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FEATURES OF MANIFESTATION OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract. Understudied aspects of political legitimacy in the contexts of these CEE countries, especially the subjects of this paper, namely Hungary, Poland, East Germany (GDR), and the Czech Republic are investigated in this study. Many of them realized political democratization mainly due to pressure from international organizations such as the European Union and the Council of Europe. In Hungary, legitimacy under Viktor Orban Fidesz government entail electoral support and conservatism and anti-immigration policies albeit undermining the democratic institutional structure. The Polish state gains its mandate from free elections or Catholic culture and civil society but it contested by the recent amendments in the judiciary made by the ruling party, Law and Justice. The GDR was pursuing a Marxist-Leninist image and policed the people and their actions, hence when the economy deteriorated, people protests and desire for freedom made the GDR to collapse following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, this has increased its democratic legitimacy after the 1989 regime with stable institutions, active civil societies, press and media freedom and EU member despite vices like corruption. This comparative investigation underlines the fact that historical, social and institutional backgrounds influence the recognition of governments in the countries of Central East Europe and concerns international interventions, the process of democratization, and internal social acceptances. Information sources include primary sources like historical documents, constitutions and international agreements; secondary sources such as academic books and articles as well as legal studies; statistical data comprising public opinion polls together with international reports.

Key words: legitimacy, Europe, government, political, human rights, state, Fidesz, Party, Post-Velvet Revolution.

Introduction. It is believed that the democratization process in Europe began to gain significant momentum after the Second World War. This democratization process is usually referred to as liberal and is often explained within the context of the Marshall Plan implemented by the United States in Western Europe, along with an anti-Soviet rhetoric. Some interpret this democratization as a kind of anti-communist inoculation. However, it cannot be claimed that this process was successfully carried out across the entire European continent. The reason for this is quite simple. After World War II, pro-communist regimes were established in Eastern Europe, forming a "mini-world" alternative to the ideology of liberal democracy supported primarily by the United States and the West.

The purpose of the research is based on the overall objective of the investigation concerning understudied aspects of political legitimacy in Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on Hungary, Poland, East Germany (GDR), and the Czech Republic. It looks at historical, social, and institutional contexts that shape government recognition and legitimacy. It also examines democratization processes within international organizations such as the EU and Council of Europe, and assesses internal factors such as cultural values and civil society. Based on the comparative models of legitimacy, the effects of legal and economic systems are analyzed in this study for their impact on political stability. The purpose of this research is to provide recommendations for increasing credibility of government and to contribute toward a universal understanding of legitimacy across various political contexts.

Literature review. This literature review synthesizes critical works exploring political legitimacy in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, focusing on Hungary, Poland, East Germany (GDR), and the Czech Republic. Kerényi and Wang (2023) examine Hungary's governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how crisis management reinforced Viktor Orbán's centralization of power while exposing limitations in democratic structures. Complementing this, Szikra (2018) provides insights into Hungary's welfare policies under Orbán, emphasizing their role in consolidating political support among select groups. These studies highlight the interplay between governance practices and political legitimacy in Hungary. In Poland, Sas (2023) analyzes the nation's legitimacy derived from Catholic culture and free elections but notes the judiciary reforms under the Law and Justice (PiS) party as a source of domestic and international contestation. Similarly, She investigates electoral participation trends, indicating fluctuations influenced by political and societal shifts. Osewska, Stala, and Bochenek (2021) delve into the relationship between religion and national culture, underscoring its enduring impact on Poland's political framework.

Studies on the GDR, such as Gallinat (2015), explore the authoritarian state's reliance on surveillance and control, while Baylis (1986) contextualizes its economic strategies. The GDR's decline and the subsequent integration into a democratic Germany, as analyzed by the European Commission (2002), which evaluates Germany's post-reunification growth. For the Czech Republic, Havlíček and Lužný (2013) focus on the interplay between religion and state, while Weszkalnys (2010) examines transformations in Berlin's cultural and political spaces as a reflection of broader democratization trends. Transparency International (2021, 2023) provides data on corruption, highlighting challenges to governance credibility despite institutional advancements.

