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**Changes in the Local Political Elite  
in Small Towns and Rural Areas.  
Does Revolution Devour its Children?\***

**Abstract**

In this paper I discuss three levels of change in the local political elite in the Czech Republic after 1989 – the institutional, the political and the personal. Two questions are answered with the help of different research findings. Who/what can be called the children of the revolution? What has happened to those children during the past fifteen years? The local revolution is now over and the local elites are stable. Legislative changes, politicisation of local politics and personal changes are rather gradual with different outcomes. Some of them are promising for the future, others are endangering local self-government, especially in the case of the smallest municipalities.

Keywords: local government, local political elite, local revolution, rural municipalities, small town, the Czech Republic.

**Introduction**

In this paper I will present part of the research findings from two projects. In the project called “Transitional processes” we tried to understand the interactive penetration of societal changes from the macro level down to the micro level and back through an empirical study of a region consisting of a small town and its surroundings (Kandert 2004). The project “Changes of rural and small town political elites” aims to go into the work

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\* An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference of the European Sociological Association, Toruń 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> September, 2005 during the programme of political sociology research stream. Research for this paper was supported financially by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (403/97/0971 and 403/03/D241).

of researchers who studied the beginnings of local self-government restoration at the beginning of the 90's (see Heřmanová et al. 1992; Illner 1992a, b). Both projects concentrate more on the periphery than the centre of political activity in the Czech Republic.<sup>1</sup> In the course of time it will become more and more difficult – especially at the level of villages and small municipalities – to find and interview the first freely elected representatives of municipalities. If their career in local politics was not terminated by failure in elections or their own resignation, it will sooner or later be terminated by generation exchange.

### **Local Revolutions 1989/1990**

Firstly I will go back to the events which Wisla Surazska called “local revolution” (see Surazska 1996: 138). In the project mentioned above we used the transitional approach which, from our point of view, reconstructs basic changes as a series of events – turning points at all levels of society, as open processes with their own dramatic time frame. The quick downfall of the communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia was framed in a non-violent, though extremely dramatic ritual of power change (Kabele 1998). The main problem of societal transition after this revolutionary turnover was that it was initiated at lower levels of society. The local stage responded in its own way and with delay (Illner 1992a: 79).

The elimination of the leading role of the Communist Party was on the micro level usually carried out under the so-called reconstruction of national committees in spring 1990. Personal changes connected with it were usually negotiated between the Communist Party cells and local Civic Forums, non-party groups that arose spontaneously out of the informal network of friends and acquaintances. In the institutional sense the free municipal elections in autumn 1990 were the outcome of the revolution at local political level.<sup>2</sup>

### **Two Questions and Three Levels of Research**

I am going to concentrate on the institutional, political and personal levels when trying to answer the two questions: Who/what can be called the children of revolution? What has happened with the children during fifteen years? From the institutional point of view I consider the self-governing

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<sup>1</sup> The municipalities with up to 10 thousand people represent 98% of all municipalities and 45% inhabitants of the Czech Republic live in these municipalities (Malý lexikon obcí 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The other side of the opening possibilities was the chance to settle old scores. Towards positive and negative potential of local Civic Forums see Smith (2003).

system based on the competition of candidates and electoral parties in elections as a child of revolution. Researchers who did research on the restoration of local self-government expected that “the first generation of leaders following a fundamental change of regime is likely to shape the new institutions and in consequence to determine the behavioural pattern at least in the foreseeable future” (Offerdal et al. 1996: 105).

On the political level it is especially the local Civic Forums which are the children of the revolution. The Civic Forum won the elections both in terms of votes and obtained seats. However it was more successful in larger municipalities than in small ones where the independents were more popular. Less than ten per cent of votes for them secured more than a quarter of the seats (Kostelecký 2004: 19). Researchers expected a development towards great party politicisation at local level (Baldersheim, Illner 1996).

