

Rethinking ‘democratic backsliding’ in Central and Eastern Europe – looking beyond

Hungary and Poland

Abstract

This essay introduces contributions to a special issue of East European Politics on “Rethinking democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe”, which seeks to expand the study of democratic regression in CEE beyond the paradigmatic cases of Hungary and Poland. Reviewing these contributions, we identify several directions for research: 1) the need to critique “democratic backsliding”, not simply as a label, but also as an assumed regional trend; 2) a need to better integrate the role of illiberal socio-economic structures such as oligarchical structures or corrupt networks; and 3) a need to (re-)examine the trade-offs between democratic stability and democratic quality. We also note how insights developed researching post-communist regions such as Western Balkans or the post-Soviet space could usefully inform work on CEE backsliding. We conclude by calling for the study of CEE democracy to become more genuinely interdisciplinary, moving beyond some narrowly institutionalist comparative political science assumptions.

Over the past decade, a scholarly consensus has emerged that that democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is deteriorating (Kochenov 2008, Sedelmeier 2014), a trend often subsumed under the label ‘backsliding’¹. However, this emergent paradigm has focused disproportionately on the two most dramatic cases: Hungary and Poland (Müller 2014, Herman 2016, Kelemen and Orenstein 2016) and on the symptoms – executive aggrandisement and illiberal nationalism – that are most characteristic of the trajectories of those states. In bringing together contributions in this special issue, we attempt to correct for the empirical and thematic biases of this paradigm by examining democratic trajectories through the prism of cases other than Hungary and Poland in both Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and in nearby postcommunist regions, the West Balkans and the former Soviet Union (FSU). We use the term CEE as a matter of convention, to refer to post-communist states that are EU members, which – partly in consequence of EU accession – had been considered to be among the post-communist world’s more successful and stable democracies.² The CEE sub-

region has been one of the main focuses of the “backsliding” agenda, as democratic deterioration was unexpected and weakly explained by existing scholarship. Introducing perspectives from the West Balkans and two non-EU countries in the FSU (Moldova and Ukraine) allows us to consider what the significant bodies of scholarship about failing or partial democratisation that developed there can tell us about CEE present and future trajectories.

In this introductory essay, drawing on the contributions to this collection, we take in five themes. 1/ we first sketch democratic trajectories in the region, by contrasting the oft-studied cases of Hungary and Poland with other CEE cases and post-communist cases stretching from Southeast Europe to the Baltics. In the following sections we expand on three sets of inter-related theoretical and comparative issues that emerge from the contributions: 2/ the need to problematise the notion of democratic backsliding, not simply as a label, but also as an assumed regional trend; 3/ the need to more adequately integrate the (possible) decline of liberal-democratic political institutions with illiberal socio-economic structures, whether in the form of oligarchical power concentrations or more diffuse, corrupt networks; and 4/ the need to (re-)examine the trade-offs between democratic stability and democratic quality and ask whether efforts to improve democracy as a system of government destabilise it as a regime. Finally, 5/ in our conclusion we build on these critiques to make a case for studying democracy and its fate in CEE as a more genuinely interdisciplinary undertaking, breaking free of some of the more narrowly institutionalist assumptions of comparative political science.

1/ Multiple (un)democratic trajectories across CEE

In the late 1990s at the end of the first post-communist decade Central and Eastern Europe was widely seen as a clear, if not unqualified, democratic success story. Scholars of the region's democratisation concluded that not only were early fears of democratic breakdown fuelled by flawed analogies with Latin America misplaced (Greskovits 1996), but that successful CEE democracies such as Hungary and Poland had rapidly consolidated (Linz and Stepan 1996) and "passed by the point of no return" making "authoritarian reversal" inconceivable (Ekiert and Kubik 1998: 579-580).

