

## **The end of the backsliding paradigm? Lessons from East Central Europe**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Debates about democratic decline are now dominated by the notion that many democracies might be undergoing a process described as democratic backsliding. While the concept can play its part, the emergence of a backsliding paradigm risks mirroring failures of the transition paradigm, famously critiqued by Carothers. The complex, halting trajectories of troubled democracies today may be hidden behind a one-size-fits all paradigm; drawing lessons from East Central Europe, we propose a broader focus that also points to intermediate patterns, often more faithful to the empirical reality on the ground.

**KEYWORDS:** Democratic backsliding; democratization; backsliding paradigm; transition paradigm; East Central Europe; democratic careening; democratic stability.

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### **Introduction**

There is now a broad consensus that the world has entered a period of global democratic retreat: we see year-on-year declines in aggregate levels of global democracy and in the number of countries classified as democracies or making democratic gains.<sup>1</sup> This process of decline now extends to established democracies, with deep concerns over the integrity of the 2020 United States presidential election and the political and social shifts associated with the rise of Donald Trump.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of the authoritarian coups typical of democratic reversal in much of the twentieth century, the most characteristic form of reversals in democratic states today is what has been termed democratic backsliding, democratic erosion or “creeping authoritarianism: the gradual stripping back of constitutional safeguards and piecemeal dismantling or disabling of democratic institutions by

elected politicians, often illiberally inclined populists. Rather than overnight democratic breakdown, democratic backsliding is a drawn-out death of a thousand cuts, in which fundamental institutional checks and balances are eroded through executive aggrandizement in ways that ultimately distort pluralism and political competition.<sup>3</sup>

While intuitive and capturing something of the mood of steady decline all around us, we argue that the concept of democratic backsliding risks becoming a counterproductive paradigm. In reducing all forms of (un)democratic developments in terms of linear path of progress, standstill or regression, in many troubled or turbulent democracies the backsliding lens may be obscuring as much as it reveals. Moreover, the rise of democratic backsliding as the dominant frame for understanding undemocratic change is reminiscent—albeit in reverse—of the so-called transition paradigm famously critiqued in this journal almost two decades ago by Thomas Carothers.<sup>4</sup>

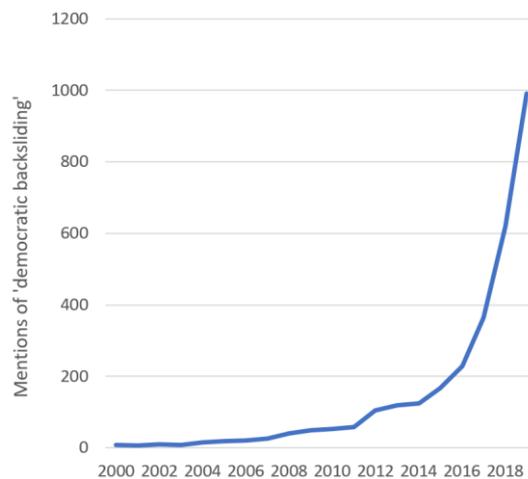
In this article, we explore these parallels and the associated pitfalls of interpretation and policymaking they generate, drawing on examples from East Central Europe (ECE).<sup>5</sup> Discussion of democratic backsliding and deconsolidation in older Western democracies has concentrated almost exclusively on the highly distinctive US case. ECE is an emblematic region where the Third Wave of democratization surged and retreated most spectacularly and where there seems less scholarly dispute that backsliding has been taking place. Democracies in this region, once hailed as remarkable successes of democratic transformation, have recently been attracting both academic and media attention as the poster children of backsliding from consolidated democracy towards hybrid or even fully authoritarian regimes. We highlight how this region demonstrates both the reality and the limitations of the backsliding paradigm and, in the spirit of Carothers's original injunction to ask "what is happening politically?"<sup>6</sup> we highlight two intermediate patterns that defy easy understanding in terms of linear movement along a continuum from democracy to autocracy.

### **A transition paradigm in reverse?**

The possibility that democratization might sooner or later go into reverse has long haunted the imagination of scholars and has also been present at moments of greatest real world democratic advance.<sup>7</sup> But scholarly interest in democratic backsliding has exploded in the last decade (see Figure

1), driven by uncertainty about the momentum of Third Wave democratization and expressed in a range of phenomena: the proliferation and durability of hybrid regimes; the international assertiveness of Russia and China; the low quality of many new democracies; the rise of populist parties in new and established democracies; and the social and political fallout of a sharp global recession that few had predicted.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 1: Mentions of “democratic backsliding” in Google Scholar results**



