

# The end of the backsliding paradigm?

## Avoiding reverse “transitology” in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT: This paper critiques some of the underlying assumptions of what we call the “backsliding paradigm”. Mirroring Thomas Carothers’s (2002a) famous critique of the “transition paradigm”, we argue that the current debate on democratic regression in Central and Eastern Europe runs the risk of becoming a “reverse transition paradigm” as it presents some of the same limitations. We discuss five such limitations as an invitation for other scholars to engage in debate on how we can study (un) democratic developments in the region in a broader way, accounting for the range of different, complex and even paradoxical trajectories its countries display.

### Introduction

In recent years, Central and Eastern European (CEE) democracies – once hailed as remarkable successes of democratic transformation and consolidation – have been attracting media and academic attention for the opposite reason, with a consensus that they are in democratic decline and might be “backsliding” towards hybrid or even fully authoritarian regimes (e.g. Anderson 2016; Ost 2016; Bochsler and Juon 2019; Kornai 2015; Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; cf. Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018).<sup>1</sup> Although it has roots in an earlier, more regionally-specific work on the prospects of post-communist democratization, the CEE democratic backsliding literature is now part of a broader literature which has developed since the early 2000s exploring global democratic regression in both new and established democracies. There has been a wide-ranging and rich scholarly debate about the scope and depth of such changes (Diamond 2015; Levitsky and Way 2015; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019); the best term to apply to conceptualise them (Cassani and Tomini 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019); their modalities (agreed to be typically gradual, led by elected governments and spearheaded by attacks on liberal checks-and-balances) (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019); and their relationship with phenomena like populism and illiberalism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Bang and Marsh 2018; Weyland and Madrid 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> For examples in the media, see e.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/18/the-guardian-view-on-poland-and-hungary-heading-the-wrong-way>; and <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/opinion/sunday/orban-hungary-kaczynski-poland.html>

The fate of democratic regimes – and the nature of contemporary threats to them – is, of course, a matter of pressing political, moral and research concern. In the CEE context, the two sharpest cases of democratic backsliding (Hungary and Poland) were once the two fastest democratisers – and it is important to explain how and why they have deteriorated so sharply. However, the jarring developments in Hungary and Poland have prompted re-readings of the entire region through backsliding lenses that may hide more than they reveal. These are particularly constrained by a narrow framing of political developments as on a linear path of progress, standstill or regression in a way reminiscent of the “transition paradigm” famously critiqued by Thomas Carothers (2002a). There is, simply put, a risk of merely substituting a pessimistic outlook viewing all political processes through the lens of backsliding for the earlier optimism which interpreted slight changes of all kinds as nascent democratic transition. The nascent “backsliding paradigm” risks resembling transitology in reverse. As Yascha Mounk (2020, 23) put it “conclusions, born from trauma, risk being just as rash as the more optimistic ones that preceded them.”

This perspective is especially pertinent in post-communist CEE, where Hungary and Poland, which once exemplified the “transition paradigm” sequence of liberalisation-transition-consolidation (Linz and Stepan 1996), now – with their slow shift towards a hybrid regime via executive aggrandisement (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2020) – appear textbook illustrations of the “backsliding paradigm”. However, although many democracy indices record generalised declines,<sup>2</sup> CEE countries exhibit a *range* of political configurations and trajectories many of which fit the Hungarian and Polish “model” only awkwardly or not at all. Attempts to identify cases of democratic backsliding in CEE (or equivalents such as “democratic erosion”) through comparative indices place at a maximum four or five of the EU’s 10 current post-communist members in this category, with only two, Hungary and Poland, consistently placed in this category.<sup>3</sup>

Many, if not most, new democracies in the region, while they may be flawed and troubled in ways requiring scholarly re-evaluation, are not backsliders in the sense of the paradigm discussed above. Indeed, many cases even include mechanisms of democratic pushback and resilience,<sup>4</sup> likely to

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<sup>2</sup> This is true for Nations in Transit, Bertelsmann and V-Dem; however, see Bochsler and Juon (2019) on Democracy Barometer.

