

## **POWER NETWORKS, CONTACTS, AND INTERACTIONS OF LOCAL POLITICAL ELITES IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE**

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*Abstract: The present paper represents a tentative preponderantly quantitative analysis of the interactions, contacts, and the resulting power networks of the local political elites in small-to-medium-sized towns (30,000 to 40,000 inhabitants) in East-Central Europe. The process of governance is completed through personal interaction, alongside impersonal, Weberian-type interaction. The democratic and local-level governance displays a series of quite specific modes of interaction, particularly within the space of the countries of the former “Sovietized Europe”. The regime change, together with the recent transformations generated by the decentralization process in the region of East-Central Europe (as part and parcel of “the transition to democracy”) leads, at the same time, to paradigm changes regarding the local elites’ interactions, contacts, and power networks. Nonetheless, in every form of government and in every political system, the level and the formula of elite integration – manifested through the specific features of the elites’ interactions with other groups, and through the particular form of the power networks – are paramount in the very process of governance (e.g., in the citizens’ scrutiny over leadership, in the implementation of public policies, in the maintenance of government stability, etc.). Furthermore, in respect to elites’ interactions with other groups and to the ensurance of a certain proper degree of elite integration, the local level of government presents an even more direct implication, for the local level is conventionally the first tier accessed by the citizen. Consequently, the analysis of the form of local political elite’s interactions and contacts with other groups, and the power networks at the local level resulting from such contacts, bear an unequivocal significance in the larger landscape of those studies consecrated on local governance.*

**Keywords:** local political elites, East-Central Europe, decentralization, power networks, integration.

**Theoretical assessments** Classical theoreticians (predominantly, Mosca, 1939, and Michels, 1962) describe the political elites' integration as being the clearest illustrated by a high level of frequency of their interactions with other groups and institutions, and by a dense network of political power. In this respect, Mosca and Michels and, afterwards, Meisel, describe the elites as a unitary, coherent group, characterized by an extreme degree of cohesion. Meisel (1962, p. 4) concludes that elites bear essentially "the 3Cs": group consciousness, coherence, conspiracy. This is particularly the reason why the elite group is perceived as a whole, the central piece of the power relations and the independent variable of government interactions. Generally, the unitary elite fulfills the requirements of the "3 Cs" to the extent in which it possesses – paraphrasing a Marxist vocabulary – "elite group consciousness". Elite "group consciousness" represents more than the exclusivist and exclusive formula of club, caste, of solidarity among members, of identity of values, interest, ideas, origins, attitudes, behaviors, oftentimes even priorities. Moreover, the elite has, as primary capacity, the preservation of self-perpetuation, for the simple reason that the elite group find its origin out of a very narrow and fragile segment of the society: the unitary elite is exclusive, so it does not receive members through a "liberal" and "democratic" equation (*i.e.* from all social *strata*, classes and categories). Its members are those "privileged" from a social standpoint, the fittest, the strong ones, the repositories of resources (wealth, abilities, acquaintances, power, prestige, influence, etc.). A cohesive elite is essentially an autonomous elite, as well, enjoying independence in its actions and, at the same time, irresponsible before anybody else for the consequences of these actions. Adhering to an evidently critical perspective and to a descriptive approach, the "Italian classical elitists" equate the elite to a sectarian, unitary, coherent, irresponsible, autonomous social construction. Of a special importance for the present study, the classical theory of elites perceive the elite as an isolated social group, its interactions and contacts being almost exclusively intra-elite ones, and the power networks including only rarely other "nodes" (other groups outside the elite, namely components of the "civil society"). The elites who display a significant degree of unity and cohesion can be united on the basis of one of the two fundamentals: (a) ideologically united elites, and (b) consensually united elites. The first are the revolutionary elites, unified around an ideal, elites who do not accept compromise, but they access leadership positions only after they suppress the elites that preceded them; the consensual ones access governing positions as a result of a compromise, of a negotiation, in the circumstances of some fundamental changes and of some profound structural and attitudinal transformations, and their unity is realized around some values – prerequisites of the good functioning of the political system (Burton & Higley, 1987, pp. 219-238; Higley & Burton, 2006).

