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Cianetti, Licia; Hanley, Seán

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THE END OF THE BACKSLIDING PARADIGM

Licia Cianetti and Seán Hanley

Licia Cianetti is research fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London. Seán Hanley is associate professor in comparative Central and East European politics at University College London. Together they are coeditors (with James Dawson) of Rethinking “Democratic Backsliding” in Central and Eastern Europe (2019).

Analysts widely agree that the world has entered a period of global democratic retreat. Quantitative indices show year-on-year declines in aggregate levels of global democracy and in the number of countries classified as democracies or making democratic gains. Moreover, concerns about democratic decay now extend beyond the young democracies of the “third wave” to some of the world’s most established democratic polities, including the United States.

Instead of the authoritarian coups that were the most common mechanisms of democratic reversal for much of the twentieth century, today’s imperiled democracies more often face what has been termed democratic backsliding, democratic erosion, or “creeping authoritarianism”: the gradual stripping back of constitutional safeguards and piecemeal dismantling of democratic institutions by elected politicians, often illiberally inclined populists. Rather than overnight breakdown, democratic backsliding is a drawn-out death by a thousand cuts, in which power-hungry executives slice away at fundamental institutional checks and balances in ways that ultimately distort pluralism and political competition.¹

While this intuitively compelling framework does much to capture the mood of steady decline all around us, there is a risk that the concept of democratic backsliding may become a counterproductive paradigm. Specifically, this analytical framework can encourage reducing (un)democratic developments to movement along a linear trajectory of progress, standstill, or regression, thereby obscuring as much as it reveals when applied to many troubled or turbulent

democracies. In this regard, 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 these pages almost two decades ago by Thomas Carothers.²

Applications of the backsliding paradigm to the countries of East-Central Europe (ECE) offer a stark illustration of these parallels, as well as the pitfalls of interpretation and policymaking that they generate.³ There seems to be comparatively little dispute that democratic backsliding has been taking place in the ECE region, once seen as emblematic of democracy’s “third wave.” Formerly hailed as remarkable transition success stories, democracies in this region—countries such as Hungary and Poland—have recently drawn academic and media attention as the poster children of backsliding from consolidated democracy toward hybrid or even fully authoritarian regimes. Scrutinized more closely, developments in this region demonstrate both the reality and the limitations of the backsliding paradigm. In the spirit of Carothers’s original injunction to ask “what is happening politically,”⁴ we offer an alternative view by highlighting two intermediate patterns—“democratic careening” and tradeoffs between competing democratic values—that defy easy understanding in terms of linear movement along a continuum from democracy to autocracy.

A Transition Paradigm In Reverse?

Even when democracy was largely advancing on the ground, the possibility that democratization might sooner or later go into reverse has haunted the imagination of scholars.⁵ But scholarly interest in democratic backsliding has exploded in the last decade, driven by uncertainty about the momentum of third-wave democratization. These feelings of unease are associated with 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.

Yet relying on the backsliding concept to set the global research agenda may come at a cost. In many ways it risks reproducing, in reverse, the intellectual constraints of the over-optimistic transition paradigm of the 1990s, highlighted by Carothers in his celebrated (though controversial) critique. In his 2002 essay Carothers identified two critically flawed assumptions impeding understanding of a world characterized by a mix of persistent authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and low-quality democracies. These were, first, that countries moving away from autocracy are in transition toward democracy; and, second, that there is a linear sequence of stages leading to or from consolidated democracy, with countries moving forward or backward 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.”⁶ Carothers further argued that those under the influence of the transition paradigm tended to take it for granted 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.

More than just an interesting polemic from another era, Carothers’s essay serves today as a timely warning of the risks inherent in the nascent backsliding paradigm. The transition paradigm, Carothers warned, was defined by the final (desired) outcome of transition: consolidated liberal democracy. The backsliding paradigm similarly rests, implicitly or explicitly, on a 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. Yet both also tend to reduce our view of dynamics and trajectories to three possible options: democracies can move forward, fall backward, or stagnate motionless in middling positions. 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 in its 2020 annual report in the familiar terms of advance versus retreat along a path between autocracy and democracy.⁷ While country-level studies often contain rich accounts of fluid and open processes of (un)democratic change, transition or reverse transition paradigms risk flattening these trends in order to give an aggregate verdict of democratic improvement or deterioration. When analysts rely overly on the intuitive but overly schematic backsliding framework, they may find themselves missing more complex dynamics involving tradeoffs or non-linear movement.