Table 1

Popular support of the most relevant electoral parties and obtained seats in local councils in 1990

	% of total votes	% of seats
Civic Forum	36.7	32.2
Social Democrats	5.2	1.7
Communist Party	16.8	14.4
People's Party (Christian Democrats)	10.9	12.0
Independents	9.7	27.0

Source: Czech Statistical Office.

In the Czech Republic, as in other countries, there was a significant personal change of local elites. This change was greater in larger municipalities. Citizens voted especially for candidates who were not connected with the former regime and were also known to people (Offerdal et al. 1996). In smaller municipalities, there was a mixture of “newcomers” and “old soldiers” who had experience from the low-level positions they occupied in the old establishment (Illner 1992a). We know little about their fate.

### Sources of the Mosaic

It is difficult to reconstruct the sequence of events from a fifteen-year perspective. Memory fails because of all the events that followed. Events during that extraordinary period lose their significance as the new system of self-government becomes more institutionalised. The stories of the chil-

dren of the revolution are rather like a mosaic composed of various sources than a compact story. Besides the interviews, they are based on state and municipal archive funds that should preserve the minutes of local government meetings and other documents. However, in a number of municipalities the documents were discarded by the former establishment or by the new representatives. Not even the helpfulness of archivists brings any results if "the minutes are so crafty that not even a lawyer could understand them." That's why I restrict myself in the following table to the enumeration of several typical events and phenomena connected with the period 1989/1990. Combining various sources it is possible to document them almost completely.

Table 2

Panel of 34 municipalities up to 10,000 inhabitants divided by size

	Civic Forum		Reconstruction of National Committees			Personal change of chairman			Personal change of secretary		
	yes	no	yes	no	und.	yes	no	und.	yes	no	und.
SUM	18	0	17	0	1	9	9	0	8	7	3
RM	12	4	10	4	2	3	12	1	3	12	1
Total	30	4	27	4	3	12	21	1	11	19	4

Notes: Civic Forum = existence of CF till municipal election 1990; und. = undetected; RM = rural municipalities (approximately up to two thousand people); SUM = small urban municipalities (from two to ten thousand people).

To sum up, the fall of the regime happened in a more moderate way in small towns and villages compared to the centre of events. The local form of the main agent of revolutionary change – the local Civic Forum – was founded in most municipalities and played a substantial part in the personal changes of the councils. In this way it weakened the position of the Communist Party. However only in larger municipalities the key posts were taken by new people. In a number of the smallest municipalities the exchange of political elites either did not occur or the exchange was really velvet. The prospect of fundamental change thus remained bound to the free municipal elections.

### **The Children of the Revolution and Their Fate**

In the Czech Republic the municipal council, a collective representative body, is elected by proportional representation. Voters can select one of the electoral parties or give their votes to individual candidates. They can

also combine both procedures. The municipal executive bodies – board and mayor – are elected from among members of the municipal council. The board consisting of at least five members is only elected in municipalities with fifteen or more councillors. The elected mayor is automatically a member. The number of councillors is decided depending on the size of the municipality by law. The municipality itself decides on the concrete number of elected councillors.

Table 3

Number of elected councillors according to laws

Population size of municipalities	Number of elected councillors according to		
	Law No. 368/1990 Coll.	Law No. 152/1994 Coll.	Law No. 313/2002 Coll.
500 or less	7–15	5–9	5–15
501 to 3000	7–15	7–15	7–15
3001 to 10,000	15–30	11–25	11–25

Table 4

The number of municipalities with only one (or one type of) election party in a panel of 34 municipalities

	1990	1994	1998	2002
Only one electoral party	0	0	1	2
Only one type of party	0	4	4	3

Competition in free elections, the gain of the revolution, is more and more endangered at the level of small municipalities by the disinterest of citizens in becoming candidates. In 1994 the legislators influenced by the diminishing pool of candidates reduced the minimal number of councillors in the smallest municipalities from 7 to 5 as we can see in table 3. According to the data provided by the Czech Statistical Office for one representative elected in rural municipalities (here approximately up to 3000 inhabitants) there were on average two candidates in the last two municipal elections. However, a growing number of municipalities only have one electoral party taking part in elections. In the last election (2002) there were 41% munici-

palties with only one type of election party.<sup>3</sup> It is generally an association of independent candidates. In my file the two smallest municipalities prove this development.

