

# The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe

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## Abstract

The essay identifies two main dangers to East Central Europe's young democracies: 'hollowing,' or declining popular involvement in democracy, and 'backsliding,' or destabilization and reverting to semi-authoritarian practices. It traces the malaise of some but not all postsocialist democracies to varied combinations of hollowing and backsliding. The main finding is an intricate pattern: in some cases the two syndromes coincide, in others they do not. There is also significant cross-country variation in the gravity of syndromes. The region's pure neoliberal capitalist regimes are likelier to undermine popular political participation than those, which try to balance marketization with relatively generous social protection for its losers. At the same time, the article finds that while the hollowing of democracy before the global financial crisis has not necessarily been a curse, the massive participation of citizenry prior to the crisis has not been a generalized blessing from the viewpoint of democracy's resilience. This is substantiated by a comparative case study of Hungary and Latvia with lessons for activists of democracy promotion and civil society development.

## Introduction

Focusing on ten East Central European member states of the EU,<sup>1</sup> this essay explores two major challenges to the quality and solidity of their democracies. The first of these refers to the general European problem of declining popular involvement in politics, termed hollowing of democracy (Mair, 2006). The second challenge is captured by the term backsliding, which suggests destabilization or even a reversal in the direction of democratic development. Backsliding is usually traced to the radicalization of sizeable groups within the remaining active citizenry, and the weakening loyalty of political elites to democratic principles.

While the long-term process of hollowing of democracy is less spectacular, the news on backsliding often makes it to the headlines. Today analysts and the general public are alarmed by the frequent disruptive protests against unemployment, poverty and uncertainty stemming from austerity, and the occasional remarkable showing of radical right wing and other antisystem parties at elections. In several countries of the region, especially those hard hit by the global financial crisis and the Great Recession (2007–09), governments have also attempted to gain control over free media and other institutions of democratic checks and balances, as well as over the activity of civil society organizations.

Although the region-wide spread of economic and political instability justifies the concerns, it is clear that the problems faced by individual democracies are neither

uniform in kind nor equally grave. This article is motivated by the interest in this diversity. It seeks to identify the concrete combinations in which hollowing and backsliding threaten the East Central European democracies, and to grasp the logics of these combinations.

The elaboration starts with a brief overview of the literature on hollowing and backsliding. The former traditionally focuses on the old democracies of the west, and the latter on the specific challenges faced by the new postsocialist democratic orders. Although these two traditions of thought have developed in parallel and without much communication between their representative authors, their relevance for understanding the current problems and prospects of democracy in East Central Europe calls for the integration of their insights.

Based on stylized evidence, the article then demonstrates that hollowing and backsliding of democracy occur in varied combinations in East Central Europe. In some cases the two syndromes coincide, in others they do not. There is also significant cross-country variation in the gravity of syndromes. Hence the question emerges: is this variation random, or is there a logic to the empirically observed configurations? In search of an answer the article compares in some detail Latvia and Hungary, two extreme examples of backsliding, preceded by democracy's hollowing in the former but not in the latter case. The conclusions summarize the lessons for policy makers and activists on multiple levels and with different tools at their disposal to combat the malaise of democracy.

## Ruling the void vs becoming authoritarian

Hollowing of democracy is not a new phenomenon but has long been observed and studied in western countries. Its symptoms are variations on the theme of citizens' exit from the democratic arena and political parties' exit from bonds with their constituencies and alliances with civil society organizations. In empirical terms, hollowing refers to declining turnout at elections, waning of citizens' identification with parties manifested in dwindling party membership and increasing volatility of voter preferences as well as atrophy of parties' relationships with civil society (Mair, 2006, 2013).

Many of the East Central European political systems exhibit this syndrome to an even larger extent than the old democracies. Except for the founding elections of the new democratic order in the early 1990s, turnout in the East has been usually lower than in the west. Membership in and identification with parties have never been close to western levels (Van Biezen et al., 2012), and stable strategic alliances between political and civil actors have rarely been forged. Accordingly, some authors characterized the postsocialist democracies as being ruled by parties without civil society and influenced by political values without parties (Rose and Munro, 2009). The hollowing of democracy continued and even accelerated during the Great Recession (Kriesi and Hernández, 2014).