There is a now broad consensus that this optimistic picture of democratisation in East Central Europe needs revising and that the region is in serious democratic difficulties. There is also widespread agreement that these difficulties go beyond the problems of poor democratic quality usually understood as legacies of communist or pre-communist authoritarianism, or side-effects of transition politics: stunted civil societies; disengaged and distrustful citizens; parties lacking social roots; corrupt and ineffective public administration (e.g. Howard 2003, van Biezen 2003, Innes 2014). Instead, the region appears to be mired in a range of negative phenomena subsumed under the label 'democratic backsliding' which impact on democracy *as a regime* threatening precisely such an authoritarian reversal.

Moreover, the new dynamics of backsliding are best illustrated precisely by the one-time democratic front-runners Hungary and Poland. In Hungary the conservative-national Fidesz party of Viktor Orbán since winning a landslide election victory in 2010 proceeded to dismantle liberal checks and balances; skew the electoral process in its own favour; extend partisan control over state agencies, media and civil society; and develop a harshly anti-liberal ideology, which de-legitimises left-wing and liberal competitors as foreign to the national community (Herman 2016). As two subsequent general election victories – albeit with a

skewed and uneven playing field – show, Orbán’s regime of ‘national co-operation’ rests on a base of substantial popular support. A similar, but faster, dynamic appears to be playing out in Poland under the government of Law and Justice (PiS), a party with a Christian conservative-national ideology comparable to that of Fidesz, following a decisive election victory in 2015 which gave PiS an absolute majority (Ost 2016).

The cases of Hungary and Poland appear at first sight paradigmatic. They represent the largest and sharpest drops in levels of democracy in ECE (Nations in Transit 2018, V-Dem 2017) and sharply contradict earlier positive expectations of democratisation in the region. Poland as the largest CEE state, and one with considerable geo-political significance, has been a particularly worrying case. Political dynamics in the two states map on to broader global patterns of democratic regression in taking the form of ‘executive aggrandisement’ triggering a slide from democracy to some form of hybrid regime (and, if continued, into full authoritarianism); rather than the direct breakdown of democracy into autocracy as seen in classic military or executive coups (Bermeo 2016). The coming to power of Fidesz and PiS in watershed elections also fits one of the modes of transition to non-democratic rule identified by Tomini (2017): the electoral victory of a democratically disloyal opposition.³ The fact that both Fidesz and PiS framed their nationalistic, socially conservative appeals in populist terms also fits them into a broader global populist trend challenging liberal democracy (Judis 2016, Müller 2017, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), although it is unclear whether populism in all forms should be regarded as an anti-system ideology.

However, the clearest CEE cases of backsliding – Hungary and Poland – lie outside the main causal patterns observed globally in the Third Wave era: a slide from democracy into a hybrid or authoritarian regime type is usually underpinned by sharp social inequality compounded

by ethnic divisions (Tomini 2017, Tomini and Wagemann 2017). Patterns of ECE backsliding, therefore, need to be explained in more regionally specific terms. Authors have posited a plethora of such factors: the falling away of EU accession conditionalities (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007, Rupnik 2007, Rupnik and Zielonka 2013, Sedelmeier 2014) and the Union's subsequent inability to sanction backsliding member states; CEE elites' lack of liberal-democratic values (Innes 2014); socio-economic frustrations generated by the Great Recession and the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis (Bohle and Greskovits 2009); institutionalised patterns of polarised populist competition (Enyedi 2016); and the geo-political influence of Russia (Shekhovtsov 2016).

With some partial exceptions, this plethora of causes has rarely gelled into a coherent comparative perspective offering compelling explanations of the range of varieties of bad governance and democratic malaise emerging across the CEE region. One reason for this, we believe, is a tendency to view the whole region through the prism of the Hungarian and Polish experiences, taking these as a paradigm likely to be reproduced to a greater or lesser or degree elsewhere. While acknowledging the empirical variation across the CEE region, the debate on democratic backsliding has revolved around the scenario of an illiberal populist party winning an absolute parliamentary majority and embarking on a conservative-nationalist project, concentrating executive power, stripping away or disabling checks and balances, and exerting partisan control over public institutions.

