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Democratic Regression, Rising Populism and the pitfalls of European Integration

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The countries in Central and Eastern Europe struggle with post-accession blues. Reports on political developments in these countries conclude that popular democratic consensus has eroded since the initial wave of enthusiasm during the immediate post-Cold War years. Among the new members of the European Union, Poland may be the most conspicuous in terms of a decreasing support for democratic values (Goehring, 2007). Other surveys also indicate that anti-democratic sentiments have emerged in a number of countries. The rightwing – socialist coalition government in Slovakia, the radical street-organized opposition of the Fidesz party in Hungary, the seven months political stalemate in the Czech Republic – all amply demonstrate a rising tide of Demokratieunzufriedenheit in many of the new member countries of the European Union. Additionally, twenty years after the 1989 revolutions, which were at least partly inspired by the “Return to Europe” metaphor, euphoria among the citizens and elites of Central and Eastern Europe has faded significantly. Euroscepticism is on the rise. How do we define and explain the political trends in Central and Eastern Europe today? Are they as worrisome, as disturbing as they are often perceived? And to what extent are they causally related: is the assumed weakening of democratic consensus linked with the increase of Euroscepticism in the new Member States of the European Union?

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These are important questions, but they are not easy to answer. As to the state of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, one may be easily swayed by the issue of the day. The twin rule of the Kaczynski brothers in Poland was routinely mentioned as a prime example of the populist advance in the region. Meanwhile, one of the two brothers, Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski suffered defeat against Donald Tusk and his Civic Platform in the October 2007 parliamentary elections. Has the Polish electorate suddenly changed? Was political populism less serious than many observers believed? Was there any populist backlash at all in Poland? As to the possible co-relationship between democracy or democratisation and European integration or enlargement some pertinent questions can also be raised. As yet, however, discussion has focussed mostly on the pro-democracy effects of enlargement. The possible negative effects of regional integration on democratisation (especially the strongly "conditional" type of EU enlargement) have received little attention from both policy makers and analysts. This paper contains preliminary observations on the interrelationship between the enlargement strategy of the European Union, the trajectory of democratic government in the accession countries, and the development of Euroscepticism.

What do we observe, and how do we interpret it?

Central and Eastern Europe is a highly diverse region which copes with a series of shared issues and concerns. Despite recent downgrades in democracy scores, most of the countries still score exceptionally high on the scales of most democracy observing institutions, i.e. in comparison with most post-communist countries in the former Soviet Union, as well as with states in other recently democratised regions. The countries in Central and Eastern Europe share a common ambiguity of impressive democratic progress against specific political drawbacks and disillusionment. We observe problems of and problems with democratic government. Their causality remains a matter of interpretation, although I would not be surprised if such a cause and effect relationship exists. Among the most frequently mentioned problems of democratic government in the new Member States of the European Union are wide-spread patronage and clientelism, behind-the-scenes
decision-making, corruption, political intolerance and intimidating moral rhetoric, political paranoia, anti-individualism, as well as intolerant collectivism. At the demand side of politics, we witness equally worrisome trends: a decrease in social trust in democratic institutions and procedures (including politicians, political parties, as well as legislatures), declining voter turn-outs, growing electoral volatility – in brief: a widening gap between citizens and politics.

How to interpret these developments? If democratic government would indeed be seriously flawed in Central and Eastern Europe, popular dissatisfaction with the current political order could be seen as a positive phenomenon. Citizens may not be dissatisfied with democratic government; they are critical about their flawed “real existing” democracies. It is a comforting but not a very convincing interpretation. There is a real – and as it seems increasing – lack of interest, trust, and participation in democratic government on the part of Central and Eastern Europe’s citizens. Various explanations, from rather reassuring to truly troublesome ones, could be given. The least disturbing interpretation stresses the conjunctive dimension of political change. It is all a matter of electoral cycles. Current events in Central and Eastern Europe are the latest expression of the only true political law in post-communist Europe: ruling parties lose elections. People have got tired of the liberal parties and politicians that have dominated politics for more than a decade. They have woken up to post-accession reality. They are distressed by the speed and disappointed with the social consequences of market reforms. Another more troubling explanation stresses the structural nature of the region’s democratic malaise. Current dissatisfaction with democratic government reflects a crisis of “liberalism” rather than of “liberals”. Ergo, the voters in Central and Eastern Europe have not only punished the political forces that stood behind the liberal consensus of the last decades; they reject political and economic liberalism as such. And finally, the most disturbing explanation: the political problems in Central and Eastern Europe reflect the malfunctioning of representative democracy, if not a crisis of democracy per se.