Once with the advance of the poliarchy studies (Dahl, 1961), the perspective on the elite as a unitary group loses its consistency, making room for some analyses which develop on the basis of pluralism inside the elite group, which is seen as a fragmented one, divided among different ideologies, diverse interests and priorities, divergent socio-demographical biographies and value and attitudinal orientations. Moreover, the elite fragmentation appears as central in the explicative attempts of the non-violent revolutions in East-Central Europe at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Kitschelt *et al.*, 1999; Szelenyi & Szelenyi, 1995, pp. 615-638; Linz & Stepan, 1996). The present study favors a particularly dynamic approach, in which every individual belonging, positionally, to the elite group is treated as a part *per se* of a local network of power, establishing and maintaining a series of interactions, in his numerous capacities and social roles (neighbor, entrepreneur, member of some religious or ethnic community, etc.). On the other hand, the scholars of democratic elites switch the center of research on the elites' plurality of ideas, of interests, of values, of attitudes, and behavioral models, concluding that the democratic leaders constitute a fairly fragmented group, a grouping of factions, frequently bearing divergent interests (given also by the representation, the responsiveness, and the accountability the elite group owes to those who owe their very political power resource, namely the electorate), of various backgrounds. Consequently, the network of power which forms at the level of one government (either central, regional, or local) has, as its "nodes", both the political elites and elites of other nature (which preserve their central position in the scheme), and other groups and institutions which are not part of the elite (civic groups, citizens groups, reform groups, religious or ethnic groups, trade unions, and other professional organizations, employers' organizations and different economic organizations, media, supporters, administrative institutions, etc.). In such an inextricable scheme, the decisional time spans expand, for decision regarding public policies and governance, generally, is the outcome of a negotiation, which is both intra- and extra-elite one (Dahl, 1971). Interactions and contacts with the different portions of the society significantly intensify – for they are imperiously necessary in a democratic construct –, the degree of interaction of elites within the society increasing proportionally. The elite, for the scholars that followed Schumpeter (1942), cease to be an isolated one – precisely because of the fact that, only by opening to the society and by permanent interacting with it, with the price of assuming the governmental responsibility, the democratic elite can preserve and reproduce itself. Hence, the network of power – or the "iron triangle" (Wright-Mills, 1956), as it appears in the classical elite theory – constitute an adjacent mark to the institutional analysis.

Surely, the level of integration of elites within the society is based equally on the frequency of the interactions which the said elite establishes and preserve, and on the density of the networks of power which they create in their extension. The level of interaction of elites refers to “the fundamental question of whether the elite in a particular social setting is united into one cohesive social unit or fragmented into several loosely connected elite factions” (Higley *et al*, 1991, pp. 35-53). The distribution of power essentially means “who has the power over whom?”, and it includes the dichotomy between influence and dominance. With respect to the role of the elites’ informal, personal relations, such a role often refers to the interconnectivity given by friendships, kinships, and marital relations, but also to the construction of “social capital”. The fashion in which the local councilors interact with other groups within or without the community is not strictly regulated by the legislations concerning local administrations, hence this analysis considers only the egocentric networks (namely, those centered on a political actor, that of the elite group), though one should not neglect those (initially, almost invisible) groups which ensure the link between the elites and other groups, which ensure (or hinder) the communication between the actors of the network, which facilitate (or curtail) the leaders assuming responsibilities and their scrutiny by the governed (precisely from this perspective, Stoica, 2003, adds to the study of Iași’s political elites’ interactions and networks, the group of public servants).

**Methodological considerations. The case-studies**                      A series of distinctions are useful in the methodological construction of the networks of power and of the interactions and contacts of the local political elite. The first dichotomy refers to (a) the institutionalized, formalized, impersonal interactions, and to (b) the uninstitutionalized, personalized, informal interactions. As a rule, even in the consolidated democracies, those contacts formed and maintained outside the institutional framework, the personal contacts bear a particularly important significance within the recruitment process of elites, in the construction of priorities at the local level, in the channeling of grievances of the various groups towards the government, etc. In such a climate, the relationships between the elite and the groups of supporters and friends, neighbours, etc. are developed. On the other hand, in less institutionalized contexts, where the rules of the democratic “game” have not been yet completely internalized, the dominance of the informal interactions translates patronage relations, clientelism, nepotism, etc. As the development of democratic institutions is still in its infancy and as the efficiency of institutions and of impersonal relations (in the Weberian sense) is still quite low for the countries of the former “Sovietized Europe”, the personal, informal interactions become crucial for the effective advance of the interests and the grievances of some key-groups within the network.