This can obscure as much as it reveals. As Hanley and Vachudova (this collection) find in their paper on the rise of Andrej Babiš and his ANO movement in the Czech Republic, even in a neighbouring country the 'Hungarian' or 'Polish' paradigm can be made to fit only loosely. Moreover, as the Czech case underlines, it is difficult and perhaps premature to think in terms

of consolidated outcomes across CEE, suggesting that trajectories and processes may be a better focus of enquiry.

Indeed, synthesising the findings of the studies collected here suggests that— rather than the steady one-directional dynamic process of deterioration implied by ‘backsliding’ – a relatively stable but low-quality-democracy is the norm for political regimes where checks on progress towards high-quality liberal democracy are already embedded. In some cases, this may imply minimal change; in others, weakly consolidated democracy may swerve or careen (Slater 2013, Bušíková and Guasti 2017) without a lasting shift towards a less democratic regime form. Concretely, this means that the cases of Hungary and Poland, while exhibiting some characteristics shared across the region, serve as a poor guide for wider understanding in CEE. The wider regional picture might be more one of (often stable) democratic malaise than of Hungary/Poland-style backsliding.

The authors in this special issue broadly agree in identifying relatively stable forms of bad governance that serve to block the path to fuller democracy and, in some cases, might open opportunities for further democratic deterioration. Taking a long-term perspective on the CEE region as a whole, Dimitrova (this collection) bemoans the fact that citizens in the region have not yet managed to compel political-economic elites to universalise access to resources. This certainly chimes with Hanley and Vachudova’s account of the Czech case (this collection), even if the problem of state capture there appears rather more limited and contested than in Dimitrova’s long durée account. We explore the problem of state capture at greater length in section 3.

A shared feature of the relatively high-functioning democratic regimes of Estonia and Latvia (Cianetti, this collection) and the less democratic competitive authoritarian regimes of the

former Yugoslavia (Bieber, this collection) is that each faces an apparent trade-off between a flawed stability, on the one hand, and an imperative to push for higher quality democracy that might destabilise that stability. The Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia, easily the best performing CEE democracies covered in these pages, are seen as having excelled in implementing economic and political reforms demanded by the EU, but as having done so at the cost of limiting democratic contestation over the economic policy and marginalising the voices of ethnic minorities. In the Western Balkans, where democratic deterioration can be observed in most cases relative to a decade ago, a kind of stability has been achieved through the cooperation of the EU with autocratic leaders willing to make concessions internationally (especially on geopolitical and security issues) at the cost of civil society, media independence and democratic pluralism domestically. This trade-off between democracy and stability is explored at greater length in the fourth section of this chapter.

Both Dawson's Serbia-Bulgaria comparison and Dimitrova's broad regional survey explicitly question the usefulness of the term 'backsliding' to describe the ongoing development of democracy in the region. This is in part because neither is convinced that prior success in democratisation has even occurred since 1989 – an idea explored further below. Both in Dawson's culturalist account of the prevailing weakness of liberal norms in everyday citizen discourse and Dimitrova's 'Tillyan' political-economic perspective, which stresses the capture of state resources by elites, the cases under consideration are seen as having failed to produce democracies in which citizens truly inhabit formal democratic institutions. While the divergence between their approaches is wide methodologically, they agree that the CEE countries they investigate are relatively stable electoral regimes, but bear some illiberal characteristics (whether political-economic or cultural) that leave them with a low quality of democracy.

This special issue also turns its gaze Eastwards beyond the CEE region, to see whether lessons can be drawn from wider cross-regional comparison. These cases to the East, Moldova and Ukraine (Knott, this collection), show a possible hybrid regime end-game for CEE countries with deteriorating democratic institutions. This might not necessarily be full authoritarianism, but a hybrid, dynamic equilibrium that might extend the horizon of the transition from democracy indefinitely.

