

POLITICS AND INSTITUTIONS

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The Decline of Political Party Elite

Abstract: In this article, the author presents a claim that, in parallel to the end of mass parties, it is possible to observe the progressing decline of elites within political parties. This phenomenon manifests itself on the following three levels: 1) a theoretical level—less and less attention is paid to elites in the theory of political parties as their place is being taken over by other approaches, in particular leadership theory; 2) a terminological level—the notion of elites is being removed from analyses devoted to political parties and supplanted by other terms such as “leaders.” They are sometimes considered as the synonyms of the word “elite”; 3) a factual level—there are strong reasons to presume that the decline in the importance of elites within political parties is an objective phenomenon related to the general revaluations taking place in contemporary political parties. Such revaluations cause changes in the distribution of power within political parties—party leaders and narrow groups of decision makers gain in importance at the expense of elites.

Keywords: political parties, elites, leadership, elite decline, power distribution within political parties

Introduction

For about three decades we have witnessed the processes of radical transformations of political parties; there is also no lack of opinions about their deep crisis. These phenomena have persuaded researcher to focus their attention particularly on the mechanisms of power distribution in parties. The main trend in such research applies to party leadership (Hine 1996; Kenig 2009; Loxbo 2011; Cross 2013; Costa Lobo 2014). For some reasons, analyses of party elites are present in the research to a very limited degree. Even if formal analyses are devoted to “party elites,” this term is usually regarded as synonymous to “leadership” (Luther, Deschouwer 1999). It looks as if the theory of political parties forgot about elites. Potentially, it leads to very serious consequences for comprehensive research into political parties, reducing the possibilities of understanding parties’ operating mechanisms and the distribution of power within them. At the same time this raises the question whether the observable decline of interest in party elites is of a theoretical nature only or whether it reflects the process of party elite decline in the realities of party politics. Avoiding disputes about definitions, for operational purposes, we assume that a party elite is a wider decision-making circle held together by a community of values, interests, and goals. Such a wider group comprises usually members of collective executive bodies, members of a parliamentary group (if a party is present in parliament), members of the government (if a party is in power). The size of a party elite depends on the size of a party and its status (a ruling party, a parliamentary party, an extra-parliamentary party).

The analysis included in this article has the following three dimensions:

- 1) a theoretical dimension analysing the evolution of “elites” (within the meaning of an “elite theory”) within development models of political parties;
- 2) a notional dimension analysing “elites” as a linguistic category in selected leading research works representing approaches to particular political party models;
- 3) a factual dimension analysing factors which potentially may determine a decrease in the importance of party elites in the practice of politics.

It has been assumed that the process of party elite decline may occur in these three dimensions, which do not have to condition one another. Therefore, party elite decline in one dimension may occur without any similar symptoms in the other dimensions.

This analysis leads to the formulation of the following three main claims:

1. Within the theory of political parties, the theory of elites is used to a very small degree. Observable since the very beginning of research into elites (coinciding with the period of mass parties), this phenomenon has intensified with time. The process of eliminating elites as a theoretical category from research into political parties is clearly visible. What is particularly striking is the domination of contemporary research by the perspective of leadership, which, being based on the antinomy of a leader and followers, does “not see” elites.

2. The removal of elites from research into political parties is also of a notional character. In academic discussions there appear terms which replace the notion of “elite.” “Elite” is the most frequently substituted with “leaders,” which is considered as a synonym for elites. The consequence is a terminological chaos in which it is difficult to ascertain whether the use of particular notions is based on some theoretical foundations or whether such notions are used as labels in their popular, rather than theoretical, meanings.

3. Although the existing detailed analyses devoted to political parties disregard party elites, they provide very strong circumstantial evidence indicating that the decline of elites within political parties is an objective phenomenon. As such analyses do not focus on party elites, an authoritative confirmation of this phenomenon requires additional research focusing on elites. It is necessary the more so that changes taking place within elites—for both theoretical and terminological reasons—are not perceivable at first glance.