Bozóki (2016) and Fleck (2018) present overarching analyses of rising authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland, linking these trends to broader shifts in CEE political landscapes. This body of work collectively underscores the multifaceted nature of political legitimacy in CEE countries, shaped by historical legacies, governance practices, cultural influences, and international dynamics.

Democratization and Legitimacy Challenges in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The democratization process in Central and Eastern European countries coincided with the 1980s and 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union considered a bifurcation point in this process. Symbolically, the starting point of these developments in this region of Europe is marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In general, it should be noted that at the end of the 1980s, revolutionary processes of various scales took place in Central and Eastern European countries, laying the foundation for deep socio-political and economic changes. Regardless of the scale and form, the main objectives of these revolutions in the mentioned countries were the dismantling of political and economic structures, recovery from socio-economic crises, restoration of universal mechanisms of development, abolition of totalitarian political regimes, restoration of human rights and freedoms, and the establishment of globally recognized democratic principles. Undoubtedly, the political processes in Central and Eastern European countries in the late 1980s served common objectives, although they manifested uniquely in each country. In much of the political literature, the transformations that occurred in Central and Eastern Europe are referred to as "velvet revolutions," largely because these processes, with the exception of Romania, were conducted peacefully.

The issue of legitimacy of political power emerged in Central and Eastern European countries immediately after the transformation of their political systems. In these countries aspiring to establish democratic regimes, there was a widespread adoption of constitutions modeled after the developed democracies of Western Europe (Piotr Uhma, 2023, p. 310-311). In a sense, the republican models of Western European countries became a model for democratic transformations in Central and Eastern Europe. Many experts studying this process view this transfer as technical. "These constitutions had proven their functionality and resilience and were capable of ensuring political stability. It was believed that if these constitutions could ensure legitimacy in countries with civil societies,

they could likely do so in any state aspiring to build such a society. In other words, there are certain constitutional values that exist in any democratic state governed by the rule of law, regardless of historical and cultural particularities.” Another factor that made democratization processes essential to ensure state legitimacy was the pressure from the international community. This primarily refers to the Council of Europe and the European Union. These organizations demanded that Central and Eastern European countries adopt specific constitutional standards as a prerequisite for integration into the European family” (Hartwig, 1999, p. 920). Because most of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe share similar political backgrounds, political legitimacy in the recent years has roughly the same phenotypes in most of these countries within the past century. However, the specifics of each country’s transition to democracy has left its specific signature on the political context including examples of legitimacy. For example, political legitimacy as a concept in Hungary would involve such components as history, culture, social and politics. In the context of modern Hungarian history, this question has provoked significant interest only within the past few decades in connection with shifts in the political situation in the country (Mark Pittaway, 2004).