<sup>3</sup> To take the example of authors reviewing the nuanced V-Dem dataset, Stanley (2019) identifies Poland, Hungary and Czechia as backsliders; Mechkova et al (2017) identify only Poland and Hungary; Lindberg (2018) finds that Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania had deteriorated sufficiently as to merit categorisation as ‘electoral democracies’ rather than ‘liberal democracies’; Lührmann and Lindberg’s (2019) more sophisticated technique for measuring episodes of autocratisation finds three episodes of ‘democratic erosion’ in CEE: Hungary (2010-2017), Poland (2013-2017), Croatia (2013-2017). While such differences are not unexpected given different cut-off points, conceptualisation and operationalisation, they underline the fuzziness and complexity of processes and the limited number of cases that straightforwardly fit the backsliding paradigm. If the EU’s four current Western Balkan candidate states (Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania) are added Serbia and Macedonia also emerge as backsliders.

<sup>4</sup> The existence of more complex patterns of (un) democratic development has sometimes been noted empirically, typically by scholars surveying and synthesising democracy indices for the region (See for example Bernhard 2017; Pettai 2017; Bochsler and Juon 2019; Stanley 2019; for a global overview see Mainwaring and Bizzarro

be obscured if they are automatically relegated to the category of “non-backsliders” or as partial or not fully realised instances of backsliding.

In this paper, we argue that there is a need to move beyond the residual thinking risked by the “backsliding paradigm” – which tends to cast all CEE cases as, in effect, a kind of Hungary “lite” or Hungary manqué (see for example, Hanley and Vachudova (2018) on Czechia) – and to avoid a debate framed in terms of reverse transition paradigm. In this vein, we argue, a re-reading Carothers’s (2002b) critique to the transition paradigm is particularly instructive. In the rest of this paper, we some draw parallels between the problematic assumptions and omissions Carothers detected in the original “transition paradigm” and the limitations of the emerging “backsliding paradigm”.

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

In 2002 Thomas Carothers (Carothers 2002b, see also 2002a) published a landmark essay, which argued that predominant understandings of political change in the post-Cold War world, particularly on the part of US policymakers and democracy promotion professionals, were constrained by a global “transition paradigm” centring on an over-optimistic and over-schematic view of democratisation. Carothers’s (2002b) critique identified five flawed assumptions impeding understanding of an emerging world of hybrid regimes and low quality democracies:

1. that a country moving away from autocracy could be seen as in transition towards democracy;
2. that this process should be seen as moving through a set sequence of stages in a linear fashion, forwards or backwards, with “...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”, implying a strong democratic teleology (Carothers 2002b, 7);
3. that elections are a watershed moment and, when they become established practice, they are a decisive engine of positive change;
4. that underlying social-structural factors mattered less than political and institutional choice; and
5. that state-building was a secondary priority and a project straightforwardly reinforcing democracy building.

He instead sketched two typical scenarios which better illustrated the real-life outcomes dysfunctional democratic institutions could settle into: a corrupt, ineffective “feckless pluralism” or a more authoritarian “dominant power politics”. Carothers’s essay was broad-brush and in places overstated,<sup>5</sup> but can, in hindsight, be read as a prescient warning not just of the prevalence of hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet space and Africa, but also the low quality of supposedly consolidated democracies in CEE,

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2019). However, this has not so far advanced beyond descriptive labelling of (clusters of) countries based on trends visible in democracy indices.

<sup>5</sup> O’Donnell (2002) objects that Carothers unfairly lumps together a diverse body of work; focuses on the weakest instances; underestimates the importance of elections; and seems unaware that early transition scholars warned against teleological assumptions (for example, O’Donnell 1996) and were aware of the potential for limited democratisation and hybrid regimes. See also Diamond et al (2014).

which often resembled Carothers's image of "feckless pluralism". However, most crucially for this paper, its re-reading can serve as a warning to the nascent "backsliding paradigm" against flawed assumptions and omissions that mirror those critiqued by Carothers.

*1. The backsliding lens limits our capacity to ask non-backsliding questions*

Although it does not see it as inevitable, the "transition paradigm" Carothers warned of was very much 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: i.e., a hybrid (competitive or electoral authoritarian) or fully authoritarian regime – albeit in a vaguer and more open-ended vein (see point two below). While some countries that show democratic flaws or undergo erosion of democratic fundamentals *might* indeed turn hybrid or authoritarian, defining change solely in terms of (non) backsliding can severely limit our understanding of different patterns and experiences. Once all democracies in the region are labelled as potential backsliders, their political life is automatically analysed only in terms of the extent (and forms) of their "backsliding". CEE countries can then be only non-backsliders, mild backsliders or full backsliders – potentially blinding us to any development that does not fit these labels.

