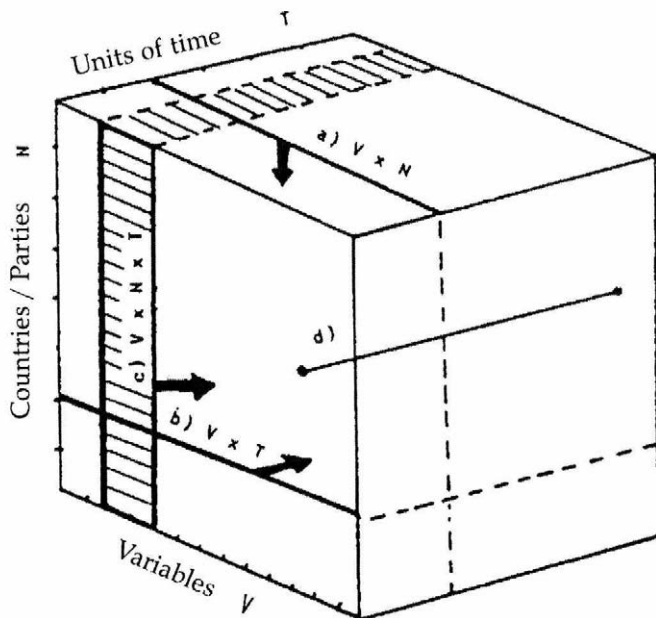
1. The variations and convergence in patterns of elite recruitment and careers in Europe and the relationship they bear to the democratisation of political systems and the modernisation of societies.
2. The formation of democratic representative elites after extended periods of authoritarian and totalitarian rule, wherein the transition to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe will be compared to that of Western and Southern European countries, such as Germany, Italy, Portugal, Greece and Spain.
3. The changes to political elites in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century, when the challenges to democratic legitimacy are growing, the impact of the media is increasing, and transnational influences are becoming more important.

4. The extent of similarities in the composition of European political elites and the persistence of distinctiveness after almost fifty years of European integration.

### The structure of the data set: the cube's three dimensions

A major part of the work by the EurElite network during the past couple of years has been devoted to producing a comprehensive and integrated database on the personal features, recruitment, and career patterns of members of national parliaments across Europe for the purpose of comparative analysis. These efforts have resulted in what the research team refers to as the DataCube (an SPSS data set), where the sides of the cube are organised along three dimensions: time, countries/party families, and a bunch of variables. It is comprised of percentages that are broken down into main party families. For example, a typical entry into the DataCube would be the percentage of female members of the Socialist Parliamentary Party in the French *Assemblée Nationale* of 2002. As illustrated in Figure 1, the DataCube allows for the

Figure 1: The EurElite DataCube and its three dimensions



Source: Best and Cotta [2000: 19]<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

analyses of the variables (b) over time, and (a) by country and/or party families. For the variables, two other dimensions (time and countries/party families) can also be observed (c) simultaneously, and (d) as indicated along the axis for time-series analyses.

### *Time (T)*

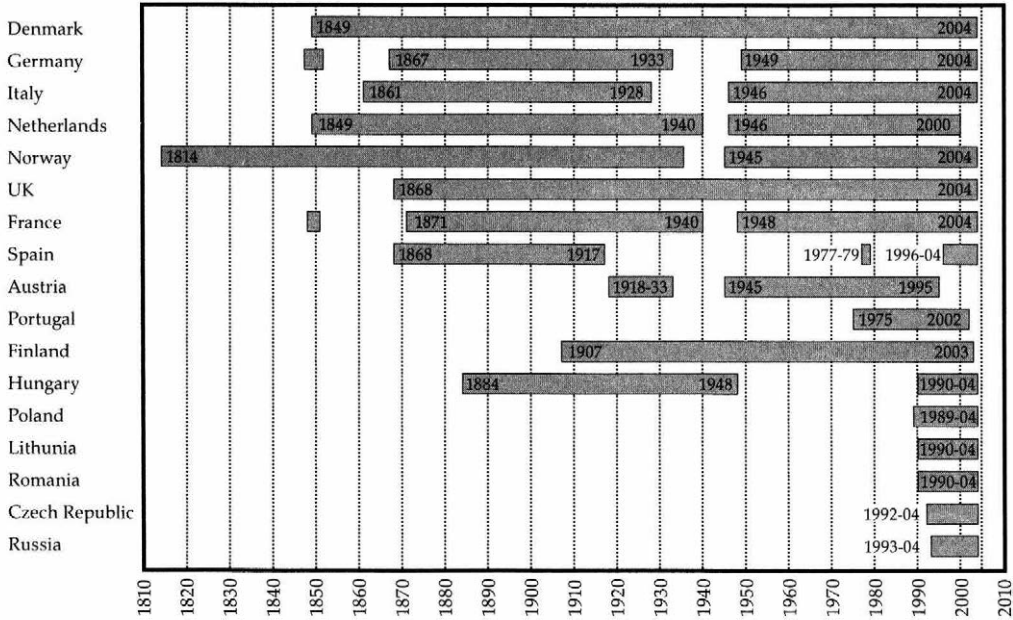
The EurElite project extends the established methods of social and political background research on political elites by pursuing comprehensive inter-temporal comparisons, providing, for the first time, a continuous time-series running from the 19th century to the present day, and offering a set of identical or at least equivalent indicators. For many Western European countries, the first available data date from the middle of the 19th century, with Norwegian data covering a record period of almost two centuries (Figure 2). The Central and Eastern European countries represent a somewhat different case, as few of them have a record of competitively elected parliaments before the *annus mirabilis* of 1989. Therefore, the long-term perspective on the composition and recruitment of representatives is, almost by definition, missing for the new democracies in post-communist Europe. Hungary, whose parliamentary experiments prior to the communist period are documented in the Data Cube, is an exception, and in Lithuania some data collection on the inter-war parliaments is also under way.