In the following sections, we examine some theoretical and comparative issues that emerge from the special issue contributions' attempts to map out these systemic forms of democratic malaise.

2. The need to problematise 'backsliding'

Backsliding is most obviously problematic as a concept because it assumes a prior period of successful democratisation that is very much open to debate. As Dawson (this collection) notes, scholarly consensus before 2007-8 that most CEE countries had reached the stage of "democratic consolidation" relied on measurements drawn from institutionally-focused indices (such as Freedom House) and the equally institutionally focused EU accession criteria. In his contribution to this special issue, he argues that this stress on formal institutions is at odds with most of contemporary democratic theory in which practices of deliberation take centre stage. After constructing an alternative theoretical framework for the evaluation of democracy based on the extent and content of public sphere discussion, Dawson's ethnographic comparison of Serbia and Bulgaria brings forward two eye-catching findings. First, that neither state comes close to democratic consolidation in the sense of anchoring democracy in a growing civic culture in which most citizens increasingly can and will uphold

liberal norms⁴ –liberal democratic norms in both states are still easily eclipsed by illiberal ones. Second, that, contrary to institutionally-oriented measurements and EU accession judgements, it was Serbia that supported a more vibrant and contested public sphere, more inclusive of liberal ideas. The wider implication is that ‘backsliding’ in CEE might reasonably be understood as an artefact of a partial and flawed system of democratic measurement prone to inflating the democratic credentials of states whose political elites are willing to undertake superficial institutional reforms without any broader societal process to validate and embed the values implied by those institutional forms.⁵

Dimitrova (this collection) also departs from institutional measures of democratisation, albeit in a different direction. Her perspective follows Charles Tilly (2007) in viewing democratisation as a process that plays out over the historical long term through social mobilisation and contention. While she stresses the elite capture of resources in what, from her long *durée* view, are still early days of post-communist democratisation, she cautions against seeing illiberal populist movements as necessarily ruinous of democracy. Given the role of political contention in the democratisation process, shorter term ebbs and flows, including perhaps episodes of backsliding and democratic regression, are to be expected. They have certainly marked the histories of established Western democracies (Berman 2017) – and, in the view of some political scientists, may be doing so again (Foa and Mounk 2017, Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) although this interpretation is very open to question (Norris 2017). This implies that we ought not to read current developments simply as a period of ‘backsliding’ evidenced by institutional erosion and illiberal populism. Rather, taking a process-oriented, Tillyan perspective focused on state-citizen relations, as Dimitrova does, may reveal not just negative but also positive signs in current developments in CEE.

However, Dimitrova's perspective is, paradoxically, simultaneously more pessimistic and more optimistic than the standard backsliding narrative of institutions being suborned by illiberal populists. More pessimistic, because it claims that citizens and civil society have not, up to now, succeeded in forcing post-communist elites to provide universal and equal access to resources and institutions and to relinquish their privileged position exploiting the political and economic resources of the state. More optimistic, because it interprets the current period of unrest and polarization as a struggle to hold elites to account through emerging mechanisms of popular mobilization. These include movements employing discourses defending liberal democracy but also, and provocatively, characteristically illiberal movements such as the citizens' initiatives to ban gay marriage, which are also part of the wider process of the 'massification' of politics paralleling, in some ways, historical processes of democratisation in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This tough-minded, but potentially optimistic reading of CEE democratisation is, however, potentially tempered by lessons from other post-communist regions. As Knott (this collection; see also Hale 2014, Way 2015) makes clear, despite periodic bouts of instability, including electoral challenges and protest movements, hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet space have proved remarkably adaptable and adept at (re-)stabilising themselves thus preventing a decisive or long-lasting democratic breakthrough. Patterns of (un)democratic development in South Eastern Europe, whose more strongly party-based political systems and involvement in EU integration processes offer a closer analogy to CEE, tell a similar story.

