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**POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPE: DOMESTIC AND EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS**

Vesselin Dimitrov,

London School of Economics and Political Science

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine some of the most important challenges that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have had to confront in the two decades since the fall of communism in 1989. While most CEE countries have been quite successful in setting up and consolidating representative democratic institutions, they have encountered serious problems in another area, that of creating effective governments. This article, therefore, focuses on this area and assesses the progress that the CEE countries have made, concentrating on Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. The article examines three key problems: the centralization of executive authority within the political system in hands of the government, by reducing the executive powers of rival institutions such as the presidency; the development of policy-making capacity within the government; and the adaptation of government institutions to EU accession and membership.

Introduction

What are the most important challenges that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have had to confront in the two decades since the fall of communism in 1989? The task of establishing and consolidating representative democracy was accomplished remarkably early and successfully. Already the first democratic elections held in 1989-91 were impressively free and fair in most CEE countries, considering that they were held after four decades of communist rule. Since then, most countries in the region have held numerous elections, almost all of which have brought about changes in government. Samuel Huntington has suggested that 'a democracy may be viewed as consolidated if the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of transition loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election' (1991, 266-267). If we apply this 'two-turnover test' (Huntington 1991: 266) to Central and Eastern Europe, we can see that most countries in the region passed this test in the mid- to late-1990s and can, therefore, be regarded as consolidated democracies since that point.

While most CEE countries have been quite successful in setting up and consolidating representative institutions, they have encountered serious problems in another area, that of creating effective governments. This has probably been the most important and intractable challenge with which they have had to deal in their efforts to develop the institutions of their new democracies over the last twenty years. This article will, therefore, focus on this challenge and assess the progress that the CEE countries have made in meeting it. In order to achieve some depth, the analysis will concentrate on four CEE countries: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, which have been chosen on the basis of variation in their structural conditions, actor constellations, and critical junctures.

The Challenge of Effective Government¹

Following their transition to democracy in 1989, the CEE countries found themselves with cabinets which lacked the ability to perform the key functions of a government: the consideration of policy alternatives, making policy choices and implementing them, and the capacity for coordination and arbitration. Under communism, political decision taking was the prerogative of the Communist Party, which enforced its domination through its formations that run parallel to, and penetrated, all state, economic, and societal institutions. In a double structure, party units virtually duplicated the organizations of the state and were sometimes placed side by side within the same state organization. Hence, the state apparatus—including the central government, its ministries, and agencies—had an essentially instrumental function in the execution and implementation of the policies decided by the party Politburo and the party bureaucracy as the real centre of political power. In this sense, one may describe the cabinet (Council of Ministers) under communism as being “under-politicized” (Goetz and Wollmann 2001, 865). The cabinet was highly fragmented, with each minister working under the supervision of the relevant Communist Party institution (usually the Politburo or a sectoral department of the Central Committee) and having relatively little to do with his ministerial colleagues. Since the ruling Communist Parties served as the chief integrative institutions within the political system, when they gave up their monopoly of power in 1989, the CEE countries were left with a “hollow crown” (Weller and Bakvis 1997) at the very top of their new democratic order.

The breaking of the link between the state and the party also had a reciprocal impact on parties in the new democratic system. The parties developing within that system were primarily concerned with the representation of social interests rather than with the management of the state. In Blondel and Cotta’s terminology (1996, 2000), parties became less “governmental”; that is, the influence of the government on the party diminished. It is useful here to remember Blondel and Cotta’s distinction between the party-in-government, the parliamentary party, and the extra-

¹ This section and the two subsequent ones draw on Dimitrov, Goetz and Wollmann (2006).

parliamentary party. The party-in-government consists of government ministers with the same party affiliation; the parliamentary party is composed of members of parliament sharing the same party identity; and the extra-parliamentary party refers to the party organization outside parliament (Cotta 2000a, 2000b). In the context of the demise of communism, the influence of the party-in-government over the parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary parties diminished. This reduction in “governmental” quality affected all parties, although it hit the new non-communist parties especially strongly, since they had no governmental experience and often defined their identities primarily in terms of opposition to the government. In the former communist parties, the reduction in the “governmental” quality also occurred but was restrained by the legacies of the past.