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The key question concerning the consequences of party elite decline in the both theoretical and factual dimensions remains unanswered. This issue goes beyond the objectives of this article. It requires thorough and separate research, hence the conclusions include only general recommendations.

The Theoretical Level

This part of the article contains an analysis of the position and importance of elites in particular party models presented in a development sequence. Probably the most frequently quoted (see: [Katz, Mair 1995: 18](#); [Mair 1997: 110](#); [Krouwel 2006: 250](#); [Mack 2010: 36–](#)

–37; Ignazi 2017) sequence of this type is the one based on the following—four models: 1) an elite party model; 2) a mass party model; 3) a catch-all party model; 4) a cartel party model. Within this general system, the analysis includes also an electoral-professional party (within the catch-all party model) and a business-firm party (within the cartel party model). The main advantage of this model is its clarity. Although it does not lack critics who question especially the cartel party model as the last stage of political parties' development, I omit such controversies because they are not significant for the findings of this article. If we were to adopt other more complex typologies (e.g. Von Beyme 1985: 28; Gunther, Diamond 2003: 176–177), the conclusions resulting from this analysis would also be fully confirmed.

Elite Party

An elite party is an original and historical form of a party dominated by elites. A political elite is based on a societal elite, hence the appearance of the first political parties is related to activities of a narrow circle of people enjoying full voting rights. These are elitist parties in which, to misquote Lincoln, power is “of the elite, by the elite, for the elite.” The elite party model is regarded as characteristic for the primary stage in the development of political parties in the 19th century (Ostrogorski 1902: 210).

Mass Party

The extension of universal suffrage and the dynamic growth of political parties' membership base led to the institutionalisation of a party elite. It ceases to be a political reflection of the highest social strata. In consequence, the elite is forced to acquire legitimisation and to have it confirmed, which means the limitation of its previously omnipotent position. Large and homogeneous membership provides a possibility of controlling the elite effectively and influencing its composition and decision making processes (Mair 1997: 113). Thus in this model, elites become to a larger degree a personal and programme-based emanation of rank and file members as well as of the relatively coherent electorate shaped by traditional cleavages. One of the consequences is a “closer and more faithful contact between the mass of the people and their ruling elites” (Duverger 1963: 427).

Furthermore, researchers emphasise essential factors limiting the possibility of exercising real control over elites by ordinary party members. Michels claims that a socially legitimised party elite transforms quickly into a closed group pursuing primarily their own interests (Michels 1949: 32). McKenzie and Duverger have developed this approach creatively. McKenzie, who does not use the term “elite” at all, advances the thesis of the intensifying domination of parliamentary parties over mass organisations. What is very important is that McKenzie perceives also the phenomenon of “decline of the independent member of parliament” (McKenzie 1955: 583, 585). Duverger also divides a party elite into groups; he distinguishes “teams of leaders” and “inner core.” The first category constitutes elite in the pluralist sense: “which are not united by any personal attachment to a dominant chief: the distinctive feature of the team is the comparative equal-

ity that rules among its members.” On the other hand, “inner core” constitutes an oligarchic part of elite gathered around a chief: “small group which makes use of close personal solidarity as a means of establishing and retaining its influence.” (Duverger 1963: 152).

To sum up, in the model of mass parties, rank and file party members and the active electorate gain in strength at the expense of the weaker position and role of elites; however, the factual possibilities of controlling the activities of elites remain limited. Analysing the case of the United Kingdom, McKenzie emphasises that it is party leaders who benefit from the weakening of a party elite (party in Parliament).