Conceiving of all democracies as potential backsliders often leads to assessing their political lives in narrow 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 widely characterized by 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 this framework might be in play, as a large, diverse, and unexplored residual category. On the ground, however, these different patterns and outcomes are frequently much more than sideshows to the main event. To borrow Carothers’ words,⁸ these non-linear dynamics 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-Central Europe—the region of successful postcommunist democratizers located between core West European states, the Western Balkans, and the successor states of the USSR. Central and East European countries played a key role in the rise of both the transition paradigm and the backsliding paradigm.⁹ A closer look at these states can once again help us to refine our notions of (un)democratic change.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the region defied a raft of early breakdown prophecies to rapidly achieve apparent democratic consolidation, aided by proximity to the EU. As Carothers pointed out, this made East-Central Europe one of the few clear illustrations of the transition paradigm in real life. The idea that this region might be losing some of its democratic achievements to backsliding emerged just over a decade ago. When the *Journal of Democracy* posed this question to leading specialists, they highlighted a mélange of negative developments: populism; illiberal nationalism and radicalism; fragmented and factionalized parties; corruption and informal practices; and a weak civil society and public sphere. Most, however, did not detect a systematic threat to democracy—and some still saw grounds for optimism or argued that populist movements were ambiguous phenomena, channeling social frustrations and correcting excessive neoliberalism, that would recast but not reverse democracy.¹⁰

Subsequent developments clarified the very real nature of the threat to democracy in countries such as Hungary (beginning with the victory of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party in 2010 parliamentary elections) and Poland (following presidential- and parliamentary-election victories by the right-wing Law and Justice [PiS] in 2015). These developments brought the region into closer alignment with theoretical notions of backsliding: The experience of these two onetime democratic frontrunners matches the 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, building on and deepening existing traditions of social conservatism and conservative nationalism,¹¹ and took on features reminiscent of radical right populists in older Western democracies. These newly radicalized parties also strove to claim the mantle of anticorruption, and they received an electoral boost from external crises that laid bare the limits of global free markets and European integration. Once securely in office with solid majorities, PiS and Fidesz waged the familiar war of attrition against liberal institutions and liberal civil society, gradually skewing political competition. In commentary on East-Central Europe, these prominent examples sometimes seem to shape discussions of expected (and feared) patterns of political change across the entire region.¹²

Yet while elements observed in Hungary and Poland such as populism, illiberal social conservatism, and attacks on media pluralism are present elsewhere (including outside East-Central Europe), they occur in different degrees and different combinations 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 eleven current postcommunist members as cases of democratic backsliding (or “democratic erosion”), with only two—Hungary and Poland—consistently categorized as backsliders.¹³ The countries of East-Central Europe exhibit a range of political configurations and trajectories, many of which fit the Hungarian and Polish models awkwardly or not at all. Yet with democracy scores declining across the region, how should we understand the many apparent “non-backsliders”? Are they instances of robust democratic resilience, simply behind the curve, or something else entirely?

Some clues can be gained by considering the analytical limitations that the backsliding paradigm shares with the “transition paradigm.” Carothers criticized the “transition paradigm” for overemphasizing elections as turning points. The backsliding paradigm too is to some degree electorally centered. Electoral victories by democratically disloyal politicians (often illiberal populists) are the logical starting point for 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 and 2019).

Inverting Carothers’s critique of the transition paradigm’s 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 sufficiently entrenched. The logic of the backsliding paradigm would suggest that the victory of “technocratic populist” Andrej Babiš in the 2017 Czech parliamentary elections and the entry of the illiberal far-right Conservative People’s Party (EKRE) into Estonia’s new governing coalition should be classified either as steps down the backsliding path or—if these illiberal advances do not lead to full-on institutional erosion—as instances of backsliding averted. However, both options inadequately capture the nature of political change in these 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 amounts to something less than backsliding but more than politics as usual.