The political legitimacy of the Hungarian government. In Hungary therefore, the source of political legitimacy can be explained as a product of a political support both internal and external electoral performance and international influence. Alone, the Fidesz government’s popularity can be seen with reference to the voter turnout; however, the government has been accused of undermining democratic principles. Some authors assume that the pattern of legitimacy in the future is to a significant extent determined by internal political factors and an external environment (András Bozóki, 2016). Fidesz Government has been dominant and enduring in the Hungary particularly after the year 2010. The Fidesz Party (Hungarian Civic Alliance) was formed in 1988 as an opposition ‘youth’ movement but change its image and operating style to reflect a more conservative and nationalist agenda its current leader Viktor Orbán deput that in the late 1990s. It assumed a more assertive position in Hungary’s politics since 2010 and has controlled all parliamentary seats since then (David Landry, 2014). Fidesz the ruling party gained parliament majority for the first time in 1998 but became victorious and formed government in 2010. In these elections the party was able to win a two thirds control in the parliament, this gave them a strong base. Since 2010, Fidesz has been controlling the government and enlarging its term of office; Its victory in the 2022 parliamentary elections gave it a fourth term. However, in 2022 elections the party once again secured a very good position with 54.13% of the vote (Fondation Robert Schuman & Helen Levy, 2010). Lately, the Fidesz government has managed several electoral campaigns, which equally boosted the party support. For the last five years, starting from 2010 to 2014, both Viktor Orbán, the PM of Hungary, and Fidesz have triumphed in every poll with a parliamentary absolute majority. Particularly these election campaigns assumed an exceptional significance for undergirding the political legitimacy of the Fidesz government. Their campaigns, as a rule, reflect the main tasks of the population and focus on the concept of national state and security, taking hold of both domestic and foreign circumstances (András Bozóki, 2016). Below is detailed information about Fidesz's most significant campaigns and their implementation methods: It is one of the first campaign centred on national identity and rejection of EU’s bureaucracy referred to as “Brussels.” Elections which was among the most successful for Fidesz was based on the campaign slogan about “national pride” in the context of the conflict with the EU. The ruling party of Viktor Orbán played on the EU’s idea as interlopers cluelessly undermining Hungary’s internal autonomy. The essence of the campaign was in calling the following three slogans: “Hungary has to remain Hungary; We don’t have to obey Brussels.” This campaign found much support among the rural and conservative to vote. It further provided hungarian voters with more reasons to turn their back on the EU and for Fidesz, it was popular with voters on the nationalist front. The great performance of Fidesz in the elections of 2018 and 2022 in particular represent the effectiveness of this approach (CIDOB Monographs, 2024).

The second one was a campaign against migration, which became the most extensive and effective campaign of Fidesz government. The government in 2015 mobilized force against border crossers and at the same time put out content in media indicating that migrants were a threat to ‘Hungary’s membership and safety’. In this regard, a number of government ads and billboards on migrants were launched within this campaign. The main activities of the campaign comprised of building walls along the borders, and trends in expressions of security. The Orbán government tried to stop the refugees by building walls along the borders of Serbia and Croatia. The government associated migrants with “terrorism” and “foreign threats,” thus putting this matter high on the agenda (Elżbieta & Goździak 2019). These messages especially awoke more conservative and nationalist electorate. They received a lot of votes thanks to this campaign; moreover, placing migration at the heart of the 2018 parliamentary election Fidesz made an excellent result. Although Hungarians have always had reservations about immigration, it was not as strong as in the 2010s, which consolidated the government.

The third major election campaign was family policy and support for traditional family values. The Fidesz government has begun using advertisement messages with regard to family policies to support traditional family models and national identity. The Orbán government launched some family assistance programmes for the families with children and the government undertook some measures to consider the economic status of the families through such programmes (Dorottya Szikra 2018, p.9). The government cut back the rights of the sexual minorities and passed laws against the rights of the LGBT. They found that this campaign was particularly effective with audiences in rural settings, and with those who could be considered more ‘traditionally minded’. Focus on family values ensured that Fidesz ensconced its conservative support base and boosted vote representation for the government’s populist agenda.

More recently, the campaigns have been on economic support in the period of the Covid-19 threat and rallying for the united states. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fidesz government tried to bring the voters closer together and restore the trust in the government offering Kern and Horn financially. In this context, the government adopted different economic stimuli measures, actions for employment preservation, and even appeals with a logbook of unity and solidarity. Voters did not experience economic insecurity, and through controlling the pandemic and stating that people should support the government and be united, this message was sent to the public in terms of the government’s competence. It has kept up voters’ support (Ádám Kerényi & Weichen Wang 2023).

In conclusion, the aspects that made Fidesz victorious are accurate slogans, security and fear sense-words and last but not least topics as national sovereignty can be mentioned. Indeed, Fidesz has delivered very particularly tuned messages addressing the issues of the voters. These messages conveyed goal and value orientation that are conservative including national, security, and family. Usually the government used security, migration, and foreign interference as the major discussion items and tried to mobilize voters via fear. To strengthen nationalist feelings, Fidesz represented its fight against the European Union and the world as protection of populist sovereignty. This is how the campaigns all evolved to the point where premier Orbán’s Fidesz government rightfully overstepped the electoral threshold and thereby procured political legitimacy.