Catch-all Party

Within the catch-all party, the ideological connection between the class electorate and political parties is at first disturbed and eventually broken. The role and position of elites undergo considerable changes. Kirchheimer, who formulated the concept of catch-all parties, indicates that one of its features is “further strengthening of a top leadership group...” (1990: 58). If what we deal with here is the identification of elites with “leadership groups,” then this strengthening applies in fact to elites. But if Kirchheimer intentionally gives up using the term “elite” and resorts to “leadership groups” or “group of leaders,” it may indicate that what he has in mind is a narrower or different circle of party decision-makers which does not meet the criteria of the traditional notion of “elite.” André Krouwel, an expert on Kirchheimer’s works, observes that “erosion of formal control and the institutional disconnection between the leadership strata and the population at large results in the concentration of power in the hands of popular leaders” (Krouwel 2003: 32). Thus Kirchheimer was able to perceive a process which acquired a clear shape and acceptance of academics three decades later: the personalisation of a popular leader, which is a feature of leadership, but not of elites.

We do not have similar doubts with respect to the approach adopted by Panebianco, Sartori and von Beyme. Panebianco intentionally moves away from the notion of elite and opts for “dominant coalition.” Deeply rooted in the Italian tradition of research into elites, Panebianco acknowledges that the role and identity of party elites has weakened to such an extent that the very theoretical category has become problematic (1988: 37). Sartori ([1976] 2005) completely rejects analyses of elites as an important category related to political parties. “Elite” appears sporadically, but only as a term. In the theoretical dimension, he focuses on the notion of “faction” as “a specific power group.” For Sartori, the internal diversification and dispersion of power circles within a party (low versus high fractionalism) becomes one of the key features of democratic parties (66–67; 93). In von Beyme’s research, elites in fact disappear from all distinguished party types (mass-based parties, ethnicity-based parties, electoralist parties, and movement parties) and become replaced by “leader.” The last two types, i.e. electoralist and movement parties, are completely leadership parties in which there is no space left for elites (1985: 28, 30). The same phenomenon can be observed in Harmel and Janda (1982). They have eliminated the notion of “elite” almost completely, replacing it with the notion of “leaders.”

Cartel Party

Finally, in the cartel party, which is the last stage in the party development process, the role and position of elites are perceived ambiguously and sometimes even contradictorily. Parties become dominated by professional politicians, while “Stratarchy; mutual autonomy” is what characterises the relationship between “ordinary members” and elites (Katz, Mair 1995: 18; Mack 2010: 36–7). In this approach, elites are replaced by “party in public office.” This category comprises “the party organization in government and in parliament” (p. 123), i.e. more or less what traditionally has been referred to as elite. This category dominates completely in a party. The expression “mutual autonomy” applied to relationships between members and elites suggests a certain degree of empowerment of members against elites as compared to their positions in the catch-all party model. The conclusions drawn by Katz and Mair move in the opposite direction: they state that leadership “autonomy is enhanced, since an atomized membership is less likely to provide the basis for mobilization of challenges” (p. 21). Of key importance is the fact that in the approach adopted by Katz and Mair, individual leaders are not differentiated from elites; these categories are perceived in combination as elites or, more frequently, as leaders or “party in public office.”

In the model of business-firm parties proposed by Hopkin and Paolucci, elites are replaced in their roles and functions by a leader or a counterpart of a boss or manager in business organisations (1999: 307–339). The authors used the word “elite” just twice, while the word “leadership” and its derivatives appear 80 times. Thus the business-firm party model represents parties with a leadership, charismatic or even managerial character. What conclusions can be drawn from these two references to elites? Firstly, “top heavy parties, consisting of little more than a parliamentary elite and a skeletal territorial structure...” (p. 328). Therefore, elites exist “physically.” However, the absence of structures indicates that it is to a considerable extent the product of the leader’s will rather than the process of bottom-up selection and representation. Secondly, elite members are totally dependent on the leader; independent or rebellious elite members are expelled: “But these ‘outsiders’ were denied effective voice within the party.” (Hopkin, Paolucci 1999: 329).

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Summing up this part of the analysis, it should be stated that the declining importance of party elites is perceived implicitly by the theoreticians of political parties and manifests itself clearly in comparisons of the particular models occurring within the process of political party development. It does not change the fact that the theory of political parties does not contain any explicitly articulated thesis about the decline of party elites. Unfortunately, in some cases ambiguities which appear to be of a linguistic rather than theoretical nature cause a situation in which the final message which appears in the characterisation of the cartel party model may be opposite, implying a growing importance of elites in political party structures when, in fact, it is leaders whose dominant position is strengthening (see: Katz, Mair 1995).