These similarities and differences notwithstanding, many analysts of East European democratization opted for alternative frameworks and terms to analyze their subject. Their often pessimistic initial accounts identified not the corrosive effect of massive exit but the explosive potential of radical voice and absent loyalty (Hirschman, 1970) as the main threats to the success of Eastern Europe's turn to and consolidation of democracy. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, in the worst case the fragile Eastern democracies were expected to pass away 'with a bang' of anarchy, violence, or electoral counterrevolution exploited by authoritarian rulers, not 'with a whimper' like in the west where the waning of popular involvement was seen to leave democrats with the task of 'ruling the void' (Mair, 2006).

In the early 1990s many scholars doubted that democracy would ever take root in postsocialist soil. Some analysts viewed the 'Leninist legacy' as being inimical to political freedom and civic activism (Jowitt, 1992). Others believed that building a market economy, a welfare state, democracy, and an independent nation state simultaneously 'from scratch' meant mutually incompatible tasks (Offe, 1991). Even in the cases where democratization had been on the agenda, rapid backsliding was expected to be brought about by protests of victims of social dislocation or by aggrieved electorates' resolve to vote out neoliberal economic reformers and bring to

power populist authoritarian rulers (Greskovits, 1998). In fact, most of the Soviet and Yugoslav successor states stayed authoritarian indeed, or after short-lived efforts of democratization backslid into semi-authoritarian mixed regimes 'that have the distinctive profile in comparison to full scale democracies and dictatorships of combining elements of both types of political systems' (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011, p. 9).

Observers who maintained their belief that democratization may against all odds succeed in the region, put their faith in the EU, as the only source of hope for the East to avoid the turbulent politics of the South, namely Latin America in the 1970s to 1980s (Przeworski, 1991). Hence another difference between the theories of democracy's troubles in Europe's core and periphery: while the former have not counted on external powers to save western democracy from erosion, the latter factored in western help in keeping backsliding at bay.

By the 2000s, the ample economic and administrative assistance provided by the EU to its regained periphery, including the close monitoring of accession preparations, created optimism about the region's future (Vachudova, 2005). Alas, the optimistic mood did not last long. Soon after the enlargement in 2004, political turbulences in a number of new member states, namely food riots in Slovakia, populist nationalist government coalitions including extremist parties as junior partners in Slovakia and Poland, the specter of ungovernability in the Czech Republic, and massive violent demonstrations in Hungary, brought back with vengeance the concerns about backsliding. As editors of a special issue of *Journal of Democracy*, reflecting on the dire state of East Central European democracies, wrote: 'Whatever danger remained of their reverting to authoritarianism seemed to be removed by their entry into the EU... Yet today, all are beset by sharp political conflict, and there is growing concern about the solidity of their democracies' (Plattner and Diamond, 2007, p. 5).

After 2008, many East Central European democracies were exposed to the disruptive effects of the global financial crisis and the Great Recession. Threats of insolvency, banking crises, collapsing export markets, International Monetary Fund (IMF)-EU interventions and the ensuing austerity programs paved the way to a new round of social dislocation. All this led to growing concerns that:

the very countries, which have achieved the greatest success in the past two decades are now displaying serious vulnerabilities in their still young democratic systems. Over the past five years, *Nations in Transit* findings have shown a clear backsliding in key governance institutions across this subset of countries (Walker and Kolaczowska-Habdanck, 2012, p. 9).

Indeed, East Central Europe's fragile democracies have had to weather the crisis in circumstances in which the fatigue of the majority of citizenry coincided with the radicalization of a minority and the weakening democratic loyalty of influential elite groups. That is why answering the question – how dangerous the current situation for democratic development really is – requires a new integrated approach that draws on the concepts of hollowing and backsliding of democracy simultaneously. This seems even more important because little is known for sure about the relationship between the erosion of democracy's popular content and the destabilization and reversal of democratic order.

On the one hand hollowing ought to have an impact on the risk of backsliding. How could democracy remain solid, if parties' membership and embeddedness in civil society evaporate at the same time as citizens lose appetite for their identification with parties, for voting at elections and joining civil society organizations? Who remains there to defend the system against its enemies once its popular content atrophies? On the other hand one could also argue that while western democracy has been eroding for several decades, instances of its serious backsliding let alone collapse have been rare after the Second World War. Ironically, then, the fact that the nascent postsocialist democracies exhibit symptoms of hollowing to a greater extent than their western counterparts but so far their majority has survived the recurrent hard times without reverting to authoritarianism, may send the message: there is a long way to go before hollowing leads to nondemocratic outcomes.