*Note:* Compiled by the authors

However, backsliding’s emergence as a global research agenda may not come without cost. Indeed, in many ways it risks reproducing, in reverse, the intellectual constraints of the over-optimistic transition paradigm of the 1990s, highlighted by Thomas Carothers in his celebrated, but controversial,<sup>9</sup> critique. In his 2002 essay Carothers identified two critically flawed assumptions impeding understanding of a world characterized not so much by nations in transition as by a mix of persistent authoritarianism, hybrid regimes and low-quality democracies; 1) the assumption that countries moving away from autocracy are in transition towards democracy; and 2) that there is a linear sequence of stages to or from consolidated democracy, with countries moving forwards or backwards and “...options all cast in terms of the speed and direction with which countries move on the path, not in terms of movement that does not conform with the path at all.”<sup>10</sup> He also pointed out the transition paradigm’s

tendencies to assume that elections were always watershed moments; to assume that social-structural factors mattered less than political and institutional choices; and to neglect the importance of state building for democratization.

Carothers's essay is more than an interesting polemic from another era. It now more than ever serves as a timely warning of the risks in the nascent backsliding paradigm. The transition paradigm, Carothers warned, was defined by the final (desired) outcome of transition: i.e., consolidated liberal democracy. The backsliding paradigm works, similarly, with an implicit or explicit fixed (feared) outcome: a hybrid (competitive or electoral authoritarian) or fully authoritarian regime. Its blanket application similarly narrows our analytical range.

Both transition and backsliding are metaphors of movement. However, the backsliding lens, like the transition paradigm, reduces our view of dynamics and trajectories to only three possible options of travel: democracies can move forward, backwards or stagnate in middling positions and not move at all. The V-Dem Institute, for example, although its dataset offers an array of indicators of unparalleled richness and its affiliated researchers publish cutting-edge studies, frames the key issues to a broader global audience in its 2020 annual report in terms of the familiar idea of advance or retreat along a path between autocracy and democracy.<sup>11</sup> While country-level studies often contain rich accounts of fluid and open processes of (un)democratic change, transition or reverse transition paradigms risk aggregating these into a one-way process of democratic improvement or deterioration. Overreliance on the intuitive but over-schematic backsliding framework risks missing more complex dynamics based on trade-offs or non-linear movement.

Once all democracies are conceived of as potential backsliders, their political life is automatically analyzed only in terms of the extent (and forms) of their backsliding. Countries can then only be non-backsliders, mild backsliders or full backsliders. As Abraham Maslow famously wrote “it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.” But even in regions of troubled democracy, backsliding into a hybrid or authoritarian regime is the exception not the rule. This leaves non-backsliding countries, where different patterns not captured by “backsliding” might be in play, as a large, diverse and unexplored residual category. Such different patterns and outcomes may not, however, be residual—sideshows to the main event—but, to take up Carothers'

words,<sup>12</sup> need to “be understood as alternative directions, not way stations” on a journey between liberal democracy and autocracy.

### **Lessons from East Central Europe**

We now turn to East and Central Europe (ECE)—the region of successful post-communist democratizers located between core West European states, the Western Balkans and the successor states of the USSR. ECE played a key role in the rise of both the transition paradigm and the subsequent popularization of the backsliding paradigm<sup>13</sup> and can once again serve as a natural laboratory for testing and refining notions of (un)democratic change.

Defying a raft of early breakdown prophecies, the region made rapid apparent democratic consolidation aided by its proximity to the EU, which, as Carothers himself pointed out, made ECE one of the few clear illustrations of the transition paradigm in real life.<sup>14</sup> The idea that ECE might in some sense be backsliding on earlier democratic achievements emerged just over a decade ago. When the *Journal of Democracy* posed the question to leading specialists on the region, they highlighted a mélange of negative developments: populism; illiberal nationalism and radicalism; fragmented and factionalized parties; corruption and informal practices; a weak civil society and public sphere.<sup>15</sup> Most, however, did not detect a systematic threat to democracy—and some still saw grounds for optimism or argued that populist movements were ambiguous, channeling social frustrations and correcting excessive neo-liberalism, which would recast, but not reverse democracy.<sup>16</sup>

Subsequent developments clarified the very real nature of the threat to democracy in some countries such as Hungary (from 2010) and Poland (from 2015) and aligned the region with the clearer core notion of backsliding. The experience of these two one-time democratic front runners matches the backsliding paradigm of elected populist politicians embarking on a slow but sure program of executive aggrandizement only too well. In both countries, mainstream parties radicalized in sharply populist directions, amplifying existing traditions of both social conservatism and conservative nationalism,<sup>17</sup> along lines that echo radical right populists in older Western democracies. Boosted by appeals to anti-corruption and external crises laying bare the limits of both global free markets and European integration, once securely in office with a solid majority, such parties waged the familiar war of attrition

against liberal institutions and liberal civil society, gradually skewing political competition. The Hungarian and Polish experiences have subsequently been used to exemplify expected (and feared) patterns of political change across the entire region.<sup>18</sup>