“Populism” is frequently used to interpret and explain the current crisis phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe. Populism is an attractive notion: ill-defined, if not vague, but with clear political
connotations and high emotional value. This is not the place to enter the scholarly debate on political populism. Suffice to say, populism reflects a rather simplistic and dichotomous world outlook (us versus them applied to practically every aspect of politics) combined with a specific political strategy and modus operandi (highly "personalized", and circumventing many of the standard procedures and institutions of representative democracy). Populism is not an equally prominent force in all post-communist countries and even in those countries where it has gained in political strength, the representatives of radical populism never reached beyond ten percent of the general vote (Lang, 2006).

Additionally, populism is not an unequivocally destructive political phenomenon. It has “distinctive virtues and vices” (Krastev, 2007). Therefore, the identification of the rise of populism with democratic backsliding is flawed at the very least. Populist politicians could engage the “marginalized” into the political process again. Populism may dissolve and open-up sclerotic political practices and institutions (including political parties). And it may put issues on the political agendas which mainstream political parties are either reluctant or afraid to openly debate and address. If populism is mainly an expression of dissatisfaction with “flawed” democracy, it may have beneficial effects on democratic government. A democratic polity is better served by criticism and disagreement, than by artificial consensus, as Robert Dahl concludes. Even political distrust, which seems so widely spread in today’s Central and Eastern Europe, could ideally function as a democratic control mechanism – as long as distrust is balanced by a minimum measure of political confidence, of course, and, to quote Dahl, as long as “a substantial majority of citizens prefer democracy and its political institutions to any non-democratic alternative and support political leaders who uphold democratic practices” (Dahl, 2000). All indications show that this is still the case in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Equally unconvincing is the identification of the current wave of democracy discontent (or for that matter: populism) in Central and Eastern Europe with either the full rejection of the dominant (liberal) post-communist transformation model or with anti-Western attitudes. “The issue is not whether one is left, right, or centre”, as Adam Michnik phrases it, “but whether one is ‘West of centre’...” I do not
believe that either populism or democracy critique can simply be identified with anti-Western postures.

The discussion on populism and related phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe would gain by a more sophisticated interpretation of democracy dissatisfaction. There is no consensus in literature on a single definition of democracy nor, consequently, on how to define non-democratic ideas and behaviour. A distinction could be made between anti-democratic and a-democratic thinking. Anti-democratic ideas and practices openly and pro-actively seek to impose limits on the democratic process in general. A-democratic ideas and behaviour express themselves in generalised political discontent or institutional distrust within formally democratic systems. They cannot be called outright anti-democratic but they can undermine the operation of full procedural democracy.

A-democratic attitudes not only seem to prevail in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, but they also, as we hypothesize in our research proposal, appear to feed Euroscepticism more than those practices and sentiments levelled against formal democratic procedures. This corresponds with the generalised political discontent or institutional distrust, identified in literature as sources of Euroscepticism (Hooghe and Marks, 2007).

EU accession and democratic politics

In the growing literature on the role and relevance of regional organizations in national democratisation processes, the enlargement of the European Union is routinely presented as one of the most successful international democracy promotion strategies. Europe is a prime example of Philippe Schmitter’s observation that the context of successful democratisation is neither national nor global – it is primarily regional (Schmitter, 2007). Among regional organizations, the European Union in particular has had a strong and beneficial influence on the transitional and consolidation phases of democracy through processes of socialization and legitimisation. Additionally, the European Union offers a prime example of another general “rule”: an external democratization strategy on the basis of agreement is more effective than one which is based on pressure. The crux of the matter is the coincidence between an aspiration to membership (and the willingness to accept all conditions involved)
and a desire for democracy. Despite the fact that the pursuit of membership is often considered as causally related to the development of democracy, it remains extremely difficult to demonstrate to what extent the political and economic conditionality applied by the European Union has exactly influenced democracy. After all, enlargement was not only, and perhaps not even primarily, a strategy of democratization, but of integration – a strategy of integration in whose success the Union itself was a major stakeholder.

