Renditions of democratic elitism from Max Weber to Joseph Schumpeter and from Robert Dahl to Giovanni Sartori differ, but there is enough common ground to employ them under the same label. The core tenets of democratic elitism are (1) political elites and leaders win governing power through open, if somewhat constrained, electoral competitions; (2) entry to these competitions is relatively open in a functioning electoral market; (3) elites and leaders who prevail in the competitions have the capacity to manage a society’s pressing problems; (4) elites and leaders are held responsible for their actions through subsequent elections; (5) elites and leaders share fundamental norms that make democracy the “only game in town”. When the relation between elites and the public is considered, however, two additional tenets of democratic elitism obtain. First, elites in democracies are ready to defend democracy in the face of less tolerant publics (Peffley and Rohrschneider 2007). Second, consensually unified elites are crucial, and nowhere more so than in societies transiting to democracy (Higley and Lengyel 2000).

Since the third wave of democratization crested at the end of the 1990s (Huntington 1991; Diamond 2008), the basic tenets of democratic elitism have spread around the globe, making them – in substance if not by label – common components in the discourse about democracy. In many parts of the world, however, the behavior of political leaders does not comply with these tenets, and this leads to a variety of semi-authoritarian regimes and façade democracies (Collier and Levitsky 1997).

In this chapter democratic elitism is used as an analytical concept to comprehend the complex reality of modern democracy and the role of political elites. I investigate the extent to which the tenets of democratic elitism have entered political life across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) two decades after the end of state socialism.
On its face, the CEE region is fertile soil for democratic elitism. Unlike many other parts of the world, quests for democracy and liberty in CEE countries date back to the mid-19th century, even if the quests seldom culminated in actual democratic practices. By the end of state socialism, moreover, CEE countries were located at relatively high levels of economic development and education conducive to establishing democracy. As well, the prospect of joining the European Union provided a strong incentive for elites to adhere to tenets of democratic elitism (Pridham 2005; Grabbe 2006).

To what extent has democracy been crafted in CEE countries during the past two decades? To answer this, I examine members of CEE national parliaments. Members of parliaments (MPs) may not be the most important component of political elites, but they represent that part of elites directly legitimized by the people and meant to represent popular interests. I first assess the social composition of MPs to determine similarities and dissimilarities across party lines. I then examine the extent of MPs’ political professionalization and the diversity of their careers across the CEE countries. This is followed by a discussion of public perceptions of MPs, trends in general elections, and aspects of MPs’ political behavior. This distinction identifies some of the barriers to democratic elitism in CEE countries. The chapter concludes with the implications of my analysis for democratic elitism as an explanatory concept.

**Hypotheses**

1. The composition of CEE parliaments displayed rather elitist or non-representative features soon after regime change at the start of the 1990s so that the introduction of an electoral market was accompanied by social closure that marginalized important groups of citizens.

2. Parliamentary parties and party families, such as the post-communist Socialist parties and the Conservatives/Christian Democratic parties, have differed not only in their policy preferences but also in their social compositions. These differences, in concert with policy disputes, have limited the scope for political compromises that are essential for effective coalition governments in CEE countries.

3. The political professionalization of MPs, while it aggravates the social divide between the electorate and the elected, is neither