Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 15, Issue 4 (2019)

Research Article

Backsliding Away? The Quality of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

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Citation

Stanley, B. (2019). 'Backsliding Away? The Quality of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15(4): 343-353.
https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v15i4.1122

First published at: www.jcer.net

Abstract

The emergence in Central and Eastern Europe of populist and illiberal political parties, some of which have succeeded in gaining power and implementing controversial reforms, has prompted concern about the condition of democracy in countries of the region and attempts to theorise and explain these changes. Starting from the premise that neither overly negative nor overly positive assessments of democratic quality give an adequate picture of reality, this paper draws upon comparative data measuring several aspects of democracy to identify broad patterns of democratic development in the region. It concludes that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe fall into three broad categories: those where consolidated democracy is currently stable; those where there is clear evidence of backsliding from consolidated democracy; and those where there is evidence of backsliding prior to full consolidation of democracy. These differences notwithstanding, it is clear that the quality and durability of democracy in the region is more fragile and provisional than commonly assumed.

Keywords

Populism; Liberal democracy; Central and Eastern Europe; Backsliding; Consolidation

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It is hard for the casual observer to know quite what to make of the present state of democracy in the states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).[1] Are they 'normal countries' that '[in] most ways… now look like any others at similar levels of economic development' (Shleifer and Treisman 2014: 93) and demonstrate 'the superiority and continuing promise' of capitalism and liberal democracy (Shleifer and Treisman 2014: 103)? Or has the 'populist and anti-liberal wave sweeping Central and Eastern Europe' (Bugaric and Ginsburg 2016, 69) pushed these countries away from the European Union (EU) mainstream (Ágh 2016, 279)?

As is often the case, the truth contains elements of both these interpretations. The European liberal tradition provided a normative and institutional blueprint for countries of the region seeking to make the transition to democracy, and, as comparisons with countries that took a different path after the collapse of communism show, following this path has made significant contributions to economic prosperity and political and social stability. Yet at a time when the superiority of the liberal model is in doubt, illiberal political and economic practices are starting to strike political entrepreneurs as 'credible and legitimate alternatives' (Ekiert 2012: 68). While the emergence of populist and illiberal movements in the CEE region remains uneven, there are abundant prospects for their further success.

Nevertheless, popular notions of a region caught in the throes of democratic backsliding overlook the presence and persistence of different patterns of democratic quality and change in that quality. Drawing on data that measure the quality of democracy across its several aspects, I argue that CEE democracies vary in three key respects: the extent of deterioration in democratic quality; the extent to which this is the product of deliberate political agency; and the extent to which we can speak of 'backsliding' as opposed to a failure of democracy to consolidate itself adequately in the first place.

VARIETIES OF DE-DEMOCRATISATION

Our understanding of the nature of democracies in CEE reflects the model of democratisation these countries were expected to implement following transition from communism. The procedural and polyarchic conception of democracy (Dahl 1971) provided the basic prerequisites: free, fair and regular elections with full active and passive enfranchisement. In the early years of post-communist transition, the simplest test of whether a country had achieved a 'consolidated' democracy was whether or not those who held power were willing to relinquish it.

Yet democracy and democratic quality are two different things. The rotation of political elites in power is no guarantee that citizens are genuinely playing a role in the determination of policy: 'democracy is a set of formal possibilities for citizen rule; democratic quality assesses whether citizen rule exists' (Roberts 2009: 25). Scrutiny of democratic quality involves the assessment of procedural quality, in the sense of evaluating how free and fair elections are and the extent to which citizens are genuinely able to participate in the electoral process. However, democratic quality rests not only on the power to select and to sanction, but also to exert control over policy makers in between elections (Roberts 2009: 34).

Recent scholarly interest in the deteriorating quality of apparently consolidated democracies has led to numerous attempts to conceptualise this process. With the decline of classic coups d'etat, executive coups and vote fraud (Bermeo 2016: 7-8), scholarly attention has turned to practices such as executive aggrandisement and the nullification of institutions of accountability (Landau 2013: 189), strategic manipulation of the electoral process that falls short of outright fraud (Bermeo 2016: 13), and the use of subtly cumulative repressive measures against civil society and the media (Huq and Ginsburg 2018: 137-138).