In order for the CEE countries to become functioning democracies after 1989, they had to fill this “hollow crown”, i.e., establish effective government institutions, able to perform the policy coordination functions which had previously been carried out by the Communist Party. Perhaps the best means of achieving that aim is the centralization of executive authority *within the political system* in hands of the cabinet (reducing the executive powers of institutions that can potentially rival the cabinet, for instance, the president or parliament), and the centralization of policy-making *within the cabinet*, for instance, by empowering the prime minister and the minister of finance, who can be assumed to be motivated by the interests of the government as a whole rather than by sectoral interests, to direct the work of the sectoral ministries.

In addition to their complex domestic problems, the governments in the CEE countries have had to confront serious external challenges. Perhaps the most important of these challenges has been the need to deal with the multiple demands arising from the process of European Union accession and membership. Most studies of the adaptation of CEE government institutions to these pressures have been conducted, with few exceptions, from two closely related perspectives: EU enlargement and Europeanization. The enlargement perspective has principally inquired into the question of whether the new EU member states and accession states are “ready for Europe,” in the sense that

their governmental and administrative institutions comply with the accession criteria and are capable of implementing effectively and efficiently the EU's *acquis communautaire*. By contrast, studies of Europeanization have been interested more broadly in the institutional and policy effects of EU integration at the level of the new and likely future member states. Both perspectives give prominence to external drivers of institutional and policy change and regard domestic institutions primarily as the objects of reform attempts.

Based on the above discussion, this article will analyse how successful the four CEE countries under examination have been in three key areas:

- 1) Centralization of executive authority within the political system in hands of the government, by reducing the executive powers of rival institutions such as the presidency
- 2) The development of policy-making capacity within the government
- 3) Adaptation of government institutions to EU accession and membership

The Location of the Executive in the Political System

Hungary

Hungary's political and institutional transformation in 1989 followed the pattern of a "negotiated transition" (Batt 1991, 566ff.) based on roundtable talks between reformist communist leaders and a score of opposition parties. The adoption of a semi-presidential system was a "dilatatory power compromise" typical of such a transition. The former communist party, the MSZP, insisted on introducing a directly elected president with substantive powers, apparently in the hope of seeing the election of a president close to their political cause, while the opposition groups, particularly the MDF, preferred a weaker president, as they expected to dominate a democratically elected parliament. The constitutional amendments enacted in 1989 mirrored the underlying compromise. The anticommunist camp prevailed in having the

president elected by parliament, rather than by popular vote, but the ex-communists succeeded in endowing the presidency with significant powers, such as the right to “petition parliament to take action,” to initiate national referendums, to veto bills (a veto that parliament can overrule by majority vote), and to refer bills to the constitutional court for constitutional review. All this made for a moderate semi-presidential system.

Almost at once, political tensions arising from “cohabitation” emerged. The first parliamentary elections of April–May 1990 led a center-right coalition of the MDF, the KDNP, and the FKGP, while president Arpad Göncz had an affiliation with the liberal SZDSZ. The president lost no time in his attempt to make extensive use of his constitutional prerogatives, for instance, by refusing to sign bills enacted by parliament. He was, however, rebuffed by the constitutional court, which rejected the notion of a division of executive power between the government and the president and established a restrictive interpretation of the powers of the presidency (Körösenyi 1999, 423). This early confrontation ended by placing Hungary on a constitutional path toward a parliamentary system of government, on which it has stayed since then.

Poland

Poland’s transition to democracy was shaped by constitutional arrangements hammered out between Solidarity and the Communist Party in their roundtable negotiations of February–March 1989. These arrangements remained in force until they were replaced by the Small Constitution of October 1992. The semi-presidential system that emerged from these talks was a compromise. The communists insisted on having a strong president through whom they hoped to retain a share of power. The president was to be directly elected and endowed with significant powers, such as a legislative veto that could not be overruled by parliament and the right to appoint the ministers responsible for security matters. By contrast, Solidarity was eager to secure the rights of parliament and to institutionalize a cabinet that would be fully accountable to parliament.