The present study favors a factor analysis having as variables the level of geographical isolation of the local elites (*i.e.* the frequency of interactions with groups and institutions from within the community), and the level of elite isolation of the local elites (*i.e.* the frequency of the interactions with groups and instances from within the political elite). For the first type, namely the local elite isolated both geographically and politically, is an extremely rare case in the proposed typology, for it is characteristic to those communities with a significant degree of decentralization, where local leaders subscribe themselves almost completely to the development plans and to the government of the municipality which it represents, and the large palette of responsibilities and attributions allows it to have only sporadic interactions with the regional or central elite. Moreover, even in the process of political recruitment of local elites, the role played by local or national elites is considerably diminished, the local party branches or local parties themselves playing the main role in recruitment. The exemplary cases for the present study are Česká Lípa and Olešnica, where the average score of isolation is significant (both as geographical and as elite isolation). A second type is the local elite isolated from a spatial standpoint, but open from an elite standpoint; the type corresponds to a situation in which the government is decentralized, although the local elite displays a high level of “group consciousness”, the distance between those who govern and the governed being considerable, and, consequently, the representativeness – low. The third case superposes on a geographically opened, but elitistically closed, local elite. The cases exemplified in the present study are those of the towns of Tecuci and Targovishte, where the local elite develops in a context characterized by a centralized government, the local leaders’ attributions and responsibilities being profoundly affected (hence, the feeling of political and decisional impotence). For such an elite, the frequency of interactions initiated and developed outside the community it leads correlates with a great distance between the local elite and the members of the community, rather due to the “group consciousness” than due to the lack of representativeness in respect to the constituency. The closed elite from an elite point of view, but open from a geographical point of view, is dependent on the resources of the center, to whom it feels subordinated, indebted; as a matter of fact, the central elites are those who ensure the recruitment and the support of the local ones.

		The level of elite isolation	
		Isolated elites	Open elites
The level of geographical isolation	Isolated elites		

	Open elites	
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A last problem discussed here – although not the last on the list of methodological problems concerning the construction of network of power – is that of identifying the key-actors with whom the local political elite establishes and maintains interactions and contacts of indisputable importance. In identifying the key-actors of the network of power, four techniques are generally employed (Stoica, 2002, 2003; Knoke, 1993): (1) the positional approach (the identification of actors placed, at a certain moment, in positions of power or decision); (2) the decisional approach (the identification of actors who participate in decision-making or who influence directly the decision-making process, following the poliarhic dahlian model); (3) the reputational approach (the identification of actors who are seen as decisional by those observers or those elements of the network who bear the necessary information regarding the networks of power, following the model imposed by Floyd Hunter, in the 1950s); (4) the relational approach (the identification of actors which, though do not enjoy a special prestige or are less known to the other actors of the network, establish and maintain essential relations for the network of power, even outside the network *per se*). This study concentrates on thirteen groups with whom the local political elite is supposed to establish and preserve interactions, contacts and connections, within the community and outside it. The isolation of the thirteen groups is by no means exhaustive, but constitutes a selection based on Samuel Eldersveld’s empirical contribution on the political activists’ interactions in Ann Arbour, Michigan, in the 1970s, and published as “Lecture II” in his acclaimed *Political Elites in Modern Societies* (1989). These thirteen groups are: (a) business groups, (b) neighbourhood groups, (c) civic and reform groups, (d) religious groups, (e) ethnic groups, (f) trade unions, (g) close friends and supporters, (h) local media, (i) other elected officials at the local level, (j) elected officials at the central level (senators, MPs, etc.), (k) other town administrators (mayors, deputy mayors), (l) county/ region/ province administrators (prefects, sub-prefects, voievodes, *kraj-s*, etc.), and (m) the members of the national executive (ministers, secretaries of state, etc.).

This study employs the experiences of six towns from East-Central Europe, similar in demographic terms (approximately 35,000 inhabitants) and in terms of development strategies (namely, food industry and trade): Tecuci (Romania), Česká Lípa (the Czech Republic), Oleśnica (Poland), Gyula (Hungary), Targovishte (Bulgaria), and Levice (Slovakia). The research methods utilized here are: the administration of a standard written questionnaire to the members of the Local/ Municipal Councils of each of the six communities, the document analysis (decisions, minutes of the Councils’ sessions,