Most of the approaches to de-democratisation in CEE countries understand it, explicitly or otherwise, as strategic and agent-led: 'a gradual, deliberate, but open-ended process' (Sitter and Bakke 2019: 1). These approaches stress the conscious subversion and nullification of liberal-democratic institutions by an increasingly over-mighty executive. However, some have rejected an exclusively voluntaristic conception of the term, arguing that we also need to understand the factors which shape the opportunity structures exploited by illiberal entrepreneurs, such as 'fading conditionalities, corruption, and economic crisis' (Dawson and Hanley 2016: 23). If backsliding is an active process, it occurs in contexts of 'democratic decay' (Daly 2019). To understand de-democratisation, we must 'distinguish the causes of vulnerability to backsliding from the proximate causes of actual backsliding' and integrate both supply-side and demand-side factors in our model of de-democratisation (Andersen 2019: 647).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a full theoretical elaboration or application of such a model, but what is clear from the discussion of the cases which follow is that the countries of CEE vary in the scope of change, the degree of change, and the role of agency.

MEASURING THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY

To measure and compare the quality of democracy across the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, we need to ascertain not only whether democracy is present in the form of institutions and norms of polyarchy, but to what extent it fulfils its core promise of popular rule. The most comprehensive comparative source for this purpose is the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Pemstein, Marquardt, Tzelgov, Wang, et al. 2019; Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, et al. 2019), which aggregates expert scores to provide measures of democracy on five distinct indexes.

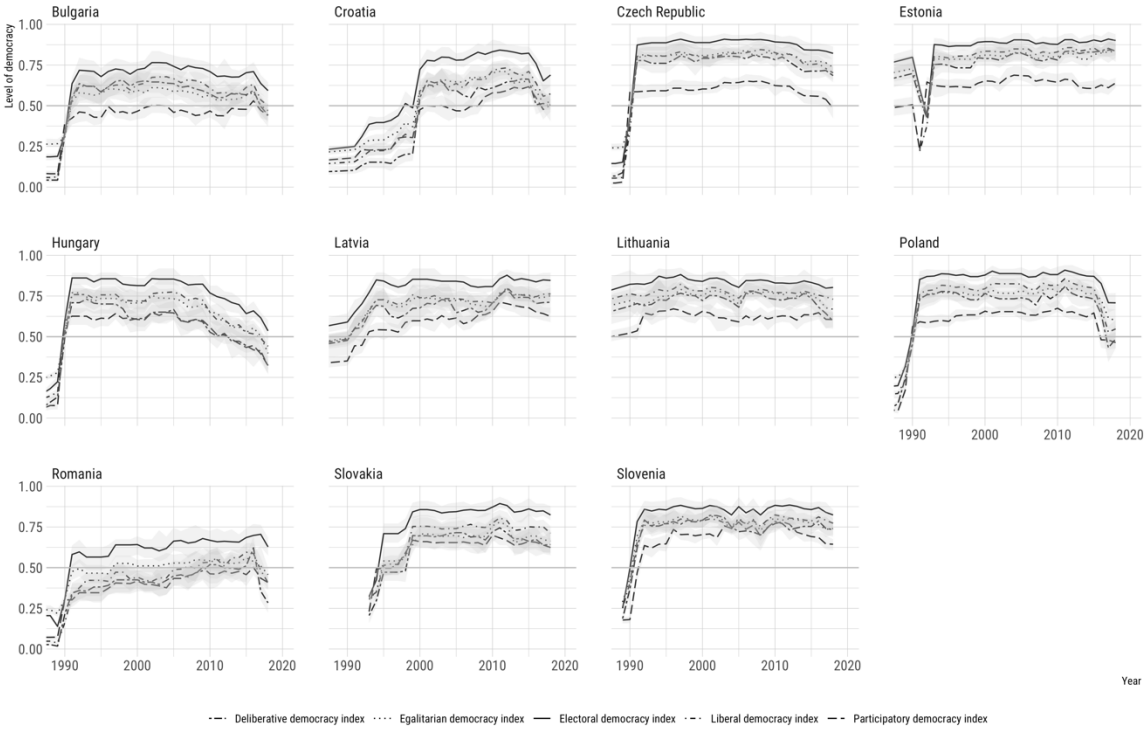
The first of these, the electoral component of democracy, corresponds to the essential concept of polyarchy, which it captures through variables measuring whether executives are elected, whether elections are free, fair and frequent, whether there is freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information, whether there is freedom of association, and whether citizenship is inclusive, offering universal suffrage (Coppedge, Lindberg, Skaaning and Teorell 2015: 582). The other four components put the flesh of popular sovereignty on the bones of proceduralism. The liberal component 'embodies the intrinsic value of protecting individual and minority rights against potential "tyranny of the majority" and state repression more generally'. The participatory component 'embodies the values of direct rule and active participation by citizens in all political processes'. The deliberative component focuses on the extent to which reasoned dialogue prevails over 'emotional appeals, solidary attachments, parochial interests, or coercion' in the decision-making process. Finally, the egalitarian component reflects the observation that 'material and immaterial inequalities inhibit the actual exercise of formal rights and liberties' (Coppedge, Lindberg, Skaaning and Teorell 2015: 582-583).

