

## *Local and Independent? Non-Partisan Groups in Eastern and Western Europe*

Local independent lists are a general phenomenon at the local level in many European countries – in established western countries as well as in the so-called »new« democracies in Central and East Europe. Aside from their qualitative importance, the mere number of these local »parties« has steadily increased in many countries during the last two decades.

However, despite the remarkable rise of non-partisan lists in Central, East and West Europe and their omnipresence, there has been little empirical research in this field. It has not been conducted much within the affected countries, and there has been no comparative research between the different European nations.

In order to shed light on this field, the research project *Non-partisan voter associations in East and West Germany*, organized an international conference at the University of Halle-Wittenberg (Germany). Bringing together researchers from different European countries – both from East and Central Europe as well as from West Europe – this conference attempted to assess and evaluate local lists in a comparative perspective. The international conference *Local Lists in Eastern and Western European countries – a Comparative Perspective* was held on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> April 2007 in Halle. In January 2008, a book is going to be published as a result of this conference, edited by Marion Reiser and Everhard Holtmann.

The conference focused on two different but interlinked aspects. First, it concentrated on the development of a theoretical and conceptual analytical framework. How are independent local lists defined in their different national contexts? How do we have to refine these definitions in order to allow for a European comparison? The second focus was on the empirical comparison of independent lists at local level in Europe. How can presence and success of these local lists be explained and which differences and

communalities can be observed between the countries and between East and West Europe?

In the first part of the conference, there were two theoretical and conceptual contributions: Harald Baldersheim from the University of Oslo talked about comparative local politics in Europe. Marion Reiser and Everhard Holtmann from the organising research group at the University of Halle-Wittenberg raised some leading questions and provided the first conceptual and theoretical framework for the international comparison of these local lists. The second part of the conference focused on theoretical and conceptual considerations as well as on the empirical analysis of independent lists in European countries.

Petr Jüptner from the University of Prague started this part of the conference and presented data on *Local lists in the Czech Republic*. Local lists are important political actors at the local level in the Czech Republic. Although they gained only 9.5% of the votes, they could win 58% of the mandates at the local elections of 2006. Jüptner distinguishes between institutionalised and non-institutionalised local lists. The latter are registered as local lists, while the others are registered officially as political parties, but see themselves as »independent parties«. The reason for this lies in the electoral law – since the change in the electoral law in 1998, independent lists need a large number of signatures to be allowed to run in elections. In the medium-sized and large towns, the number of signatures needed is larger than the signatures needed to register for a national party. Therefore, local lists register as party, although they see themselves as local lists. The empirical analysis has shown that despite these changed regulations, the non-institutionalised local lists still dominate. Jüptner points out that local lists are more frequently present and successful in small communities than in bigger cities. In these small communities, local lists benefit from the predominant idea of apolitical and factual local politics in the public and from the low organisational degree of political parties.

Ivan Koprivic from the University of Zagreb focused in his contribution on *Independent Local Lists in Croatia: In a Search of a Composite Theoretical Frame*. According to the Local Elections Law, he defines local lists as the lists nominated by a group of voters themselves, whose official name includes a term such as »independent communal list«. Koprivic presented data on these lists and showed that they won 17.4% of the seats in the municipalities where these lists competed in the general elections of 2005. Similar to the Czech results, they are more frequently present and successful in small rural communities than in bigger towns and counties. Koprivic interprets this pattern with the stronger personalisation of local politics, the

lower influence of party programmes and a lower organisational degree of political parties in the rural areas. Furthermore, there are also big differences between certain regions in Croatia. Explanatory factors for these differences are the existence of minorities, which fosters the presence of local lists, and historically stronger traditions of civil society in some regions. In the second part of his presentation, Koprivic developed a theoretical framework for a comparative analysis of the presence and success of local lists within their specific local context. Due to the high heterogeneity of local lists, Koprivic argues for a deeper analysis based on classifications and typologies that include quantitative and qualitative characteristics of local lists. This would also allow the assessment of these lists in the context of democratic theory.