The semi-presidential system rapidly led to conflicts between the president and the government. Until the first direct presidential election in December 1990, there was a cohabitation between the communist president Jaruzelski and a government led by Solidarity under Prime Minister Mazowiecki. Perhaps surprisingly, given Jaruzelski's role in the suppression of Solidarity following the proclamation of martial law in 1981, this cohabitation passed off relatively peacefully. When the Solidarity leader Lech Walesa was elected president in December 1990 for a five-year term, he dominated the all-Solidarity cabinet under the politically weak Prime Minister Bielecki to the point that Poland came "closest ever to having a presidential government" (Zubek 2001).

In the Small Constitution of October 1992, which was adopted under a center-right multiparty cabinet headed by Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka, the Polish government system remained on the bipolar semi-presidential track. Although the incumbent president, Walesa, succeeded in preserving most of his presidential prerogatives unimpaired, some of the powers of the presidency were trimmed, ushering in a more moderate variant of a semi-presidential system. The president continued to be directly elected. While he retained his veto power over legislation, parliament could now reject his veto with a two-thirds majority of its members. The president's former prerogative of appointing security ministers was watered down to a right "to appoint ministers of state to represent him in matters related to the exercise of his powers" (art. 48.1). The president was given the right to "nominate the prime minister and, on his motion, the Council of Ministers" (art. 57.1), but his nominations had to be confirmed by parliament.

It was only under the relatively stable SLD-PSL coalition government of 1993-1997, and with the victory of the SLD candidate Alexander Kwasniewski in the 1995 presidential elections, that the actor constellation became favorable to the concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister. There was also a growing realization by Poland's political elites that governance capacity needed to be radically improved to meet the demands of EU accession (Nunberg 1999). The dynamics of change surfaced, first of all, in the drafting of a new constitution to replace the Small Constitution of 1992.

The new constitution was passed by parliament on April 2, 1997, and was approved in a national referendum in October 1997.

While the 1997 constitution retained a directly elected president, presidential executive powers were further reduced in favour of the government. Under the 1997 constitution, the president can still play an active role in government formation, as he nominates a prime minister, who in turn proposes the composition of the government. The president has the right to introduce legislative drafts in parliament, to refer bills passed by parliament to the constitutional court, or to veto them; in the last case, parliament may overrule the presidential veto with a three-fifths majority in the presence of at least half of the statutory number of deputies. The president has, however, been stripped of his earlier prerogative of appointing ministers. In assessing the impact of the constitutional reform on Poland's governmental system, some observers went as far as suggesting that the president had been reduced to a largely representational role (van der Meer Krok-Paszowska 1999). But even if some presidents have shown restraint in the exercise of their powers, the president's prerogatives are still significant (see Millard 2000) and could potentially be used by an activist incumbent, such as the current president Kaczynski, resulting in serious tensions with the government.

Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic

The sudden collapse of the politically orthodox and repressive communist regime in Czechoslovakia in November–December 1989 initially left the anticommunist umbrella movements—the Civic Forum in the Czech Republic and Public against Violence in Slovakia—in a position of unchallenged dominance. In the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus succeeded in replacing the Civic Forum as the dominant party with his own liberal party, the ODS. The ODS not only won the Czech 1992 parliamentary elections, leading to the formation of a new Czech government under Klaus, but was also largely responsible for the creation of an independent Czech state in 1993.

The constitution of the Czech Republic of December 1992, the discussion and enactment of which were overshadowed by the conflict over

the dissolution of the Czechoslovak federation, was strongly influenced by the anticommunist forces. It provides for a president who is elected by parliament at a joint session of the two chambers and is endowed with a number of substantive powers, such as the right of a suspensory veto over legislative bills, which can be overruled by an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies (between 1992 and 1996, four out of seven presidential vetoes were rejected by parliament; see Kopecký 2001, 156–57). In the process of government formation, the president has the right to appoint the prime minister and, upon the suggestion of the prime minister, the ministers. Perhaps the most significant lever of informal power available to the Czech president has been his ability to enter and shape the political debate by directly appealing to the general public, political parties, and organized interests (Wolchik 1997, 184–87). Since 1993, the Czech Republic has had only two presidents: Havel and Klaus. They have, for the most part, left policy-making to the government, though from time to time they (and especially Klaus) have attempted to exercise influence over it.