### *Countries and party families (N)*

The DataCube covers eleven Western European states, including the four big countries: Germany, UK, France and Italy (Figure 2). From the fifteen pre-2004 EU members states only five smaller parliaments are missing, while the Norwegian *Storting* represents the only parliament in the Cube with a long history that is from outside the EU borders. For some parliaments, like the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados*, it was not possible to cover all the legislative terms, and in the case of the Austrian *Nationalrat* data coding stopped in the middle of the 1990s. But for the majority of Western European parliaments the data coverage is both relatively complete and updated to include even the most recent general elections.

With the extension of the project to Central and Eastern Europe data are now also available on the democratically elected parliaments in many post-communist countries. The historic changes in the region provide us with an unprecedented chance to compare the new democracies with the more consolidated ones in Western Europe and also with countries from the 'early days' of the third wave of democratisation in the south of the continent. The coverage is equal to that for Western Europe, with five out of eight EU accession countries from the region already included in the DataCube, and data processing underway for the other three (Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia). Furthermore, the EurElite network was able to integrate data from two accession candi-

Figure 2: EurElite regional and temporal coverage of national parliaments (as of 12/2004)\*



\* Recently, data coding was completed also for Croatia and Latvia.

date parliaments, the Croatian *Sabor* and the Romanian *Camera Deputaților*, and even from the Russian *Duma*, as a particular interesting post-communist legislature.<sup>3</sup>

The DataCube contains data provided by the national experts for both the entire parliament and for party families. The concept of party families, frequently used in comparative political science, enables the analysis of patterns of recruitment not only across parliaments but also within parliaments and on a party by nation basis. The classification of parties or parliamentary party groups into party families follows the typology suggested by Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver and Peter Mair in their book *Representative Government in Modern Europe*.<sup>4</sup> Based on the three criteria

<sup>3</sup> The authors would like to thank the following scholars from CEE (and the respective research teams) for their substantial contributions to EurElite research on MPs in post-communist legislatures: Goran Čular (Croatia), Oxana Gaman-Golutvina (Russia), Gabriella Ilon-szki (Hungary), Mindaugas Kuklys (Latvia), Zdenka Mansfeldová (Czech Republic), Irmina Matonyte (Lithuania), Laurențiu Ștefan (Romania), Jacek Wasilewski (Poland) as well as Béla Keszegh (Slovakia), Jüri Ruus (Estonia) and Uroš Pinterič (Slovenia).

<sup>4</sup> Gallagher, M., M. Laver and P. Mair. 2001. *Representative Government in Modern Europe*. 3rd Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.

of shared ideology/policies, 'genetic origin', and membership in international party federations, their classification was developed against a Western European backdrop. Its application to the somewhat different Central and East European party landscapes therefore required some modifications. The most important changes include the introduction of two new types of party families, which are specific to all or some of the post-communist polities: the anti-communist umbrella movements (as crucial actors, for example, in the Baltic republics during the early stages of the change in regime) and the pro-presidential parties (figuring prominently in Russia). The Gallagher-Laver-Mair typology only runs up against difficulties in a few cases, for example, when nationalist parties need to be qualified either as conservative or as extreme right. For most of the communist successor parties (like the Hungarian MSZP, the Polish SLD and even the Romanian PSD) their platforms and policies and their European party affiliation leave little doubt that they belong to the socialist or social democratic party family.