Fidesz has obtained the power legally and has performed effective campaigns to receive the votes of the people. Since 2010 economic policies, migration policies and overall approach emphasizing the importance of national sovereignty found the support among the population in the country. Based on the prior sections and the subsequent discussions, the government of Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party are in the focus of severe criticism during the past years both at the national and international level for the authoritarianization processes they enacted and supported. The main reasons for these criticisms are as follows:

1. The Orbán government is charged with excessive regulation and limitation of operations by the independent media outlets. The Fidesz government since 2010 has made moves with the apparent

goal of controlling the media more at the central level and controlling more media outlets. These small independent news groups have been threatened and some media houses have either been bought by friendly businessmen to the government or closed down. This has considerably reduced the liberal degree of freedom of speech and public democratic debate. In total, it can be stated that controlling mass media is one of the biggest complaints regarding the Orbán government (Polyák Gábor, 2015).

2. Since the year 2010 the Fidesz government has initiated some drastic changes in the system of judiciary which has been considered by many as the government assuming full control of judiciary institutions. The year 2012 saw the introduction of a new constitution and with that new judges to the courts were either dismissed and replaced with individuals sympathetic to the government. This has led widely discuss the question of Hungary's legal system's sovereignty. These problems have been often raised by the European Union, and it has pointed out that the Hungarian authorities have effectively politicised the justice system (Fleck 2018). This constitutes what may be termed as augmentation of control over the judiciary.

3. Looking at it in terms of human rights, the Orbán government has recently introduced strict measures regarding the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). First of all, foreign funded NGOs have been hit by the so called "foreign agent" laws and, their activity, has been limited. This has affected the work of human rights defender and civil society organizations in a very big way.

4. The current government of Orbán has been on the epicenter of attention for its uncompromising position on the migration issue in Europe. In early 2015, the government has constructed barriers around the countries borders in order to try to halt refugee and migrant movements into the country. Using highly aggressive language towards the immigrants, the government justified the preservation of the 'sovereignty' within the EU even. However, such an approach has been denounced by human right non-governmental organizations and the international community (Elżbieta & Goździak, 2019).

5. The recent authoritarian shift in Hungary and attacks on the rule of law have attracted a lot of discontent among the EU. The Fidesz government bullying of the judiciary, pressure on the media and changes in legislation affecting NGOs are concerns voiced in the European Commission and the European Parliament. The European Union has also taken legal action against Hungary and it has threatened to demuse Hungary's financial support when necessary (Dr. Júlia Mink 2017, pp. 22-29).

Domestically, Fidesz and the Hungarian government headed by Viktor Orbán are also criticized. Democracy area of concern for the opposition political parties and civil society of the country emanates from the government's encroachment on democratic institutions to consolidate its powers, political pressure on independent media and judiciary. However, ideas, which define Orbán as the champion of national sovereignty, the enemy of "foreign interventions," meet great approval among people.

The first is approval from domestic sources and, second, the numbers obtained through the elections by the Fidesz government. Having the series of election and gaining high mandate matters enhance internal legitimacy of the Fidesz government. Since the year 2010, the party has scored a big win in every liberty it has entered into. In the parliamentary elections of 2022 Fidesz obtained 54.13% the votes and got 135 seats, thus it controls the majority of seats in the parliament (Fondation Robert Schuman & Helen Levy, 2010).

However, two factors could indicate how the political legitimacy for the Orbán government endures all pressures and criticism. First, his approach that is formally conservative – he has been focusing on national sovereignty, has been inveterately anti-immigrant, does not accept "interference" from the West – helped him to built a nationalist core vote (Gabor Halmai, 2018). It also assists Fidesz to justify its existence, so to speak, from occupying the dominant position in Hungary's political landscape this move aids in maintaining its credibility. The second one is the economic support factor. COVID-19 governmental financial assistance and social measures provided have stabilised voter confidence in the government, thus strengthening its legitimacy. In general, Fidesz's actions prompted pre-elec-

tion and post-election protests, and other displays of increased opposition that the government seeks to counter through reactionary policies, alongside anti-immigrant, nationalistic, and security rhetoric. This dynamic makes the position of Fidesz in the political system and government legitimacy rather vague.