Gabor Soos from the Tocqueville Research Centre in Budapest compared local and national parties in Hungary. He defines local parties, as opposed to the local branches of national parties, as political organisations that run candidates at elections, organise themselves, and are active only on a certain territory. Soos argues that local lists have a rather low share of votes, but still play an important (even increasingly important) role in local politics. Based on a survey, Soos distinguishes three types of local parties in Hungary. First, »interest organizations« (39%), which represent the interests of a specific societal group, e.g. ethnic minority organizations. »Community associations« (31%) concentrate their efforts on the public life of local governments. This category includes mainly cultural and sport organisations. They claim that they take care of the common good of the community, and not of special interests. The third group are »electoral organizations« (30%), which are established with the specific aim to participate in local elections and rarely have any other activity. The analysis claims that the foundation of local parties is frequently motivated by utilitarian considerations and anti-party strategies. In Hungary, the most important explanatory factor for the emergence and success of such local parties is also the size of the community. Further explanatory factors are the level of education, age structure, and citizens' income, which have a positive effect on the performance of local parties. There are also institutional factors, particularly the two types of electoral system – the small ticket and the mixed system, which give different opportunities and constraints to local parties.

Vello Pettai, Rein Toomla, and Elvis Joakit from the University of Tartu presented findings on *Citizen electoral alliances (CEAs) in Estonia*. Their analysis has shown that CEAs dominated local elections in Estonia in the early 1990s, for instance with the presence in 95% of the communities

and a share of votes of 65% at the local elections of 1993. At the last local elections in 2005, CEAs were present in only 58% of the communities and won 20% of the votes. Based on these results, the authors inquire about the reasons for this rapid decrease of significance of these local groups in such a short period. Their analysis has shown two main reasons. First, national political parties were weak in the early 1990s, they were actually only parliamentary parties and were not organised at local level. Since then, there has been a gradual strengthening of political parties as the main players in the post-communist democracy. CEAs have since become less strong, having been slowly forced out by an increasingly cartelised party system. According to Pettai et al, the second reason is the attempts undertaken by the political parties in 2002 and 2005 to ban CEAs. Although both bans were overruled by court, they weakened the CEAs. Pettai et al. conclude that CEAs were important for the process of democratic consolidation, but they are less significant since the party system has been developed and consolidated.

Agnieszka Dudzińska from the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, outlines that non-party lists in Poland are still very important local actors. This is reflected in their omnipresence (99.8% of the municipalities) as well as in their success in the last local elections: They won 72% of all seats in the whole country, based on the 59% total share of votes. As in other countries, structural factors, especially the size of municipalities, and institutional factors, e.g. two types of electoral law, influence the success of non-partisan groups. Based on the two criteria »geographical reach« and »partisanship«, Dudzińska identifies two different types of local lists: local non-party lists, which run for elections in only one community, and over-local lists, which are present in more than one municipality. The empirical analysis shows that in Poland non-party lists are usually local ones, hence limited to one municipality only. Based on a more detailed analysis, she shows the incompleteness of the nominal criteria since the analysis revealed two further types of local lists: hidden political parties and party-related lists that are not nominally related to a national party, but have the same programmatic profile and ideology.

The members of the research group at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, Stefan Göhlert, Everhard Holtmann, Adrienne Krappidel and Marion Reiser, define voter associations as the lists participating in local elections, which are not parties according to the German party law, and are groups irrespective of their organisational structure for they are not independent candidates. The authors show that local lists play an important political role at the local level in most German states. They ran in more than 73%

of German communities and won on average 35% of the votes in each community in the last elections. Thereby, they are more successful in East Germany (46%) than in West Germany (30%). A multivariate analysis shows that the different institutional frameworks in the different states have no influence on their presence and success, while tradition, regional political culture, the size of the community, and especially the presence of political parties, have a huge impact. The analysis of the sociology of these groups proves that local lists in Germany are also very heterogeneous with regard to organisation, programmatic profile, social profile of the councillors, and their position in the local political system. However, the analysis shows that this heterogeneous spectrum is divided into clearly specifiable subtypes of local lists such as the »old« materialistic type in small communities in West Germany, the »new« post materialistic type in bigger cities and towns, local associations in small communities in East Germany, or the single-issue groups as well as protest groups in medium-sized towns. Nevertheless, there is a unifying idea of local politics for all councillors of local lists in Germany, namely that they believe that factual politics has to have priority over party politics at local level.