### *Variables (V)*

Altogether the DataCube encompasses roughly fifty variables related to the social and political background of MPs. Beyond some basic socio-demographic variables like education there is also information on parliamentarians' linkage to politics, the economy and other spheres of society (Table 1). Particular attention is given to the pre-parliamentary political experience of MPs including positions in local politics, leading party functions, and membership in the cabinet. In addition the DataCube covers some structural variables indicative of the formation of the representative elite, such as the percentage of newcomers (turnover).

For the post-communist parliaments the scope of the analysis was broadened to include another fifteen variables. Half of these additional variables are meant to capture the issue of elite reproduction after regime change. Examples include membership in the Communist Party, positions in the nomenklatura, or dissident activities during the former regime. Beyond this, the structural aspects of parliament's composition are covered more comprehensively, providing information on the percentages of substitutes, longstanding MPs, and the mobility between party families during the term. The moderate extension of the sets of variables makes it possible to discuss, for example the professionalisation of representative elites in CEE countries, using a broader empirical basis.

**Table 1. Sets of variables covered by the EurElite project**

Set of variables	Social background & composition	Linkage to politics & political experience	Linkage to other spheres of society	Formation of the representative elite
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Education</li><li>• Type of university degree</li><li>• Mean age</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Local political experience</li><li>• Position in government</li><li>• Political party employee</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender</li><li>• Occupation</li><li>• Religious denomination</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Turnover</li><li>• Mean number of legislative terms</li><li>• Longstanding MPs</li></ul>

## The extension of the original cube: research on MEPs and on ministers

The MEP task force (or *CubeMEPs*) 'kicked off' its work only recently at a special meeting in Strasbourg at the end of 2003. Comprised of a small group of younger researchers and some leading scholars in the field of political elite research, the task force aims to study a somewhat specific brand of politicians in Europe: the members of the European Parliament since its first direct election in 1979. The study of European or EU parliamentarians provides the opportunity to add a new dimension to elite convergence in Europe, as it touches upon the possible formation of a European 'political class'. The core of this kind of devotedly European political elite may be expected to develop in the Strasbourg/Brussels parliament as the sole representative European body elected directly by the people.

By analysing the political background and careers of MEPs, the research goes beyond the national borders of policy-making, leading to a more comprehensive comparison of representative elites in an enlarged Europe. *CubeMEPs* allows for a diachronic analysis of the European Parliament over six legislative terms, covering a quarter of a century in a parliament that, despite a substantial increase in competences, is still a representative body *sui generis*. From a synchronic perspective the similarities and differences between the MEPs from the EU-15 countries and the new members from the ten (mostly post-communist) accession countries can provide indications of the extent to which a European political class is in the making. Beyond this the research design allows for a systematic comparison of MEPs with national parliamentarians in many of the EU member states.

The EP task force has developed a codebook that covers a broad set of variables including all of the DataCube for the national MPs, plus variables directly related to European politics and to career moves in a European multi-level setting. While applying almost the same methodological and theoretical tools already used in the original DataCube, the MEP task force opted for a different kind of data set. Rather than using aggregate data the task force decided to collect individual data, which allow for the application of a broader range of methods of data analysis. The codebook provides for the collection of basic biographical and career data for all six terms of the European Parliament, while considerably broadening the research scope for the 1999 and the 2004 periods in particular. Data collection has been completed for the new MEPs from the CEE accession countries and for those from Austria, Germany and the three Scandinavian countries, and for most of the time span the Italian deputies in Strasbourg/Brussels are also covered. In the case of France data are available for the 2004 elections.

In the immediate future the task force will focus on the following empirical goals:

- completing data selection for the sixth term of the European Parliament and then extending the data collection back to earlier periods;
- transforming the disaggregate data in an aggregate table based on national/party clusters of MEPs in order to reach a direct line of comparison between *CubeMEPs* and the DataCube;



- developing a specific analytic grid on parliamentary elites in office after the 2004 term, which is considered to be a crucial one in the development of the European Parliament; this should include a broader survey on the recruitment of European representatives, including new qualitative variables on candidate selection, media coverage and the domestic impact of the European election campaign.