The Notional Level

Terminology should constitute a natural emanation of a particular theory. Unfortunately, it is not always so in the case of theories advanced by elites, and particularly by party elites. Even among recognized authors analysing elites, it is very common to use notions characteristic of other theories (primarily the theory of leadership) such as leaders, a group of leaders or a party in office. The objective of this part is to identify the main theoreticians of political parties who, while introducing new terminology, treat it as an emanation of a change in the theoretical paradigm (e.g. the leader's importance increasing at the cost of elites), and those who simply equate the two theories (of elites and leadership) with one another.

Researchers' unwillingness to use the category of "elite" appears to have its roots in the negative connotations accumulated around this category. As a matter of fact, it has become dominated by elitist approaches which treat "elite" as a category of a group which is closed, self-replicating and acting in its own interest. And although the notion of "elite" has acquired a scientifically neutral meaning, the aforementioned negative heritage of this term continues to appear in the scholarly narration (Zuba 2016).

In the course of the analysis of the position and role of elites in political parties there appears a serious problem. The gist of the problem is that researchers very rarely perceive "an elite as an elite." They frequently refer to other terminological categories. The used terms are seldom accurate; furthermore, they are almost never compatible with generally accepted definitions of particular words. Additionally, it is difficult to decide whether, in particular cases, what happens is a change in theoretical categories or a change in used terms.

This type of terminological vagueness is fully understandable in studies published at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when the theory of political elites was still in its budding stage. Ostrogorski (1902) applies the term "elite" to a social elite; with respect to politics (parliament), he uses such terms as "leaders," "ruling class," "clique" or "wire-pullers." The last term is also used frequently by Bryce, when he describes elites in American parties ([1888] 1995). Belloc and Chesterton (1911) do not use the term "elite" at all; they limit themselves to "leaders" and "clique." It should be stressed once more that at that stage in the development of the theory of political parties, when research into elites was only beginning and there were no foundations for any leadership theory, such terminological latitude was understandable. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, irrespective of what words they used, the researchers active in that period meant what we nowadays understand as elite.

But the development of mass parties would change this situation, especially in view of the fact that it occurred at the time when the categories of "elite" and "leadership" were being theorised. Interestingly, Michels, considered as one of the classics of the theory of elites, very rarely uses the notion of "elite." In the English publication of Michels' work the term "elite" (and its derivatives) appeared only 16 times, making references to both Mosca's and Pareto's works. The word "leadership" (and derivatives) appeared in Michels' work (1949) over 800 times. The theory of leadership was then in its infancy; therefore, in this case, there is no doubt that, for Michels, "leaders" and "elites" were synonymous. We can observe the same tendency in Duverger, who studied political parties when the

theory of elites had already been well established. Although he uses the term “elite” much more frequently than Michels, he uses it completely interchangeably with “leaders”: “To recognize two elements within a group of human beings, the members and the leaders, those who obey and those who command, those who govern and those who are governed—the ‘gouvernants’ and the ‘gouvernés’...” (1963: 4).

The transition to catch-all parties, i.e. the period when the notions of “leadership” and “elite” acquired their separate semantic ranges, by no means results in a clarified situation with respect to political parties. In some cases (von Beyme) there are no indications whether the author treats the notions of “elite” and “leaders” as synonyms or intentionally replaces the former with the latter, referring implicitly to their theoretical resources. What creates a problem is von Beyme’s use of the synthesised term “elite leadership” (1985: 232). In other cases (Kirchheimer) there are reasons to presume that the change of the notions is intentional; thus what we are confronted with is not a linguistic phenomenon only. On the other hand, as it has been indicated above, the case of Panebianco and Sartori represents an obvious theoretical, and not linguistic, replacement of the notions, although also these researchers use the term “leaders” in its common sense which we ascribe to “elite” (Panebianco 1988: 37).