However, while elements observed in Hungary and Poland such as populism, illiberal social conservatism, and attacks on media pluralism are present elsewhere (including outside ECE), they are so in different degrees and different combinations, in ways that—we argue—ultimately do not amount to the same thing. On closer examination, in much of the region democratic backsliding in the strict sense is more conspicuous by its absence. Scholars reviewing comparative democracy indices identify a maximum of four or five of the EU’s ten current post-communist members as cases of democratic backsliding (or “democratic erosion”) with only two, Hungary and Poland consistently categorized as backsliders.<sup>19</sup> ECE countries exhibit a range of political configurations and trajectories, many of which fit the Hungarian and Polish experience only awkwardly or not at all. Yet given declining democracy scores across the region, how then should we understand the many apparent “non-backsliders”? Are they instances of robust democratic resilience, or simply behind the curve, or something else entirely?

Some clues can be gained by considering the limitations the backsliding paradigm shares with the “transition paradigm” when discussing political dynamics and institutions. Carothers criticized the “transition paradigm” for overemphasizing elections as turning points. The backsliding paradigm too is to some degree electorally centered. The electoral victory of democratically disloyal politicians (often illiberal populists) is a logical starting point of backsliding episodes. Elected governments are the key agents of executive aggrandizement, and some illiberal governments in backsliding states have enjoyed repeat electoral victories (in Hungary in 2014 and 2018; in Poland in 2015).

Inverting Carothers’s critique of electoralism, we might point out that the election of authoritarian politicians does not necessarily lead to backsliding, for example, if institutions are robust and checks and balances too entrenched. The logic of the backsliding paradigm suggests that, for example, the victory of the “technocratic populist” Andrej Babiš in Czechia or the entry of the illiberal far-right party EKRE in the new Estonian governing coalition are either signs of (impending) backsliding or, if their illiberalism does not turn into full-on institutional erosion, instances of backsliding averted. However, both options—linking backsliding to the electoral fortunes of illiberal actors—inadequately

capture political change in both countries. The presence of a strong, but less than dominant populist party at the heart of the political system can generate a distinct dynamic, which is something less than backsliding but more than politics-as-usual.

Conversely, there may be other routes to concentrating power by actors other than elected politicians wielding electoral majorities. In this sense, not only are elections insufficient to trigger backsliding, but the idea that they are a necessary condition of democratic backsliding should also be questioned. For example, the rise of powerful oligarchical structures or concentrations of corporate power capable of party and state capture, evident in weaker democratizers such as Bulgaria but also in Slovakia, can stifle and subvert competition and representation to such an extent, some have suggested, as to undermine democracy.<sup>20</sup> As Dimitrova pointedly observes

backsliding is not simply a period of bad institutional choices ushered by illiberal populists. Instead, the possibility should be considered that systematic interactions between governments linked to key economic interests, in power for several electoral terms, and large constituencies depending on these economic interests, have led to the emergence of a less democratic framework of governance.<sup>21</sup>

The conceptualization of backsliding as a primarily electoral process—one that is triggered by “bad people” winning elections and stopped or even reversed by “good people” winning them—seems inadequate to capture these longer-term, slower and more complex forms of democratic erosion.

Focusing (heavily) on elections and the short-term fortunes of illiberal politicians also risks aggravating the inevitable “presentist” bias in any analysis of a gradual ongoing process: interpreting immediate events as major (un)democratic shifts. For example, Zuzana Čaputová’s election as Slovak president—succeeding another liberal independent, Andrej Kiska—was hailed as a turning point in the struggle against populism in Eastern Europe with global lessons for turning the populist tide.<sup>22</sup> Over-interpreting current events at one moment risks generating an opposite reaction later, driving a rollercoaster of optimism and pessimism that has often characterized discussions of democracy historically.<sup>23</sup> This may do little to illuminate how troubled democracies actually work.

This ties in with a broader neglect of underlying conditions—“economic level, political history, institutional legacies, ethnic make-up, sociocultural traditions, or other ‘structural’ features”—detected by Carothers in the transition paradigm,<sup>24</sup> which is echoed in the backsliding paradigm. This is true even in a region such as ECE, where legacies of communism and political culture have in the past often been a go-to explanation for democratic difficulties and political variation. Following global trends, the tendency in ECE has been to explain backsliding through more general proximate causes such as electoral volatility, political polarization and the rise of populist parties and ideologies, or as stemming from exogenous shocks such as the Great Recession, the European refugee crisis, the Eurozone crisis, Russian-sponsored manipulation, and more recently, the covid-19 pandemic—with domestic social, economic and political structures tending to remain in the background, or get subsumed into the global context. In particular, the fact that one-time democratic front-runners such as Hungary and Poland can succumb to backsliding has reinforced the view of backsliding as contagion—“Orbanization” driven by the spread of illiberal ideas and unscrupulous elites; a Hungarian-inspired playbook for elites crafting a transition from democracy that can spread almost regardless of structural conditions.<sup>25</sup>