THE BROAD PICTURE: STABILITY, BACKSLIDING AND ARRESTED CONSOLIDATION

Figure 1 shows the level of democracy on each of the five V-Dem measures since 1989 (or the first applicable date). There are a number of common features. Most countries established a reasonably well functioning electoral democracy relatively quickly after transition from communism, the exceptions being Croatia and Romania.[2] In all cases, electoral democracy is the highest-performing indicator, which is in keeping with scores observed for the developed democracies of Western Europe (results not displayed). On the other hand, participatory democracy is in most instances the lowest-performing indicator. Again, this is a common pattern in democracies of longer standing and not necessarily a sign of democratic immaturity.

These common points aside, there are some clear differences. One group of countries exhibits general stability on each of the measures. In Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia there is fluctuation on some indexes, but the longer-term trend is stable. In Hungary, Poland and, to a certain extent, the Czech Republic, democracies which appeared to be consolidated have experienced significant reversals in the quality of democracy over the last few years, with a long, slow decline in Hungary since 2010, the beginnings of gradual decline in Czech Republic, and a swift reversal in Poland. Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania form a third category of countries in which the process of democratic consolidation appears to have been arrested in recent years.

Fig 1: The quality of democracy in selected CEE countries



Source: Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, Lindberg, et al. (2019)

RELATIVELY STABLE DEMOCRACIES: ESTONIA, LATVIA, LITHUANIA, SLOVAKIA AND SLOVENIA

The Baltic states, Slovakia and Slovenia are all consolidated democracies and currently show little sign of de-democratisation. Each country has established a robust procedural democracy. However, in several cases the stability of other aspects reflects a lack of progress in solving persistent flaws in democratic quality.

On regaining independence, the three Baltic states all faced challenges to the democratic order which were resolved 'through peaceful constitutional mechanisms' (Auers 2015: 2). Estonia stands out for a particularly high quality of democracy, both by the standards of its Baltic neighbours and by the standards of the region. Problems include the persistence of public and private-sector corruption and the exclusion from the democratic process of stateless ethnic Russians, who comprise approximately six per cent of the Estonian population. Surprisingly, in light of Estonia's innovative approach to e-governance services, levels of participatory democracy are no greater than those observed elsewhere in the region. Lithuania and Latvia lag slightly behind Estonia and have experienced greater fluctuation in democratic quality but show no sign of backsliding. Both face similar problems of political corruption, socio-economic exclusion, and the exclusion of minorities.

Slovenia made a swift transition to democracy after achieving independence in 1991. It experienced political crisis and mass protests at the beginning of its third decade, after the onset of economic crisis in 2010 revealed the extent of monopolistic, rent-seeking and nepotistic behaviour among an entrenched elite, with 'formal democratic rules and institutions often operat[ing] in the shadow of informal networks and practices' (Berend and Bugaric 2015: 778). Corruption, unequal application of the rule of law, the social and economic marginalisation of the Roma, and discrimination against LGBT

people continue to be barriers to the improvement of Slovenian democracy. The V-Dem figures indicate a significant decline in the quality of participatory democracy in Slovenia over the past decade, but not to the extent that it stands out from other countries in this regard.