This shift in importance towards the category of “leadership” becomes evident in the analyses of the cartel party model. This happens, however, in the conditions of the intensifying terminological chaos. Katz and Mair write: “Parties are groups of leaders who compete for the next election for government performance,” but besides “groups of leaders,” they also use the category of “teams of leaders.” (Katz, Mair 1995: 14, 21). It can be assumed that “group of leaders” is semantically close to “elite”; on the other hand, it is “party in public office” (“the party organization in government and in parliament”) (Mair 1997: 123) that carries the meaning which is the closest to the traditionally defined “party elite.”

Concluding, it should be stated that analyses of political parties with respect to their elites are accompanied by enormous terminological inconsistencies. In some cases, this is the result of confusing theoretical and notional categories; in others, such inconsistencies are caused by linguistic nonchalance. Hardly ever (Panebianco) does a change in notional categories constitute a clear reflection of the adopted theoretical concepts. In the large majority of cases, we have to deal with considerable latitude in the use of the old notions and the introduction of new ones. Since the very beginning of research into political parties the most surprising tendency was the replacement of the notion of “elite” with the term “leaders” and the use of both words as synonyms.

Party Politics Changes and Elite Decline

There are many indications that the decline of elites manifests itself not only in the removal of elites from the theories of political parties or, the more so, from the language of the theories of political parties. There is strong circumstantial evidence indicating the factual decline in the importance of elites in contemporary political organisations. Among the most significant factors determining this process, we can distinguish deideologization and partisan dealignment, personalisation and mediatization, greater inclusivity in the se-

lection of party authorities, professionalisation and a fall in the number of rank and file party members. This analysis does not discuss these concepts, phenomena and tendencies as they are well presented in the literature on the subject. All these factors play an increasing important role in the shaping of parties' images; depending on one another, they create a climate in which the role of party elites is being systematically and strongly limited. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the aforementioned analyses disregard the impact of these factors on the status and condition of elites. This should not be surprising in light of the very limited interest of political scholars in party elites.

These processes can be regarded as a phenomenon common in the party systems of contemporary democracies. It should be emphasized, however, that they do not manifest themselves with the same dynamics. Political parties in the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are a case in point. Competitive party systems came into being in these states in the period when changes in the party systems of consolidated democracies became plainly evident. This was also the reason for political parties in the CEE states to enter, as it were, at the beginning of their existence, the phase of critical changes such as personalization, a leadership model of party management (Tavits 2013: 137), a low membership (Millard 2004: 71), a weak affiliation with the electorate (Kitschelt, Mansfeldowa, Markowski, Toka 1999: 198; Jasiewicz 2007: 101), or a party's orientation towards office-seeking. Among these changes, it is only de-ideologization that is proceeding considerably more slowly in some CEE countries (particularly in Poland). The specific character of party systems in these countries was determined to a considerable extent by the top-down model followed in their establishment in consequence of which they were becoming the emanation of the will of a narrow group of politicians, and quite frequently just one leader.

Deideologization, Partisan Realignment and Dealignment

Party deideologization is the result of social changes, in particular the disappearance of the class structure, resulting from modernisation processes (Dalton, Wattenberg 2000: 11). In their consequence there occur changes in party identifications, partisan realignment and dealignment as well as ideological and political propositions put forward by political parties. The class rootedness of parties caused a situation of direct relationships among the specific needs of the electorate, representatives (elites), a programme and its ideological superstructure (Mair 1997: 47). In the sequence of electorate-ideology-politics, elites fulfilled the fundamental role of representatives (the chosen ones), interpreters, and guardians of ideological content. The appearance of catch-all parties, in particular cartel parties, is, on the one hand, the effect of such changes, and on the other hand, a factor that strengthens and consolidates such changes (Caramani 2004: 163). Any ideological superstructure becomes redundant. It remains a mere label, an individual sign of historical continuity highlighting the existence of a particular sphere of ideals.