Conversely, concentrations of power that threaten democracy may arise by routes other than politicians gaining and wielding electoral majorities. In this sense, elections not only are insufficient on their own to trigger democratic backsliding, but also may not be a necessary condition of backsliding. For example, some have suggested that the rise of powerful oligarchic 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 as to undermine democracy. As Antoaneta 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.¹⁴

Powerful elite and oligarchical networks not only plunder public resources, but stealthily gain control over courts, media, parties and even civil society. Although electoral competition, alternation in government, and periodic upsurges of protest may continue, at a certain point representation, political choice, rule of law may be so hollowed, that democracy is effectively negated as a regime. The conceptualization of backsliding as a primarily electoral process—one that is triggered by “bad people” winning watershed elections and stopped or reversed by “good people” winning them back—seems inadequate to capture these longer-term, slower, and more complex forms of democratic erosion.

Focusing too much on elections and the short-term fortunes of illiberal politicians also risks aggravating the “presentist” bias inevitable in any analysis of a gradual ongoing process, which creates a tendency to interpret events currently in the headlines as major (un)democratic shifts. For example, Zuzana Čaputová’s 2019 election as Slovak president—succeeding another liberal independent, Andrej Kiska—was hailed as a turning point for the struggle against populism in Eastern Europe, with global implications for turning the populist tide. Once scholars have overinterpreted the positive or negative significance of one moment, they may be inclined to view subsequent events as equally dramatic turns in the opposite direction. Such tendencies drive a rollercoaster of optimism and pessimism that has often characterized discussions of democracy historically,¹⁵ but may do little to illuminate how troubled democracies actually work.

This problem ties in with a broader inattention to underlying conditions (“economic level, political history, institutional legacies, ethnic make-up, sociocultural traditions, or other ‘structural’ features”), a shortcoming detected by Carothers in the transition paradigm and also evident in the backsliding paradigm.¹⁶ This is true even with regard to analyses of East-Central Europe, despite political culture and communist legacies having previously been go-to explanations for democratic difficulties and political variation in the region. Following global trends, the tendency has been to explain backsliding in ECE countries by invoking more general proximate causes such as electoral volatility, political polarization, and the rise of populist parties and ideologies, or exogenous shocks such as the Great Recession, the European refugee crisis, the Eurozone crisis, Russian-sponsored manipulation, and more recently, the covid-19 pandemic. In such analyses, domestic social, economic, and political structures tend to remain in the background, or to be subsumed in discussions of the global context. In particular, the unexpected susceptibility of onetime democratic frontrunners such as Hungary and Poland has reinforced the view of backsliding as contagion—“Orbánization” driven by the spread of illiberal ideas; a Hungarian-inspired playbook for unscrupulous elites crafting a transition from democracy that can be enacted almost regardless of structural conditions.¹⁷

If Not Backsliding, What? Entering the Twilight Zone

A focus on linear movement backward or forward—with the direction determined by summing up a balance sheet of democratic pluses and minuses—is especially problematic for analyzing countries that do not move (much) in either direction or that move erratically in contradictory directions. Scholars are, naturally, aware of such cases, in which states “have moved back and forth or hovered on the precipice” for extended periods.¹⁸ In other instances, democracies

morph in troubling and fundamental ways without sliding (or beginning to slide) into hybrid, competitive authoritarian regimes. Examined through the backsliding paradigm, these countries—and the array of democratic difficulties they display—either are relegated to a loosely theorized twilight zone of “stagnant” cases, or are rendered as democratically resilient success stories or lucky instances of backsliding averted.¹⁹ These broad categorizations, however, do not necessarily give the clearest sense of 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?”²⁰ Stagnant or resilient need not mean immobile. Such classifications may hide patterns of change and adaptation that tell us more about (un)democratic development than narratives of movement along a supposed linear path.