If we define backsliding as the erosion of democracy towards a hybrid regime via the actions of an elected executive, countries can fall outside of this "box" in different ways. Leaving aside old-style patterns of democratic breakdown such as military coup or executive autogolpe (unknown in post-communist CEE), one possibility is that backsliding might occur through processes other than executive aggrandisement. The possibility of these *alternative backsliders* has been advanced for example in Michal Klíma's (2015, 2019) pioneering study of the interpenetration of corrupt informal business interests and political parties in the Czech Republic, which, he argues, corroded Czech democracy into a hybrid regime or "defective democracy" of the type envisaged by Merkel (2004), with compromised and captured mainstream parties acting as a special kind of anti-democratic "anti-system parties" (cf. Hanley and Vachudova 2018).

However, other authors sketch comparative outcomes which lie outside the transition paradigm (moving towards consolidation) or its reverse (backsliding, autocratisation, de-consolidation) altogether. In a global survey of the Third Wave, Mainwaring and Bizarro (2019), for example, identify outcomes of low level "stagnation" and (early) high-level democratisation without advance, alongside more familiar categories overlapping with concepts of backsliding ("erosion", "breakdown") and consolidation ("advances"). Stanley's (2019) review of CEE through the prism of the V-Dem data makes a similar distinction between "arrested developers" (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia) and consolidated democracies with "robust procedural democracy" but a "lack of progress in solving persistent flaws in democratic quality" (Baltic states, Slovenia, Slovakia) (Stanley 2019, 347, 350).

However, such static categories, partially framed in terms of consolidation and progress, limits our capacity to see and investigate other ways in which their democracies may be changing. Some might

be going through less than linear trajectories. For example, Buřtíková and Guasti (2017) evoke the image of turbulent but ultimately resilient, self-righting democracy with their concept of short-term illiberal “swerving”, first towards, then away from authoritarianism (with Slovakia and Czechia in mid-1990s as initial empirical references points).<sup>6</sup> Others stress not just that non-linear dynamics, but multiple complex configurations entailing trade-offs between democratic stability and democratic quality. For instance, Greskovits (2015) argues that we should distinguish between democratic backsliding and “democratic hollowing”, a process of emptying out of the popular component of democracy, paralleling that in Western Europe; but he also shows that the relationship between hollowing (or lack thereof) and backsliding is complex, not linear. Thus while high levels of conservative civic engagement and party institutionalisation can be associated with backsliding (Greskovits 2015, 2020; also see Enyedi 2016), stable democracy and good governance can rest on ethnic exclusion and “technocratic hollowness” (Cianetti 2018).

In regions such as CEE – and perhaps Europe as a whole – where backsliding into a hybrid regime is the exception not the rule, reading every event and phenomenon as a signal that a country is backsliding, prone to backslide, or resilient against backsliding, risks hiding other patterns and outcomes that fall beyond the backsliding paradigm or leaving them as unexplored residual categories. To go beyond the limitations of the “backsliding paradigm”, therefore, such different patterns and outcomes must, to take up Carothers’s (2002, 14) words, “be understood as alternative directions, not way stations” on a journey from liberal democracy to a hybrid regime.

## *2. The backsliding lens narrows our view of possible dynamics and trajectories*

The “transition paradigm” invoked a metaphor of movement but was focused on a fixed (“consolidated”) democratic end state (Marks 2011, 97–99). The “reverse transition paradigm” (so far) does better. It too presents an image of motion (“backsliding”) and uses the language of process (“autocratisation”), but it typically leaves the question of a stable end-state vague. This appears partly pragmatic, reflecting the problem of studying a “moving target” of ongoing social and political processes. The difficulty of making empirical judgements given the gradual nature of democratic backsliding also seems to privilege thinking in terms of a dynamic “outcome”. As Greskovits (2015, 30) observes, the “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.” Moreover, a hybrid regime – a key point of crossover in the transition from democracy – is, almost by definition, unstable given its potentially explosive mix of competitive and autocratic elements (Levitsky and Way 2002) or the tendency of some

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<sup>6</sup> Knott (2018) identifies similar movements towards and away from full autocracy and towards and away from democracy in hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet space.

hybrid regimes to go through cycles of apparent democratic breakthroughs alternating with lapses back into authoritarianism (Hale 2005; Knott 2018).