The reason for the deliberate reduction of the number of councillors is not necessarily only the citizens' low interest in standing as candidates. While a decision is made in most small municipalities on the number of councillors, it is also decided whether the town hall will only be led by the mayor or by the board. Before the first municipal election the number of councillors for the smallest municipalities was set below the number required for the board to be elected. This was done at a time when municipalities that were merged before gained autonomy. In a number of larger municipalities the board was cancelled after the experience from the first or second electoral period. Legislative cutting of the minimum number of councillors from 15 to 11 in 1994 (see table 5) made it possible for all municipalities up to 10,000 inhabitants. For managerially oriented mayors it was advantageous to reduce the number of councillors so that their authority was not limited by the existence of the board.

It is worth noticing the less common cases of municipalities where the number of councillors was raised again and the board was elected anew. In my file, this regressive change was accompanied by the return of people with experience from the pre-November national committees. In municipality Z. board members could often not reach agreement with the mayor who in the end before the election in 1994 enforced the dissolution of the board, proclaiming it as a "useless thing." He was successful twice in elections but in order to keep his post he needed other parties' support. The communists helped him in 1998 but were obviously dissatisfied with the gained share of power. At the end of the electoral period they voted for an increased number of councillors and for the reintroduction of the board. The mayor was beaten by a more acceptable woman with experience from the former national committee.

At the instigation of small municipalities the amendment of the law on municipalities from 2002 opened the possibility of also establishing a board in the smallest municipalities (up to 500 inhabitants). The change was apart from other things also justified by bad experience with the concentration of power in the hands of the mayor (Vedral 2004). However, the effort to delegate a larger share of decision making to the mayor is not necessarily an expression of democratic deficit. It is rather the consequence of the current system that makes it possible that a different set of executive self-governing bodies are elected in municipalities of comparable size.

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<sup>3</sup> It means one political party/movement or only independent candidates (one or more lists). Unfortunately, I do not have any data about municipalities with one election party only.

The above mentioned examples also refute the myth that all the important things in local politics are determined from above by parliament. In another area legislators on the national level either overlook the opinion of the public and local politicians or try to oppose them actively. In short, by changing the electoral law legislators try to make it more difficult for independent candidates and their associations to gain access to mandates. They would prefer to see a candidate from a political party to be in their place. Despite this fact support for "the independent" (especially for The Association of the Independent Candidates) is on the rise in municipal elections (see Outlý 2003, Kostelecký 2004).

Due to legislative changes the electoral party (which decides the order of candidates on their list) gains more significance at the expense of the voter (who elects concrete candidates). The Czech election system favours the number of votes gained for the electoral party, not for the candidate (Balík 2004). For example, in town F. 99 votes were sufficient for the Republican Party representative to be elected in 1998. However, not even 480 votes gained by an independent candidate were sufficient. Such a system is difficult to be understood by a layman who compares the results of concrete candidates. This easily leads to disillusion.

### **Political Parties: Yes or No?**

When researchers asked the first generation of freely elected councillors what personal qualities councillors should have, party membership was ranked very low. Rejection of "party membership" was understandable given the immediate past (Baldersheim, Illner 1996). Moreover, in the Czech Republic most of the interviewed were elected for the non-political movement Civic Forum. Notwithstanding the support given to it by President Vaclav Havel, the movement soon disintegrated. Havel's "non-political politics" came into conflict with the conception of party politics symbolised by the then Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus. This conception quickly spread nationwide (see Havel, Klaus, Pithart 1996). "The notion of 'non-political politics,' although originating in urban intellectual circles, chimed with social attitudes prevalent in rural or small town communities, suspicious of all political ideologies and convinced that local government is an essentially 'non-(party)political' affair" Smith assessed the situation (2003: 43). The research on mayors of towns and villages made by the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic in 1997 (see Vajdová 1997, Illner 2001) confirmed his view. The opinions were the same as in 1991.

