PART II

Political institutions
4

CORE EXECUTIVES IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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Introduction

Core executives have become increasingly important political actors and arenas due to several interlinked developments affecting both states and societies. Modernisation has weakened the ties between political parties and voters, making parties more dependent on state resources and, in particular, access to government. Since the political process has become more dominated by media communication, political controversy tends to be framed between chief executives and rival political leaders. Global economic integration has narrowed the policy discretion of nation states and fostered the spread of non-majoritarian institutions entrusted with regulatory functions. These trends have been associated with the growing weight of policy output as a source of legitimacy, in contrast to ‘input legitimacy’ derived from democratic elections. Among the three branches of state power, executives control most of the tools available to influence policy outputs and the interventions of both domestic and international regulatory agencies. The crisis and politicisation of European integration have further enhanced the salience of national (chief) executives compared to national legislatures and supranational institutions. As a result, many of the choices characterising politics and policymaking are now made or shaped at the centres of executives.

This chapter discusses the ‘core executive’ both as an empirical field of actors, institutions, and behavioural practices at the centres of Central European governments and as a theoretical concept formulated to study this field. The term ‘core executive’ was initially proposed by Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) to describe the centre of the British government from a functional perspective. The core executive comprises ‘all those organizations and procedures which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine’ (Rhodes, 1995, 12, Dunleavy and Rhodes, 1990). In the UK, these functions are performed by the complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the prime minister, cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalised ministerial “clubs” or meetings, bilateral negotiations and interdepartmental committees, including the coordinating departments at the centre of government (Rhodes, 1995, 12). The notion of a core executive represents a conceptual innovation insofar as it

1 Focuses on neutral functions rather than specific institutions like the prime minister or cabinet which may convey normative connotations and cultural bias;
2. Goes beyond a formal institutional analysis to investigate the empirical practice and resources of policy coordination, including both its political and administrative dimensions;

3. Reflects the fragmented network of institutions that emerged from neoliberal reforms of government and substituted the traditional framework of cabinet government.

Replacing hierarchic, Weberian models of central government by market mechanisms, negotiations, and networks as modes of governance, these reforms are viewed as part of a broader ‘hollowing-out of the state’, a process that has also been driven by growing international interdependencies, the privatisation of public services and devolution (Rhodes, 1994). As a consequence, the spatial metaphor ‘core’ seems more appropriate than ‘top’, and heads or centres of government now appear to be more aptly characterised by their coordination and arbitration functions than by ‘instructing’ or ‘ordering’. The notion of political power underlying the concept of the core executive is relational and contingent (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015, Elgie, 2011): in order to achieve their goals, prime ministers and core political actors depend on other actors and must exchange resources such as authority, expertise, or money with them (Rhodes, 1997, 203).

Apart from these assumptions, the concept of the core executive initially did not bear any implications for the likely or desirable distribution of power, the prevalent modes of governance, or the roles of political actors in central government. This indeterminacy has facilitated its diffusion from the original British context to other Westminster systems as well as to continental European and even to presidential systems of government (Helms, 2005, Weller et al., 1997). However,

[the] essential malleability of the term ‘core executive’ is [also] the reason why its use has become de rigueur. It is a wonderfully convenient term. The result, though, is that the universe of ‘core executive studies’ includes a great deal of work that could, quite happily, use a different term and have no less analytical purchase.

(Elgie, 2011, 72)

The remainder of this chapter distinguishes two paradigms that have shaped core executive studies focusing on Central Europe and that reflect the recent history of the region: transition and Europeanisation. A third paradigm of ‘executive governance’ is suggested as a perspective for future work. The main argument of the chapter is that the trend towards centralised executive authority in several Central European countries suggests complementing the analysis of institutional arrangements with a broader analysis of governance. Such an approach would relate institutions to policies and their outcomes, highlighting possible drawbacks of centralisation and trade-offs between different functions or policy objectives.