Bulgaria

To understand institution building in Bulgaria after 1989, the mode of the transition to post-communism proves crucial. This transition took the form of the ousting of the orthodox communist leader Zhivkov in November 1989 by his reformist colleagues in the Politburo of Bulgarian Communist Party and the subsequent transformation of the party into the BSP, dedicated to democratic socialism. The BSP was able to remain the leading political party and retain power well into the mid-1990s. As in Poland, the introduction of a semi-presidential system was the outcome of roundtable negotiations in March 1990 between the former communist BSP and the anti-communist UDF. Reflecting the underlying “dilatatory power compromise,” the temporary constitutional settlement agreed at the roundtable did not contain a clear definition of the powers of the president, a reflection of the BSP’s hopes of retaining a share of power through a potentially strong presidency.

In the constitution adopted in July 1991 by the constitutional assembly—in which the BSP held 53 percent of the seats and the UDF 36 percent—the powers of the president were given a clearer definition that stressed his limited political role. By that time, the BSP, contrary to its expectations, had lost the presidency to the UDF leader Zhelev but dominated the constitutional assembly and no longer wished to endow the president with extensive prerogatives. Thus, the president is directly elected but has few executive powers, considerably fewer than his Polish counterpart under the 1989 Round Table agreement, and, in formal terms, even fewer than his Hungarian counterpart. The Bulgarian system is therefore closer to the parliamentary rather than the semi-presidential model and since 1991 presidents have rarely been influential in policy-making.

The Development of Governments' Policy-Making Capacity

Hungary

In regulating the relations between parliament, the government, and the prime minister, Hungary's founding constitution differed significantly from the post-communist constitutional arrangements of other CEE countries, most notably by emphasizing the leadership of the prime minister both within the cabinet and vis-à-vis parliament. The prime minister is elected by an absolute majority of the members of parliament. The position of the prime minister was further strengthened by the introduction of a constructive vote of no-confidence that could only be directed against the head of the government but not the cabinet, a provision reminiscent of Germany's constructive vote of no-confidence aimed at the chancellor. The leadership role of the prime minister within the cabinet is buttressed by his power to appoint and dismiss ministers.

In line with the constitutional logic of having a strong prime minister, the Office of Government, which during the communist era was subordinated to the council of ministers, was turned into a Prime Minister's Office, again drawing on the German example. The Antall government introduced the term *government* instead of *council of ministers* in order to emphasize the shift

from sectoral to functional integration and from fragmentation to political control.

Hungary's early transition to prime ministerial government can be explained both by the institutional legacy of communism and by the party composition of the first democratic government. The government under Prime Minister Nemeth had already begun to dissociate itself from the Communist Party during the last years of communism and had sought to strengthen its own governmental capacities. The dominant role played by the MDF in the first democratic government allowed the party, and especially its leader, Josef Antall, to push for a wide range of prime ministerial prerogatives. Indeed, so strong was MDF's position that it did not hesitate to conclude an agreement with the opposition SZDSZ in May 1990 to secure the necessary support for these institutional changes. Antall's effective personal exercise of these powers, until his death in December 1993, contributed to their broad acceptance. Prime ministerialization was accompanied by the early strengthening of a centralized core executive, which relied, in particular, on a centre of government that functioned as a Prime Minister's Office. The institutional structures put in place in 1989–1990 have continued to function effectively since then, in cabinets led by both right and left wing parties.