To counter the schematic transition paradigm, Carothers outlined two “broad political syndromes” that better approximated real-life patterns into which third-wave countries were settling. Tentatively following in his footsteps, we use examples from the ECE region to sketch two intermediate patterns visible today: (1) bumpy, dynamic sequences of episodic crisis and confrontation falling short of the clash between authoritarian-minded illiberals and “prodemocracy” forces envisaged in accounts of backsliding (akin to what Slater has called “careening”); and (2) cases marked by tradeoffs between distinct democratic values, whose complex dynamics defy the “all good things go together” logic that often informs thinking about democratization, backsliding, and the quality of democracy.²¹

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 where populist governments inclined toward bypassing constitutional restraints take office, subsequent developments follow a pattern that diverges from these expectations. Populist challenges to the liberal fundamentals of democracy can be too weak and unsystematic to push decisively in the direction of a hybrid regime. Such challenges may also be stymied by institutional resistance or pushback from opposition or civic movements, perhaps leading to defeat in sometimes skewed but still competitive elections. Some observers view such episodes as “near misses” that offer lessons in democratic resilience.²² 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 countermobilization.²³ Such dynamics are well captured by 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.”²⁴

Although it may be reinforced by sociocultural and identity cleavages, careening is driven by many sources of polarization and by the unresolved tension between rival blocs making competing democratic claims. On one side is a “populist” claim to channel a democratic majority, typically one including previously excluded groups and concerns, whose will overrides institutional constraints. On the other side one finds a “liberal” claim to defend constitutionality, institutions, transparency, the rule of law, and the rights of minorities. The dynamics of careening rest on an unstable balance between the two: Both sides have (opposing) democratic claims of some validity, while neither has the political weight or coherency to enforce a settlement along its preferred lines. This confrontation brings no quick resolution. Populist triumphs within this

dynamic are not entry points to a new politics of democratic backsliding, and populist setbacks do not herald a quick return to democratic consolidation. Rather than marking the lead-in to a new and different political game, this struggle between opposing democratic claims *is* the game.

Slater identifies careening in East and Southeast Asian democracies (Thailand, Taiwan, and Indonesia), where it takes the form of clashes between rival party-backed social movements, sometimes overlapping with conflict between presidents and prime ministers. But parallel patterns have emerged in the very different ECE context. Their most visible expressions are upsurges of grassroots civic protest, unaligned with any party or movement and typically triggered by incumbent corruption and bad governance: for instance in Bulgaria (2013, 2020), Romania (2012, 2017–19), Slovenia (2012–13), the Czech Republic (2019), and Slovakia (2012, 2018). Instances of popular mobilization and civic protest are usually framed within the backsliding paradigm as “prodemocracy” movements of resistance against autocratically-inclined leaders.²⁵ In East-Central Europe, however, (anti-)corruption—which is central in the politics of the region—feeds both liberal claims about the crucial checking role of unelected institutions and civic protest movements *and* populist claims to be mobilizing the popular will against corrupt, out-of-touch elites. Moreover, as Veronika Stoyanova’s critical analysis of the 2013 protests in Bulgaria highlights,²⁶ citizen mobilization in this region 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 socioeconomic inclusion and egalitarian demands off the political agenda. This divergence of interests has the potential to produce precisely the type of faceoff between opposing coalitions seen by Slater as the driver of “careening” in Southeast Asia.

The different perspective that the careening frame offers is well illustrated by the seemingly divergent cases of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. With a “technocratic populist” government led by the agro-food and media magnate Andrej Babiš as prime minister and with left-nationalist Miloš Zeman as president, the Czech Republic might seem to be traveling along the familiar backsliding trajectory, albeit with backsliding taking a comparatively mild form due to Babiš’s limited electoral support, his lack of a consistent ideological narrative, and a strong grassroots pushback against his conflicts of interests and threats to democratic checks and balances.²⁷ Conversely, Slovakia elected liberal independent presidents in 2014 and 2019, was convulsed by civic protest movements in 2018, and dislodged the long-dominant left-populist Smer party in 2020 parliamentary elections. It is usually seen as a regional bright spot where liberal forces have pushed back successfully and forced illiberalism into retreat.