The East Central European context complicates clarification of the relationship between the two threats even further. Some complications stem from the specific manifestations of the phenomena under postsocialist conditions, others from the possibility of alternative interpretations of existing experience. As far as hollowing is concerned, the notion may not be applied to the East with the same meaning and analytic rigor as to the West, because in the former case there has never been much to hollow out in the first place. As argued elsewhere, in comparison to their western counterparts, the postsocialist democracies had been born with a 'hollow core' (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). It follows that while sparse popular involvement, that is, *hollowness*, is an often mentioned feature of these new democracies, it should be traced as much to the legacies of Soviet-type socialism as to a process of further erosion.

Moreover, even when some analysts claim to have found evidence of hollowing, as in the case of declining turnout at elections, others see wild fluctuation instead of a uniform downward trend in participation (Pacek et al., 2009). The latter authors attribute fluctuation to voters' rational behavior rather than to disenchantment with democracy: citizens are more eager to turn out at

important elections. The argument is that after the salient issues of capitalism, democracy and EU membership had been decided the stakes involved in elections declined and the incentives to participate weakened.

As to the turbulent dynamics of backsliding, the main difficulty of interpretation is that it is easier to demonstrate backsliding as an ongoing *process* than to capture the exact turning point at which the accumulation of destabilizing strains and pressures ultimately leads to the demise of democracy. Even if the East's postwar past is replete with episodes of democratic breakdown administered by the communists in the late 1940s, and new authoritarian leaders after the collapse of Soviet-type socialism, the historical perspective might be of little help to judge contemporary cases. This is because the few ongoing semi-authoritarian projects of East Central Europe – prominently Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán's illiberal state building – advance in an almost surreptitious way via adoption of a patchwork of worldwide existing legal and institutional 'worst practices' to gradually weaken democracy until it is, to paraphrase Van Biezen et al. (2012), 'going, going... gone'.

Whether or not authoritarian-leaning leaders consciously opt for *low-key tactics* of rollback of democracy in order to remain safely under the radar screen of EU institutions and international watchdog organizations of democratic development, their practices tend to lead to confusion and caution at both kinds of forums. This is apparent at the fact that in contrast to the assessment of many domestic and foreign experts, and after downgrading Hungary's democracy score for seven years in a row, the 2014 *Nations in Transit* report of Freedom House still classifies Hungary as 'consolidated democracy'.

## Hollowing and backsliding in East Central Europe

To get an idea of the varied configurations of hollowing and backsliding, I constructed composite indexes of both syndromes, which allow a ranking of the postsocialist EU member states on these dimensions.

The result of hollowing, as it stood in 2000–2007, is proxied by data on turnout at national and European parliamentary elections, party membership and volatility of voter preferences. The same indicators were considered by Mair (2006, 2013). To capture parties' embeddedness in society, the article relies on data which, albeit unable to capture the exact links between party politics and civic activism, indicates the density and clout of civil society. This set includes the civil society sub-scores of *Nations in Transit*, and data on trust in NGOs. Data on the share of workers covered by collective agreements and trust in religious organizations is added on the grounds that traditionally trade unions and church-bound organizations have been important allies of

political parties in maintaining and mobilizing their constituencies.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the composite index of backsliding is based on commonsensical and broadly comparable stylized evidence. This includes the Bertelsmann index of democratic transformation, Freedom House data on the freedom of the press, the World Bank's Voice and Accountability and Political Stability and Absence of Violence indices, and data on the vote share of radical right-wing parties at national and European parliamentary elections. Finally, I considered data on the intensity of antiausterity protest, namely number of events, participants and the extent of economic violence involved. The backsliding index captures both the dynamic and static aspects, because while its focus is on *change* in the hard times of 2009–2013/14 relative to the preceding good years of 2004–2007, it also considers the actual *level* of indicators in 2009–2013/14, where possible and relevant. The results of East Central European democracies' simultaneous ranking on the scales of hollowing and backsliding are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 reveals puzzling configurations. First, shown to be the region's most dramatic case of backsliding in 2009–2013/14, Hungarian democracy also happens to have been the most hospitable environment for political participation over 2000–2007. Similarly, recent instability of Slovene democracy could hardly be traced to the prior evaporation of its popular content. In terms of the main focus of the article, namely the gravity of backsliding, next to Hungary Latvia is the second (and Bulgaria the third) extreme case. Yet, in contrast to Hungary and Slovenia, both Latvia and Bulgaria rank high on the scale of hollowing as well. In line with the opinion of other observers, the Czech, Slovak and Polish democracies appear to have been the least challenged by hollowing and backsliding alike. Therefore, especially the Czech and Slovak cases seem to be ideal contexts to study the factors of success in keeping both dangers simultaneously at bay. Finally, Estonia constitutes the polar opposite of Hungary. Ranked as the least participatory in the region, Estonian democracy seems to have suffered the least from backsliding during the crisis.