On the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Slovakia swiftly developed the institutions of electoral democracy, but democratic consolidation was stymied by the illiberal nationalist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) until the late 1990s, when opposition forces cooperated to oust it and return Slovakia to the path of liberal democracy (Dawson and Hanley 2016: 28). Since then, it has experienced periods of party-system turbulence that have sometimes descended into political instability, but in spite of concerns about the intentions and influence of populist parties, and the legacy of the HZDS period, it has not undergone a sustained period of backsliding. Yet while the integrity of the electoral system is not in question, corruption remains a particularly prominent issue in Slovak public life, both with respect to privatisation and to the workings of the judiciary. The egalitarian aspect of democracy also remains underdeveloped, particularly in the case of the persistent problems of exclusion faced by the Roma population, the underrepresentation of women in politics and bias against LGBT people.

BACKSLIDING DEMOCRACIES: CZECH REPUBLIC, HUNGARY, POLAND

While the course of democratic consolidation has not been smooth in most of the countries of the region, in three cases there are clear signs of backsliding, whether the gradual but inexorable decline observed in Hungary, the precipitous fall in Poland, or the less pronounced but nevertheless significant downturn in the Czech Republic.

Hungary is the standard bearer of democratic backsliding in CEE. For the first decade and a half after transition from communism, democracy in Hungary was relatively stable, with the rotation in power of conservative and socialist blocs, neither of which contested the essential macro-political trajectory of Hungarian democratisation. However, the political crisis that followed the leaking of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's admission of repeatedly lying to the electorate about Hungary's economic performance and the impact of the economic crisis on the Hungarian public from 2008 onwards enfeebled the governing socialist-liberal alliance and opened a space for Viktor Orbán's conservative Fidesz party to turn sharply away from liberal democracy (Andersen 2019: 659).

Fidesz's landslide victory in the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections gave it the two-thirds majority it needed to make unilateral changes to the constitution. The course then taken by Hungary was explicitly justified as a departure from liberal conceptions of constitutional order (Berend and Bugaric 2015: 781). The extent of Fidesz's initial victory made it easy for the party to argue that it had more than a simple mandate to govern; that it embodied the national interest 'not in constant debates but in its natural way' (Enyedi 2016: 11). The dysfunctional character of Hungarian democracy prior to Fidesz's taking power could easily be blamed upon the pluralistic ethos of liberal democracy, which allegedly subordinated efficiency and the interests of the national community to enfeebled governance and individual rights.

Accordingly, Fidesz embarked on a programme of fundamental reform that has taken the country away from liberal democracy. Taking advantage of its constitutional majority in parliament, Fidesz promulgated a new constitution that took very little account of the interests of opposition or civil society, and which effectively 'ringfenced' aspects of policy in the area of culture, religion and the economy by requiring a two-thirds majority for their amendment. Having entrenched its ideological preferences in the constitution, Fidesz then set about re-centralising political power and executing the political capture of successive independent institutions by packing them with party loyalists: in particular the constitutional court, the judiciary, public and private media, the office of the prosecutor,

the tax authorities and the election commission (Scheppele 2018: 550; Buzogány and Varga 2019: 820-821).

These reforms have had a direct impact on the quality of Hungarian democracy in numerous respects: the politicisation of institutions of state has subordinated the rule of law to the rule of the majority; restrictions on the freedom of civil society organisations and extensive regulation of private and public media have eroded political pluralism; and electoral reforms designed to favour Fidesz (including the redrawing of constituency boundaries and the extension of the franchise to non-resident Hungarians, among whom support for Fidesz is disproportionally high compared with the electorate overall) has taken electoral democracy ever further away from the pluralistic ideal (Herman 2015: 259-262). While '[o]ne of the defining features of democratic backsliding' is the maintenance of competitive elections (Sitter and Bakke 2019: 9), without which there can be no democracy, in Hungary even genuinely competitive elections are now in peril, given the extent to which the playing field has been tilted.

Poland's backsliding was explicitly inspired by Fidesz's example. After a defeat in 2011 which consigned his party to a second term in opposition, Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the populist-nationalist Law and Justice (PiS), said 'I am deeply convinced that there will come a day when we will have Budapest on the Vistula'. Since the early years of the 1990s, Kaczyński had evinced scepticism about the liberal elites who implemented Poland's democratic transition, and this gradually congealed into an antipathy for the idea of liberal democracy itself. Having learned lessons in the sequencing and strategy of attacks on key institutions during a brief and ill-fated period of a coalition government in 2006 and 2007 (see Stanley 2016 for details), on returning to power in 2015 PiS embarked upon a programme of illiberal reforms that rivalled Fidesz for ambition and led to a decline in the quality of democracy swifter and steeper than that observed in Hungary.