Yet looking through the lens of democratic careening offers a different, and perhaps more accurate, view of two cases that turn out to have a great deal in common. Considered in these terms, tendencies toward authoritarian populism and the opposing liberal pushback in both countries figure as opposed democratic claims. When mass protests arose in Slovakia following the 2018 murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, participants decried Prime Minister Robert Fico as heading a corrupt state where the rule of law had been subverted. Fico, meanwhile, framed himself as a besieged democrat resisting a Europe-wide threat to popular rule from unelected institutions and movements without an electoral mandate. Rather than pushing democratic politics decisively forward or backward, in both countries the “liberal” and “populist” camps are weaker than they seem. Even at moments when political developments suddenly careen in one camp’s favor, this may simply prepare the ground for a swing back in the opposite direction.

In such settings, populist advances have their limits. Despite holding the offices of president and prime minister, populist forces in the Czech Republic were pushed back by oppositional civic protest and institutional constraints (especially as Babiš's party ANO failed to gain control of countervailing institutions such as the Senate). In Slovakia, even when Smer commanded a majority (during its stint in government from 2012 to 2016), it did not attack democratic institutions in a concerted way. 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 players in Slovakia's coalition government—many of which are top-down personalistic parties—appear vulnerable to capture by vested interests, and in some cases these parties are cultivating anticorruption agendas framed along populist lines. Civic protest in the Czech Republic has failed to give rise to a coherent liberal political movement or party, and existing opposition parties are fragmented; however, the Southeast Asian experience suggests that even if liberal and center-right forces did unite and manage to defeat Babiš, the result would likely be another transient stage of careening, rather than immediate 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 tradeoffs, for instance 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 policy making.²⁸ Exclusion can come in different forms: It can be based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, or intersections thereof, and can be enshrined in law or established in practice. Yet forms of exclusion are not simply minuses to

be added to the tally when calculating a country's degree of backsliding or backsliding potential. In some circumstances, exclusion can function as a stabilization mechanism that sustains functional 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; the entrance of previously excluded voices, despite its clear desirability from the point of view of an optimal inclusive democracy, can have destabilizing effects on existing democratic arrangements. Paradoxically, predictable patterns of political competition that sustain institutional and policy consensus may be 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 making up between a quarter and a third of the national population and which display patterns of mutually reinforcing ethnic and social exclusion, provide strong examples of this mechanism at work. By most accounts and per all major democracy indices, Latvia and Estonia have remained very successful democratizers. Indeed, Estonia (with Slovenia) is often ranked the highest performer among the EU's post-communist member states, and Latvia is not far behind.²⁹ Nonetheless, their state and democracy building were led by ethnic-majority elites who enshrined collective advantages establishing ethnic Estonian and Latvian "titular" populations as the sole legitimate proprietors of the state, above and sometimes against the sizeable Russian-speaking minorities.³⁰ Exclusionary citizenship laws left out a sizable portion of Estonia's and Latvia's Russian speakers, and with a steady stream of policies aimed at defending the small Baltic languages, language has remained a highly politicized issue and a key social cleavage that shapes party politics.

Upon independence, the mass disenfranchisement of Russian speakers through citizenship laws minimized contestation and debate over forms of democratic transition and Europeanization. The resulting exclusionary democratic settlement, which limits the influence of the Russian-speaking minority over policy making, was further crystalized through language legislation and by party political dynamics that preserved the majority elite's grip on power. In a context where Russian speakers were on average more working-class and left-leaning in their economic outlook, economic-policy discussions that cast hard-hitting neoliberal reforms as ethical imperatives further reduced the scope for debate, while maintaining a certain degree of stability and predictability.³¹ In Latvia, despite a volatile party system characterized by frequent electoral booms and busts for newcomer (often populist) parties, parties new and old always regroup on the Latvian side of the ethnic divide when forming governing coalitions, excluding the large "Russian" party Harmony. In Estonia, the minority-friendly (but Estonian-led) Center Party until very recently was similarly excluded from coalition-building.