### **If not backsliding, what? Entering the twilight zone**

A focus on linear movement backwards or forwards—based on a balance-sheet approach of adding up democratic pluses and minuses—is especially problematic for countries that do not move (much) in either direction or move erratically in contradictory directions. Scholars are, naturally, empirically aware of such cases, where states “have moved back and forth or hovered on the precipice” for extended periods.<sup>26</sup> In other cases, democracies morph in troubling and fundamental ways without sliding—or beginning to slide—into a hybrid, competitive authoritarian regime. Examined through the paradigm of backsliding, these countries—and the array of democratic difficulties they display—get stuck into a loosely theorized twilight zone of “stagnant” cases, or are rendered as democratically resilient success stories or lucky instances of backsliding averted.<sup>27</sup> Beyond these general suggestions, however, is it possible to say what might be going on politically? As Dan Slater has pointedly asked “how might we best make sense of instances when the democratic game changes in decisive ways even as democracy neither collapses nor more firmly consolidates in the process?”<sup>28</sup> Stagnant or resilient need not mean

immobile. Such instances may hide patterns of change and adaptation that tell us more about the nature of really existing democracies' (un)democratic development than aggregate moves backwards or forwards along a supposed linear path.

Carothers countered the schematic transition paradigm by sketching two “broad political syndromes” which better illustrated real-life patterns Third Wave countries were settling into. Tentatively following in his footsteps, we use the ECE region to sketch two intermediate patterns: (1) a bumpy, dynamic process of episodic crisis and confrontation which falls short of the clash between illiberals with authoritarian instincts and “pro-democracy” forces envisaged in accounts of backsliding (akin to what Dan Slater called “careening”), and (2) the trade-offs within democracy that defy the “all good things go together” logic that often informs thinking about democratization, backsliding and quality of democracy (we illustrate this through the “inclusion/stability trade-off”).<sup>29</sup>

### **Democratic careening: unsettled politics as a different game in town**

In the backsliding paradigm, the electoral success of democratically disloyal populist parties or leaders is seen as the first step on the path to backsliding. But in some polities, while populist governments inclined to bypassing constitutional restraints take office, developments not only fall short of the backsliding paradigm but assume a different pattern altogether. Populist challenges to the liberal fundamentals of democracy can be too weak and unsystematic to push decisively in the direction of a hybrid regime, and get stymied by institutional resistance and/or pushback by opposition or civic movements, including defeat in sometimes skewed but still competitive elections. Some observers view such episodes as near misses teaching lessons in democratic resilience.<sup>30</sup> Others, however, detect a more drawn out pattern, a riskier but nevertheless democratic state of “swerves” or “endemic unsettledness” producing turbulent and changeable episodes of polarized mobilization and counter-mobilization.<sup>31</sup> Such dynamics are well captured in Dan Slater’s metaphor of democratic careening, which conveys the idea of movement that is not unidirectional (democratizing or backsliding) but “back and forth from side to side, with no clear prospect for steadying in sight.”<sup>32</sup>

Although it may be reinforced by socio-cultural and identity cleavages, careening is driven by many sources of polarization and by the unresolved tension between rival blocs making competing

democratic claims: a “populist” claim to express the will of a democratic majority overriding institutional constraints, typically one including previously excluded groups and concerns, and a “liberal” claim to defend constitutionality, institutions, transparency, the rule of law and the rights of minorities.<sup>33</sup> The dynamics of careening are sustained by an unstable balance between the two: both sides have (opposing) democratic claims of some validity and both lack the political weight or coherency to enforce a settlement along their preferred lines.<sup>34</sup> This confrontation brings no quick resolution; it is neither the entry point to a new politics of democratic backsliding nor a return to democratic consolidation once the populist challengers are put on the back foot. Rather than marking the start of a new political game, it *is* the game.