Is there a logic which can capture the actual relationships between hollowing and backsliding in individual democracies? While a systematic comparison of all the cases is beyond the scope of this essay, Table 1 helps us identify some commonalities and differences, which were established in earlier research (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012) and are likely to be relevant for the current state of democracy in the region.

First, all the eroded democracies in the lower cells (the Baltic states, Bulgaria and Romania) have meager welfare states. In contrast, their counterparts in the upper cells (the Visegrad states and Slovenia) have much more generously spent on social protection, even if with the

exception of Hungary their welfare states have typically shrunk over the 2000s. Most countries in the latter group have also been more equal than those in the former. Is there a relationship between welfare expenditure, equity and the extent of popular involvement in democracy?

Second, the Baltic states as well as Bulgaria and Romania stand out for their relatively prudent fiscal and monetary policies. These countries typically kept fiscal deficit, government debt (albeit not private foreign debt), and overall public expenditures low and established effective institutional safeguards of macroeconomic stability. In this respect, the experience of the Visegrad countries and Slovenia is much more mixed. Is there a relationship between stability-oriented macroeconomic governance and the hollowing of democracy?

Third, only three of the five participatory democracies, namely the Czech and Slovak republics and Poland, could escape the most devastating consequences of the global financial meltdown: banking crises, austerity programs with or without IMF-EU tutelage, record deep recessions, skyrocketing unemployment and impoverishment. All the rest of democracies, whether hollow or not, suffered disproportionately and witnessed much more disruptive protests of aggrieved losers (Beissinger and Sasse, 2012). Is it then exposure to the crisis and its management that account for most of the difference? If so, how to make sense of the striking variation in the gravity of backsliding in the similarly eroded Estonian and Latvian democracies, especially that the Baltic states were particularly hard hit by the financial crisis and ensuing recession?

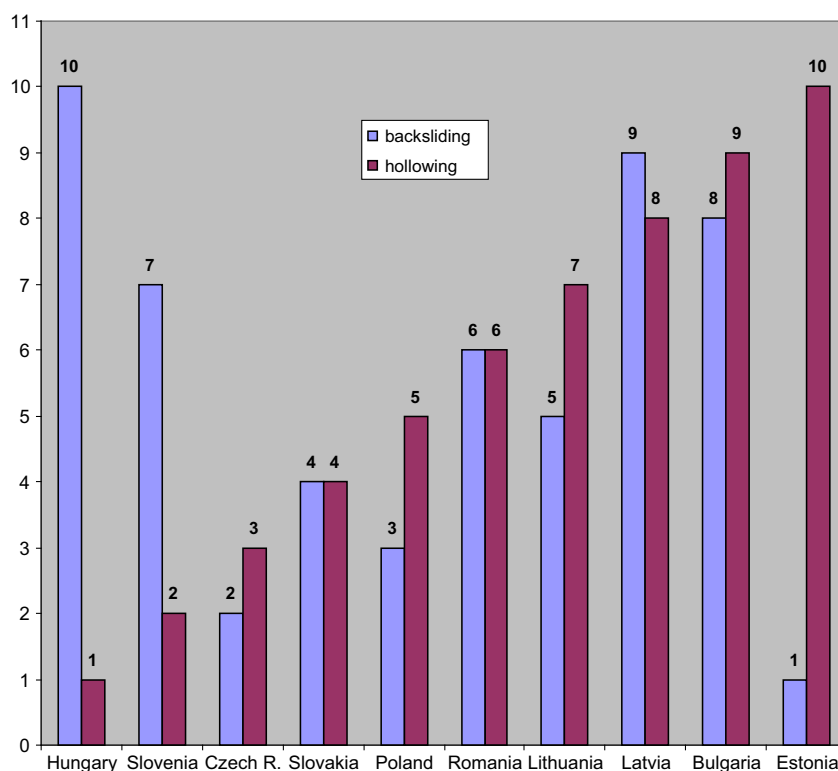
To answer at least some of the above questions and thereby learn about the relationship between hollowing and backsliding of democracy, the article will contrast below the two cases, which are most similar in the latter but highly dissimilar in the former terms: Hungary and Latvia.<sup>3</sup>