Nevertheless, and following from the first assumption, the backsliding paradigm – like the transition paradigm – sees dynamics in quite limited terms, thinking in terms of only three possible options of travel for CEE democracies: they can move forward, backwards or stagnate in middling positions and not move at all.<sup>7</sup> However, the politics of “backsliding” (and of democratic development more generally) is a more fluid and open process of reaction and counter-reaction and of multiple, changing and contradictory trajectories, not a one-way process of democratic improvement or deterioration (see Dimitrova 2018).

Indeed, even stagnant need not mean immobile. Many CEE democracies would loosely fit the bill of “stagnant democracies”, but this residual category, we argue, needs more in-depth treatment than the “not backsliding (yet)” basket allows for. In a stagnant situation, changes and adaptations do not coalesce to indicate a clear direction of travel: stagnant democracies are not necessarily democratising, but they are not necessarily backsliding either.<sup>8</sup> With its unidirectional implications, the category of backsliding might not be particularly useful to understand how these regimes work, are sustained, and change, even if, in aggregate, change is negative. The broader logic is that the notion of outcomes connected by transition paths needs to be replaced by a view that the different types of trajectories (which are also unstable, ambiguous and paradoxical) are themselves the comparative “outcomes” to be explained.<sup>9</sup> Only by developing, complexifying and applying more nuanced scrutiny to the residual categories sketched by the current literatures on both democratic and backsliding variants of the transition paradigm can we hope to make sense of these more complex trajectories.

### *3. The backsliding paradigm needs to clarify the role of elections*

Carothers criticised the “transition paradigm” for its overemphasis on elections as key turning points and overestimation of their significance for democratic consolidation (and underestimation of their use by authoritarians – a point later widely explored in the literature on hybrid forms of authoritarianism (Schedler 2006; Cheeseman and Klaas 2018)). The literature in the “backsliding paradigm” is so far too

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<sup>7</sup> Even Mainwaring and Bizzarro (2019, 99) who are sensitive to the need to go “[b]eyond the up-or-down question of survival versus breakdown” argue that there are three possible routes for third-wave democracies: they “may deepen, with once-fragile institutions increasingly safeguarding a broad panoply of liberal-democratic rights; they may remain mired in long-term struggles to overcome illiberal practices and institutional dysfunction; and they may slip toward the borderline of competitive authoritarianism or break down completely”.

<sup>8</sup> While Mainwaring and Bizzarro (2019, 108) rightly note that “At an intuitive level, it is not helpful to label high-level democracies as stagnant”, the same considerations (that stability does not necessarily mean immobility) might apply to these high-level cases too.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the whole notion that regimes are locked-in after periods of change thrown up at moments of critical juncture can perhaps be questioned (for a partial critique see Dawson and Hanley 2019). Patterns of apparent stability may in fact conceal unsuspected vulnerabilities. This is not to argue that a trajectory is driven by one antecedent initial cause, although such a view is possible: for example, the seeds of the current democratic backsliding as sown in the very process of democracy building (Rupnik 2007; Bohle and Greskovits 2019).

underdeveloped to allow any judgement about whether it overestimates (or underestimates) the significance of elections in facilitating backsliding. However, as in the “transition paradigm” elections clearly play a turning point role in launching the process.

The electoral victory of democratically disloyal politicians (often illiberal populists) is a logical starting point of backsliding episodes. Elected governments are the key agent of executive aggrandisement (Bermeo 2016), and some illiberal governments in backsliding states have enjoyed repeat election victories (in Hungary in 2014 and 2018; in Poland in 2015). The stress, in a European context, on illiberal populism as a facilitator of backsliding reinforces this, given the understanding of populism in much of the literature as a party-electoral phenomenon. However, inverting Carothers, the logical criticism to the expected sequence of events is that the election of authoritarian or democratically disloyal politicians does not necessarily lead to backsliding (for example, if institutions are robust and checks and balances too entrenched). It is not clear if CEE offers a case matching these parameters. However the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016 may illustrate the scenario of a constrained populist in government (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Weyland and Madrid 2019; but see Mickey, Levitsky, and Way 2017).

Alternatively, the centrality of elections for backsliding could be called into question by the possibility of other processes concentrating power where actors other than elected politicians are agents of backsliding. As mentioned above, the rise of powerful oligarchical structures or concentrations of corporate power capable of state capture could be one such functional equivalent. At the same time, parts of the backsliding(-related) literature and the literature on populism point to processes of radicalisation and socio-cultural change that occur outside of the party-electoral arena as having deep effects on democracy and democratic resilience (Greskovits 2015, 28, 2020; Kotwas and Kubik 2019; cf. also Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017). In order to identify and understand the non-linear trajectories we discuss above, the relationship between electoral politics and processes such as state capture, socio-cultural change and radicalisation needs deeper investigation.