Emergence and studies of post-socialist core executives

Scholars have used the core executive concept in various ways and have sought to fill it with different meanings. One tendency has been to associate the concept with the centralisation of power around the chief executive (Peters et al., 2000, 7, Poguntke and Webb, 2005, 5). Scholars studying Central Europe have adopted this idea and argued that post-socialist central governments lack an ‘effective core executive’ that would be able to exercise political leadership and perform the coordination and arbitration functions associated with the generic concept of the core executive (Goetz and Margetts, 1999, 426, Dimitrov et al., 2006, Goetz and Wollmann, 2001). This argument assumes, first, that the collapse of the state socialist systems of government has led to an
institutional fragmentation in central government, engendering ‘a vacuum of policy leadership’ within the executive (Dimitrov et al., 2006, 8).

Second, the argument interprets the evolution of post-socialist core executives as a ‘governmentalisation’ (Goetz and Wollmann, 2001), that is, as the transformation of a subordinated and fragmented administration into a cohesive government that is able to demonstrate political leadership (Dimitrov et al., 2006, 206–207). This perspective views the formation of a core executive centred on the prime minister as a functionally necessary process of transforming executives into governments adopting the roles played by governments in liberal democracies. ‘State institutions had to be shaped in a way that allowed them to be effectively directed by political parties in government’ (Dimitrov et al., 2006, 8).

Dimitrov and his co-authors do not hesitate to emphasise the contingency of a convergence with Western government systems. However, their approach continues to be rooted in a ‘transition paradigm’ (Carothers, 2002) since it frames Central European core executives in comparison to Western points of reference and assumes that post-socialist political actors develop an interest in building a leadership-type core executive. Their empirical study documents the difficulties of this catch-up project by observing that the new democratic political elites by the early 2000s had institutionalised ‘effective core executives’ only in Hungary and partially in Poland (after 2001), but not in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic (Dimitrov et al., 2006, 230–231). Political actors in the latter two countries returned to decentralised core executives after episodes of personalised prime ministerial dominance under Prime Ministers Kostov (1997–2001) and Klaus (1992–1997), respectively.

The literature on executives in Eastern Europe broadly agrees that systems of government were structured similarly during the state socialist regimes since these regimes shared the main ideological basis of political rule, Marxism-Leninism, and its idea about the leading role of the Socialist or Communist Party (cf., for example, Baylis, 1989). The body heading the executive, the Council of Ministers, was subordinated to the Central Committee of the Communist (or Socialist) Party and its Politburo. While the two party institutions formed the centre of political power, the Council of Ministers was confined to implementing political decisions. The Council was formally a collective and collegiate body headed by a chairperson; in practice, the Council and the wider executive were segmented into numerous different ministries closely involved in administering the state, economy, and society.

The subordination of the executive under the party leadership de facto fused the party and the executive, transforming the state socialist party into a part of the state. Reform initiatives in several state socialist countries sought to enhance the professional-legal rationality and autonomy of government, but did not challenge (or were hindered from questioning) the leadership claim of the ruling Communist parties. It was the breakdown of the state socialist regimes that disrupted the formal link between the party and the state. Those executive institutions that prevailed were exposed to a fundamentally transformed political and institutional constellation. Given the inherited segmentation of ministerial administration, the available organisational resources were most conducive to models of ministerial or bureaucratic government where individual ministers or senior civil servants have significant decision-making powers (Dunleavy and Rhodes, 1990, Elgie, 1997).

Most studies on the emerging post-socialist executives in Eastern Europe have focused on how the role of a president was institutionalised in this constellation (see for example Protsyk, 2011; Sedelius and Åberg in this volume). This scholarly interest reflected major political debates and struggles in all countries of the region during the political transition, the revision of constitutions, and the consolidation of new, democratic, or authoritarian political regimes. Moreover, researchers also examined the powers of the president vis-à-vis the executive and the legislature.
because the design of these relationships defines a system of government as parliamentary, presidential, or hybrid (for example, semi-presidential) in political science. This literature rarely uses the concept of a core executive and rather discusses its associated coordination and arbitration functions under broad terms such as ‘leadership’ or ‘governance’ (Holmes, 2014, Taras, 2013).