## The sources and logics of democratic malaise in Hungary and Latvia

As explanation of the large difference in the extent of erosion of popular involvement in Hungarian and Latvian democracies the following is proposed. Both countries 'returned to Europe' after multiple and simultaneous transformations. Yet, while in Latvia the politics and policies characterizing each major area of systemic change, namely building an independent nation state, welfare state, market economy and democracy (Offe, 1991) tended to *contribute* to the hollowing of democracy, in Hungary they typically *conspired against* hollowing.

Policies to (re)build the nation state restricted the electoral base and thus popular democratic involvement in Latvia but not in Hungary. The nonparticipatory character of Latvian democracy can be partly traced to a

**Figure 1.** Hollowing (2000–2007) and backsliding (2009–2013/14) of East Central European democracies (lowest rank = 1, highest rank = 10).



Sources for sub-indexes of hollowing: IDEA Database; Kriesi and Hernández, 2013; Van Biezen et al., 2012; Freedom House: *Nations in Transit*, 2014a; Visser, 2013; EUROBAROMETER 68, 2008; Beissinger, 2012. Sources for sub-indexes of backsliding: Kaufmann et al., 2014; Bertelsmann Transformationsindex, 2014; Freedom House: *Freedom of the Press*, 2014b; Mudde, 2014; Beissinger and Sasse, 2012.

**Table 1.** A map of hollowing and backsliding of democracy in East Central Europe

Index of backsliding	Low: rank 1–5		High: rank 6–10	
Index of hollowing				
Low: rank 1–5	Low hollowing/low backsliding		Low hollowing/high backsliding	
	Czech Republic		Hungary	
	Slovakia		Slovenia	
	Poland			
High: rank 6–10	High hollowing/low backsliding		High hollowing/high backsliding	
	Estonia		Latvia	
	Lithuania		Bulgaria	
			Romania	

'birth defect' in the sense that the new state introduced a restrictive citizenship law in the early 1990s that denied citizenship and thus the right to vote for all those Russians who had arrived under the Soviet era: almost one-third of the country's population. In contrast, rebuilding the independent nation state did not bring about restrictions of citizenship and democratic rights in Hungary.

Both the meager Latvian and the relatively generous Hungarian welfare systems protected certain social groups more than others. However, the selectivity of welfare state might have had a detrimental impact on popular democratic involvement much more in Latvia than in Hungary.

In Latvia, the new agenda of nation building under threat was consistent with a specific pattern of welfare



provisions. On the one hand, spending on benefits that were accessible for citizens and noncitizens alike – i.e. health care, pensions, or active and passive labor market policies – was subject to strict control. On the other hand, the few areas where the country's welfare system was less meager – i.e. public sector employment and spending on higher education – happened to be those, which had a larger potential to distribute benefits above all to the titular majority as access could be limited through requirement of citizenship and/or official language proficiency.

The Hungarian welfare system envisaged protection – through liberalized access to disability and early retirement pensions, benefits for the unemployed and families, and encompassing schemes of public health care and education – against decline in social hierarchy due to material deprivation and status loss. Protection has been granted above all to those who had acquired a fair social status under socialism. In contrast, Hungary's sizeable Roma population was deprived of sufficient protection against the threat of a decline to underclass status. Roma have had no means to combat exclusion, as they had few allies among the better off, and were passive in democratic politics. Similarly, the generational distribution of benefits reveals a tendency of the welfare system to protect age groups endowed with, and neglect those without, political resources. As a consequence, while in Hungary children and certain groups of youth run high risks of becoming poor, the risk of poverty gradually declines with ageing, and reaches its bottom in the oldest generations. This is in striking contrast with the situation in Latvia, where mainly elderly people are affected by impoverishment.

In sum, in Hungary social protection is geared towards satisfying those groups on whose vote, contentious behavior and loyalty political success ultimately depends. In turn, those unprotected by the welfare system were the ones whose political participation was the least likely anyway, namely the Roma and the youth. Inclusion/exclusion via the welfare system have thus kept the hollowing of Hungarian democracy at bay, albeit at the cost of a deepening divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' of the political clout. In Latvia, the meager welfare state contributed to the deprivation and political apathy of those – pensioners and industrial workers – whose political involvement was otherwise likely and could have perhaps saved Latvian democracy from becoming a showcase of popular disinvolvement.