Poland

The 1992 Small Constitution continued the communist practice of defining the council of ministers as a collective body. Although it stipulated that the premier “shall direct the work of the Council of Ministers and shall coordinate and control the work of individual ministers” (art. 55.1), he was scarcely more than an “equal among equals”—with the ministers claiming and exerting operational autonomy. Thus, “the government . . . acted like a loose federation of ministries” (Nunberg 1997, 5). In line with the emphasis on the collective nature of the council of ministers, the Office of Government continued to be subordinated to cabinet as a collective body and possessed few effective coordinating powers. In short, semi-presidentialism coexisted with a cabinet type of government, and the core executive was decentralized in

character (with the exception of the period immediately following the transition to democracy, when the unique cohesion of Solidarity made it possible for the government to function as a centralized cabinet executive).

The institutional weakness of the prime minister and the lack of a core executive that would have acted to support the chief executive can in large part be attributed to the very heterogeneous party composition of successive governments. In the first fully democratic parliamentary elections of 1991 (the election of 1989 had opened only one-third of the seats in the more important lower house of parliament, the Sejm, to democratic contestation, reserving the rest for the Communist Party and its allies), as many as twenty-nine parties entered the Sejm, with no one party commanding more than 13 percent of the seats. This multitude of political parties made the formation of stable coalition governments almost impossible. The Olszewski government, formed in December 1991, consisted of four parties and lasted only until June 1992. Another coalition government, led by Hanna Suchocka, was appointed in July 1992 and had to rely on the support of seven parties. After numerous crises, the government was finally brought down in May 1993. The parties' rapidly shifting fortunes made it impossible to predict which parties would survive to fight the next general election. Indeed, most of the parties represented in the 1991 parliament failed to secure a place in parliament in 1993. There were, therefore, few incentives for parties to agree to the creation of centralized executive institutions.

In the mid-1990s, there was a significant shift in the trajectory of the central executive away from cabinet-ministerial governments and towards a substantial enhancement of the powers of the prime minister. The first steps towards strengthening the position of the prime minister were taken in the Small Constitution of 1992, which recognized his right to "coordinate and control the work of individual ministers". The 1997 constitution strengthened the position of the government by the introduction of a constructive vote of no-confidence in place of the previous negative one. Regarding the position of the prime minister within the government, however, the new constitutional and legal provisions reveal some ambivalence. On the one hand, the constitution still focuses on primacy of the council of ministers as a collective

organ (art. 197.1). On the other, the prime minister has been given a leading role in the formation of the government in that he can propose the composition of the council of ministers. In addition, the position of the premier has been markedly strengthened by legislation that was part of the reform package passed in August 1996 (Fidien 1996; Zubek 2001, 92off.).

The development of coordinating institutions in the center of government, which would enable the prime minister to exercise his newly-acquired rights, has, however, been rather uncertain.

Czech Republic

Under the constitution of December 1992, the newly appointed government requires the approval of the Chamber of Deputies. The government can be brought down at any time by a negative vote of no-confidence, requiring an absolute majority of all deputies. The constitutional provisions define the government—the council of ministers—as a collective and collegiate body, with the prime minister as an “equal among equals.” Accordingly, the Office of Government is subordinated as a support unit to the council of ministers and not to the prime minister.

The formally weak position of the prime minister may be explained with reference to the mode of the demise of the communist regime and the state of the emergent party system at the time, but also with Vaclav Klaus’s personal leadership. As the founding father both of ODS—as the dominant party-political force in the early transition period—as well as of the new Czech state, Klaus proved highly skilful in building up his own party and a strong parliamentary majority during the first legislative period of the Czech parliament (1992–1996). His strong personal leadership allowed him to make good for the constitutional weakness of the prime ministerial position. Yet, in the longer term, this institutional weakness proved an onerous legacy under conditions when the parliamentary majorities became less secure and personalist power resources weakened. Thus, as early as, and during, his albeit short-lived second prime ministerial term, from July 1996 to November 1997, Klaus had to face up to the consequences of a formally weak

premiership. His successors as prime ministers have usually not been able to rely on informal power resources of the type he could use to bolster limited formal powers. As a result, their hold over the members of their cabinets has remained weak, and a centralized core executive has failed to emerge in the Czech Republic.