After more than two decades of post-socialism, there is a clear and strong correlation between the emergence and consolidation of democracy and the institutional choice for constraining presidential powers over the executive (Holmes, 2014, 648). All new European Union (EU) member states in Central Europe and the six South Eastern European accession candidate states (as of 2015) either had parliamentary government or premier-presidential government with a popularly elected president exercising limited powers (Sedelius and Åberg in this volume).\(^1\)

Blondel and his co-authors have claimed that the decision for a parliamentary democracy in Eastern Europe implied a ‘cabinet system of government’ (Blondel, 2001, Blondel, 2007). Since parliamentary democracy is defined by the parliamentary accountability of government, Blondel et al. infer that this accountability refers to a collective body, the cabinet, which represents the government as a whole and formally takes its decisions collectively. A cabinet consists of the prime minister, other ministers, and possibly also other leading executive officials. To differ from presidential government, the cabinet, according to Blondel et al., has to be, at least to some extent, ‘collective’ or at least ‘collegial’: decisions are taken ‘together’. This requirement of ‘togetherness’ is regarded as central to the cabinet system because such a mode of operation is felt to be a more liberal, more democratic and therefore superior form of decision-making.

(Blondel et al., 2007, 5)

Cabinet government is seen as preferable compared to a system where ministers depend on the head of government, a practice ‘which smack[s] of authoritarianism’ (Blondel et al., 2007, 6).

While Blondel et al. also study centres of government in post-socialist Eastern Europe and share the ‘transition paradigm’ with Dimitrov et al. (2006, Blondel and Müller-Rommel 2001, Blondel et al. 2007), their approach differs in several respects. First, they are less interested in the trajectories of institutional development and rather seek to map the procedures and institutional environment of cabinet decision-making synchronically by covering fifteen and seven East Central and South Eastern European countries, respectively (Blondel and Müller-Rommel, 2001, Blondel et al., 2007).\(^2\)

Second, Dimitrov et al. view institutional change as the result of institutional legacies, critical junctures, and actors’ choices, drawing on the theoretical tools of historical institutionalism (Thelen, 1999). In contrast, the work of Blondel et al. is grounded in the empirical institutionalist tradition of comparative politics (cf., for example, Lijphart, 1999). They start by identifying a general problem of cabinet systems: the trade-off between representativeness and efficiency (Blondel et al., 2007, 4ff.). Institutional change is then conceived as the result of political actors’ efforts to ‘streamline’ cabinet systems, aimed at reducing the inefficiencies of collective decision-making. For example, governments established procedural arrangements to reduce the workload of cabinets (particularly through cabinet committees and cabinet secretariats). These streamlining efforts are likely to be less effective than in Western European executives because, among other reasons, prime ministers have lacked political authority and party systems have been unstable in several countries (Blondel et al., 2007, 17–18).

To examine their hypotheses about streamlining efforts and obstacles, Blondel et al. conducted a survey of 230 former ministers who held office during the period from 1990 to 2003 in ten East European countries. They observed that the ministers not only indicated a general
satisfaction with the functioning of ‘their’ cabinets and a general willingness to approximate the operational standards of Western European cabinets, but also that ministers’ factual statements about cabinet meetings, secretariats, and cabinet committees broadly resembled Western European practice. These findings led the authors to conclude that the surveyed East European countries ‘have successfully adopted the parliamentary-cabinet system of government in the early 1990s’ and have ‘a governmental system which compares well with the governmental systems of Western Europe’ (Blondel and Andreev, 2001, 193).