As Bieber (this collection) highlights, ruling parties in South East Europe in the 2010s have been able to contain or reverse the pressures for democratisation of the 2000s, to establish forms of competitive authoritarian government distinct from those of the 1990s. Familiar

moves in the direction of ‘executive aggrandisement’ – a decline in press freedom, the erosion of independent institutions, reliance on informal control of the state administration and the strategic use of crises – were supplemented by the strategic use of ideology and other legitimising tools. Ruling parties that built hybrid regimes often (re-)took office as self-proclaimed pro-European reformers, with Western political and financial backing, actively seeking inclusion in mainstream European party families and the EU.

The variation of hybrid regimes across time and the adaptability and resilience of the political forces underpinning them may have lessons for CEE and, in particular, for Hungary and Poland where backsliding has been spearheaded by illiberal ‘mainstream’ parties. Comparison across post-communist (sub-)regions may also help throw the distinctness of CEE backsliding into sharp focus.

3. Bringing in illiberal socio-economic structures

Dimitrova’s stress on the need for a perspective on CEE’s democratic difficulties that is explicitly informed by the real distribution of economic and social power is echoed by other contributors to this collection. There is a voluminous literature on the relationship between patterns of socio-economic development and forms of (un)democratic political development (for overviews see Diamond 1992, Bunce 2001, Robinson 2006). In the context of CEE democratisation, much of the literature focused on how new democracies in the region could manage simultaneous economic and political transition, and why the economic dislocation suffered by many in the region did not bring forth destabilising mass protest (Greskovits 1996, Ekiert and Kubik 1998, Vanhuyse 2006). Later research sought to establish whether there was a distinct model or models of post-communist capitalism, noting that, while there was

variation, the distinct neo-liberal inspiration of capitalism marked almost all societies in CEE (Bohle and Greskovits 2012, Innes 2014, Appel and Orenstein 2018). This meant that CEE democracies were 'born hollow' not simply in terms of having weakly rooted institutions of political and civil society, but also in terms of domestically-rooted economic society and economic actors.

The question posed is whether forms of democratic 'hollowness' – which, while different in scope and origin, loosely parallel 'normal' patterns of decline of party-electoral politics in Western Europe – and authoritarian backsliding are related. Bela Greskovits' (2015) seminal paper found no systemic relationship between backsliding and hollowing in CEE and his later research suggested that, far from being a simple block on democratic disloyal elites, in a case such as Hungary the relative strength (of parts of) the civil society – concretely, conservative civic movements and civil society organisations (Greskovits 2017) – facilitated backsliding.

However, as Hanley and Vachudova, Dimitrova, and Cianetti (all this collection) note, other than Hungary and Poland, in CEE systemic threats to democracy have come less from electorally dominant illiberal parties capturing society and the state, than illiberal interests in society and predatory elites capturing mainstream parties. The Estonian and Latvian cases (Cianetti, this collection) show that the democratic threat of exclusivist elites can come in the form of impediments to higher democratic quality rather than necessarily in the form of direct challenges to existing democratic institutions. The entrenchment of private interests in the state and in party politics may potentially represent an alternative route to backsliding in states such as the Czech Republic and Slovenia with fragmented party systems and/or where a strong socially conservative right is weak or absent (Bugarić and Kuhelj 2015, Innes 2016).

As Hanley and Vachudova's paper on the rise of Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic shows, this route can entail political disruption rather than the simple creeping capture of existing institutions and parties. In such cases, where the existing party systems do not spawn a dominant illiberal party from their existing line-up, disruption eventually comes from the (cyclical) rise of new anti-establishment parties (Haughton and Deegan Krause 2015, Hanley and Sikk 2016). However, as the case of the Czech billionaire-turned-politician Babiš shows, these 'anti-corruption' parties can themselves be vehicles for vested economic interests. Hanley and Vachudova's study also demonstrates the need to move beyond generic models of CEE political economy or evocation of anonymous off-stage business interests: a closer look at Babiš's origins highlights the presence of a small influential group of oligarchical billionaires who sit atop a society with a famously equal distribution of income and an economy powerfully shaped by FDI (Drahokoupil 2008).