Finally, 'depoliticization' of economic policy making might have further undermined the incentives for democratic participation, because it diminished the number of policy areas subject to democratic popular control. Depoliticization of policy making was more effective in Latvia than in Hungary, where the position and practice of institutional safeguards of macroeconomic stability, namely

budgetary discipline and central bank independence, remained politically contested.

While these differences help us better understand the structural conditions of Latvia's hollow and Hungary's vibrant democracy they tell us little about the content of popular political involvement and about its driving forces and relationship with democracy's destabilization and backsliding during hard times. To learn about the latter additional factors must be considered.

Different as they are, in 2008 both the Hungarian and Latvian economies were among the first put on test by global market actors. Both countries failed the test and became 'hot spots' of the financial crisis. What went wrong in Hungary, was that both public welfare spending and foreign currency denominated loans to private households and firms spiraled out of control of successive left-liberal governments. What went wrong in Latvia? Even if – unlike Hungarian authorities – Latvian conservatives stayed committed to prudent fiscal policies amidst fast growth and abundant international finance they opted for a mortgage and housing boom to promote middle class living standards (Bohle, 2010; Kattel and Raudla, 2013). By the late 2000s it became clear that these strategies of indebted development were built on shaky global foundations. Hungary's and Latvia's export competitiveness plummeted, current account deficits and external debt soared. Both countries fell from international grace, and had to turn to the IMF and EU for financial rescue packages. In exchange they implemented austerity programs, which triggered intense social and political protest.

A comparison of the turbulent events at the turning point of the global financial crisis and Great Recession helps highlight the relationship between Hungary's vibrant and Latvia's hollow democracy on the one hand, and the form and extent of democracy's backsliding in both polities on the other.

In terms of the intensity of protests during the crisis, both countries rank high in comparison with other regional eruptions of contentious politics (Beissinger and Sasse, 2012). However, while the Latvian protest wave occurred abruptly after an extended period of relative social peace, the antiausterity protests in Hungary were part and parcel of an almost decade-long upward trend in the number of protest events. While protest over the 2000s took many forms and was motivated by a variety of material or ideational purposes, its dynamics was driven by an increase in antigovernment contention organized and/or sponsored by the right-wing FIDESZ and far right Jobbik parties, as well as right-wing and far right social movements and organizations (Greskovits and Wittenberg, 2013; Várhalmi, 2013).

Related, Hungary and Latvia alike have seen the rise of the region's currently strongest far right parties, Jobbik and National Alliance, respectively. However, as noted by

an expert on the European far right, it is only the success of National Alliance that can be clearly linked to the crisis and recession. The

far right National Alliance (NA) not only significantly increased its representation in parliament between 2006 and 2011; it also became a junior coalition partner in the Latvian government. The puzzling aspect is that the NA's rise took place between 2010 and 2011, after the peak of the economic crisis in Latvia (Mudde, 2014, p. 101).

In turn, Jobbik, originating in a far right youth movement founded in the early 2000s, has become a successful political party during the intensifying contention of the 2000s in the context of a vibrant and mobilized civil society. Its ascendance was also fostered by its alliance with a number of other far right movements, including its paramilitary arm, the (by now banned but under several new names re-born) Hungarian Guard. Jobbik is also very popular among Hungarian youth, including university students. Indeed, the party is currently one of the main political actors on the right to amplify 'the voice of a disappointed generation', namely the youth disappointed with Hungarian capitalist democracy as it had been formed by *all* the earlier generations – whether representing the left or right of the political spectrum (Török, 2013).

There is a third similarity in the fact that the governments of both countries were exposed to intense protest at a moment of policy deadlock and impaired legitimacy. At the same time their hands were tied by too many inherited and new commitments ranging from providing social security through public welfare benefits and private loans, to the task of restoring macroeconomic stability and regaining control over foreign indebtedness. However, it was only in Hungary that the many voices of contention got orchestrated and organized into a powerful and sustained 'countermovement' (Polanyi, 1957) by a challenger, FIDESZ, which used a mixture of social demagoguery and strong populist/nationalist appeals for effective political mobilization.