Third, both studies disagree about the empirical relevance and conceptual status of cabinets for understanding core executives in Central Europe. Blondel et al. do not use the concept of the core executive and rather retain the notion of the cabinet as a necessary and normatively desirable corollary of parliamentary democracy and as a functioning institution of inter-ministerial cooperation. Of the ministers surveyed, 36 per cent stated that the prevailing negotiation style of ‘their’ prime minister was to build consensus, while only 16 per cent noted that their prime minister tended to force solutions (Blondel et al., 2007, 183).

In contrast, Dimitrov et al. distinguish between ‘a cabinet type of government’ and a cabinet ‘type of core executive’ (2006, 35–36). Whereas the core executive refers to the empirical practice and internal structures of coordination/arbitration (centralised vs. decentralised), the ‘type of government’ refers to the formal-legal constitution of government. Cabinet ‘government’ exists if the cabinet as a whole is elected by and accountable to parliament. In contrast with Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland do not strictly fulfil these definitional criteria, because Hungary’s parliament elects the prime minister (upon the president’s proposal) but does not approve the composition of the cabinet. Poland’s constitution enables the Sejm to take a vote of non-confidence against individual ministers (in addition to the option of a non-confidence vote against the whole Council of Ministers).

The idea behind this conceptual distinction between types of core executive and government is to mark the distinctness of the core executive concept as opposed to cabinet/prime ministerial government and to capture cross-national and cross-temporal empirical variation in more detail. Dimitrov et al. observe a cabinet-type core executive only for the brief 1989–1991 period in Poland, noting the difficulties of sustaining a cabinet model of decision-making in practice: ‘Centralization around the prime minister offered a relatively straightforward answer to coordination requirements compared to more contingent coordination patterns that prioritize collegiality, collectivity, and inclusiveness’ (Dimitrov et al., 2006, 11). Thus, whereas Blondel et al. find empirical evidence of cabinet-type collective and collegial decision-making practices, this contradicts the prevalence of segmented ministerial or centralised prime-ministerial core executives noticed by Dimitrov et al.

**Europeanising core executives**

The enlargement of the EU and the membership aspiration of East European states have facilitated institutional reforms of core executives and provided a new paradigm for core executive studies in Eastern Europe. The EU does not have formal rules about how the executives of its member states are to be organised or how decisions should be taken in national cabinets. However, it is possible to identify requirements and expectations with regard to governmental organisation that had (and have) to be met by East European states in the process of EU accession and during membership.

The EU has considered the rule of law a key condition for accession. Executive government is expected to act through legal regulations and within the limits set by law. Although there are no EU rules on how to organise intra-executive coordination, the functional requirements
of EU policymaking have induced governments to intensify policy coordination across sectors and among leading civil servants. The European Commission has encouraged more effective core executives by stressing the need for strategic planning capacity, a unified civil service (see Meyer-Sahling in this volume), horizontal coordination, and mainstreaming of policies. Lacking a formal legal basis to impose these objectives as conditions, the Commission created the Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA) programme jointly with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). SIGMA and World Bank experts with a background in the ‘Anglo-governance school’ (Marinetto, 2003) promoted stronger government offices endowed with comprehensive coordination functions (cf., for example, James and Ben-Gera, 2004, Ben-Gera, 2004, Manning et al., 1999). Negotiation and transposition requirements further increased the power of core executives in relation to line ministries and specialised agencies (Grabbe, 2001, 1018, Lippert and Umbach, 2005). Participation in the Council formations and in the EU’s comitology caused governments to create the roles of central coordinators and an ‘inner core’ of ministries primarily involved in managing EU issues (Laffan, 2008, 133).

The enlargement rounds of 2004/2007/2013 and the dynamics of European integration between the early 1990s and the early 2000s generated a wave of ‘Europeanisation’ research that mainly examines the impact of the EU and European integration for domestic polities, politics, and public policies. Within the Europeanisation paradigm, scholars typically ask how the EU influences domestic institutional and political changes or how such changes can be explained by the interaction of the EU and other possible causes.