strategies, statutes, etc.), and participative observation. The main objective will remain that of constructing a hierarchy and a classification of thirteen groups with which a local councilor uses to maintain stable links. According to the resulting grading of the significance of these interactions, one can attempt an assessment regarding the manner in which the local councilors guide their interests and coordinate their activities, within the communities they lead. Thusly a dynamic model was adopted, in which the members of the six Local Councils are asked to answer to the question on their interactions with other groups, in their capacity as individuals (*i.e.* as businessmen, as neighbors, as members of some families, as influential persons within the community, as persons who try to change for the better the existing situation of their towns, etc.), and not exclusively as members of the Municipal Councils (at this point, the positional approach is temporarily abandoned). As a result, the six Municipal Councils will cease to be perceived and studied as comprehensive, unified local institutions, which establish a series of formal contacts, in a legal and conventional manner, with other institutions and groups of individuals; rather, the councilors themselves will be seen as six groups of individuals, part of the local political elite, each of these individuals maintaining and forming networks of interactions with other different groups. Eventually, two important differentiations will be operated among the thirteen selected groups: (a) one is that between those interactions with groups from within the political elite (those usually formal, rather specialized, connections; *e.g.* town administrators, other elected officials, county/ region/ district administrators, the members of the national legislative and executive, etc.), and those interactions with groups from outside the political elite (those more personal, frequently informal, connections; *e.g.* the business groups, ethnic and religious groups, supporters, neighbors, civic groups, unions, local media, etc.); (b) the other one is that between the interactions established and developed exclusively or predominantly within the town (the “internal” ones; *e.g.* those with supporters, neighbors, unions, local media, etc.), and the interactions underpinned and developed outside the town (the “external” ones, generally at the regional and the national levels).

**The results of the research. Preliminary observations**

From the collected *data*, following the administration of the questionnaire on the members of the Municipal/ Local Councils of the six towns, one can observe a profound inclination towards the local level of the political elites of these communities. Markers differ, though not significantly, which suggests, on the one hand, an evident tendency of geographical isolation of the local elite, and, on the other hand, a focus of interests and priorities on the led communities. The most frequent interactions with the central/ regional institutions and with political elites from outside the community are maintained by the members of the Local Council

in Tecuci (12.17%), followed by the councilors of Targovishte (6.47%), the least decentralized cases out the six ones; as such, regarding the centralized government and administrative organization *formulae*, the local elites find themselves obligated to increase the number of interactions with the central and regional elites, whom they “owe” a translation, into the local, of the decisions taken at the central level. The dependency to the central level is found also in the recruitment *formulae* of local elites, and in the absence of strong, well-rounded local party branches, capable of independently supporting candidates. The frequency of interaction with the elites from outside the community significantly decreases as the mechanisms of decentralization start to operate, the lowest scores being characteristic for the Czech case (Česká Lípa – 1.58%) and the Polish case (Oleśnica – 2.63%), where a rather pragmatic elite detaches itself from the centre in order to independently operate changes in the development of the governed communities.

For the consolidating democracies and the transitional democracies, key-groups for the democratic government appear as extremely weak in action, the pressure upon and possible interactions with local elites being virtually inexistent. This is the case of trade unions and of other professional organizations, of civic and reform groups, sometimes of ethnic and religious groups. It is thusly natural that the interactions with these groups to be found in a conspicuously insufficient proportion in those communities in which the rules of the “democratic game”, the democratic values, principles, and institutional logic are in the process of internalization. Only in the Czech case (and, only partially, in the Polish one – 21.05% –, the Hungarian case – 20.35% –, and the Slovak case – 23.23%), the contacts with the civic and reform groups acquire a significant frequency (25.39%), and can represent a nodal point of the scheme of interactions with the local elite. The case of Oleśnica is a peculiar case, for the increased frequency of interactions between the Municipal Council and the organized civil society (21.05%) is due to the occupational origin of the present local elite: part of the existing Council’s membership comes from the ranks of the civil society, previously being members of some local reform organizations, particularly in the sphere of education and instruction. These connections are maintained and facilitate a permanence and a consistency in the local elite’s interactions with those citizens organized in civic groups.

The contacts with the neighbourhood groups, as well as those with supporters and friends constitute two categories of particular importance for the dynamic of reelection (and, hence, for the