Foundations of political legitimacy in contemporary Poland. In the context of Polish politics political legitimacy has to be defined and analyzed from historical, cultural, institutional and social perspective. This work reviewed selected aspects of the rule of law and assess the polity in Poland. In line with the established expectation, Poland adopts the Constitution that spells out a structure of power and ensures that there is a system of check and balance which remains a critical factor in as far as political legitimacy is concerned. The rules and principles of the constitution created in the new law are supposed to enhance the citizens' confidence in state authorities.

In the current years, Poland has received criticisms within the international community and domestically for political controversies on judicial reforms driven by Law and Justice party. Such changes are viewed as endangering the existence of the judiciary's autonomy, raising questions about the legal status of some state officials. Nowadays Polish civil society is rather developed, and effectively engaged in political processes, political performances, and monitoring the elections. Free press and media is equally important in enhancing political legitimacy through passing information, promoting freedom of speech and debates and giving an opportunity for been used to question the structures of the government.

Credibility of governmental authorities in Poland is unprecedented in relation to the political processes in the country, traditions and the present state. Some of the forces are as follows: Basically, the following factors underlines the force that legitimise the Polish government. First of all, the first sign of political legitimacy in Poland – democracy within the sign is manifested through democratic election. Parliamentary as well as presidential elections established the voter turnout and contributed to the favourable role of the political parties after 1989. Free and fair elections enhance the legal credibility of the governments (Adriana Sas, 2023). Synchronously, Polish people have a great appreciation for political discourses associated with freedom and nation self-rule. Free state with a historical background discourages nationalism of the people. This, in turn, increases the government's popularity since people, ideally, support the idea of independence, do not approve of interference from outside. Secondly the religious and cultural aspects have maintained their influence on the political situation in modern Poland. In particular, Catholic Church sanctions political legitimacy in Poland as a force of progress (Elżbieta et al., 2021, p.8). Interference in the political affairs further creates legitimacy among the voters who hold a strong belong to the church. Furthermore, government's actions in social and economic liberalization help to legitimate states. Decreases in unemployment rates, economic growth and the enhancement of social security systems result in improved voter confidence in government enabling political balance (Jakub & Dušan 2013, pp. 195-196). In addition, social justice and the credibility or confidence in the working of the state are features of political acceptance. Less oligarchic and more transparent governance increases voter confidence and correspondingly the feelings of legitimacy (Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski & Maciej Wilga, 2018)

This paper analyzes the nature and dynamics of Polish political culture and the key historical events that have shaped it, striving to map the sources of the legitimacy of the current Polish government. The current governing Law and Justice Party (PiS) has continuously gained political triumphs since 2015, as they enjoy wide support via free elections. Poland especially has a distinctive national character shaped and put into historical memory by dynamic political fights for independence and tends to support governments focused on the nation's independence. The Polish Catholic Church is also very influential, it operates directly within the political process initiating policies that reflect tradition (Jakub Havlíček & Dušan Lužný, 2013, pp. 195-196). Economic liberalization, an emphasis on Peronist social programs has intended betterment of living standards and strengthened the gov-

ernment's domestic appeal. The involvement of Poland with the European Union makes it even more credible for promoting EU standards of the compliance while increasing the interest in economic and security collaboration. Political legitimacy is also anchored in membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. EU supports the standards of democratic governance and human rights, but also offers funds for economy that make the citizens to trust national institutions. Indeed, political legitimacy can be viewed as a concept that is not easy to define in the context of the Polish state and society as it is consistently changing depending on a wide range of internal and external factors.

Factors undermining the legitimacy of the German Democratic Republic. The government of the GDR strived for years to establish political as well as the economical foundation and at the same time lost its legitimacy due to any reasons. This process went much further than simply economic problems and social unrest; the external pressures, problems of governance and the internal contradictions of the system also led to the exacerbation of the crisis vital to the existence of the regime (Thomas, 1986, p.416).