In his comparative study of core executives and Europeanisation in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, Zubek argues that EU pressures to step up the transposition of EU legislation encouraged domestic policy entrepreneurs to push for core executive reinforcement (2008, 2011). However, the success of such reinforcement was contingent on domestic ‘coalition politics, prime ministerial preferences, and institutional legacies’ (Zubek, 2008, 157).

Zubek’s work is notable in two respects. First, he draws on rational choice institutionalism to conceive the relations between ministers and the prime minister (Ostrom, 1990). In his view, the reinforcement of a core executive constitutes a strategy to address ‘ministerial non-responsiveness’ or departmentalism. ‘The core executive represents a unique institutional response to collective dilemmas in the production of the legal rules that bring diffuse benefits to many voters and require interministerial cooperation’ (Zubek, 2008, 5). This interpretation enables Zubek to operationalise the core executive concept by specifying position, authority, and information rules that facilitate the monitoring and supervision of line ministries. The presence of these rules, which may be sustained by prime ministerial or cabinet government, indicates a ‘strong “European” core executive’ (Zubek, 2008, 156).

Second, Zubek conceptualises the core executive (changes) both as a response variable and as an explanatory variable. Placing this variable within an extended cause-effect chain allows to understand the drivers of core executive changes and to assess the policy impact of these changes. Zubek and other scholars influenced by the Europeanisation paradigm tend to agree that domestic political actors decisively influenced the institutional arrangements of EU policy coordination and executive governance in East European countries (Brusis, 2004, Dimitrova and Toshkov, 2007, Fink-Hafner, 2014). Political parties as well as political leaders and their interests are found to matter more than institutional legacies or EU incentives (for a dissenting position, cf. Meyer-Sahling and Veen, 2012, Meyer-Sahling and van Stolk, 2015).

Both ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘transition’ studies of core executives have identified the strength and structure of domestic political competition as important dimensions explaining cross-national variation (Baylis, 2007, Dimitrov et al., 2006, Müller-Rommel, 2001, 199), thereby confirming
insights from the broader literature on comparative government (Blondel and Müller-Rommel, 1993, Lijphart, 1999). In Hungary, for example, polarised political competition has generated prime ministerial government backed by elaborate devices of administrative coordination. In contrast, a more multipolar constellation of parties in the Czech Republic has rendered the prime minister a consensus-seeker among powerful ministers and extra-governmental actors, shifting the onus of executive coordination towards the political level (Brusis, 2004).

Several other studies have treated the configuration of the core executive as an explanatory variable, claiming that it makes a difference for empirical policy outcomes. Centralised, cohesive core executives, for example, are likely to have ensured a quicker transposition of EU legislation, lower budget deficits and a better quality of regulatory impact assessment (Hallerberg, 2010, Staroňová, 2010, Zubek, 2011).

Towards executive governance studies?

Thus, to make more sense of the core executive concept, students of Central Europe have identified varieties of core executives (prime ministerial – cabinet – ministerial, political vs. administrative coordination, formal-informal, etc.) and embedded them in cause-effect sequences. Those studies that adhere more closely to the generic concept and/or originate from the sub-discipline of comparative public administration have tended to evaluate stronger and more centralised coordination positively (Dimitrov et al., 2006). However, there has also been a strand of the literature, usually from the sub-field of comparative government/politics, that has emphasised the benefits of power dispersion, more accountable officeholders and constraints on executive authority (cf., for example, Orenstein, 2001). A key argument in this literature is that a robust political competition can cause ‘governing parties to moderate their rent seeking, anticipate an exit from office by building formal constraints, and co-opt the opposition through power-sharing measures that limit (. . .) any one party’s ability to gain private benefits from the state’ (Grzymała-Busse, 2007, 10, see also O’Dwyer, 2006, Kopecký, 2008).