In principle, deideologization changes the integration plane of the party elite and undermines its traditionally developed functions. Even if it was treated instrumentally, ideology performed functions of key importance for partisan identity and activities. This, in turn, ensured for the members of elites the unique role of "the priest of ideology." Deideologization has also a fundamental impact on the character of an elite's cohesion. At the same time

there is no change in its “operational cohesion” manifesting itself in, for example, ballots. This, however, is enforced cohesion (discipline) which has replaced previous spontaneous cohesion resulting from the internal programme- and ideology-based identity of a group (Heidar, Koole 2000b: 259). Even if it did not hold a group more strongly than it is the case nowadays, such an axiological identity integrated a group quite differently from the existence of common targets and individually determined interests (offices).

Personalisation and Mediatisation

Although both phenomena (personalisation and mediatisation) are not identical, they influence one another so much that they are frequently analysed together. These processes appeared with full power at the stage of catch-all parties, but in the period of cartel parties they adopted an almost radical image determining the nature of party politics (Kaase 1994; Campus 2010; Garzia 2014).

Personalisation and mediatisation determine the decline of party elites because they strengthen these people within a party who “have a face,” i.e. the leader and a small circle of the main politicians. The leader becomes one of the main resources of the party, attracting the attention of the media and through the media, the attention of voters (Mughan 2000: 74; Poguntke, Webb 2005). In this context, it is possible to make a reference to relationships between a party and the electorate perceived in terms of brand names (Grynaviski 2010: 28–29). The result of personalisation and mediatisation is that more and more frequently the key to success in party politics is in the hands of one person or a few people capable of attracting the attention of the media and the public opinion as well as transforming the latter into the electorate. Of no less importance is the fact that, in the increasingly dynamic environment, flexibility and the speed of decision making become fundamental advantages (Mair, Müller, Plasser, 2004: 266); in this respect, elites which require the skills of deliberation and compromise lose decidedly in confrontation with one-person leadership.

Democratisation of Party Authorities Election Procedures

Emerging in contemporary party politics and consisting in the broadening of groups of people participating in the selection of party authorities (selectorate), the democratisation trend is parties’ reaction to the legitimisation and membership crisis (Scarrow, Webb, Farrell 2000; Bille 2001; Hazan 2002; Hazan, Voerman 2006; Hazan, Rahat 2010; Cross 2013).

The democratisation of the leader election process results in a serious reduction of the elites’ influence on the election of the leader. It is regular party members or some other groups that become empowered in this respect. The hierarchical type of creating party authorities is distorted and eventually replaced by a bridge connecting the lowest level (electorate, ordinary members) and the highest level (leader) of the party structure. This change is the most advantageous for the individual leader, who, acquiring popular legitimisation, becomes emancipated from the influence of the elite. The leader’s position strengthens additionally through the fact that the amorphous electorate or party members as a whole are not able to control the leader effectively (Kenig 2009; Rachat 2013: 148; von dem Berge, Poguntke 2017: 151).

Professionalisation of Parties

Borchert identifies three determinants of the party professionalisation process: 1) Increasing income from political activities being the only source of livelihood for politicians; 2) Increasing stability in the holding of political offices; 3) Increasing opportunities for personal careers in politics (Borchert 2003: 7–8; see: Heidar, Koole 2000: 10). The intensifying domination of “career politicians” is additionally conditioned by dealignment processes and changes in candidate selection processes (Norris 1995). Nowadays professionals are no longer what they used to be in the 1980s, i.e. external actors (Panebianco 1988: 230). In the elite member election process, more and more preference is given to people possessing skills and know-how necessary first of all for winning elections. Thus we deal with a different type of professionalisation at the stage of cartel parties. Professionals are no longer outsiders or, as it were, mercenaries; they become essential elements of political parties and enter their elites (Hine 1996: 137).