preservation of local elites<sup>1</sup>). The Polish case is, yet again, telling, as the contacts with the neighbours, the supporters, and friends dominate the *palette* of interactions of the members of the Municipal Council (49.99%). Through these groups, the representative of local power can collect grievances, can articulate interests, can establish priorities and a working agenda to be consequently presented and advanced in the Council's meetings. Consequently, although seemingly marginal, the interactions with supporters, friends, and neighbours bear a double importance: essential role in reelection and the preservation of the local elite (particularly, in the case of extramural recruitment, as it is the case, as a matter of fact, of the Municipal Council of Oleśnica), and a role in the direct conveyance of grievances, needs, interests, exigencies, and of control from the part of the members of the community. Similarly to the interactions with the traditionally contesting groups (*i.e.* the reform groups, the civic groups), the local elites' interactions with the mass-media are, more often than not, generators of pressures, oppositions, tensions, contestation. The initial working hypothesis is that, in a democratic climate, within the community, the political elite's interactions with the local media are based on pressures similar to the ones exerted by the relations with the reform groups. Nonetheless, for the consolidating democracies, the contacts with the press, particularly at the local level, can develop under the form of a patronage, as well, the elite's predominance over the local information means, through sponsorships and funding, either direct or indirect, conspicuous or veiled, hence becoming rather the rule than the exception of a "backwardness"<sup>2</sup> residue. East-Central Europe postulates local relations between the two groups which are oftentimes informal, dominance-styled, poorly institutionalized. The interactions with the business groups, with the economic elite – from within or from outside the governed constituency – constitute a major point in the construction of the local elites' agenda of priorities, for the development strategies of the town which they govern. A constant and coherent interaction with the local group of entrepreneurs or with the potential external investors appears as *sine qua non* for any efficient local government. On the other hand, it is a plain truism the fact that the informal links the local political elite establishes and maintains with the economic elite cannot be controlled – in what concerns their orientation and content – by the citizens; as such – and especially in the case of decentralized elites, where no restrictive downwards accountability mechanism exists –, the contacts between the two elite groups can generate changes in influence and

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<sup>1</sup> One can easily observe, for that matter, that, in those cases in which the interaction with these three types of groups presents a higher share, the reelection rate is higher: 42.1% (for Tecuci), 48% (for Česká Lípa), 51% (for Oleśnica), 49.6% (for Gyula), 46.6% (for Levice), 41.5% (for Targovishte).

<sup>2</sup> For the conceptualization of the notion of "backwardness" for "the second Europe" (Martin Malia), *see*: Iván T. Berend, 1986, pp. 153-170; Iván T. Berend, 2003; and Martin E. Malia, 2006.

power, changes that can only fragilely be controlled by the upwards accountability mechanisms, exerted by the town's citizens (mechanisms which, indeed, are functional precisely in decentralized contexts). Moreover, for the cases of consolidating democracies, the patronage and "sponsorship" structures can be easily reproduced, forasmuch as the overlapping of local political elites on the economic elites can appear in situations of fragile institutionalization. Such a circumstance is characteristic for the cases of elites in Tecuci and Targovishte, where local councilors interact with (especially local) businessmen and entrepreneurs, precisely because the former are themselves members of the economic elite: 19.51% of the interactions of the political elite in Tecuci, and 14.28% of those of the political elite in Targovishte are linked to the economic elite, while the significantly decentralized elites of Česká Lípa and Olešnica record considerably lower proportions of contacts with the business groups (7.93% out of the total of contacts, in the Czech case, and 13.15% of the contacts, in the Polish case), although their frequency is constant. If the weight, in the case of the two towns and in the case of the towns of Gyula (10.65%) and Levice (8.23%), suggests a relation founded on influence, on the other hand, in the case of the town of Tecuci and Targovishte, the intercrecence between the local political elite and the economic one, and the intensity of the relations between the Local Councils and the business group translate a relationship based on dominance. The decisions approved in the Councils are profoundly influenced by the councilors' capacity as entrepreneurs, firm administrators or managers, employers.

A particular case is represented by the contacts of the local/ municipal councilors with minority groups (ethnic and religious ones). For the "consociational", consensual model of democracy – as it appears in Lijphart, 1999 –, such interactions constitute the foundation of an "ideal type" of democratic governance meant to accommodate the interests of some quite diverse groups, which act in a fragmented society/ community, a society/ community of pluralities and (especially ethnic and religious) diversity. In addition, the groups of ethnic and religious minorities can act as ones of the most powerful sources of pressure, contestation, and *critique*, even for the local government. Surely and expectedly, those ethnically and religiously homogeneous communities are to be governed by local elites with weak, rare, circumstantial, or occasional interactions with the groups of religious and ethnic minorities. This is largely also the case of the six towns selected here, where the religious and ethnic groups, out of purely numerical considerations, cannot articulate interests and demands directed towards the local government. The frequency of the local political elites' interactions with the ethnic groups is consequently insignificant in all of the six cases: in the case of the town of Tecuci, only 4.87% of the local elites' interactions are established with the ethnic group of the Roma population; in Česká Lípa, only 1.58% of interactions are