The importance of executive accountability is reinforced by broader empirical trends in East European democracies that have increased the dominance of executives and governing parties and eroded accountability institutions such as parliaments, opposition parties, constitutional courts, the judiciary, civil society organisations, and independent media (cf., for example, Rupnik and Zielonka, 2013). These changes can be seen as a reaction to the growth of non-majoritarian institutions and external, transnational constraints that have widened the gap between responsible and responsive government (Mair, 2013). Responsibly governing parties that adjust their policies to the expectations of international financial markets and EU institutions enable anti-establishment parties to present themselves as ‘truly’ responsive to voters’ concerns. Having entered government, the latter parties seek to combine responsive, populist policies with measures to constrain public scrutiny and political competition, aimed at silencing criticism from abroad or home.

While a centralised core executive, the normative ideal of many core executive studies, does not necessarily contradict executive accountability, the trend towards more powerful executives and ‘dominant-power politics’ (Carothers, 2002) suggests a more cautious and context-sensitive evaluation of institutional arrangements and change in East European core executives. One conceptual strategy to achieve this is to elaborate a paradigm of ‘executive governance’ that embeds the institutional analysis of core executives and provides a ‘missing link’ between institutions and policies and their outcomes. Put differently, there is a need to review the early association of the core executive concept with centralisation and to complement centralisation with other dimensions or qualities of executive governance.
An example of how a new paradigm could be developed will now be suggested. The example distinguishes two dimensions of core executive activities, drawing on the ‘Sustainable Governance Indicators’ (SGI), a dataset that has been created by the Bertelsmann Foundation, a think tank based in Germany (Brusis, 2009). The data is collected by annual expert surveys covering forty-one EU and OECD member states. Country experts assess and rate questions on the practices and procedures of planning, consultation, coordination, communication, decision-making, and policy implementation in executives.

A Principal Component Analysis of the expert ratings for twenty-four questions from the 2015 edition reveals two components (dimensions) that may be labelled ‘Implementation Capacity’ and ‘Information-Processing Capacity’. These two dimensions correspond to the broader concept of ‘governance capacity’ proposed by Pierre and Peters (2005): The capacity of the state to make and enforce binding decisions on the society and to do so without significant involvement of, or competition from, societal actors (…). In addition, states must be open to a wide range of information, including much that is uncomfortable and dissonant, if it is to be successful in governing. (…) the state must be in close contact with the society and utilize social information openly and accurately when governing.

(Pierre and Peters, 2005, 46)

This combination of enforcement capacity and societal openness is very similar to the two constituent dimensions of ‘authority’ and ‘inclusion’ in Gerring and Thacker’s ‘centripetal theory of democratic governance’ (Gerring and Thacker, 2008, 17).

The ‘Implementation Capacity’ dimension is best represented by SGI items that evaluate the extent to which government offices have sectoral policy expertise, determine the agenda of cabinet meetings, coordinate among line ministries, support ministerial compliance, and monitor policy implementation. ‘Information-Processing Capacity’ mainly consists of items that assess the extent to which core executive actors use regulatory impact assessments and consult with strategic planning units, non-governmental experts, and societal actors in order to deliberate and prepare decisions.

Figure 4.1 plots the standardised scores of countries based on these two dimensions, with higher scores indicating higher capacities. As the figure shows, the Baltic states and Poland in early 2015 formed a cluster of executives with similar, relatively developed implementation and information-processing capacities. In contrast, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovenia constitute a distinct cluster situated among the executives with relatively low capacities. Whereas Hungary’s executive appears to be an outlier in its combination of centralised enforcement authority with insulation from society, the Czech Republic combines relatively well-developed consultation procedures with a lack of centralised coordination and monitoring. The positioning of Hungary’s executive indicates that its model of a leader-type core executive centred on Prime Minister Orbán suffers from weak practices of information-gathering, consultation, and foresight.