First, the GDR relied on a planned economy, however the productivity encountered major challenges on the way. Subsidisation from the Soviet Union and restrictions in East – West – trade decreased in the course of the 1980s and thus the East German economy had come under pressure. They experienced severe scarcity of the most important life necessities and other necessities (Thomas, 1986 p.396). It intensified the disillusionment of people and caused the erosion of trust in governmental efficiency. According to some sources, even by mid 1980s, the requirements of most basic needs of the consumerist culture were not being fulfilled in the GDR. Besides, living conditions in East Germany seemed to be of a lower standard than West German, hence increasing social illiterate. People of East Germany understood severity of their situation and the living standard in West Germany through television broadcasts, especially if they lived close to the Berlin Wall. In combination with restrictive conditions, people lived everyday life that was entirely different from what they had known before – this brought injustice (Gisa, 2010, pp. 81-84). While those in the west received better paid job, more consumer goods and liberal policies the East German people were subjected to a closed planned economy.

The rational-legal legitimation of the GDR government suffered badly under its repressive political environment. Facilitated by widespread spying from the Ministry for State Security (Stasi), the government wielded unprecedented control over its citizens, at a cost of curtailing public freedom. (Anselma Gallinat, 2015, p.6) The oppressive surveillance established an atmosphere of political conditions where citizens believed their freedoms stripped; generating a devastating collapse in faith towards the government. This was an idea that resonated particularly strongly with younger people, thus making it possible to evoke yet more discontent (Gisa, 2010, pp. 81–84). It also revealed that the shelf-life of the repressive system was not sustainable due to this limitation in its legitimacy. And as the USSR curtailed its subsidies, making East Germany increasingly part of a stagnant high-cost environment mainly in defence and aerospace, GDR economic woes perpetuated. That co-dependency weakened economic security and narrowed the government's domestic-policy latitude. In the late 1980s, Soviet reforms under Mikhail Gorbachev (such as Perestroika) clashed with the authoritarian regime of East German President/Erich Honecker. Declining Soviet assistance also lessened the GDR's international standing. At the end of the 1980s, there were similar popular movements in the GDR. The 1989 protests, in particular, showed that the population had simply had enough of government. At mass protests and marches, such as a high official gathering in the heart of Berlin at Alexanderplatz demands were made for political change and reform (Gisa, 2010, p.8) The protests laid bare the rot within a political structure where declining government legitimacy could no longer repel pressure from citizen demands for freedom and reform; improvements in economic conditions. The crude rolling of its power and oppressive practices were completed with Berlin Wall crashing in

1989, destroying the legitimate basis for GDR government. This event finally marked the complete breakdown of control by the GDR government, on national and international scales. Il faut désormais accepter que les niveaux incompressibles de mécontentement populaire ont fait sauter le régime.

This all leads us to the conclusion that however many ways in which the GDR government tried to maintain its own legitimacy and stability, economic weakness, oppressive governance, international pressures, and social unrest made its long-run right of existence unfeasible. The failure of the government to solve issues in economic and political areas hand in hand with the repressive way people felt the restrictions in their everyday lives with grew resentment against the government. This process peaked with the falling of the Berlin Wall and was followed by an absolute collapse of government within in GDR. The mass protests, which started in Leipzig in the autumn of 1989 and spread to other cities, became a watershed moment in GDR history. These protests brought together different social forces with common demands, including freedom of movement, democratic reforms and better living standards. The organization and scale of these protests showed that society, as a whole, was done accepting faded status quo. This trajectory ended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. This event was a symbol of the end of Germany's division and spoke to why reunification was on its way. As we know from the events of 1989-1990, a regime with the skimpiest ideological base, maintained through repressive means could not survive against the tide To begin with, the GDR's political legitimacy was based on a Marxist-Leninist foundation. The SED elite ruled under this doctrine. This was a political slogan only, for the government claimed to embody the will and wishes of the people but in fact this ideological stance allowed it to overlook dissenting voices and ensure compliance across society. The mention of repression, particularly via the line ministry – that is, using Stasi – came to be central. QR Code Link to This Post 2015 (Anselma, 2015, p.5) The Stasi put a system of horizontal surveillance in place, intervening heavily into the life-course of citizens. The government was unable to gain popular support and social discontent grew in this context. Secondly, the economy of GDR was based on planned economy but the economic situation in East Germany was really weak comparing to West Germany. But then the standards of living in GDR started to fall by the 1980s and shortages of consumer goods and a stagnant economy eroded faith in the future of East Germany. Statistical figures show that at the end of the 1980s, the growth rate of GDP in the GDR was about 1.5%, while this figure in West Germany stood at almost 3% (Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs, 2002). Daily issues of having food for the population accelerated this process, losing even more people to support for those in government. Third, the media provided clear images of West Germany's high living standards to GDR citizens. This made people feel like there was a division in the society. Frustration was especially high among locals on the exact opposite side of the Berlin Wall. In the West, there was freedom of travel, a higher income and economic opportunities; in the GDR there were fewer social freedoms with poor economic opportunities. This discontentment resulted in mass emigration. Around 300,000 people had escaped to West Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (Maier, 1997 p.209).