Table 5

Mayor's evaluation of desirable qualities of local councillors  
(Percentage answering "very important" and "important")

	1991	1997
Good morals	97.0	97.3
Good local knowledge	92.3	94.6
Party membership	8.7	10.3
Religious belief	3.3	5.9

Sources: Local Democracy and Innovation I, 1991; Mayors in seventh year of local government, 1997 (Illner 2001).

Nowadays representatives of self-governing bodies define themselves against "big" politics or, as they like to put it, politicking. The politics of political parties is a matter of parliament and big cities. Local politicians should not enforce the interests of their parties but of the whole municipality. Are these authentic declarations made by the supporters of the "non-political politics" or proclamations of the current council leaders who don't want to be disturbed by the opposition? This is not easy to decide. In small municipalities it is usually only the mayor who makes his living by local politics. Therefore, in the long run, it is not easy to work in opposition at local level. Actually, I found signs of moving towards bigger politicisation in my sample of municipalities. In the course of time there has been a decreasing number of municipalities where all electoral parties represented in the council participate in setting up the board. On the other hand, there is a growing number of municipalities where the board is composed of the minimum winning coalition.

Table 6

Slowly increasing politicisation of municipal councils

		1990	1994	1998	2002
One party majority in the council		12	9	11	12
Composition of boards	Surplus majority coalition*	6	5	4	3
	Minimum winning coalition	1	2	3	5
	Minority coalition	0	0	1	1

\* All election parties participate in the board.



However, a more common situation is when only one electoral party gains most mandates in elections. It is up to this party whether it chooses to occupy the posts in the municipal executive bodies or whether it will create a surplus majority coalition. Ideological differences of political parties do not prevent them from cooperation at local level. Greater importance is put on the assessment of the concrete representative.

The majority of representatives of small municipalities can also imagine self-government without political parties. According to the already cited research on mayors, the percentage of 'yes' replies to the statement "The democratic self-government in this town/village would also work well without political parties" decreased with the growing size of the town. Changes in opinion in favour of political parties are apparent with mayors of towns with over 10,000 inhabitants. This is partly due to the fact that mayors of bigger municipalities are usually themselves members of a political party.

Table 7

Democratic local government in our municipality without political parties?  
(Column percentage, rounded; non-answers excluded)

Municipality size	< 2000	2-5000	5-10,000	> 10,000
Consent	73	61	53	34
Neutral	7	9	13	21
Dissent	20	30	34	45
Number of resp.	55	220	91	87

What is the advantage of being a member of a political party for a local politician? I asked the mayor of the municipality Ky. about her reasons for joining the Civic Democratic Party. Despite having joined the party, she remained the leader of the local Association of Independents although some people in the party reproached her with it. Some people she wanted to have on the electoral list would not stand as candidates for a political party.

I am a non-party woman by disposition who finds it odd to be answerable to some "party discipline," I rely mainly on common sense. But on the other hand, I am also very strongly rightwing. I think everybody should be responsible for his own life and make a big effort... In discussions with my colleagues with similar orientation I realised that we are already over forty, it's parliamentary democracy in our country and that to push a law or new things through must largely be done via par-

ties... However, the most important reason were contacts with Mr. XY, a member of parliament, who represents the district Z. This member of parliament has done a lot for our poor region and has been really doing more than anyone else in the past.