Hypothetically, various features of this democratization/integration strategy may have negatively affected the current state of democracy in the new Member States. Firstly, the enlargement of the European Union was a strongly elitist enterprise. It benefited from a relatively weak civil society and low political participation. Secondly, despite the widely shared ambition to join the European Union, accession was poorly legitimised and suffered from a clear lack of accountability. How can one be held accountable for policies which are essentially inevitable, predetermined. Accession itself and accession conditions were generally presented as desirable, necessary, rational, even inevitable. They were largely depoliticised. The accession strategy to the European Union was built on “forced”, artificial consensus. National legislatures played only a marginal role in the process. Accession served as a focal point of cooperation among political parties and groups which would otherwise be (strongly) divided. Accession politics were virtual politics. This puts the notorious remarks by the Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyrucrsany (May 2006) in a slightly different light: “for a year and a half we have faked governing (…) we lied in the morning, in the evening, and at night (…) there is no choice” (Rupnik, 2007).

From the perspective of enlargement as a strategy of integration, these features of the accession process may have been beneficial. The realization of the accession conditions and other painful consequences of the transition process were probably much easier in a largely depoliticised environment than in a strongly politicised one. From the perspective of democratization, however, the very specifics of the accession strategy may help to explain the political problems the new Member States are faced with today.

Demokratieunzufriedenheit could be considered as a welcome, to avoid the unduly deterministic “inevitable”, reaction to the experience of accession. The post-accession blues could be seen as the
“return of politics” to Central and Eastern Europe. Self-enforced conformity is over. There is room for politics again: for non-consensus, for polarization, for political choice, in other words: for true democratic accountability. This return of politics may have some unpleasant features and effects (of which the rise of “populism” is generally seen as the most conspicuous one) but it is no immediate threat to the democratic gains of the last two decades. The room to manoeuvre remains limited. Most political populists in Central and Eastern Europe today distinguish themselves through moral issues, not through alternative economic policies or ideological designs. Their policies reflect, and appeal to, a-democratic, rather than antidemocratic sentiments.

Paradoxically, the European Union exerts less influence on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe today, now they have joined the union, than it did before, during the accession process. Whilst strict conditionality no longer applies, competencies have blurred, and decision-making structures and procedures have become more complex (Zielonka, 2007). In short, from an institution which needs to be complied with, the European Union became one which can be disputed. The counter-argument is of course that while “leverage” may have decreased, “linkage” has increased.

If the current problems with and of democratic politics in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe are at least partly related to their accession to the European Union (and therefore primarily determined by the enlargement strategy of the Union), one might expect another causality: between a- or antidemocratic attitudes and Euroscepticism.

Euroscepticism is as multi-interpretable as democracy critique. Kopecky and Mudde have distinguished between “diffuse” and “specific” support for European integration. The former refers to “support for the general ideas of European integration that underlie the EU” (Kopecky and Mudde, 2002). The latter denotes “support for the general practice of European integration; that is, the EU as it is and as it is developing”. From a different perspective, Taggart and Szcerbiak refined the definition of Euroscepticism by making a distinction between “hard” and “soft” Euroscepticism. While the former implies outright rejection of the entire European project; the latter involves “contingent or qualified opposition to European integration” (Taggart and Szcerbiak, 2001).
Research indicates that on average the new Member States of the European Union show a higher measure of Euroscepticism in combination with a lower level of “European identity” (Wessels, 2007). My interpretation, however, is that their discontent with “Europe” is predominantly of the “soft” variant, as their democracy critique is primarily of the “a-democratic” form. For a full rejection of European integration, the hard version of Euroscepticism, one needs to look further eastwards to the republics of the former Soviet Union. And even there hard Euroscepticism is probably a minority issue. The new Member States of the European Union present a political reality which is neither very appealing nor particularly dramatic. The return of politics in the region has some ugly features. The backlash against the liberal consensus, the advance of political populism and the rise of democracy dissatisfaction and Euroscepticism form an unattractive mix. They may be a symptom of the flaws of the democratic order in Central and Eastern Europe but they should not be identified with either a crisis of democratic government or with a full rejection of the European project.

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