Seen through the lens of a trade-off between inclusion and stability, Estonia and Latvia appear to have attained their status as regional leaders in democratization not despite, but *because of* this pattern of exclusion. Rather than endangering their democratic stability, it has underpinned this stability and shaped the way these democracies work by cementing majority elites' control over policy making. Over the years, minorities have mobilized (particularly in Latvia) and have even extracted concessions, especially when backed by strong international pressure. However, majority elites have managed to remain "democracy's gatekeepers," legislating on minority-sensitive issues such as language and education as well as on economic policy with little in the way of opposition.

The logic of the backsliding paradigm would lead us to label Estonia and Latvia either as progressing (with some hiccups) toward consolidation or, in light of the success of nationalist far-right parties and their inclusion in governing coalitions, as facing some risk of democratic backsliding.³² Consideration of tradeoffs, however, reveals the limits of this view: Classifying Estonia and Latvia as “normal” 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, classifying 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.

In Estonia, recent developments suggest that the long-established tradeoff between inclusion and stability may soon be upset by growing polarization: The Center Party now leads an unlikely coalition government with the “establishment” nationalist Pro Patria and the far-right nationalist EKRE. Even here, however, a shift to careening—with this dynamic pitting a rebranded, populist, and less minority-friendly Center Party against the liberal center-right Reform—might prove a better conceptual framework than backsliding for understanding patterns of change.

Refreshing Our Analytical Toolkit

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. In countries such as Hungary and Poland, this concept captures a

disturbing reality. However, even in a region that is genuinely experiencing sharp democratic decline (as is the case in East-Central Europe), the tendency to read all recent (un)democratic developments through the lens of “backsliding” obscures crucial dynamics of tradeoffs, fluctuation, and sideways movement. While the picture that emerges in East-Central Europe 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 progress or regression along a continuum of regimes. The type of patterns we have highlighted might sustain themselves over extended periods, but they are better seen as open-ended processes rather than fixed outcomes. In a country such as 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 give way to one of textbook backsliding—though in a case such as the Czech Republic, 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 that 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 prodemocracy and authoritarian-minded actors, prioritizing civic resistance and the defense of independent institutions to impede would-be autocrats and boost democrats must of course be a priority. However, for countries whose dynamics follow ambiguous and intermediate patterns of the kind 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 such as East-Central Europe. If intermediate syndromes are more than mere stepping-stones on the way to paradigmatic backsliding, then different strategies of democracy promotion will be needed to address these cases—strategies that openly recognize the uncomfortable normative and political choices between stability, inclusivity, and contestation that practitioners may encounter on the ground. Democracy’s global malaise is real, but it is also complex; if we are to have any hope of finding effective remedies, we must redouble our efforts at diagnosis.

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¹ Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27 (January 2016): 5–19; Larry Diamond, “Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes,” *Democratization*, online 15 September 2020; Anna Lührmann et al., *Autocratization Surges—Resistance Grows: Democracy Report 2020* (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2020); Elisabeth Bakke and Nick Sitter, “The EU’s *Enfants Terribles*: Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe Since 2010,” *Perspectives on Politics*, online 24 July 2020.

² Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (January 2002): 5–21.

³ We define East-Central Europe as postcommunist countries that joined the European Union in the 2004, 2007, and 2013 enlargement rounds.

⁴ Carothers, “End of the Transition Paradigm,” 18.

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 290–294; see also Larry Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” *Journal of Democracy* 7 (July 1996): 20–37.

⁶ Carothers, “End of the Transition Paradigm,” 7.

⁷ See Figure on Lührmann et al., *Autocratization Surges*, 11.

⁸ Carothers, “End of the Transition Paradigm,” 14.

⁹ 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, no. 3 (2018): 243–56.

¹⁰ The Editors, “Is East-Central Europe Backsliding?” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 5–6; Ivan Krastev, “Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus,” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (October 2007): 56–63.