Bulgaria

The 1991 constitution left the prime minister in a relatively weak position. It defines the government as a council of ministers, a collective body, with the prime minister being merely an “equal among equals.” The collective responsibility of the council of ministers surfaces also in the constitutional provision that “the council of ministers shall rescind any illegitimate or improper act issued by a minister” (art. 107). In line with the primacy of collective responsibility of the council of ministers, the Office of Government is subordinated to it. However, its ability to serve as a guardian of collective responsibility has remained strictly limited and its predominant nature has been that of a government registrar.

In 1996–1997, Bulgaria slid into its worst economic crisis since the beginning of the transition, with a drop in the gross domestic product of 11 percent in 1996 and another 7 percent in 1997. Against the backdrop of this dismal economic record, the democratic opposition party UDF, led by Ivan Kostov, won a landslide victory over the BSP in the parliamentary elections of April 1997. This victory was not a normal swing in the political pendulum, but it marked a political rupture. It established the UDF’s supremacy within the Bulgarian party system, which was rather similar to the dominance that the BSP had enjoyed before 1997. Prime Minister Kostov made significant progress in reforming the government structure, notably through the Public Administration Act of 1998. For the first time, the act established a uniform organizational structure for central government. It emphasized the primacy of the council of ministers as “a central collective body of the executive power with a general competence” (art. 20.1), but it also aimed at cautiously upgrading the position of the prime minister by endowing him with the right

to refer acts which he considers illegal or improper to the council of ministers (art. 20.6) and to appoint regional governors and to control their activities. It is revealing that all three provisions were later nullified by the constitutional court, on the grounds of violating the collective primacy of the council of ministers laid down in the constitution. Thus, notwithstanding the overwhelming majority of the UDF in parliament and the political muscle of Kostov, the cabinet type of government continued to prevail. In the same vein, the Office of Government continued to be assigned and subordinated to the council of ministers. But centralization was modestly increased through the establishment of sectoral units mirroring policy fields and of horizontal units, including the “Chancellery Department,” which were charged with providing administrative support to the council of ministers (SIGMA 1999). Kostov could, however, exercise personal and party-political dominance over his ministerial colleagues, and, thus, he created a centralized prime ministerial core executive that relied strongly on party-political coordination mechanisms. His successor as prime ministers could not command the same personal and political influence, and as result, Bulgaria has had a succession of relatively weak premiers.

Adaptation of Government Institutions to EU Accession and Membership²

This section of the article will address two main questions:

- To what extent can the CEE countries be regarded as “ready for Europe”?
- How far-reaching has been the Europeanization of institutions and public policy in the CEE countries?

² This section draws on Dimitrov, Goetz and Wollmann (2006).

Ready for Europe?

Academic comment and analysis from the enlargement perspective have concentrated, first, on providing assessments of domestic institutional capacity and, second, on charting the evolution of the EU approach to fostering domestic EU compatibility. As regards the former, attention has focused on governmental and administrative “linkage”—that is, “institutional arrangements that link national executives and EU authorities and the institutional practices that have evolved at the national level to support national-EU connections” (Goetz 2000, 212). In the CEE case, this has involved mapping the domestic setup for conducting and coordinating the accession negotiations and tracing the steps taken to ensure the transposition of the *acquis communautaire* into domestic law. There is already a good deal of research on this issue, with work on Hungary (Ágh 2003, 91ff.; 2004), Slovenia (Fink Hafner and Lajh 2003), Lithuania (Nakrosis 2003), Poland (Zubek 2005a,b), and the Czech Republic (Kabele and Linek 2004); and with comparative studies covering a range of countries, including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia (Laffan 2003; Lippert and Umbach 2005; Lippert, Umbach, and Wessels 2001).