reserved to the group of Slovak minority; in Gyula, 4.65% of the local elite's interactions are established with the groups of ethnic Romanians (3.2% of the total population of the community), ethnic Germans (3.1% of the population), and Roma (0.3% of the population); in Targovishte, the local councilors' interactions with the ethnic groups (especially, with the ethnic Turks, who constitute 18% of the town's population) comprise 5.19% out of the total of this elite group's interactions (in fact, the highest weight among the six cases); in Levice, the share of the local elite's interactions with the ethnic groups constitute 4.95% from the total of contacts, dominantly with the Hungarian minority, which forms a community of 8.4% of the town's population; finally, the local political elites in Olešnica do not establish no contact with ethnic groups (despite the fact that a very thin percentage of ethnic Germans does exist in the ethnic composition of the town, following the attainment of the "Recovered Territories", after 1945). Nevertheless, in respect of the representation of ethnic groups and their existence as a mode of networks of local power, one should remark the Hungarian representation system, for councils of ethnic minorities, formed of inhabitants of the town, function in Gyula, as well as in other towns of the country: their role is rather consultative and formal, bearing a significance primarily in the sphere of the cultural activities of the citadel, but their very existence (which is, as a matter of fact, compulsory, according to the Hungarian legislation on local administration) provides a genuine basis for the representation and crystallization of minority groups' interests at the local level.

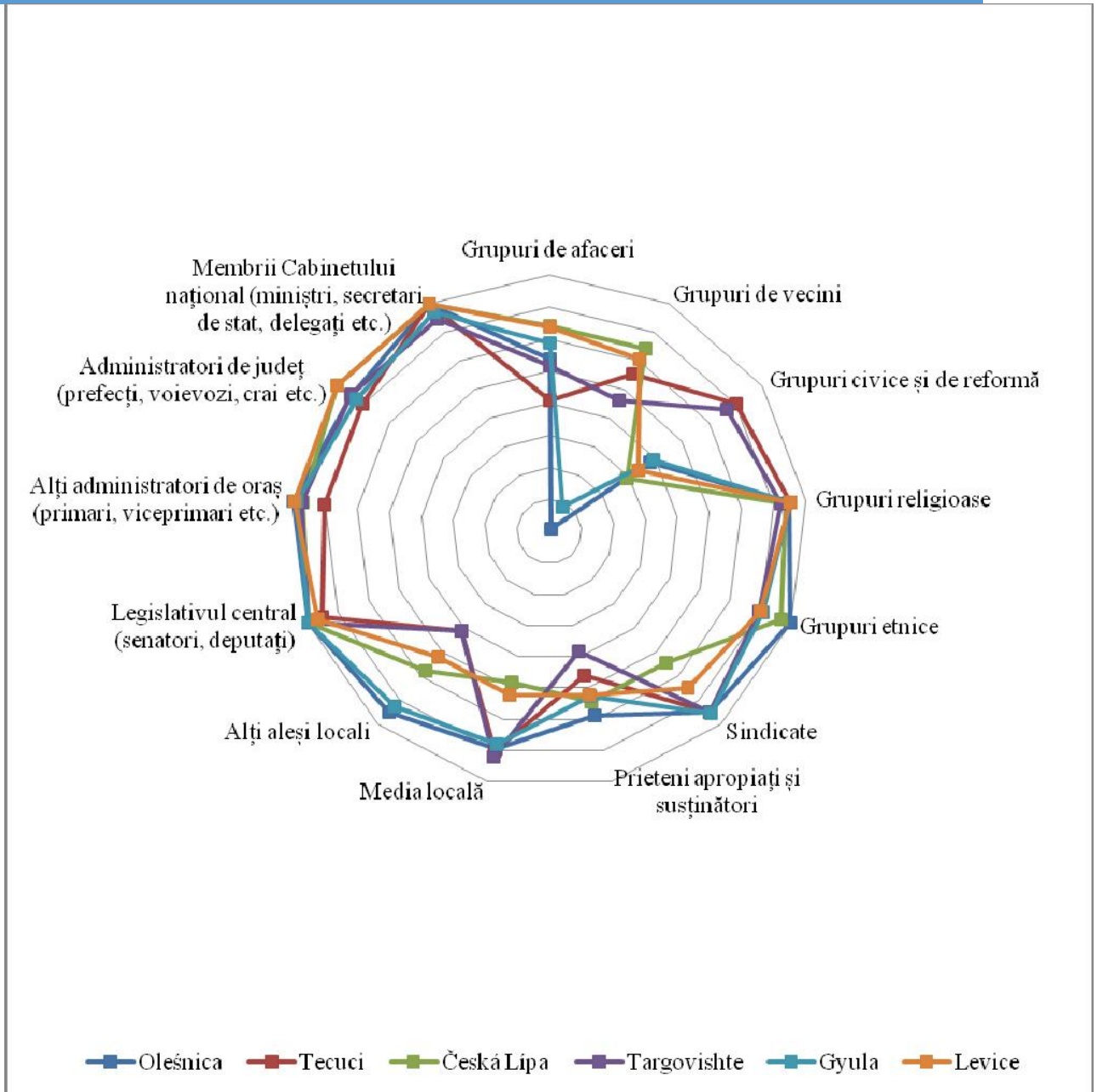
On the other hand, the representation, within the network of local political elites' interactions and contacts in the six towns, of the religious groups places itself on similar indicators, the weight of these groups within the network being even less significant than that of ethnic groups (with an average ratio of 2.83% out of the total of interactions, as opposed to 3.54% of contacts, in the case of ethnic groups). For the case studies discussed here, the proportion (and, inherently, the impact) of the municipal councilors' interactions with the religious groups (oftentimes, minority ones, but also those of the majority) presents itself as the following: for Tecuci, 2.43% of interactions are those with Christian-Orthodox groups and Neo-protestant groups (Adventists, Pentecostals); for Česká Lípa, 3.17% of the local elite's contacts are those with the minority groups of Protestants (Lutherans) and Catholics, although the majority of the members of the Municipal Council and of the town's population identify itself as atheist; for Olešnica, 2.63% of interactions are constituted by those with the Catholic organizations (which have, to a large extent, a charitable and social scope, as well as a ritualistic and ceremonial one); for Gyula, 2.35% of contacts are established and maintained with diverse religious groups (from Greek-Catholics, Roman-Catholics, to Lutherans), though they are small groups and, thusly, with no notable