Finally, mass protests in the GDR in 1989: this was an unmistakable sign of the population having had enough of their government. Citizens started protesting over freedom, development and democracy. Thousands took to the streets of Leipzig in October 1989, demanding the end of the regime and, ultimately, a way past the Berlin Wall. At the end of the day on 9 November, it was clear that the government had lost control and nothing could be done to reverse the mounting public discontent – this moment represented a watershed, heralding almost immediately into being everything foreseeable which would lead to the GDR government's collapse with the fall of Berlin Wall.

Thus it can be said that the GDR government gained its legitimacy through thin ideological means and authoritarian constriction. But what 1989-1990 showed was that such systems could not survive in the long run when faced with a combination of economic weakness and the desire of people to be free. While public frustration grew due to economic stagnation, abysmal living standards and

repression, the legitimacy of the regime being gone with December 1989 as expressing itself in style commensurate to its end, but after the fall of the Berlin Wall there was nothing to do—the government had lost all grounds for credibility. The fall of the GDR was due to not only internal processes, but also external relations in the wider world. The GDR ended when the country was reunified into one Germany.

Building political legitimacy in the Czech Republic: post-velvet revolution developments and ongoing challenges. For the Czech Republic, political legitimacy is one of the most important factors that help to explain the stability and operationalisation of its democratic order. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic, managed to construct democratic institutions and promote the rule of law quite effectively (LADISLAW RABUŠIC, TOMÁŠ SIROVÁTKA, 1999, p. 240). However, the process of constructing politically legitimate institutions is still ongoing and has many challenges that need to be addressed.

One of the most crucial components of political legitimacy is the people's faith in that specific government and its bodies. Like a number of other Central and Eastern European nations, the Czech government's approval ratings are not always so positive. Corruption scandals and political crises have a tendency to undermine public trust towards state institutions (LADISLAW RABUŠIC, TOMÁŠ SIROVÁTKA, 1999, p. 242). In recent times, the higher authorities have made more intense and vigorous attempts to address this issue through anti-corruption measures and improving the accountability of the government, but more remains to be done in this particular issue.

Also, in enhancing political legitimacy, the importance of civil sector activism and freedom of media is significant. Czech society has a sizeable civil sector in which many NGOs watch what the government does and promote the political participation of citizens. Media freedom, which has been experienced even under pressure from some politicians and business interests, is extensive in ensuring the availability of information to the public and fostering democratic engagement to the (Jan Wintr et al., 2016, p. 147). In addition, the Czech Republic's membership in the European Union has a significant impact on domestic politics and serves as an additional factor supporting political legitimacy. Commitment to democratic principles and adherence to strict EU standards help strengthen trust in Czech institutions both domestically and internationally. However, in order to further consolidate lasting legitimacy, systemic reforms, the provision of high democracy standards, and transparency in public administration are necessary. Political legitimacy in the Czech Republic is a crucial aspect of the country's democratic stability and the functioning of state institutions. Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Czechoslovakia transitioned from a communist regime to democracy, and after gaining independence in 1993, the Czech Republic began to establish a democratic governance system. The legitimacy of the government is supported by the public's trust in the government, the activity of civil society, and the country's international relations. These elements contribute to the sustainability of Czech democratic governance.