The impact of professionalisation on the weakening position of elites is obvious. In Panebianco, it is reflected in his replacement of “elite” with “dominant coalition.” Also in decision making processes, the leader was relying more and more on experts from outside the party at the expenses of his own parliamentary, and quite frequently governmental, powerbase, which was also becoming more and more dependent on the knowledge and skills of external experts (Panebianco 1988). The professionalisation of party elites contributed to a decisive change in their character and cohesion. In the middle of the 1980s von Beyme wrote about two types of politicians: “amateurs and professionals” (Von Beyme 1985: 167). It appears very much that the reduction in the number of the former and the domination of the latter determine the falling level of elite autonomy. A party dominated by “professionals” resembles a corporation, also with respect to the division of roles, subordination, reward systems; the findings of Hopkin and Paolucci concerning business-firm parties are particularly significant. The interpretations of parties as brand names are of a similar character. Potential candidates for elite members first of all have to convince the party leadership that they will be effective in conducting the “political business” under the party’s common signboard (Grynawski 2010: 28–29).

Falling Membership in Political Parties

The dynamic fall in membership of contemporary political parties is well documented. Since the 1980s, in the 13 established democracies in Western Europe, the average fall in party membership has been close to 43 percent, in two countries (United Kingdom, Norway) exceeding 60 percent (Scarrow 2000: 90; Mair, van Biezen 2001; van Biezen, Mair, Poguntke 2012).

The consequences of such a dynamic fall in political party membership for the status and condition of elites are not unambiguous. Nominally, elites should benefit because the degree of their autonomy increases when the weak structures of the grassroots party are not able to control them effectively. On the other hand, the elites lose their basic advantage, i.e. the legitimising support of rank and file members in their relations with the leader and the narrow “inner circle.” The consequence of the falling party membership is the situation

in which both the elites and the leader have lost a considerable part of the transmission belt (the mobilisation function) in their relationships with the electorate. These relationships are becoming necessarily direct, which is good for the leader and bad for the elites. It has already been mentioned that, in the conditions of the intensifying mediatisation and personalisation of politics, it is the leader who remains the party's main advantage in its relationships with the electorate. For the poorly informed electorate (unlike the well informed rank and file party members in the past), elites become a group of anonymous politicians.

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Considered together, all these factors lead to essential revaluations of the distribution of power within parties. To a considerable degree, power is a zero-sum game, hence, if somebody acquires a greater share in power, it happens at the expense of their competitors. However, there are differences of opinions on who wins and who loses.

With respect to the other issue of qualitative changes within elites, it can be said that nowadays elites are aideological groups deprived of any unifying ethos, frequently even without a programme. They are groups of office seekers, strongly individualised and thus clientelistic with respect to the party leadership. They cannot count on rank and file party members as regular membership is gradually disappearing. Elites cannot count on the electorate, either because firstly, the electorate is more and more changeable, and secondly, within the process of mediatisation and personalisation, it is more and more oriented towards the leader and their opinions. Even if in some systems the electorate is focused more on issues than on leaders (Bellucci, Garzia, Lewis-Beck 2015: 281), the participation of elites in the shaping of electoral issues is much smaller than in the past and the participation of leaders has increased considerably.

In the model of mass parties, the leader was in a sense *primus inter pares* within the elite, which was the dominant force not only with respect to determining and pursuing political objectives but also because of its decisive influence on the filling of the post of the leader. A long career and party activism were conditions for holding key posts in a party (and consequently in a state) (Aberdach, Putnam, Rockman 1981). At the subsequent stages of the party development process (catch-all parties, and particularly cartel parties), the leader rises above the elite. In the growing number of parties, and not only charismatic ones, the elite becomes the "leader's team," which is becoming more and more amorphous or even more and more clientelistic in relationships with the leader. As political parties are more and more focused on "office seeking," holding an office (in parliament, government or central administration) becomes the main determinant of belonging to the elite.