impact within the network of local power; for Levice, 2.45% of interactions are represented by those with the groups of Catholics and Protestants (Lutherans); finally, for Targovishte, the interactions with the religious groups present the greatest weight among the six cases (3.89% out of the total of interactions), explicably only through the prism of a certain cultural effervescence between the majority of Christian-Orthodox and the Muslim minority.

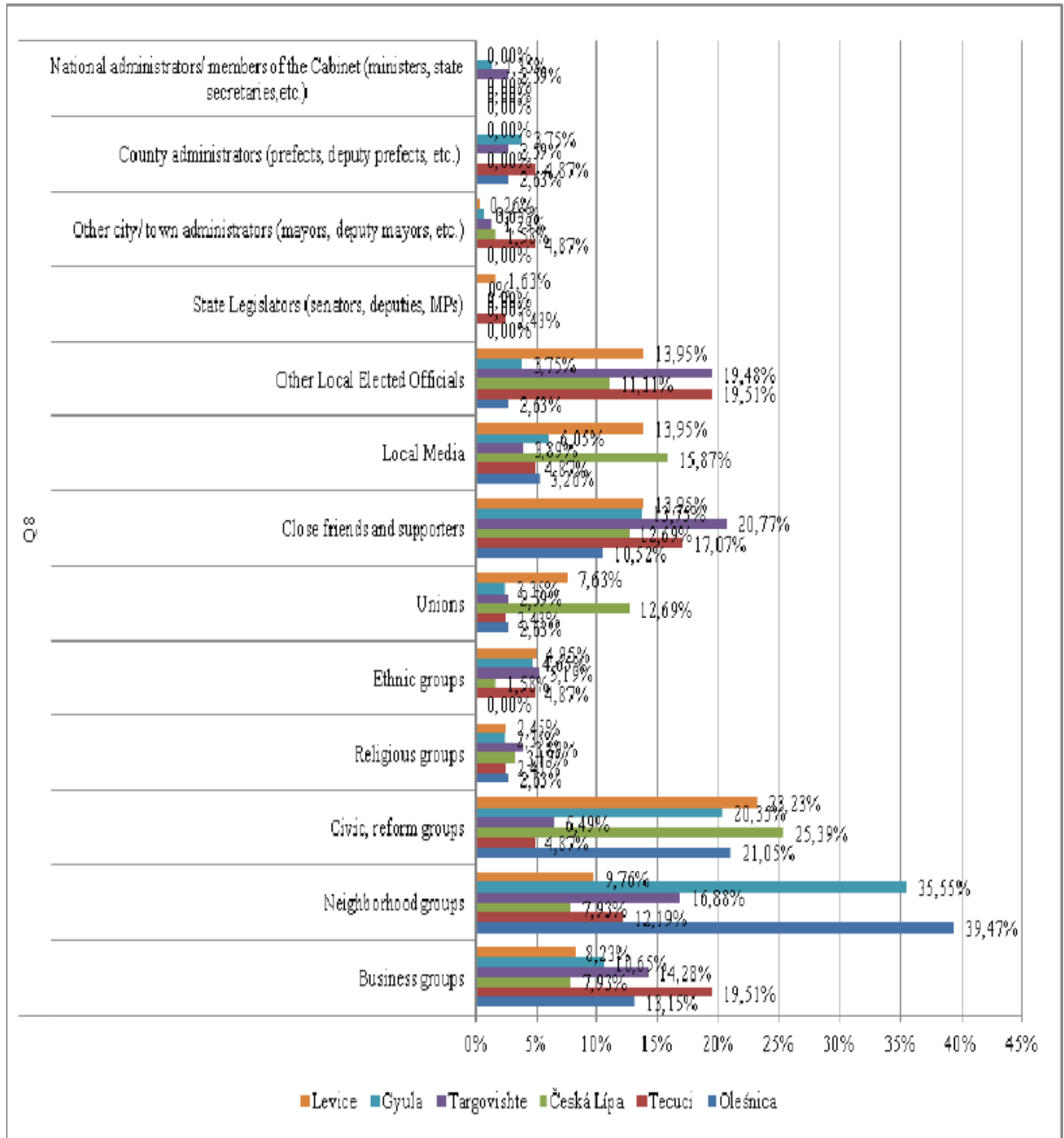
Regarding the sketch of the networks of power in the case of each of the six local political elite groups, this study considers only the binomial links (that is, those established between two nodes, the simplest “paths” of the network), underpinning the drawing of the networks on the presumption that the network is of concentric type (the “absolute network” premise, in the framework of which all the “nodes” establish binomial links with the center, but do not establish binomial contacts between them). Taking into consideration the contingencies of this study, the density of each of the six networks is equal to:  $D(K) = \frac{13}{91} = 0.14$ , hence, only the links between the thirteen selected groups and the group of municipal councilors are considered, not also the direct interactions established between or among them. Due to the structure of the network and to the limitations of the study, the index of absolute centrality is set at 1, *i.e.* the proportion of the relations already established within the network which involves the actor *i* (the members of the Municipal Council) is 100%.