¹¹ Béla Greskovits, “Rebuilding the Hungarian Right Through Conquering Civil Society: The Civic Circles Movement,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 2 (2020): 247–66; Zsolt Enyedi, “Right-Wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020): 363–77.

¹² “East-Central and Southeast Europe: Illiberal Drift,” in Bertelsmann Stiftung, ed., *Transformation Index BTI 2018: Governance in International Comparison* (Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018): 84–92.

¹³ For example, reviewing the V-Dem dataset, Ben Stanley identifies Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as backsliders (“Backsliding Away? The Quality of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15, no. 4 [2019]: 343–53); Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg identify only Poland and Hungary (“How Much Democratic Backsliding?” *Journal of Democracy* 28 [October 2017]: 162–69); Lindberg finds that Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania deteriorated sufficiently to downgrade from “liberal” to “electoral” democracy (“The Nature of Democratic Backsliding in Europe,” Carnegie Europe, 24 July 2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/07/24/nature-of-democratic-backsliding-in-europe-pub-76868>); Lührmann and Lindberg find three episodes of “democratic erosion” in CEE: Hungary (2010–17), Poland (2013–17), and Croatia (2013–17) (“A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?” *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–113).

¹⁴ Antoaneta L. 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, no. 3 (2018): 260. On these issues see also Grigorij Meseznikov, “Slovak Corruption: Enemy of Democracy, Ally of Extremism,” *Balkan Insight*, 16 December 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/12/16/slovak-corruption-enemy-of-democracy-ally-of-extremism>; Radosveta Vassileva, “Is Bulgaria the EU’s Next Rule of Law Crisis?” *EUobserver*, 12 September 2018.

¹⁵ David Runciman, *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” 8.

¹⁷ See for example Jan-Werner Müller, “Eastern Europe Goes South,” *Foreign Affairs* (March–April 2014): 14–19; Eszter Zalan, “How to Build an Illiberal Democracy in the EU,” *EUobserver*, 8 January 2016; 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, 30 June 2020.

¹⁸ Diamond, “Democratic Regression.”

¹⁹ See for example Scott Mainwaring and Fernando Bizzarro, “The Fates of Third-Wave Democracies,” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (January 2019): 99.

²⁰ Dan Slater, “Democratic Careening,” *World Politics* 65 (October 2013): 730.

²¹ Sonja Grimm and Julia Leininger, “Not All Good Things Go Together: Conflicting Objectives in Democracy Promotion,” *Democratization* 19, no. 3 (2012): 391–414.

²² Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq, “Democracy’s Near Misses,” *Journal of Democracy* 29 (October 2018): 16–30.

²³ Slater, “Democratic Careening,” 730; Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, “The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?” *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 166–76; see also Michael Bernhard, “Chronic Instability and the Limits of Path Dependence,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (December 2015): 976.

²⁴ Slater, “Democratic Careening,” 730.

²⁵ Lührmann and Lindberg, *Autocratization Surges*; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.

²⁶ Veronika Stoyanova, *Ideology and Social Protests in Eastern Europe: Beyond the Transition’s Liberal Consensus* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁷ Seán Hanley and Milada Anna Vachudova, “Understanding the Illiberal Turn: Democratic Backsliding in the Czech Republic,” *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 276–96.

²⁸ Luca Tomini, *When Democracies Collapse: Assessing Transitions to Non-Democratic Regimes in the Contemporary World* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Jane Mansbridge, “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes,’” *Journal of Politics* 61 (August 1999): 628–57.

²⁹ Their Freedom in the World scores have remained largely unchanged in recent years, with Estonia at 94 on a 100-point scale in every report since 2017, and Latvia at 87 from 2017 to 2019, rising to 89 in 2020. Both countries’ liberal democracy index scores in V-Dem since 1990 make them regional leaders.

³⁰ Licia Cianetti, *The Quality of Divided Democracies: Minority Inclusion, Exclusion and Representation in the New Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

³¹ 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, no. 3 (2018): 317–36.

³² See for example Béla Greskovits, “The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe,” *Global Policy* 6 (June 2015): 28–37.