

Democratic Deconsolidation in Eastern Europe

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1 Introduction

EU enlargement has been hailed as the most successful instance of external democracy promotion (Dimitrova and Pridham 2004; Schimmelfennig and Scholz 2008). From 2010 onwards however, cases of democratic backsliding have emerged both among new EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Greskovits 2015) and in the candidate states in the Western Balkans (WB) (Kmezić and Bieber 2017), while the overall pace of democratisation has stagnated in both regions.

Research questions:

- 1) What explains the relative slowdown and deterioration of democratic performance in the enlargement region?
- 2) Which role do EU leverage and political conditionality play in accounting for the observed variance?

2 Research puzzle

EU political conditionality is expected to be most effective in countries midway along the democratisation path, with frontrunners not in need of additional encouragement and laggards not sufficiently receptive to external incentives (Vachudova 2005). Yet, it is precisely among the former high performers of the CEE enlargement round that democratic backsliding is most pronounced.

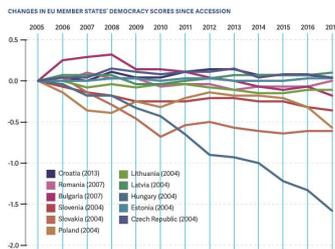


Fig. 1. Stagnation or decline of democracy in new EU member states since 2005. Source: Freedom House Nations in Transit 2017.

Among candidate countries, incentives for democratisation are supposed to be highest, especially once negotiations have been opened. Yet, we see generalised backsliding, including among the two countries engaged in formal membership negotiations.

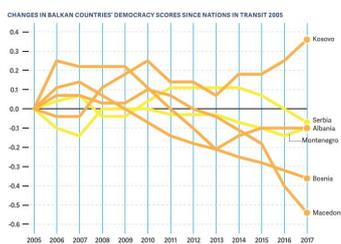


Fig. 2. Overall decline of democracy scores in Balkan countries since 2005. Source: Freedom House Nations in Transit 2017.

3 Theoretical framework

Democratic backsliding is conceptualised as a concentration of power in the executive and the resulting erosion of the quality of democracy. It is thought to be produced by an interaction of EU leverage and domestic democratic safeguards.

EU political conditionality acts as an external incentive and safeguard for democratisation in member and candidate states, favouring institutional and behavioural compliance, but not necessarily attitudinal change among elites. EU leverage has declined in recent years:

- in post-accession countries, due to low credibility of sanctions and low domestic legitimacy of EU
- in pre-accession countries, due to low credibility of membership perspective

Expected causal pattern:

H1: EU leverage works in interaction with domestic factors, through mutual reinforcement or compensation.

H1a: Where EU leverage is strong, it strengthens domestic reform-minded elites, fostering democratic consolidation.

H1b: Where EU leverage is weak, strong internal safeguards may protect democracy against backsliding.

H1c: Where both EU leverage and internal safeguards are weak, we should observe democratic backsliding.

Expected causal mechanism:

H2: The EU accession process strengthens the national executive to the point where executive leaders can deliberately undermine internal democratic safeguards which, in the absence of EU leverage, enables executive aggrandizement and the erosion of democracy from within.

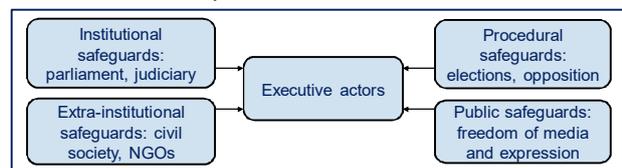


Fig. 3. Domestic democratic safeguards and embedded executives.

4 Research design

Nested design covering 17 countries:

- CEE-8 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia)
- Bulgaria & Romania
- Croatia
- WB-6 (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia)

Stage 1: Evolution of democratisation patterns

Panel data analysis of CEE/WB democratic trajectories 1996-2016 (V-Dem + own coding)

- How does the strength of the hypothesized internal safeguards affect a country's democratic performance? (How) do the different safeguards interact?
- How do shifts in the strength of EU leverage affect democratic performance?
- Does the relative weight of domestic vs. international/EU factors shift over the course of the democratisation/EU accession process?

Stage 2: Mechanisms of (de)consolidation

Four case studies with variation pre-/post-accession and with/without backsliding

- Which causal mechanisms explain the observed variation in the degree of consolidation/ backsliding?
- Are there systematic differences depending on the EU membership status of a country?
- Do we observe interaction effects or learning between different instances of democratic backsliding, be it within the group of new member states or candidate countries, or between the two groups?

5 Conclusion

The project is set in a broader context of global democratic decline and deconsolidation (Diamond and Plattner 2015; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017) and a questioning of the EU's ability to foster democratic change in its neighbourhood (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017).

Its main expected contributions are:

- To integrate international and domestic factors into the theoretical framework explaining shifts in the quality of democracy.
- To offer a conceptualisation and an adequate measurement of democratic deconsolidation.
- To provide an empirical overview over democratisation trajectories in Post-Communist Europe, with a particular focus on the role and effectiveness of EU political conditionality.
- To contribute to the formulation of the emerging research agenda on democratic deconsolidation.



Fig. 4. Changes in democratic performance in CEE and WB countries since 2005. Source: Freedom House Nations in Transit 2017.

6 References

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7 Acknowledgements

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