Babiš's displacement of traditional parties – and the 'regional godfathers' who informally controlled them – also highlights how perspectives developed in the post-Soviet context can inform the study of CEE's evolving democratic difficulties. While the clash of clans and oligarchs is a common but complex phenomenon which, as Knott (this collection) suggests, can be the crude underpinning of a form of pluralism, the direct entry of an oligarch into politics as party founder is a rare and risky undertaking, which exposes the oligarch-politician to direct, public scrutiny and cuts off the usual options for hedging bets by discreetly backing other parties. In this sense, the Moldovan post-Soviet case resonates with the Czech one. Both highlight the need to study more closely the fusion of political, economic and media power, commonly studied in a compartmentalised way or fed into aggregate indexes of democracy and good governance as simple numerical scores.

What is less clear is whether hollowness, corruption and state capture – while stabilising hybrid regimes in Moldova and Ukraine or consolidating party-based hybrid regimes in South East Europe – can in and of themselves end democracy. There is, to be sure, broad agreement that they are detrimental to democracy in multiple ways. As Dimitrova (this collection; see also Tudoroiu (2015)) notes, state capture “... subverts the very fabric of young democracies, undermining both input legitimacy (political representation) and output legitimacy (effective public policies/universal provision of public goods) ...”. This, she argues, may aid backsliding by prompting public withdrawal from politics or lending credibility to illiberal and authoritarian discourses. However, few authors go as far as Klíma (2015; see also Klíma and Medilow 2016), who concludes that the interpenetration of corrupt informal business interests and the traditional parties had already degraded Czech democracy into a hybrid regime long before the rise of the billionaire populist Babiš and his anti-corruption movement ANO. This implies that the appearance of populist forces like Babiš’s ANO is a potentially ambiguous phenomenon, articulating genuine societal demands for political reform and pushing issues of good governance centre stage, while further loosening the weak checks and balances that characterise post-communist democracy and embedding private interests at the core of the state.

4. Maintaining democratic’ stability versus improving democratic quality?

The idea that there may be a trade-off between efforts to improve democratic quality and to maintain the stability of democracies with low democratic quality is the third theme which emerges across the collection. Unsurprisingly given the focus on Hungary and Poland, much discussion about backsliding has so far focused on issues of democratic stability. As the

Hungarian and Polish governments have proceeded to undermine democratic institutions, the key preoccupation of the backsliding debate has been with the resilience of democratic institutions and of democracy as a regime. By broadening our perspective beyond the Hungarian and Polish cases, this special issue challenges facile equivalences between democratic stability and quality, showing different ways in which the stability of institutions can be sustained – rather than threatened – by their low-democratic-quality features. While all the contributions recognise the importance of functional democratic institutions, several also highlight how stability *per se* does not necessarily mean (good) democracy, as it can rest on elements of exclusion, elite control, and popular apathy.

Stability is premised on general agreement on the ‘rules of the game’ among key political players. While this can apply to any regime’s chance of survival, the literature on democratic consolidation has put particular emphasis on the need for such basic agreement to guarantee the persistence of democratic institutions as the ‘only game in town’ (Linz and Stepan 1996, Schedler 1998, see also Rhoden 2013). However, democratic stability is not the same as democratic quality.

The difference (and, in fact, the potential trade off) between the two was already envisioned in Lijphart’s (1975) early works on consociationalism. Although he subsequently tended to stress only the advantages of consociational stability for plural societies, Lijphart initially also highlighted the risks entailed by the enforced stability that characterises consociationalism, and especially the risk of promoting elitism and de-politicising public debate.⁶ In his review of the democratisation and quality of democracy literatures, Munck (2007) also stressed that democratic stability and democratic quality are to be seen as two separate research agendas, as they concern two distinct aspects of the issue. This distinction has been usefully employed

in, for example, the study of Latin America, where it has been argued that economic (neo-)liberalism has at the same time sustained democratic stability and undermined democratic quality (Weyland 2004).