In the absence of a legislative supermajority, PiS was unable to make direct changes to the constitution that would have allowed it to proceed unimpeded. Instead, one of the first priorities was to paralyse the work of the Constitutional Tribunal by amending the law governing its functioning, and then to capture it through the appointment of political loyalists. Having transformed the Tribunal from "an effective, counter-majoritarian device to scrutinize laws … into a positive supporter of enhanced majoritarian powers" (Sadurski 2019: 84), PiS then turned its attentions to the judicial system, attempting to purge the court system from the top down by extending the power of an executive-dominated legislature to appoint court presidents and using disciplinary procedures to selectively harass and intimidate independent judges (Scheppele 2018: 553). These measures brought PiS into conflict with the European Commission, which initiated for the first time its rule of law procedure under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union. Aside from the rule of law crisis, PiS also followed Fidesz in using its dominance in the legislature to marginalise the role of the opposition in scrutinising the government, legislating to facilitate the politicisation of the civil service, transforming public media into a mouthpiece of the executive, and centralising state control over the governance and funding of civil society organisations (Sadurski 2019: 132-146). Poland's rapid descent on all measures of democracy reflects not only the political capture of key democratic institutions, but also the functional hollowing out of those institutions via the abandonment of the norm of pluralism. However, in contrast to Hungary electoral democracy remains relatively unaffected, albeit impaired by the advantage PiS gains from public media bias.

If Hungary and Poland are unambiguous cases of backsliding, the Czech Republic is better characterised as a 'weakening democracy' (Buštíková and Guasti 2018: 315) the quality of which has been eroded over the last decade. While the Czech Republic has tended to be seen as one of the more robust CEE democracies, it has experienced persistent problems of corruption and accountability attributable to the permeability of the border between political institutions and business interests (Dawson and Hanley 2016: 27). Concerns about the descent of Czech politics into a 'plutocratic' (Bugaric and Kuhelj 2018: 24) or 'technocratic' (Buštíková and Guasti 2018: 315) form of populism were amplified by the

rise of billionaire businessman Andrej Babiš and his party, the Association of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO). While ANO's platform is avowedly anti-ideological and lacks the explicitly illiberal and exclusionist rhetoric of Fidesz or PiS, Babiš's murky background in the interstices of business and the state and 'impatien[ce] with the give-and-take of democratic politics' (Bugaric and Kuhelj 2018: 24) has prompted concerns about the prospects for the further delegitimisation of liberal democratic institutions and movement towards '[running] the state as a firm' (Buštíková and Guasti 2018: 320).

ARRESTED DEVELOPERS: BULGARIA, CROATIA, ROMANIA

De-democratisation is not always a reversion from consolidated democracy. In most countries of the Balkans and South-Eastern Europe, democratic consolidation, which is a process as well as a destination, has taken longer to achieve. The three cases examined here have exhibited different trajectories but arrived at a similar outcome: failure to converge with regional leaders.

In the case of Croatia, the armed conflicts that emerged in the wake of the disintegration of Yugoslavia significantly impeded transition to democracy and the development of democratic institutions, with the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) able to manipulate electoral rules and the output of the mass media to its benefit. Only following the victory of the opposition in 2000 was the process of consolidation 'unfrozen' (Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink 2009: 1613). As the V-Dem data in Figure 1 show, since then Croatia has been more democratic than not on each of the indicators, but in recent years has begun to regress. A number of factors threaten Croatia's weakly consolidated democracy, including persistently high levels of corruption and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities.

While Bulgaria's transition to and consolidation of democracy was swifter than that of Romania, by their accession to the EU in 2007 both countries had reached a stagnant equilibrium, with democratic quality neither rising to converge with that of regional leaders, nor regressing. However, in recent years there has been a movement in the other direction: the most recent V-Dem report classifies Bulgaria as an 'autocratizing' regime (Lührmann, Gastaldi, Grahn, Lindberg et al. 2019: 11), while Romania escapes such a designation only by the width of a confidence interval.