Some mayors consider party membership of a local politician as harmful, others see non-membership as an advantage. Especially when trust in parliament and political parties is low, party membership can damage the reputation of a local politician. On the other hand, contacts with regional or parliamentary politicians make access to sources of investments easier. In a situation when the degree of personalisation of local politics is high, party membership is only one of many characteristics that can decide whether the local politician is acceptable to the citizens. Entering politics, which is always 'dirty,' will not help an unpopular person. An esteemed person proves the usefulness of party membership by his ability to make use of acquired contacts.

### **Where Have All the Children Gone?**

On a personal level I will restrict myself to the heads of self-government – mayors. Only two pre-November national committee chairmen “survived” the period of the local revolution in my sample. The others usually led the municipality for one or two electoral periods but in the course of time most of them left the post of mayor. Some were beaten in elections, others didn't stand as candidates again because they devoted themselves to some other work or retired. The stories of three mayors show how varied the changes of local elites are.

### **The Evil Child of Revolution and the Comeback of a Pre-November Cadre**

Mr. Red<sup>4</sup> worked on the national committee management in a municipality of eight hundred inhabitants since he was young until the elections in 1990. In his time the national committee had thirty members and other co-operators, in all approximately every tenth inhabitant in the village. When the local Civic Forum was established at the end of 1989, it tried in vain to remove Mr. Red from the post of the national committee chairman. He had support. However, he refused to stand as a candidate in elections because “the new people” slung mud at everything. “We sulked” he remembers fifteen years later. In the end the Communist Party made a list of candidates

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<sup>4</sup> All names in the text are nicknames.

half of whom were the wives of the former national committee representatives. However, Civic Forum didn't manage to beat this "weak" association.

The local Civic Forum cell was an evil child of the revolution. Local people didn't trust one of the Civic Forum representatives in particular although he was already politically active around 1968. He had the reputation of being a man only interested in his own career.<sup>5</sup> People willing to enter local politics but not under the heading of Civic Forum (or of its successor Civic Democratic Party) or the Communist Party, prefer to stand as independent candidates in this municipality. But the power of the communists grew from one election to the next. Gradually they won a third, a half and in the last election two thirds of the mandates. Mr. Red "came back" as mayor in 1994 and will hold the post until he retires. He is afraid that in the next elections his party will not have any rival. He admits that the system of national committees wasn't democratic but according to him it worked better than the current self-government. In the past people were gradually trained for a certain post.

### **When a Child of the Revolution is not Intimidated by a First Failure**

Mrs. Merta moved to her husband's birthplace, a village of about 1000 inhabitants, from the smoky Northern Bohemia. Both of them got jobs in the local agricultural cooperative. Mr. Merta was asked to work on the national committee. After November 1989 the Mertas together with their friends in Civic Forum (who also moved from Northern Bohemia) "made revolution." They managed to get the chairman in the agricultural cooperative replaced but the old residents would not accept them. Mr. Merta expected to become mayor. The Civic Forum and the Green Party coalition won the elections but Mr. Merta was not elected to the council. The Mertas started their own business but did not shun local politics. They were there when the local branch of the Civic Democratic Party was founded.

The first mayor left after two years for a position, which was professionally and financially better for him. The second became unhappily entangled in a financial scandal when he – in the name of the municipality – signed a guarantee for credit given to a private company, which didn't pay it back. In a situation where the interest in the post of mayor was minimal, Mrs. Merta became mayor although she, like her husband didn't gain sufficient support from the citizens in elections. She joined the council as the first substitute for a candidate who renounced the mandate. Two other electoral parties got the posts of her deputies. If they had proceeded to-

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<sup>5</sup> He obtained the lowest number of votes in two municipal elections.

gether they could have removed the mayor from office at any time but this never happened. Mrs. Merta gradually managed to gain investments for the municipality and to stimulate cultural life. Thanks to this the municipality became known in the region where the mayor represents the village. In the following elections Mrs. Merta overcame the stigma of a newcomer to the village and won without a problem. After that she was repeatedly successful in regional elections. The regional press quoted the words of a successful local politician: "I will be the mayor as long as the citizens want me to be... Into Parliament? On no account, I don't have the disposition for that."