Several contributions to this special issue highlight aspects of this trade-off, which seems to persist in different forms across different stages of democratic consolidation. At the low end, the post-Soviet countries analysed by Knott (this collection) and the South-Eastern European countries discussed by Bieber (this collection) provide examples of stability in the context of hybrid regimes. In Moldova and Ukraine, stability is founded on the balance between popular pressures for greater and better democracy, on one hand, and competing elites' resistance and control over existing institutions on the other. This balancing act, Knott argues, creates the conditions for a relatively stable dynamic equilibrium. In South-East Europe, as Bieber explains, stability has taken precedence over genuine democratisation – not least in the eyes of EU policymakers – creating the conditions for illiberal elites to establish and consolidate their power while playing the 'Europeanisation' card, thus defusing contestation from below. This has often been called 'stabilitocracy' (Bieber 2017, Pavlović 2016, 2017).

Estonia and Latvia (Cianetti, this collection) illustrate the complexities of the stability-quality trade off at a higher level of democratisation. The two Baltic countries have in many respects been success stories, surging ahead from their Soviet past to establish functioning democratic institutions, which show little sign of being vulnerable to backsliding. Their stability is all the more surprising as an ethnically divided polity is typically expected to breed instability (see, for example, Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2007, 14). While these achievements are not to be dismissed, it is also important to look at the price of such stability. Cianetti argues that Estonia and Latvia's stability has been founded on a double hollowness – intended to empty out (or

keep empty) democracy of its popular component: a “technocratic hollowness” (often observed in other CEE countries) that narrows the space for discussing and contesting socio-economic policies (*what* the state is for); and an “ethnic hollowness”, which restricts debate and political inclusion along ethnic lines (*who* the state is for). While the debate about the relationship between hollowness and backsliding remains open (Greskovits 2015), the cases of Estonia and Latvia show that hollowness cannot be taken as necessarily causing (or creating the conditions for) backsliding. On the contrary, the Estonian and Latvian double hollowness – far from triggering instability – has been a constitutive feature of stability. Once again, paralleling Bieber’s findings on South-East Europe, an excessive focus on stability might hinder improvements in democratic quality.

This also suggests that the increasing attractiveness of populist and ‘unorthodox’ parties (Pop-Eleches 2010) elsewhere in Europe may be understood as a disruption of a hollow party competition rather than as disaffection with democracy as a regime. While, as the cases of Hungary and Poland show, this situation can open the doors for “backsliders” to attack democratic institutions, destabilisation of party competition might also be necessary to revitalise and “fill up” hollow democracy.

Collectively, these contributions show that stability cannot be taken as an end in itself, and that the relationship between stability, destabilisation, and quality of democracy must be investigated rather than assuming that all forms of destabilisation of the status quo must by necessity imply backsliding.

5. Conclusion: an agenda for an interdisciplinary approach

The consensus around the success of democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe that reigned in the near-decade following EU Accession of 2004 was largely rooted in the (sub-) discipline of comparative political science with its focus on the putting into place of institutions, which would constrain and cultivate political and social actors. These would gradually anchor themselves in transformed social structures and cultures, as well as ‘anchoring themselves from above’ in an enlarged EU dealing with issues of ‘non-compliance’ (Sedelmeier 2014). Like all social science perspectives, this has had to contend with the strength and resilience of various ‘unexpected’ challenges: the salience of illiberal identity politics; the degree to which corrupt political-economic elites have reneged on democratic settlements post-accession (Ganev 2013); the unexpected continuity and even resurgence of autocratic Russian influence in CEE. Taken together, the extent of democratic regression in a region considered the clearest democratic success story in the post-communist world – and proceeding most rapidly in countries, like Hungary and Poland, that were considered CEE’s democratic frontrunners – poses a need for rethinking the ways in which (de-)democratisation in the region is studied and understood.