Slater identifies careening in Southeast Asian democracies (Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia), where it takes the form of clashes between rival party-backed social movements, sometimes overlapping with presidential and prime ministerial conflict. But parallel patterns also occurred in the very different ECE context. Their most visible expressions are upsurges of grassroots civic protest, unaligned with any party or movement, typically triggered by incumbent corruption and bad governance: for example, in Bulgaria (2013, 2020), Romania (2012, 2017-19), Slovenia (2012-13), Czechia (2019) and Slovakia (2012, 2018). Popular mobilization and civic protest are usually framed within the backsliding paradigm as “pro-democracy” movements of resistance against autocratically-inclined leaders.<sup>35</sup> However, in ECE (anti-)corruption—which is central in the politics of the region—feeds both liberal claims in defense of unelected institutions and of the role of civic protest movements as social conscience and check on power *and* populist claims to be mobilizing the popular will against corrupt, out-of-touch elites. Moreover, as Stoyanova’s critical analysis of the 2013 protests in Bulgaria highlights,<sup>36</sup> citizen mobilization in ECE can be shot through with class conflict, with demands for good governance, accountability and the rule of law, potentially serving a better-educated, urban, middle-class constituency while pushing questions of socio-economic inclusion and egalitarian demands off the political agenda—a pattern echoing the coalitions Slater detects driving careening processes in Southeast Asia.

The different light that the careening perspective can shed is well illustrated by the seemingly divergent cases of Czechia and Slovakia. Czechia with its “technocratic populist” ANO government led

by the agro-food and media magnate prime minister Andrej Babiš and left-nationalist president Miloš Zeman seems to be reproducing the familiar backsliding trajectory, albeit in weaker form due to Babiš's limited electoral support, lack of a consistent ideological narrative, and a strong grassroots pushback against his conflicts of interests and threats to democratic checks and balances.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, Slovakia twice elected liberal independent presidents (2014, 2019), was convulsed by civic protest movements in 2018, and displaced the long-dominant left-populist Smer party in parliamentary elections in 2020, and is usually seen as a regional bright spot where illiberalism is in retreat with liberal forces fighting back.<sup>38</sup>

In reality, the two cases might be better regarded as having much in common as instances of ongoing democratic careening. In both cases, tendencies towards authoritarian populism and the opposing liberal pushback are framed as opposed democratic claims. In Slovakia in 2018, following the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, protest movements saw prime minister Robert Fico as heading a captured state where rule of law had been subverted, while Fico framed himself as a besieged democrat resisting a Europe-wide threat to democracy from unelected institutions and movements without an electoral mandate. Rather than pushing democratic politics decisively forwards or backwards, in both countries the “liberal” and “populist” camps are weaker than they seem at moments even when politics suddenly careens in their direction, preparing the ground for a swing in the opposite direction. In Czechia, populist forces were pushed back by oppositional civic protest and institutional constraints (especially as ANO failed to gain control of countervailing institutions like the Senate). In Slovakia, even when Smer commanded a majority it did not attack democratic institutions in a concerted way.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, when politics recoils and careens back in a liberal direction, grassroots protest and institutional pushback do not translate into a permanent reset. The new parties in Slovakia's coalition government—many of which are top-down personal parties—look vulnerable to capture by vested interests and, in some cases, are cultivating anti-corruption agendas framed along populist lines. Czechia's civic protest movement has failed to give rise to a coherent liberal political movement or party, and existing opposition parties are similarly fragmented; however, as the Southeast Asian experience suggests, even if liberal and center-right forces did unite and win over Babiš, the result

would likely be another transient stage of careening, rather than immediate and substantive democratic renewal.

### **Democratic inclusion versus democratic stability**

Just as apparent backsliding can conceal more complex patterns of careening, apparent democratic success may conceal problematic trade-offs, like that between democratic inclusion and democratic stability. The exclusion of sections of the population from full and meaningful democratic participation is usually seen as uncontroversially bad for democracy. It is a known risk factor for democratic collapse and a contributor to poor policymaking.<sup>40</sup> Exclusion can come in different forms: it can be based on gender, race, ethnicity, class and intersections thereof, and can be enshrined in law or established in practice. However, forms of exclusion are not simply minuses to be added up to tally a country's degree of backsliding or backsliding potential. In fact, in some circumstances, exclusion can function as a stabilization mechanism that sustains stable democratic institutions and even efficient governance by shielding them from potentially destabilizing (if democratically invigorating) contestation. To put it simply, exclusion means that there are fewer actors able to rock the boat; while the entrance of previously excluded voices can have destabilizing effects on existing democratic arrangements. This despite its clear desirability from the point of view of an optimal inclusive democracy. Paradoxically, predictable patterns of political competition that sustain institutional and policy consensus are achieved at the expense of a pluralistic political arena that allows for contestation, challenge and change.

The Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia, which have large, marginalized Russophone minorities of between a quarter and a third of the population and display patterns of ethnic and social exclusion that reinforce each other, are strong examples of this mechanism at work. And yet Latvia and Estonia have remained by most accounts, and by all major democracy indices, very successful democratizers. Indeed, Estonia (with Slovenia) is often ranked the highest performer, and Latvia is not far behind.<sup>41</sup> However, their state- and democracy-building were led by ethnic majority elites that took care to create collective advantages that established ethnic Estonian and Latvian "titular" populations as the sole legitimate holders of the state, above and sometimes against their sizeable Russian-speaking minorities.<sup>42</sup> Exclusionary citizenship laws left out a sizable portion of Estonia's and Latvia's Russian

speakers, and language has persistently been a highly politicized issue, a subject of endless policy-making to defend the small Baltic languages, and a key social cleavage that shapes their party politics. Upon independence, the mass disenfranchisement of Russian speakers through citizenship laws minimized contestation and debate over forms of democratic transition and Europeanisation. The resulting exclusionary democratic settlement, which limits the influence of the Russian-speaking minority over policymaking, was further crystalized through language legislation and by party political dynamics that preserved the majority elite's grip on power. As Russian speakers were on average more working-class and left-leaning in their economic outlook, ethicized discussions of economic policy—which in the event took the form of hard-hitting neoliberal reforms—reduced the scope for democratic debate in both identity and social terms<sup>43</sup> while maintaining a certain degree of stability and predictability in the system.<sup>44</sup>

Seen through the lens of a trade-off between inclusion and stability, the success stories we can tell about Estonia and Latvia as the best democratizers in the region happen not despite but *because* of this pattern of exclusion. Such exclusion has not endangered Estonia and Latvia's democratic stability as was initially feared. Rather, it has shaped the way their democracies work, underpinning their relative stability by cementing and sustaining majority elites' control over the policy-making process. Over the years, minorities have mobilized (particularly in Latvia) and have even extracted concessions, especially when international pressure was strong. However, majority elites have managed to remain "democracy's gatekeepers," legislating on minority-sensitive issues such as language and education as well as on more general economic policies with little in the way of opposition.<sup>45</sup>

Within the logic of the backsliding paradigm, Estonia and Latvia appear to be either progressing (with some hiccups) towards consolidation—an assessment backed up by the democracy indices—or, in light of the success of nationalist far-right parties and their inclusion in governing coalitions, at risk from democratic backsliding.<sup>46</sup> However, as the trade-off above suggests, classing Estonia and Latvia as "normal democracies" or even consolidating democracies obscures the ways in which ethnic and social exclusion are embedded in their institutions, with serious implications for democratic quality. At the same time, classing them as backsliders is also misleading. In both countries far-right parties' electoral success, illiberal ideas, and participation in governing coalitions are not new and do not in

practice subvert existing democratic arrangements. While ethnonationalist and social exclusion are hardly good for democracy, in contexts where they are foundational—part of the normal rules of the game—they do not necessarily threaten stability. Even in Estonia, where recent developments suggest the inclusion/stability trade-off may soon be upset by growing polarization, careening rather than backsliding might prove a better guide to understanding patterns of change.<sup>47</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The notion of democratic backsliding has coalesced into a clear concept: slow, formally legal descent into a hybrid regime orchestrated by power-concentrating elected leaders in a relatively predictable sequence. As ECE examples show, in some countries like Hungary and Poland that were once exemplary democracies, the concept captures a disturbing reality. However, even in a sharply democratically declining region like ECE, the tendency to read all recent (un)democratic developments through “backsliding” misses dynamics of trade-offs, fluctuation and sideways movement that shape the realities of these democracies. While the picture that emerges in ECE is far from rosy, most states in the region do not fit the backsliding paradigm. All unhappy democracies are, to paraphrase Tolstoy, unhappy in their own ways.

We need to better understand these intermediate patterns, of which we have sketched only two, and to do so we need to develop a more diverse conceptual toolkit. We will, in particular, need to think about processes of change that are more complex than the progress or regress along a continuum of regimes. The type of patterns we highlight might sustain themselves over extended periods, but they are better seen as open-ended processes rather than fixed outcomes. In a country like Estonia, stability bought at the price of social and ethnic exclusion may at some point morph into careening. In turn, a dynamic of careening may transit to one of textbook backsliding, but in a case like Czechia, a reworked form of technocratic populism or even a renewal that kick-starts democratic consolidation is equally plausible. Political scientists will, in particular, need to think hard about conceptualizing and identifying the tipping points which bring about such changes of state.