In both countries, corruption has been a significant enough problem to require ongoing monitoring through the EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. While there have been several recent convictions of high-profile politicians in Romania, corruption has become 'the most important cleavage in Romanian politics' with anti-corruption campaigners falling victim to the temptations of corruption after entering office (Mungiu-Pippidi 2018: 108). The political instability this generates has impeded government efficiency, and the omnipresence of corrupt practices continues to hamper the development of a politically neutral civil service, a genuinely independent judiciary, media pluralism, and a predictable environment for business and investment.

Bulgarian democracy is marked by many of the same deficiencies. While elections remain free and fair (if not, by V-Dem's measures, of particularly high quality) in recent years voices critical of the governing GERB party have been increasingly squeezed out of public and private media, while pro-government media outlets have generated a climate of hostility toward non-governmental organisations that pursue an autonomous line. While Bulgaria has not seen a coordinated assault on the independence of the judiciary to rival that undertaken in Hungary and Poland, GERB loyalists dominate institutions empowered to appoint members of the judiciary and the anti-corruption agencies set up to hold those in power to account (Ganev 2018: 96-98). As a result, Bulgaria risks being trapped in a self-perpetuating semi-consolidated equilibrium, with those in power using their dominance over institutions of control to validate their own legitimacy.

CONCLUSIONS

Backsliding is not the only game in town. As this short, synoptic overview of the quality of democracy in CEE has shown, there are three reasons to reject the 'predominant framing' of a purposeful, consistent departure from the norms and institutions of liberal democracy in the CEE region (Dawson and Hanley 2019: 6).

First, there are several democracies in the region that do not exhibit any sign of change at present. While the lack of further progress in improving democratic quality in the Baltic states, Slovakia and Slovenia requires attention, there are no immediate reasons for concern about de-democratisation in these countries.

Second, in those countries that have experienced a recent decline in the quality of democracy, causal factors differ. Hungary and Poland are clear cases of the intentional subversion and capture of liberal-democratic institutions and the abandonment of the norms of pluralism and individual freedoms upon which those institutions rest. Yet the prominence of these cases has tended to obscure the existence of other forms of declining democratic quality in which deliberate agency plays a less prominent role, as in the Czech Republic.

Third, several cases draw into question the idea that backsliding is something that follows 'substantial earlier democratic progress' (Dawson and Hanley 2019: 6). If, as in the cases of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, the quality of existing democracy has lagged behind that of others, are current problems a case of backsliding, or a symptom of arrested democratic consolidation?

If there is a common conclusion to be drawn, it is that the quality of democracy in the region, and its capacity to persist, is more fragile and provisional than many have assumed. While not all countries have experienced concerted attempts at de-democratisation, it should be of particular concern that those countries which have experienced agent-led backsliding - Hungary and Poland - are the ones which were once generally seen to have made the most progress in the consolidation of democracy (Bugaric and Ginsburg 2016: 70). Others may not necessarily follow, but we cannot be confident of this.

A recent study has convincingly debunked the notion that satisfaction with democracy has declined in recent years (Zilinsky 2019: 2), but this is not necessarily a reason for optimism about the robustness of democracy in CEE countries. The invariance of public satisfaction with democracy across stably consolidated, weakly consolidated and backsliding countries may instead support the conclusion that these attitudes are insensitive to democratic quality and dependent only on the maintenance of the procedural minimum of electoral democracy, or that contentment with democracy adapts to backsliding. The often profound 'discrepancy between the form and substance of liberal democracy in this part of the world' (Berend and Bugaric 2015: 780) may be reflected in a similar discrepancy between the form of democracy we have assumed CEE publics will be content with, and the substance of the democracies they are willing to accept.

Those concerned with democratic quality in the region find themselves in a paradoxical situation. One the one hand, CEE countries clearly need to rethink and redesign democratic institutions to ensure they enjoy stronger normative commitment on the part of political elites and publics alike (Bugaric 2015: 191). On the other hand, admitting the possibility of different paths to democracy opens a space for precisely those majoritarian, illiberal ideas of political order that, as the cases of Hungary and Poland have shown, ultimately threaten the most basic principles of democratic order.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Consistent with the aim of this special section, in this paper I focus on those countries of the region that are members of the EU. However, the findings are also applicable to a number of countries on the EU's periphery.
[2] The development of functioning, if imperfect, electoral democracy is understood here as signalled by a country passing the mid-point on the scale, at which point it can be argued that electoral democracy has crossed a threshold separating countries that are more democratic than autocratic from those which are more autocratic than democratic.

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