Conclusions

The conducted analysis has shown a clear, but not completely consistent, sequence within which the evolution of the political party models is accompanied by the weakening of the position and role of elites. In elite parties, their position was dominant or just omnipotent. In mass parties, the role and position of elites were against strong and active members as

well as mid-level and low-level party apparatus. However, elites remained decision-making and ideological centres, not only determining political directions but also making final decisions and creating party leaders. The evolution towards catch-all parties undermined this position of elites, primarily for the benefit of external players such as professionals, spin-doctors or interest groups. Already at this stage, party leadership becomes strengthened and “peels off” of elites. The earlier relationships between elites and grass-roots parties are weakened considerably, first of all with respect to their quality. The absence of the class-based electorate redefines their position as representatives deeply rooted in their constituencies. The appearance of cartel parties disturbs the general tendency of party elite decline. Katz and Mair (1995) claim that elites, which they refer to as a “party in public office,” win the dominant position in parties, instrumentalising both regular members and the electorate. At this stage, however, we face a complete lack of the determination of mutual relationships among such categories as elites, middle-level elites, party in public office, group of leaders, leadership group, leadership, leader.

The terminological aspect of the decline of party elites makes it possible to explain why so far the true decline of the significance of party elites has not been observed and subjected to analysis. The obvious and intensifying tendency to avoid the very term “elite” may be explained by the domination of the concept of party elites by the elitist approach. A pluralistic and democratic interpretation of the theory of elites has been applied to a rather limited extent in analyses of political parties. This can be explained by the fact that the de-democratisation (oligarchisation) of party elites was much faster and went much further than the de-democratisation of elites within the whole political system. In the latter case, elites were extended with the representatives of other political actors (interest groups, social movements, civic organisations, veto player institutions). The scope of such changes in political parties was different.

Researchers in the field of political parties have tried to use other theoretical labels for political parties: “inner core” (Duverger), “dominant coalition” (Panbianco) or leaders, which has become a standard. It does not change the fact that party elites remain elites, irrespective of deep changes which elites undergo. What is more, changes in names mask the “common denominator” and continuity of this category, which causes a situation in which elites are analytically imperceptible. It is characteristic that even researchers analysing parliamentary (Heidar, Koole 2000) and governmental (Katz 1987: 2) structures, i.e. the basic “habitat of elites,” prefer to use narrower categories such as parliamentary party groups, party governance or, collectively, party in public office (Katz, Mair 1995).

The aforementioned interchangeable use of the categories of “elite” and “leaders” has very serious consequences for theoretical reception because the use of confusing terminology in sciences necessarily entails confusion in described theoretical constructs (Zuba 2016). In the basic dimension, the difference between “elite” and “leader” is such that while the former has a collective character, the latter is individual (Cross 2013: 102). Both theories are based on different antinomies: elite—masses and leader—followers; both are separate from one another and furthermore, they come from separate scientific traditions. Although they cannot be regarded as incompatible, the fact is that they are completely un-integrated. The leader’s interests and objectives do not have to coincide with those of the elite (Müller, Strøm 1999: 295).

The third part of this analysis has been devoted to objective factors which could condition the process of party elite decline in contemporary political parties. It is difficult to settle conclusively that all of the identified phenomena (deideologization, personalisation and mediatisation, increased inclusivity of party authorities election, professionalisation and falling party membership) explicitly and directly condition the phenomenon of party elite decline. It is so because researchers of these phenomena pass over their impact on party elite decline. Thus it is possible to refer to strong circumstantial evidence, but not to irrefutable proof. The acquisition of such irrefutable proof would require additional research adjusted to the continuously changing positions and roles of party elites. Changes taking place in party elites, as many things indicate, are primarily of a qualitative character; although such phenomena as professionalisation and deideologization indicate it clearly, it is difficult to ascertain that they condition party elite decline. Furthermore, the diversification of political parties causes radical differences in the status, numerical force and even functions of party elites. In principle, they will be different in the case of parties in power, opposition parties within parliament or extra-parliamentary parties. Also such factors as the organisation of party structures, a party's type or even ideological profile can condition changes in the position and character of elites.

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