The country reports prepared for the 2015 SGI edition show that government offices in Hungary, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania have the most developed capacities to evaluate policies substantively, whereas these capacities are more limited or lacking in Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Slovakia. In the latter countries, government offices are also confined to formal-technical checks of documents envisaged for cabinet meetings. Their policy coordination functions are (partially) performed by cabinet-level bodies or leading ministry officials below the ministers. Among the government offices with stronger policy evaluation capacities, some
may also return such documents on policy grounds and are involved by line ministries in the preparation of policy proposals (Hungary and Poland, and to some extent also in Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania).

In countries with weaker government offices, senior civil servants or cabinet committees and committees involving both ministers and other officials or experts tend to play a more significant role in inter-ministerial coordination. Bureaucracy-led coordination appears to be most prevalent in the Baltic states, while departmentalist practices are more pronounced, for example, in Bulgaria and Slovakia. Slovenia’s government relies on an elaborate system of cabinet committees to prepare cabinet decisions, whereas Estonia has instead established a practice of weekly consultative cabinet meetings to discuss pending issues. Informal coordination among political leaders has crucial importance in all Central European countries, necessitated by the need for, and tradition of, governing coalitions.

**Conclusion**

Cross-nationally comparative expert surveys constitute an important method for studying executive governance because they allow us to relate culturally ingrained interpretations – and the interpretations of interpretations favoured by the latest version of the Anglo-governance school (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010) – to interpretations in other national contexts. Such surveys provide one important agenda of future research. Expert surveys can and should be complemented by (1) studies and theory-building on the micro-mechanisms of executive governance (cf., for example, Rasch et al., 2015) and (2) holistic, contextualising perspectives on core executives as
networks of contingent and contested, culturally bound ‘practices with fuzzy boundaries’ and meanings in action (Bevir, 2007, 163).

The SGI survey and comparativists such as Blondel or Müller-Rommel have integrated Central European core executives as additional cases into broader European or global research designs, indicating that ‘Central Europe’ or ‘post-socialist’ may persist as regional or historical identifiers, but no longer constitute substantively defining attributes of these country cases. The principal-agent approach to core executives elaborated in rational choice institutionalism lagged behind in absorbing Central Europe, but is likely to reach out to the Central European cases soon. By 2015, core executives in the non-EU countries of South Eastern and Eastern Europe continued to be underexplored or even terra incognita. This is due both to the lack of resources in the local social sciences and the diminishing returns of including more peripheral countries into large cross-national comparativist projects. Contextualised case studies that reconstruct the institutional dynamics of these executives from a reflected nativist perspective are another promising avenue of research.

The lack of such studies is particularly regrettable since the under-institutionalised core executives of this world would provide rich empirical evidence of ‘court politics’, advocated as one of the promising new directions of core executive research (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015). This notion captures the ‘shift from formal decision-making processes in cabinet (. . .) to informal processes involving (. . .) the prime minister and a small group of carefully selected courtiers’ (Savoie, 2008, 16–17). These aspects of ‘court politics’ have for a long time been a focus of interest for researchers studying Russia (cf., for example, Kryshtanovskaya and White, 2005), but they have also been scrutinised in Central European countries with stronger autochthonous social science traditions. The British and West European scholarship on core executives could benefit from tapping such local knowledge accumulated in its periphery.

Notes

1 Premier-presidential systems differ from president-parliamentary systems of government insofar as the latter systems enable the president to dismiss the prime minister and cabinet without the legislature’s approval (Shugart and Carey, 1992). The term super-presidentialism denotes a governmental system, for example in Russia, where the president and his/her administration de facto suspend the separation of powers and supervise or guide the activities of the legislature and the judiciary (Taras, 2013).

2 The 2007 volume analyses Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Baltic States; the 2001 volume also includes Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, and Serbia/Yugoslavia.


4 The two components together explain 71 per cent of the variance in the data.

5 Despite Zubek’s bridge-building, major works remained confined to the usual West European cases (cf., for example, Strøm et al., 2003).

References


Core executives in Central Europe


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