#### *4. The backsliding paradigm lacks an effective way to discuss underlying conditions*

The transition paradigm’s fourth assumption (as identified by Carothers) dealt with the role of underlying conditions. Carothers (with perhaps more than a pinch of exaggeration) accused the transition paradigm of discounting the role of underlying conditions – “economic level, political history, institutional legacies, ethnic make-up, sociocultural traditions, or other ‘structural’ features” (Carothers 2002b, 8) – in determining (un)successful democratisation. This limitation has, to some extent, also been present in the “backsliding paradigm”, which has retained the focus on (formal) institutions characteristic of the democratisation assumptions criticised by Carothers.

Although it is possible to pick out social, cultural and historical factors that distinguish post-communist CEE as a region (and that characterise individual CEE countries) – which are identified in a rich comparative area studies literature – the “backsliding paradigm” has tended to dwell on more

general proximate causes such as electoral volatility, political polarisation, the rise of populist actors and ideologies; the impact of exogenous shocks such as the Great Recession, the European refugee crisis or the Eurozone crisis; or changes in external policies promoting liberal democracy such as the fading out of the accession conditionalities in CEE after EU enlargement.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that one-time democratic front-runners such as Hungary and Poland can succumb to backsliding has also reinforced the view of backsliding as contagion – driven by the rise of illiberal ideas, unscrupulous elites and authoritarian learning – that can spread almost regardless of structural conditions. The idea of an Hungarian “playbook” that illiberal leaders can (more or less successfully) pick up elsewhere in the region reinforces this tendency (e.g. Mueller 2014; Zalan 2016). While it is important to identify cross-national illiberal strategies and understand networks of illiberal learning, this should not blind us to alternative “playbooks” and differences in local institutional arrangements, but also – and most crucially – to deeper shifts and continuities in the economic, social and political arrangements of CEE societies. These have to do – for example – with the extent and patterns of civil society involvement in democratic processes;<sup>11</sup> with how deeply liberal democratic norms are entrenched among society and the political elites (Dawson 2018; Dawson and Hanley 2016, 2019); with the relations between public and private interests (Dimitrova 2018); with underlying tensions between varieties of democratic and capitalist development (Bohle 2018; Bohle and Greskovits 2012) as well as between democratisation and Europeanisation (Ekiert 2008); and with mechanisms of societal exclusion (especially ethnic) that have underpinned state- and institution-building in many CEE countries (Cianetti 2018, 2019; Agarin 2020).

For example, surprisingly, with the possible exception of case study work on Macedonia (Crowther 2017), structural ethnic divisions – seen by authors as Vachudova (2005) as a key enabler of illiberal nationalist appeals in CEE in the 1990s – have not featured prominently in accounts of comparative backsliding in CEE, or are subsumed into broader discussions of right-wing populism. This is perhaps because the most ethnically divided societies, despite strong majority ethnocentrism and radical majority nationalist parties, have not been among the most commonly identified backsliders in CEE. However, neglecting these kinds of deeper structures of CEE social and political life can lead to overestimating, underestimating or mischaracterising their (un) democratic developments.<sup>12</sup>

This risks treating deep social, economic, and cultural underlying conditions either too “thinly”, simply as enabling factors for democratically disloyal leaders to play the illiberal playbook more or

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<sup>10</sup> In global and historical comparisons of democratic breakdown and regression (including but not confined to democratic backsliding) structural variables and their integration with shorter-term processes have been extensively discussed (see, for example, Erdmann 2011; Tomini 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Greskovits (2015, 30; see also Bohle and Greskovits 2012) notes that, although some CEE democracies have experienced *declining* participation since 1989 – taking the form of “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” – they were often already “born with a hollow core”.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Cianetti’s (2018) critique of Greskovits’ reading of Latvia as backsliding that omits the foundational (rather than contingent) nature of ethnocentrism in Latvian politics.



less successfully, or in an unintegrated ad hoc way – for example by interpreting structural (although not unchangeable) features of the political regime as contingent signs of backsliding.