Populist/nationalist leaders, prominently the leader of FIDESZ Viktor Orbán, reach out to their constituencies using revived notions of 'the people' and 'the nation', and promise to represent them as equal members of these communities rather than as individual citizens with different wealth, status and divisive preferences. This boded well for disenchanted Hungarians who by the late 2000s were felt to have been atomized by the downturn and anarchy of global markets and betrayed by the ruling left-liberal government. In this context of deadlock and loss of credibility FIDESZ promised, albeit in vague terms, to cut 'through prevailing stalemates or collusive agreements,' which paralyze policy making, and resolve

'issues previously believed to be unattainable, incompatible, or excluded' due to 'exploitative dependencies upon foreign powers' (Schmitter, 2007, pp. 6–7, 10).

In contrast, in Latvia, resistance to austerity has declined after the eruption of protest in the late 2000s. It is not the case though that an alternative to a radical neoliberal strategy of crisis management has been entirely absent. From 2010 on, Harmony – a social democratic party representing Latvia's Russian speaking minority – substantially increased its electoral support to the point that it became the largest party in the parliament. Even so, the lasting alliance between Latvia's nationalists and neoliberals – represented by fast-changing parties – has routinely excluded Harmony from becoming part of government coalitions and from presenting an alternative to neoliberal austerity.

Against the above background, FIDESZ's landslide victory at the 2010 parliamentary elections was a foregone conclusion, whereas the fact that the party acquired two-thirds of the mandate was accidental and is best explained by the Hungarian electoral system. However, it is partly due to this accident that the FIDESZ government could move ahead so fast in rolling back Hungarian democracy by using its overwhelming legislative power to infuse all the democratic institutions with authoritarian and illiberal 'checks and balances'. A far from complete list of changes includes softening up the legal and procedural constraints of legislation and government; far reaching centralization within the units of public administration; increasing exposure of civil servants to political pressures; stripping the parliamentary opposition off its remaining opportunities to influence political decisions; serious restrictions of media freedom; and the repeated modification of the electoral law in favor of the incumbent.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, since the 2010 parliamentary elections FIDESZ won four more landslide victories at local, European parliament and national parliamentary elections in a row. Explanations of this spectacular performance are many, including FIDESZ's sustained maneuvers to change the electoral system, party finance, or media access to their own benefit, as well as the pervasive fragmentation of opposition in terms of ideology, program, tactics and leadership. Not denying the relevance of these explanations, this essay emphasizes an additional factor: the Hungarian right could cement its political rule partly thanks to its sustained and successful efforts to conquer civil society. In contrast the left-liberals lost out in political battles not at least because their roots in civil society have atrophied over time.

There is a historical path to this asymmetric development (Greskovits and Wittenberg, 2013). After a period of weakness in the 1990s, Hungarian civil society began to regain its strength. But it strengthened in a particular way: the left and liberal camps, which due to their inherited and newly acquired social networks and political

capital were initially best endowed with organizational and ideational links to civil society, have over time severed these linkages, and depleted their reserves. This has happened for a number of reasons. The clarification of those requires further research. Nonetheless, one of the reasons could be that the dominant view of democracy, increasingly shared by (neo)liberal and postsocialist left-wing political actors, equated citizens' political involvement largely with voting and only very specific forms of civic activism, such as protection of civil rights and the rights of minorities, but barely anything else. A second reason might be political. Within their coalition governments the parties of the postsocialist left and the liberals kept competing for influence over politics and policy making, and their struggle reinforced their mutual ambivalence, even suspicion, towards each other's organizational bases in society. Sensing the opportunity, actors of the right and later the far right have gradually worked off their original disadvantages in social embeddedness, have taken deeper roots in and acquired increasing influence over civil society.

Along these lines, the subsequent victories of the right and the enduring weakness of the left-liberal opposition can partly be traced to the long-term 'tectonic' restructuring of state/civil society relationships. Indeed, the same process might have lasting implications for the development and quality of Hungarian democracy. In particular, there could be two ways in which formal politics might have interfered with civil organization and mobilization negatively, hampering consolidation and ultimately contributing to the backsliding of democracy. First, especially from 2006–2010, the left-liberal government's practices routinely ignored both a systematic deliberation with, and the protest by, certain civil society actors and kept democratic politics and policy making 'above' the sphere of society. This might have impeded democratic consolidation by discouraging popular political engagement. Second, in the same period, the right-wing parties' practices of bypassing parliament and appealing to the people directly through permanent mobilization might have impeded democratic consolidation 'from below' by not respecting the results of democratic elections and undermining trust in democratic institutions in other ways.