### **Mayors Karvach and Klocman – Calling of Revolutionary Time and Communist Upside Down**

After November 1989 Mr Karvach actively participated in the Civic Forum in the cooperative outside P. where he was a junior manager. At the time when he could utilise former political discrimination in his professional career Mr Karvach listened to the new President Havel who appealed to the people to participate in politics. "That speech of the President made me decide, ok, I went for it... I cannot run away from it in these provisional times" Mr Karvach said in an interview in 1997. He perceived the mayor's function as a service to citizens. Like many mayors in the Czech Republic he preferred high investment into the modernisation of infrastructure of the town. The Karvach's town hall continued in 'the strategy of building construction,' inherited from the former communist leaders, which was probably the reason for the communists' supporting Karvach in 1994 when a group of businessmen dissatisfied with the town hall policy formed the Association of Independent Candidates. Difficult times for Mr Karvach culminated in 1998 when the main responsibility for the town's growing indebtedness was ascribed to him.

At the end of the 1980s, Mr Klocman became director of the biggest plant in P. and this made him one of the most powerful men in the town. After 1989 he was forced by the factory Civic Forum to move to another plant outside P. where his position weakened. At the same time, he gradually moved into private business. The economic outcome of his business projects was ambiguous. While Mr Klocman sought to use his weak ties out of P., the strong ones caused problems to his business, particularly the firms dependent on the local market. On the other hand, there was a small group of younger people who opposed Mr Karvach but valued Klocman's competence, experience and connections more than his communist past. With these people Mr Klocman persuaded the local cell of the Communist Party to grant them the top positions on the party's list of candidates. After that a strong but unpopular Mr Klocman encountered Mr Karvach in the local

elections of 1998. Karvach's party list obtained a narrow majority of seats in the local council, nevertheless he was beaten by Mr Klocman in a secret ballot for mayor in an extremely dramatic first meeting of the council. Mr Karvach was embittered due to the betrayal and the Communist Party candidate Klocman won as if the situation of 1990 had turned upside down. Members of the Communist Party sacrificed their ideas to election victory. The young independent candidate on the Communist Party list commented on the new situation: "They told us that we are leftist but we will start to do really right-wing, liberal politics, which is social where it is essential." Mr Klocman gradually broadened his political activities. He was twice elected to the regional council on the Communist Party list but failed in the Senate election.

### **Conclusion**

The local revolution in small towns and villages is over. After the first free elections in 1990 renewed local governments were established. Councilors are relatively free to decide if local power is concentrated in the mayor's hands or his/her authority is limited by the existence of the municipal board. A concrete set of representative and executive bodies are influenced by a diminishing pool of candidates and the disinterest of citizens to become candidates.

From the political point of view 'non-political politics' still have a relevance to local democracy, especially in rural municipalities (Smith 2003). Local elites quite successfully face parliamentary political forces which try to interfere in local politics. On the local level ideological differences of parties they represent don't prevent them from cooperation. However, changes in composition of some boards (towards minimum winning coalitions) are signs of stronger politicisation. Regional elections also proved to be a challenge for a number of local politicians. Quite a lot of mayors of small municipalities were successful in these, mostly on the lists of national political parties.

Personally local elites stabilised themselves. Speedy changes happen exceptionally. The first post-revolutionary teams of local politicians slowly leave the town hall. They are not always successful in finding the right person who could replace them. "Incomers" come to the fore in a number of municipalities. However this "imported elite" (Surazska 1996) has to gain respect with the voters by public activity, e.g. in local cultural life. As for the future, those municipalities are endangered where the disinterest of citizens in solving local matters exceeds the critical limit, i.e. the ability to fill the posts of the self-governing bodies.

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