One of the key characteristics of political legitimacy in the Czech Republic is the stability of democratic institutions. The Czech parliamentary democracy model is based on the election of representatives in both houses (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate). The activities of Parliament, the limited executive powers of the President, and government policies under the leadership of the Prime Minister form the foundation of democratic institutions. Since 1993, elections for both chambers have been held regularly, with voter turnout ranging from 60% to 70% (Jan Wintr et al., 2016, p. 147). Significant progress has been made in continuing democratic reforms and strengthening the rule of law. However, political instability at certain times weakens the public's trust in the government. For example, after the 2017 parliamentary elections, the government formation process was prolonged, and ultimately, Andrej Babiš, leader of the ANO party, was elected Prime Minister. Although this instability temporarily reduced trust in the government, the Czech Republic continued to uphold its commitment to democratic principles.

One of the most important aspects of political legitimacy is trust in the government. However, in the Czech Republic, corruption scandals are one of the key factors undermining this trust. For example, in 2021, Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš was linked to the "Pandora Papers" scandal (Scilla Alecci, 2021). This event led to significant public discontent, and as a result, Babiš lost in the 2021 parliamentary elections (Transparency International, 2021). Although steps have been taken to increase transparency and accountability in the fight against corruption, efforts to increase public trust in state institutions must continue. According to Transparency International, in 2022, the Czech Republic ranked 41st out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perception Index, which indicates that the country has made progress in the fight against corruption (Transparency International, 2023). However, this highlights the ongoing need for the Czech government to intensify its efforts to enhance transparency and reduce corruption. Civil society and media freedom play a major role in political legitimacy in the Czech Republic. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society are actively involved in overseeing government actions and working to protect citizens' rights. Although the government has occasionally attempted to restrict civil society activities, citizen activism continues to strengthen the democratic system. Media freedom is widely accepted in the Czech Republic, and the level of press freedom is high. According to Reporters Without Borders, in 2023, the Czech Republic ranked 20th in the world press freedom index (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). This indicates that media freedom is an essential component of democracy, providing the public with the opportunity to access objective information about the government's activities. The Czech Republic's membership in the European Union (EU) is a significant factor for political legitimacy. Having joined the EU in 2004, the Czech Republic has further strengthened its democratic institutions by adhering to EU standards and laws. Commitment to EU principles of democracy and the rule of law enhances trust in state governance within the country. Monitoring by the European Commission and requirements for adherence to the rule of law help support the sustainability of the Czech political system. EU membership has also opened up vast opportunities for the Czech Republic in the economic sphere. The Czech Republic benefits from trade and investment exchange within the EU, and its GDP growth has ranged between 2-3% in recent years (Czech Statistical Office, 2024). This economic stability and growth also have a positive impact on the legitimacy of the government.

In conclusion, political legitimacy in the Czech Republic is based on the stability of democratic institutions, the activism of civil society, and public trust in the government. Although efforts to combat corruption and increase transparency are not fully resolved, they are key factors strengthening political legitimacy. Media freedom and EU membership also play an important role in reinforcing the legitimacy of the Czech government. However, ongoing reforms and the protection of democratic principles in state governance must remain a priority in the future. By strengthening its democratic institutions, the Czech Republic continues to take significant steps to enhance its legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

Conclusions. The article is devoted to the analysis of political legitimacy in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Like the majority of post-Soviet countries and first of all Azerbaijan, these countries have passed the transition period from administrative-empire system to market economy, from totalitarian dictatorship to democratic management systems. In general, in the political discourse, the transformation of political systems in these countries occurs faster and more efficiently, so studying these examples of transition is of special interest. During the research, the political transit process of the specified countries is separately analyzed and the mechanisms of achieving the legitimacy of political institutions are explored. Manifestations of political legitimacy in each country are noted and characteristic features for the region are summarized at the end.

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