## Conclusions

One general lesson of the inquiry is that *neoliberal market societies* – especially when governed by coalitions of 'nation builders' and radical reformer technocrats (as is the case of all three Baltic states) – *are likelier to lead to hollow democracies than* the socially more protective and equitable models of *'embedded neoliberal' capitalism* characteristic to the Visegrad states or Slovenia (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012).

A second lesson is that while *the hollowing of democracy before the global financial crisis has not necessarily been a curse, the massive participation of citizenry prior to the crisis has not been a generalized blessing* from the viewpoint of democracy's resilience during the crisis. Instead, the essay discovered instances of backsliding in the clusters of hollowed and vibrant democracies alike. It is tempting to suggest, then, that a detailed comparative account of all these cases would help us better understand the differences of democracy's malaise in liberal and social democratic models of capitalism.

A related third lesson, inferred from the comparison of the Hungarian and Latvian cases, is that what really matters for the solidity or backsliding of democracy is not the vibrancy vs hollowness of the system, or the strength vs weakness of civil society per se. What seems to make the difference is the *liberal/democratic rather than illiberal/authoritarian ideology and purpose of the actors* who mobilize civil society organizations and their members for political participation.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the above, the analysis of the Latvian case points to the task of *(re)building civil society essentially 'from scratch'* and thereby strengthen democracy's popular content more generally. In contrast, the Hungarian case suggests different but no less complex tasks for those who put their faith in stable liberal *and* participatory democracy. There, the rollback of democracy has occurred in the context of a relatively vibrant, mobilized and politicized civil society.

The main challenge in Hungary then lies in the condition that citizens' participation has been exploited by political actors driven by ultimately illiberal and authoritarian motifs. In such circumstances, 'the tyranny of the majority' of ordinary citizens (Tocqueville, 2002) lays the foundations for the tyranny of an elite minority. Tyranny is there to stay unless civil society and thus the terrain of everyday democratic activism is (re)conquered from illiberal and autocratic ideas, practices and actors, and the regained social capital is converted to new political capital for liberal democratic forces.

The lessons for those involved in civil society development are far from simple. Rolling back the rollback of democracy is likely to require painstaking and slow-moving action at multiple levels. At the level of ideas, although demonstration of the attraction of European legal and cultural norms and other values of open society remains important, it will not suffice. The intellectual agenda also should include crafting and dissemination of a more inclusive concept of democracy in which popular involvement is not restricted to voting and a limited repertoire of civic activism, but is a more permanent and better institutionalized process. Along similar lines, more politicized e.g. Gramscian understandings of civil society should be brought back in.



At the level of national high politics, civil actors will have to forge new alliances with democratic parties to resist further consolidation of populist, nationalist and authoritarian practices and help and/or force parties to be more responsive to their constituency.

At the grassroots level of civil organization, the difficult task seems to be to penetrate nationalistic and other potentially exclusive communities with more inclusive sentiments of (local) patriotism, which are compatible with being European. Similarly, populism should not be condemned as coming from the devil altogether: indeed, its all-inclusive notion could offer foundations for efforts to reinvigorate solidarity across classes, sectors, regions, generations and ethnic groups without denying their existence or salience.

## Notes

1. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (the Baltic states), the Czech and Slovak republics, Hungary, and Poland (the Visegrad states), and Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia.
2. The ten countries are ranked on each of these dimensions, i.e. electoral participation, party membership, trade union strength, civil society strength, etc. Similarly, they are also ranked on Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence, index of democratic transformation, vote share of far right parties, etc. Overall ranks on hollowing and backsliding are calculated as unweighted averages of ranks on both subsets of indicators. Admittedly these are crude measures, as the rankings are sensitive to the indicators considered. Nevertheless, I find them helpful as a first step towards more detailed and sophisticated comparisons.
3. The comparison draws on Bohle and Greskovits (2009, 2012).
4. For details see e.g. Hungary's Illiberal Turn, 2012.
5. This is in line with the study of Berman, S. (1997) on the collapse of democracy in the Weimar Republic, and with the nuanced view of Ekiert (2013) on civil society and the illiberal challenge to democracy in Eastern Europe.

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