In Portugal, non-partisan lists have been allowed since 1997 and hence a rather new phenomenon. Maria Antónia Pires de Almeida from the University of Lisbon traced the dynamic development of these lists since then. She has shown that these lists succeed predominantly in small rural areas of very low economic, social, and political importance for the national level. However, this pattern is changing as she has shown with a case study of Lisbon, where a local list ran for the elections in 2006.

Marcel Boogers from the University of Tilburg defines independent local parties as groups with no formal ties to any national party. Boogers states that, in the last 15 years, the Netherlands has witnessed an enormous growth of independent local parties and their electoral support. After the last two elections of 2002 and 2006, independent local parties were jointly best represented in Dutch municipal councils, having received 24% of the votes. Based on the diagnosis that political parties are under considerable pressure, Boogers raises his central question whether local political parties in the Netherlands are – in comparison to the local branches of national political parties – rather an anomaly or a prototype of the modern cadre party. He concludes that local parties are a prototype of a modernized party organization, because of three aspects. First, local lists are spearheading the party change from membership organization into staff-type organization and second, they enrich local politics with new political dividing lines, since they put new issues on the political agenda. Finally, they

prove to be more resourceful in recruiting citizens to stand as candidates for municipal councillorship.

Kristof Steyvers, Herwig Reynart, Koenraad De Ceuninck and Tony Valcke, political scientists at the University of Gent, deal with local lists in Belgium. As other participants, they discussed different criteria for the definition of local lists. In the first step, they open up a dichotomy between national and local parties and lists in which the latter are defined in a negative way, i.e. all lists not bearing national nominal standards. However, they argue that this definition is not complete and comprehensive, since »the flag of local lists covers a highly varied content ranging from national lists with simply another name over quasi-national to mere local phenomena«. Regarding this aspect, they make a distinction between pseudo and genuine local lists. Pseudo local lists bear a local name but also refer to national parties and national politics. There is either an ideological, programmatic, personal, structural, or an organisational link. Local lists have no such references in this respect to any party operating at the national level. Therefore, the authors argue against a dichotomy between national and local parties, but for a distinguishing continuum. Due to a lack of in-depth insight for the empirical analysis, they have to rely on the nominal criterion only. Their analysis of the ecology of local lists shows that they gained 20% of the votes, but that there are clear differences between the two regions Flanders and Wallonia and also – as in other countries – differences with regard to the size of the community. The sociology of local lists has revealed that local lists are more loosely structured, oriented towards (or against) issues of municipal development and less ideologically outspoken.

Ingemar Wörlund from the Mittuniversitet Östersund defines a local party as a group that only runs for election in a limited political region such as a municipality or a county council without national ambitions. Wörlund has assessed that political parties are very dominant at the local level in Sweden. During the last few decades, however, local parties have become more frequently present and successful in Swedish local politics, although with 5.5% of the votes in 2006 still at a rather low level. Wörlund's analysis has shown that institutional factors and socio-structural factors cannot explain the emergence of local parties. Non-partisan groups in Sweden are a reaction or a protest against the established parties in the national arena; and are a consequence of an increasing awareness of local problems due to cuts in local welfare systems.

Local lists in Norway have been a stable element in local politics since 1937, as Jacob Aars and Hans-Erik Ringkjøb from the Rokkan Centre of

the University of Bergen stated. They define non-partisan lists as »candidate lists presented in local elections, not taking part in national elections, and not attached to a registered national party«. Their analysis on supply and success of local lists shows that the supply of non-partisan lists has been reasonably stable since 1947 – local lists are present in about 56% of the communities, although the supply dropped in the 2003 election due to a new electoral law, which established extra barriers for running non-partisan lists. Even though local branches of national parties dominate local politics, local lists are successful in elections and won 17% of the votes in 2003. Furthermore, Aars and Ringkjøb discussed whether the traditional picture of local lists as single-issue oriented, short-lived and non-institutionalised is appropriate. The comparison of local lists and political parties has shown that local lists are heterogeneous, but do not differ from political parties in many aspects. Differences are that local lists want to be alternative to political parties since they found themselves mainly because of discontent with national parties and because they are opposed to party politics at the local level.