The working group on ministers, or 'EuroMin', has been involved in the study of European cabinet members for a longer period of time and it is working closely with a number of international and national research projects. There are at least three main sources of data on ministerial recruitment. The first is an archive on ministers after the First World War, developed by Jean Blondel. This source is connected with the second source, which is an ongoing project led by Ferdinand Müller-Rommel that focuses mainly on the new ministerial elites in the post-communist systems of Central and Eastern Europe. A third project, under the direction of Antonio Costa Pinto and Pedro Tavares de Almeida, is directed at collecting data on ministerial elites in Southern Europe from 1850 to the present.

The EuroMin meetings have been mainly devoted to assessing the level of research in this field. The standardisation of existing codebooks was established at a preliminary meeting (Pontignano/Siena, November 2002). More substantive reflections were developed at subsequent meetings, and the ambitious task of standardising and upgrading the data sets is still in progress. In the meantime, a comprehensive study of the long-term transformation of ministerial elites in Southern Europe<sup>5</sup> has been published, and an impressive work on cabinet structure in Central and Eastern Europe has also been completed.<sup>6</sup>

### Selected activities and publications in English

Since the mid-1990s the EurElite project has initiated more than a dozen international conferences, bringing together a broad range of European and also some American scholars to present and discuss findings on comparative political elite research. In recent years a number of smaller conferences and meetings have been devoted to the formation of representative elites in Central and Eastern Europe. Beginning with a conference in Budapest (June 2002), hosted by Gabriella Ilonszki, a group of experts from post-communist societies combined their efforts to collect data on parliamentarians in their home countries and to standardise existing national data sets. Subsequent conferences in Jena (December 2002), Bucharest (September 2003) and Vilnius (May 2004) contributed further by including additional

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<sup>5</sup> Tavares de Almeida, Pedro, António Costa Pinto and Nancy Bermeo (eds.) 2003. *Who Governs Southern Europe? Regime Change and Ministerial Recruitment, 1850–2000*. London: Frank Cass.

<sup>6</sup> Müller Rommel, Ferdinand, Katja Fettelschoss and Philipp Harfst. 2004. "Party Government in Central Eastern European Democracies." *European Journal of Political Research* 43: 869–894.

countries and launching comparative analyses. During 2005 the EurElite network and some of its members will actively take part in Section 15 of the 3rd ECPR Conference in Budapest (September) and in the international conference 'From Local Politics to Europe: Political Careers on Different Levels. Challenges of Professionalisation, Legitimacy, and Career Moves in Comparison', which is to be held in Jena and Dornburg (October).

The first outcome of the project is the publication of a collection of conference papers.<sup>7</sup> This volume of conference proceedings, which will contain up to twelve country chapters and the first comparative analyses, edited by Heinrich Best, is currently being prepared and will go to press at the end of 2005. Among the major publications in English resulting from the research activities of the EurElite project are the following:

- Best, Heinrich and Maurizio Cotta. 2000. *Parliamentary Representatives in Europe 1848–2000. Legislative Recruitment and Careers in Eleven European Countries*. Oxford: OUP.
- Best, Heinrich, Valerie Cromwell and Christopher Hausmann. 2001. "The Transformation of Legislative Elites. The Cases of Britain and Germany since the 1860s." *Journal of Legislative Studies* 7 (2): 65–91.
- Cotta, Maurizio and Heinrich Best (eds.) 2005. *The European Representative*. (forthcoming)
- Iłonszki, Gabriella. 1998. "Representation Deficit in a New Democracy: Theoretical Considerations and the Hungarian Case." *Communist and Post Communist Studies* 31: 157–170.
- Müller-Rommel, Ferdinand, Katja Fettelschoss and Philipp Harfst. 2004. "Party Government in Central Eastern European Democracies." *European Journal of Political Research* 43: 869–894.
- Ștefan, Laurențiu. 2004. *Patterns of Political Elite Recruitment in Post-Communist Romania*. Bucharest: Editura Ziua.
- Tavares de Almeida, Pedro, António Costa Pinto and Nancy Bermeo (eds.) 2003. *Who Governs Southern Europe? Regime Change and Ministerial Recruitment, 1850–2000*. London: Frank Cass.
- Verzichelli, Luca and Michael Edinger. 2005. "A Critical Juncture? The 2004 European Elections and the Making of a Supranational Political Elite." *Journal of Legislative Studies* 11 (2): 1–21 (forthcoming).

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<sup>7</sup> Best, Heinrich and Michael Edinger. (eds.) 2003. *Representative Elites in Post-Communist Settings* (= SFB 580 Mitteilungen, No. 8), Jena.

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