Rethinking along these lines could also carry policy implications. In contexts that match up closely with the backsliding paradigm and its stylized division between pro-democracy and pro-

autocracy actors, prioritizing civic resistance and the defense of independent institutions to impede autocrats and boost democrats must of course be a priority. However, for countries with ambiguous and intermediate patterns like those sketched here, a wider set of responses, going beyond the formulation of a general anti-populist playbook, may need to be developed to support liberal-democratic development. This is true as much for older, troubled democracies as for younger democracies in regions like ECE. If intermediate syndromes are seen as more than mere stepping-stones on the way to paradigmatic backsliding, effective democracy promotion will need different strategies—ones that openly recognize the uncomfortable normative and political choices between stability, inclusivity and contestation that may be encountered in practice. Democracy’s global malaise is real, but it is also complex; if remedies are to have hope of being effective, we must redouble our efforts at diagnosis

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<sup>2</sup> Lührmann and Lindberg, *Autocratization Surges*. On the US see Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation”, *Journal of Democracy* 28 (January 2017): 5–15; Amy C Alexander and Christian Welzel, *The Myth of Deconsolidation: Rising Liberalism and the Populist Reaction* (ILE Working Paper Series, No. 10, University of Hamburg, 2017), 18; Kurt Weyland and Raúl L Madrid (eds), *When Democracy Trumps Populism: European and Latin American Lessons for the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Bermeo, “On democratic backsliding”; Diamond “Democratic regression”; Lührmann and Lindberg “Autocratization”; Elisabeth Bakke and Nick Sitter, “The EU’s Enfants Terribles: Democratic

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm.” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.

<sup>5</sup> We define ECE as post-communist countries that joined the European Union in the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargement rounds.

<sup>6</sup> Carothers, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 290-294; see also Larry Diamond, “Is the third wave over?” *Journal of Democracy* 7:3 (1996). 20-37.

<sup>8</sup> See Diamond, “Democratic regression.”

<sup>9</sup> See Guillermo O’Donnell, “Debating the Transition Paradigm: In Partial Defense of an Evanescent ‘Paradigm.’” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (July 2002): 6–12; Thomas Carothers, “Debating the Transition Paradigm: A Reply to My Critics”, *Journal of Democracy* 13 (July 2002): 33–38; and Larry Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, Donald L. Horowitz, and Marc F. Plattner, “Reconsidering the Transition Paradigm.” *Journal of Democracy* 25 (January 2014): 86–100.

<sup>10</sup> Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, 7.

<sup>11</sup> See Figure on Lührmann and Lindberg, *Autocratization Surges*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, 14.

<sup>13</sup> See Licia Cianetti, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley, “Rethinking ‘Democratic Backsliding’ in Central and Eastern Europe. Looking beyond Hungary and Poland.” *East European Politics* 34: 3 (2018): 243–56.

<sup>14</sup> Béla Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience: East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998);

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Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, and Milada Vachudova, "Democracy in the post-communist world: An unending quest?" *East European Politics and Societies* 21:1 (2007): 7-30.

<sup>15</sup> Marc F. Plattner and Larry Diamond, "Is East-Central Europe Backsliding?" *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Krastev, "Is East-Central Europe backsliding? The strange death of the liberal consensus." *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 56-64.

<sup>17</sup> Béla Greskovits, "Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: The Civic Circles Movement", *East European Politics* (2020); Zsolt Enyedi, "Right-Wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe." *East European Politics* (2020).

<sup>18</sup> Martin Brusis, "Illiberal Drift: East-Central and Southeast Europe" in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.). *Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison* (Gütersloh 2018): 84–92. [https://www.bti-project.org/content/en/downloads/reports/regional\\_report\\_2018\\_ESE.pdf](https://www.bti-project.org/content/en/downloads/reports/regional_report_2018_ESE.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> For example, reviewing the V-Dem dataset, Stanley identifies Poland, Hungary and Czechia as backsliders.; Mechkova et al identify only Poland and Hungary; Lindberg finds that Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania deteriorated sufficiently to downgrade from "liberal" to "electoral" democracy; Lührmann and Lindberg find three episodes of "democratic erosion" in CEE: Hungary (2010-2017), Poland (2013-2017), and Croatia (2013-2017). Mechkova, Valeriya, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg, 'How Much Democratic Backsliding?' *Journal of Democracy* 28: 4 (2017), 162–69.; Lindberg, Staffan. "The Nature of Democratic Backsliding in Europe". *Carnegie Europe* (blog). 24 July 2018. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/07/24/nature-of-democratic-backsliding-in-europe-pub-76868>; Ben Stanley, "Backsliding Away? The Quality of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe." *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15:4 (2019): 343–53; Lührmann and Lindberg, *Autocratization Surges*; Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, "A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it?" *Democratization* 26:7 (2019): 1095-1113.