**Conclusions** Perceived correlations among dependent variables can also constitute paths for further interpretation of the results for the six cases, and consequently, for generalization. The local political elites’ interactions and contacts, with an undeniable impact upon the recruitment process, present a remarkable importance in what concerns prioritization at the local level, as well: according to the hierarchical classification of interactions, done by each municipal councilor, one can construct valid arguments on the manner in which the local councilors present their interests and coordinate their activities. Generally, the preference for certain groups denotes an interest from the part of the local elite towards a certain field of activity or set of interests; the quotidian interactions can thusly sketch the agenda of a local decision-maker to a very significant extent. The differences among the six cases claim some explanatory attempts. As already stated, this study proposes two major explanatory trajectories, but, in tentatively explaining the outlook of local political elites’ interactions, the emphasis will fall on one of them, namely the level of decentralization of the community represented by each elite group. The main working hypotheses regarding the relationship between the form and the nature of the local political elites’ interactions and contacts, of the networks of power at the local level, on the one hand, and the level of decentralization regulated and practiced by the government, have been constructed as follows: H1: The

local political elite is the more geographically isolated as the level of decentralization of the community is more significant. H2: The local political elites is the more “elitistically” isolated as the political culture of the elites of the *ancien régime* favored a larger gap between the governed and the government and as the character of the former regime’s government was a monolithic, unitary one. Actually, the stake of the construction of the networks of power and of identifying and analyzing the local political elites’ contacts and interactions with other groups and institutions is to be found, not only in setting up the influences of various groups on the local political agenda, but also in the pressure on, and, afterwards, in the accountability of the local political elite in front of the governed community. The intensity, the force of the (rather contesting) groups’ pressures on the elite group, within the community, generates a certain impact level, a certain importance on the public policy agenda and on those decisions taken at the local level, of those key-areas (domains) of activity for which the groups had interacted, in a targeted way, with the political elite.



**Graph 1:** The networks of local power in the six towns (Note: Consider the center as the local political elite.) (Source: the results of the administration of the questionnaire on the population of local councilors in the six towns under scrutiny)



**Graph 2.** The frequency and the importance of local political elites' interactions and contacts in the six towns with other thirteen groups (Source: the results of the administration of the questionnaire on the population of local councilors in the six towns under scrutiny)

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