As in Western Europe (Kassim, Peters, and Wright 2000; Mittag and Wessels 2003), the new member states differ as regards the degree to which linkage functions have been concentrated within specialized units; patterns of inter-ministerial coordination; and the role of the chief executive and his staff in domestic-EU linkage. It has been suggested that the creation of specialized executive units dealing with accession, transposition, and pre-accession funds has fostered fragmentation at the level of central government, as such units constitute organizational “islands of excellence” or “enclaves” (Goetz 2001; Nunberg 2000); certainly, dealing with EU business has, on the whole, tended to increase the autonomy of executive actors. For example, a recent study of Czech civil servants concerned with EU accession has found that involvement in EU business brings a “significant degree of institutional autonomy towards domestic politics since civil servants tend to be more sensitive to signals from the EU institutions than those from their political leadership. This sensitivity

is most pronounced with those who are most exposed to the EU” (Drulák, Česal, and Hampl 2003, 651).

There are several reasons that help explain why there has been a pronounced tendency to the emergence of distinct “EU core executives,” which are, to a greater or lesser extent, separated from the rest of the administration. Negotiating entry and ensuring legal transposition of the entire *acquis* posed challenges of a different quality and magnitude from those associated with everyday EU business in long-standing member states. It was much more akin to the “high politics” of shaping member states’ basic relationships with the EU than it was to the “low politics” surrounding individual policy decisions. The EU itself insisted on dealing with a small range of authoritative interlocutors, stressing the need for an effective lead from the centre.

Europeanization Eastern Style?³

The discussion about EU-related institutional capacity has been closely linked to arguments about Europeanization, which have inquired, in particular, into the mechanisms by which European integration produces effects in the political systems of the new and prospective member states. The discussion of Europeanization “Eastern style” has tended, thus far, to stress “hierarchical” aspects of “adaptation” to real or imaged EU requirements and has paid special attention to the impact of EU “conditionality” (Grabbe 2003).

Yet, there is a danger of overemphasizing both the hierarchical dimension of Europeanization and the intensity of effects. The focus on “adaptive pressures” should not obscure the “usage” of EU integration (Jacquot and Woll 2003) by domestic actors for their own purposes. More recent work on Europeanization in Western European countries has emphasized “the use that domestic actors make of the EU in order to legitimate policy reforms, to develop new policy solutions, and to alter policy beliefs” (Dyson and Goetz 2003, 18), and while research from this perspective

³ This subsection draws on Goetz (2005).

in CEE is still in the beginning, there is already some evidence that such usage has been widespread.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, it is clear that the CEE countries have had rather different success in dealing with the three key challenges outlined at the start of this article.

In relation to the first challenge - the centralization of executive authority within the political system in hands of the cabinet and the weakening of rival institutions such as the presidency - all four countries: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, have been relatively successful, although important tensions remain in relations between the government and the president in Poland and, to a lesser extent, in the Czech Republic.

With regard to the second challenge - the development of policy-making capacity within the government – the picture is much more varied. It is notable that only Hungary and, in somewhat weaker form, Poland have developed prime ministerial systems. The Czech Republic and Bulgaria, on the other hand, have retained relatively decentralized government institutions, with limited policy-making capacity. This observation goes somewhat against the general perception of post-communist politics that tends to emphasize the key role played by powerful and often ruthless “strongmen” (and the occasional “strongwoman”). What the analysis above suggests is a somewhat more complex picture in which party-political and personalist power resources can be employed by skilled politicians—such as Prime Ministers Klaus and Kostov in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, respectively—to overcome the restrictions that the type of government imposes on their authority and coordinative ability within the government. This tends to be, however, only a temporary solution; and with the politically weaker prime ministers that have succeeded Klaus and Kostov, the disadvantages of the decentralized cabinet institutions in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria have become increasingly apparent. With the exception of the Hungarian case, the

power of chief executives is built on rather precarious institutional foundations. The “hollow crown” created by the fall of communism has thus been replenished only to a limited extent.

In relation to the third challenge, it is possible to observe that the pressures arising from EU accession and membership have led to significant adaptations in the government institutions of the CEE countries. These adaptations have included the development of distinct “EU core executives” within national administrations, which have been dedicated specifically to dealing with the complex challenges posed by relations with the Union. While these specialized executives have proved quite successful in managing tasks that were of vital importance in securing accession to the EU, such as the transposition of the *acquis*, the fact that they have been, to a varying extent, separated from the rest of the administration, may limit the capacity of the CEE countries to operate effectively as full members of the Union.

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