<sup>20</sup> Grigorij Meseznikov "Slovak Corruption Enemy of Democracy, Ally of Extremism." *Balkan Insight*. December 16, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/16/slovak-corruption-enemy-of->

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[democracy-ally-of-extremism/](#); Radoslava Vassileva “Is Bulgaria the EU’s Next Rule of Law Crisis?” EUObserver, September 18, 2018: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/142795>

<sup>21</sup> Antoaneta Dimitrova, “The Uncertain Road to Sustainable Democracy: Elite Coalitions, Citizen Protests and the Prospects of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.” *East European Politics* 34:3 (2018), 260.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Applebaum, “Slovakia’s president suggests a way out of the world’s populist quagmire.” *Washington Post*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/15/slovakias-president-suggests-way-out-worlds-populist-quagmire/>

<sup>23</sup> David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, 8.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example: Jan-Werner Mueller, “Eastern Europe Goes South.” *Foreign Affairs* 93:2 (2014): 14–19; Eszter Zalan, “How to Build an Illiberal Democracy in the EU.” *EUObserver*, January 2016, <https://euobserver.com/political/131723>; Amanda B Edgell, et al., “An Update on Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy Four Months After the Beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic”, V-Dem Policy Brief No. 24, June 30, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Diamond, “Democratic Regression”, 5.

<sup>27</sup> See for example Scott Mainwaring and Fernando Bizzarro, “The Fates of Third-Wave Democracies.” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (January 2019), 99.

<sup>28</sup> Dan Slater, “Democratic Careening.” *World Politics* 65:4 (2013), 730.

<sup>29</sup> Sonja Grimm and Julia Leininger, “Not all Good Things Go Together: Conflicting Objectives in Democracy Promotion.” *Democratization* 19:3 (2012): 391–414.

<sup>30</sup> Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq, “Democracy’s Near Misses.” *Journal of Democracy* 29: 4 (2018), 16–30.

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<sup>31</sup> Slater, “Democratic careening”,730; Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, “The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?” *Politics and Governance* 5:4 (2017): 166–76; see also Michael Bernhard, “Chronic instability and the limits of path dependence.” *Perspectives on Politics*, 13:4 (2015), 976.

<sup>32</sup> Slater, “Democratic careening”,730; see also Dan Slater and Aries A. Arugay, “Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (1): 92–106.

<sup>33</sup> Slater (following Aristotle) terms these “oligarchic.”

<sup>34</sup> This inherent tension in liberal democracy typically ignites where divisive polarizing leaders emerge or where flawed constitutional reforms generate problems of cohabitation between president and prime minister. Slater, “Democratic careening.”

<sup>35</sup> Lührmann and Lindberg, *Autocratization Surges*; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*.

<sup>36</sup> Veronika Stoyanova, *Ideology and Social Protests in Eastern Europe: Beyond Transition’s Liberal Consensus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Seán Hanley and Milada Vachudova, “Understanding the Illiberal Turn: Democratic Backsliding in the Czech Republic.” *East European Politics* 34:3 (2018): 276–96.

<sup>38</sup> Natalie Nougayrède “A new wave of dissidents in the east can turn back Europe’s populist tide.” *Guardian*. November 22, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Smer was in government with illiberal minor parties in 2006-10 and as a single-party majority in 2012-16.

<sup>40</sup> Luca Tomini, *When Democracies Collapse: Assessing Transitions to Non-Democratic Regimes in the Contemporary World*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2018) and Jane Mansbridge, “Should Blacks represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes’” *Journal of Politics* 61:3 (1999): 628–657.

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<sup>41</sup> Their Freedom in the World score has remained largely unchanged in recent years, with Estonia at 94/100 in every report since 2017, and Latvia at 87/100 from 2017 to 2019 rising to 89/100 in 2020. Both countries' liberal democracy index in V-Dem since 1990 made them regional leaders.

<sup>42</sup> Licia Cianetti, *The Quality of Divided Democracies: Minority Inclusion, Exclusion and Representation in the New Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Dorothee Bohle and Béla Greskovits, *Capitalist Diversity on Europe's Periphery* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012); Licia Cianetti, "Consolidated Technocratic and Ethnic Hollowness, but No Backsliding: Reassessing Europeanisation in Estonia and Latvia." *East European Politics* 34:3 (2018): 317–36.

<sup>44</sup> This is especially stark in Latvia, whose volatile party system is characterised by frequent electoral booms and busts of new (often populist) parties. Nevertheless parties new and old always re-group on the Latvian side of the ethnic divide excluding the large "Russian" party Harmony. In Estonia, the minority-friendly (but Estonian-led) Centre Party until recently played a similar role of uncoalitionable large party.

<sup>45</sup> Cianetti, *The Quality of Divided Democracies*.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Béla Greskovits, "The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe." *Global Policy* 6:1 (2015): 28–37.

<sup>47</sup> The Centre Party entered government and, after elections in 2019, went led a new coalition government with the "establishment" nationalist party Pro Patria and – to the shock of many – the newer far-right nationalist party EKRE. This shake-up of "normal" Estonian party politics opens the possibility of a new careening equilibrium between the Centre Party (potentially rebranded as less minority-friendly and more populist) and the liberal centre-right Reform.