This process of rethinking need not, however, take the form of the self-lacerating baby-and-bathwater critiques of practitioners of ‘Sovietology’ after 1991, over the failure to anticipate the speed and scale of the Soviet collapse (Cox 1994), or re-treading polemics of the mid 1990s about the incursion of comparativists into the study of Eastern Europe or the relative merits of intra-regional versus cross-regional comparison (Bunce 1995, Karl and Schmitter 1995). Most, if not all social science can expect to be wrong in key respects – and to be wrong-footed by events. What is striking, however, across the diverse contributions to this special issue is that all pull away from understanding (de-)democratisation in terms of a political science-based agenda of institutional design and institutional (de-)consolidation. Instead,

many seek to bring in insights from adjacent disciplines such as political economy, political theory, and ethnography to get to grips with the ways in which social, cultural and economic practices have inflected institutions rather than being inflected by them. This raises the possibility that the backsliding debate may best be approached through a new interdisciplinary synthesis along the lines of the 'contextual holism' advocated by Kubik (2013). The somewhat rigid division of the post-communist world in three sub-regions based, in part, on perceived success in democratisation – Central (and Eastern Europe); the (Western) Balkans; and the former Soviet Union (Rupnik 1999, Moeller and Skaaning 2010) – may also need rethinking. Adhering too rigidly to this tripartite division might impede our capacity to draw comparisons that will help us understand unexpected backsliding in a region such as CEE.

A useful point-of-departure exercise could be the production of better, more intellectually pluralist measurements of democracy. While Dimitrova (this collection) follows Charles Tilly in advocating a 'processual', political-economy based understanding of democratisation that learns from the slow-burning universalisation of resources in Western cases, Dawson (this collection) follows Jurgen Habermas and others in seeing democratisation as rooted primarily in the deliberative practices of citizens and only secondarily in the state, thus calling for a research strategy centred on ethnographical fieldwork. These varied, less commonly used approaches to democratisation throw into sharp relief the reliance of political science-based attempts to chart democratisation on a very narrow strand of democratic theory: the institutional checklists deriving from Robert Dahl's ideas about the procedural minimum criteria for democracy.

In a CEE context, we might then move to compare the historic-high democracy gradings given to CEE countries in the mid-2000s – and the comparative research that largely followed such institutional evaluation – with more in-depth case studies published at the same time, charting various aspects of democratic practice, such as political discourse, historical memory, social justice, minority rights, corruption, public spheres, civil societies. In charting a way forward in the study of backsliding and other forms of democratic malaise in CEE and beyond, it is the complex, the uncountable, the non-linear, the multi-causal and the long-term that must come to the fore.

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¹ The label ‘backsliding’, which originates as a religious term meaning a failure to maintain piety and Christian faith, has been criticised because of its moralistic and normative overtones (Müller2014, Krastev 2016).

² The nature of Eastern and/or Central Europe– both as identity construct, and as politically distinct sub-region(s)– is the subject of an extensive literature. See overviews, for example, Moeller and Skaaning (2010), Bernhard and Jasiewicz (2015), and Twardzisz (2018).

³ The primary examples he identifies are relatively new political outsider movements such as Hugo Chavez and the Chavistas, rather than well-established parties such as Fidesz and PiS.

⁴ For a discussion of an alternative conceptualisation of democratic consolidation as the absence of threat to democracy and unlikelihood of its collapse see Schneider (2008:8-19).

⁵ For a wider critique of governance ratings (including on democracy), see Cooley and Snyder (2015).

⁶ As Dryzek (2005) notes, the elite-driven form of consociationalism that Lijphart ultimately endorsed rested on an attempt to 'silence' the public sphere.