##### *5. The backsliding paradigm is insensitive to longer-term processes of state transformation*

Carothers's fifth criticism of the 'transition paradigm' was that it took for granted the existence of a functioning state. Here, the backsliding paradigm – at least as it applies to CEE – appears better prepared than its forerunner. The experience of the post-communist world was one of the key drivers of the realisation that – as scholars such as Tilly (2007) had argued for Western Europe – patterns of state building, state capture and state-society relations mattered for democratic outcomes. As scholarship on the region uncovered, it mattered particularly in post-communist countries, where state-building was an unusually fluid, telescoped and complex process, vulnerable to exploitation by both democratic- and authoritarian-inclined elites (e.g. Ganev 2001; Grzymala-Busse and Luong 2002; Grzymala-Busse 2007; Hellman 1998). Patterns of state-building more strongly characterised by informal practices, corruption and clientelism also weakened democratic accountability and representation in some societies by impeding both programmatic competition and the formation of effective organised economic interests and civil society (Kitschelt et al. 1999).

Much earlier work saw state-building as shaped by legacies of the (pre-)communist past or by struggles in critical junctures immediately after the fall of communism (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Grzymala-Busse and Luong 2002), setting an initial path for post-1989 democratisation, and then settling into some kind of equilibrium with patterns of party competition (O'Dwyer 2006; Ganev 2007; Grzymala-Busse 2007). These debates overlapped with the parallel literature on European integration and, in particular, its debates over the extent to which the EU exerted pressures for effective state-building and good governance – and how deep and lasting its impacts would be (e.g. Kelley 2004; Sasse 2008; Sedelmeier 2008; Schulze 2010).

There has, however, been limited updating of this agenda to address the era of more recent democratic decline in CEE. Early work which first noted that unexpected democratic decline in CEE was connected to forms of state capture focused on the seizure of the state by newly elected, dominant parties (Innes 2014; Magyar 2016) and models of illiberal political economy they subsequently develop, as well as documenting the persistence and growth of more traditional forms of state and party capture by informal networks (Innes 2014; Klíma 2015, 2019). However, as noted above, most of the "backsliding paradigm" debate focuses on shorter-term policy changes and the actions of illiberal elites. This leads the backsliding debate to be excessively "presentist", following and interpreting current events to find signs of (un) democratic shifts to come, and re-interpreting the past (especially the transition and the financial crisis) through the narrow focus of explaining backsliding. This not only makes it more difficult to discuss underlying conditions and continuities, but it also blinds us to slower, deeper changes. As Dimitrova (2018, 260) 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.

As Dimitrova (2018), following Tilly, makes clear, following deeper changes in this way over a longer period implies understanding them in terms of more complex, non-linear trajectories rather than cramming them into the narrower framework of transition and backsliding paradigms.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that studying current political developments in CEE (solely) through the lenses of the “backsliding paradigm” can obscure as much as it reveals. It risks hiding the complex ways in which contradictory elements and processes (both short term and long term) interact to shape the ways in which CEE democracies are evolving. While we do not intend to deny actual processes of backsliding in countries such as Hungary and Poland, seeing the entire region through the backsliding lenses constrains our ability to make sense of (un) democratic change in other countries (most of the region) by relegating them to backsliders-in-waiting or various residual and weakly conceptualised “non-backsliding” categories. Not all that is bad or insufficient about CEE democracies is an effect of backsliding or a harbinger of backsliding to come.

By writing of a “backsliding paradigm” and reflecting on current agendas on democratic decline through the prism of the “transition paradigm” debate, we do not intend to argue that *all* scholars writing about backsliding are equally “guilty” of *all* the flaws we identify – or that we ourselves did not contribute to these flaws in our own work. Fortunately the scholarship on CEE democracies is rich and varied. Many works that have the potential to advance us beyond one or more of the five “flaws” we identify above. However, we believe it is important to warn of the potential risks of the rise of widespread (and mostly unaddressed) underlying one-size-fits-all assumptions, diffusing through academia to the worlds of journalism, policymaking and NGOs (and back again). We do not want to shut down the current vital debate on CEE democracies, but to prompt a deeper conversation about how we can study (un) democratic developments in a region like CEE accounting for the different, complex and potentially paradoxical trajectories its countries display. Looking at the politics of these countries moving away from the constraints of the “backsliding paradigm”, we should, to paraphrase Carothers (2002b: 18), start not by asking “How far and how fast are they backsliding?” but “What is happening politically?”

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