Finally, Colin Copus, Alistair Clark and Karin Bottom from the University of Birmingham focussed on *Multi-Party Politics in England*. Factual dominance of the three big parliamentary parties – the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Liberal Democrats – is also present at the local level in Britain. Independents and political associations are a rather new phenomenon in Britain and are still in an early stage of development. Copus et al. identify two main reasons for the growing importance of these independent groups. First, a growing anti-party mood at the local level and second, the supply of specific local issues and hence alternative politics. Along with the empirical analysis, Copus et al. have developed a typology of political organisations at the local level. They distinguish between branch parties and purely local parties that focus only on the council at the local level. They identify three main differences between those two types: purely local parties derive from a different part of the local civil society, political representation in the council is not their exclusive aim and their self-definition as non-party differs clearly from political parties. In the course of the workshop, these different approaches were discussed and systemised. The conferences showed very clearly that – although local lists have existed in many European countries for decades – not much theoretical groundwork has been laid out. There is not even a common term to describe this phenomenon. Furthermore, it is very difficult to find a common definition of local lists necessary for the international comparison. So far, there are different definitions and criteria used: along with

the legalistic definitions, for instance in Croatia and Germany, all authors have used a nominal criterion to define local lists and therewith distinguish it from local branches of political parties. Hence, all authors conform in the minimal definition that independent local lists participate in local elections but not in national and state elections and they are not attached to national parties. However, all authors are aware of the fact that this definition is not complete and comprehensive, since there are also pseudo parties that use a name that has no connection to a political party, but whose programmatic and ideological profiles are attached to national politics or are somehow connected to political parties. However, detecting these pseudo parties further requires detailed empirical analyses. Therefore, all authors have used the nominal definition for the empirical analysis, especially for the analysis of the presence and success of local lists.

Furthermore, the workshop has shown that independent local lists, despite their common characteristics, are a very heterogeneous phenomenon in all analysed countries. Although that might appear as commonplace, the confirmation is necessary at this point, as it presents a hurdle for scientific understanding. For example, independent lists differ very much regarding the cohesiveness of their organisational form – from short-lived, loose associations, which only collect signatures for the proposed candidates, to durable organizations with their own statute, programme and formal membership. Along with the question of organisational stability and institutionalisation, great differences have been revealed regarding the motives for foundation and the programmatic profile. It is not only that independent local lists differ broadly on the political map, as studies in various countries have shown; they also cover the whole range from the extreme left to the extreme right and therefore represent different interests and population groups.

In most countries, there is evidence that local lists are not just heterogeneous, but that there are different types of local lists. This result allows working in more detail on local lists, from theoretical, conceptual and empirical aspect. The development of a common typology of local lists would allow us to compare local lists despite their heterogeneity and the different national and regional context of local lists.

The main empirical results of the workshop concern the performance of local lists in local elections. Analytically, two levels have been distinguished. Firstly, the presence of local lists: Where do local lists exist and where do they run for elections? Secondly, the success of local lists: How successful are they in local elections and how are they compared to political parties? The analysis has shown that local lists are present in all countries but that

there are huge differences in their current presence and success. While they are very strong in countries such as Poland, Norway and Germany, they are rather marginal in countries such as Portugal, Estonia and Sweden. There seem to be three main influencing factors of the presence and success of local lists: (1) *Size*: local lists perform especially well in rural areas and in smaller communities. However, in the last decades they have become more successful in some major cities as well. (2) *Organisational degree* of political parties: the question whether the established political parties participate in the local elections or not is tightly linked to the community-size-factor. Independent local lists benefit from a low presence of parties. Finally, (3) the *institutional framework*, especially the electoral system and the electoral law, has an important influence on the existence and success of these local lists.

The results of this conference are going to be published in January 2008 in the book *Independent Local Lists in Eastern and Western European Countries*, edited by Marion Reiser and Everhard Holtmann.

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