Is East-Central Europe Backsliding?

EU ACCESSION IS NO "END OF HISTORY"

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Fewer than twenty years ago, the Central and East European countries that have now joined the European Union were the "other Europe." They were bankrupt and famished. Their citizens had to deal with empty store shelves, the lack of any right to a passport, and a formidable communist secret service spying on their private lives. Since the Soviet collapse, however, these nations have reshaped their economies and societies and have gained membership in the EU and NATO. Foreign investment is pouring in, and what is left of the secret-service files has been opened to the public. In the textbooks on democratic transition, Central and Eastern Europe provides the model of success. Yet in Brussels—the new benevolent metropolis of these countries on the European periphery—concern over the politics of the new members has been mounting. Thus we need to seek an explanation as to why there is growing concern for these countries when in many ways they seem to be performing so well.

What are the facts on the ground? A quick glance at the countries of Central and Eastern Europe quickly singles out Slovenia as having no serious troubles whatsoever. It is the only new member country that already has joined Europe's monetary union and is ready to hold the six-month rotating European presidency in 2008, a performance test for any government. The Baltic states also are doing rather well in terms of domestic politics, though during the transition they had their ups and downs. Hungary, whose transition performance had been lauded by EU negotiators, went through some difficult moments in 2006. Anger spread in the streets of Budapest following a political scandal involving the prime minister. Scenes of opposition-backed demonstrators blocking a major bridge and trying to bring down the government through an insurrection on the streets reminded one more of Kyrgyzstan than of

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Central Europe. As for its economy, Hungary emerged from its last two governments with a budget deficit exceeding 10 percent of GNP, and it cannot realistically hope to meet the tight European monetary-stability criteria in the near future. To join the Eurozone, Hungary will have to return to fiscal austerity.

The Czech Republic held a close and inconclusive election in June 2006, followed by a seven-month stalemate, and the Parliament is still deadlocked between the left and the right. Poland has had a minority government since its 2005 elections, and its main conservative party (itself not greatly loved in Europe) forged unstable alliances with radical populists in order to govern. In Slovakia, the center-right government that had managed the country's EU accession was ousted after two mandates and succeeded by a coalition of right-wing populists, left-wing populists, and radical nationalists. Immediately after Romania's EU accession on 1 January 2007, a left-right alliance in Parliament tried to oust President Traian Băsescu, a popular leader who eventually survived a referendum meant to impeach him, though he lost his reform-minded ministers in the process. In Bulgaria, the center-right parties that had managed Bulgaria's successful EU accession fell from favor with voters, who voted for a mild populist party and a radical nationalist one in their first elections for the European Parliament.

Five distinct features are apparent in the politically troubled countries of the region: 1) the electoral advance of populist groups, whether extremist or relatively democratic, to the detriment of classic "ideological" parties (as in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania, Poland, and Slovakia); 2) political radicalization on both sides of the main political cleavage—generally the left-right one, though ideological borders are sometimes fuzzy—resulting in a lack of cooperation across the cleavage line and in political instability (as in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania); 3) electorates evenly split between the two electoral coalitions, resulting in weak majorities and unstable minority governments (as in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania); 4) factional behavior, leading to poor cooperation within electoral coalitions and bringing further instability to governments (as evidenced nearly everywhere); and 5) occasional acts that violate democratic standards or are on the margins of doing so—such as attempts to influence justice, rig elections, or restrict the rights of political opponents—which are generally limited in time and impact and end in public scandal. These five features of the current crises in Central and Eastern Europe are often interrelated, yet they can still be distinguished from one another quite clearly.

Diagnosing the Symptoms

This brief review suggests three questions: First, can we consider the association of the above symptoms of political malaise as constituting

Table 1—Political Symptoms Across the Region

Country	Number of Symptoms	Populist Electoral Gains	Political Radicalization	Weak Majority*	Factional Behavior	Misbehavior of Political Elites
Bulgaria	4	+		+	+	+
Czech Republic	3		+	+	+	
Hungary	3		++		+	+
Poland	5	+	+	+	+	+
Romania	5	+	+	+	+	+
Slovakia	3	+	+		+	

* By weak majority I understand here not the lack of a single-party majority, but a weak majority for an ideologically consistent electoral coalition. In PR systems one party seldom receives a comfortable majority: The problem in Central and Eastern Europe is the inability of parties with close ideological positions to form a governing coalition together, either before or after elections, and to hold it together once it is eventually formed.

a *single* political syndrome that we can use as a dependent variable, or are we speaking of various unrelated diseases that each call for separate and locally driven explanations? Second, if there is such a syndrome, is it a *disease of democracy* in these countries, rather than a malfunction of their respective political systems, of the kind we have witnessed in Italy after 1989? Third, what is the role of our independent variable of interest, EU accession, among the other factors causing these symptoms?

To answer the first question I have reunited the symptoms in Table 1, with the inherent and regrettable simplifications that such syntheses presume. None of the countries has fewer than three symptoms, and some display them all. Thus there seems to be a syndrome here, although more research is needed to explore the linkages between the symptoms. There have been populist gains in all those countries with proportional-representation (PR) electoral systems, and two populist parties have even won elections (namely, for the Slovak parliament and for Bulgaria's representatives in the European Parliament [EP]). Yet except for the Hungarian street demonstrations in 2006, we do not see any mass behavior threatening democracy itself—despite innumerable anecdotes that can be cited on the uncivil behavior of political elites and quite widespread (though unsuccessful) attempts by politicians to position themselves above the law or to pass legislation for their personal advantage.

It is puzzling to find the presence of similar symptoms in countries displaying considerable variation in terms of transition performance (leaders and laggards), institutions (parliamentary and semipresidential systems, PR and mixed voting systems), democracy scores, and average incomes. But are these symptoms of democratic decay rather than of transient instability generated by the need to adjust to the new European environment?

For the answer, we can look at "old Europe"—the fifteen countries

that were EU members prior to the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. Populist gains vis-à-vis traditional parties do not characterize Central and Eastern Europe alone. In Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain, we have witnessed in recent years a rise in far-right nationalism and populism. This seems to be a pan-European problem, with such parties becoming partners in governing coalitions. Europe may dislike this tendency, but the EU, having learned the lesson of its failed attempt to boycott the presence in government of the party headed by far-right Austrian politician Jörg Haider, does not intervene anymore. So how could it justify intervening in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe once they have become full EU members?

The 2007 arrival in the European Parliament of new radical populists from Romania and Bulgaria actually provided European populists with sufficient numbers to organize a new political club in the EP, initiating an era of common socialization of such parties from the two halves of Europe. Radical populists from Central and Eastern Europe may be more violent in their language or more overtly anti-Semitic than West European populists, but none of their programs features truly antidemocratic policies, such as abolishing the rights of minority groups. The values that they profess in their speeches are neither liberal nor democratic, but so far one cannot charge them with having taken any antidemocratic actions. Moreover, these radical populists do bring to the surface issues that are of great concern to the public, which explains their popularity.

Some traditional parties have learned from their previous failure to address these kinds of issues, and so some populist contagion has spilled across party borders. In the 2007 French presidential elections, even the mainstream parties adopted a good deal of populist language in order to compete, and there were signs of considerable radicalization as well. In Italy it is common for coalitions to break up after a government is formed, and factional behavior is widespread. (Such actions and behavior are far less common among the "consociational" democracies in Western Europe.) An examination of these political symptoms points to a difference in quantity rather than in quality between the democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and those of "old Europe." In "new Europe," the problem seems to lie with the behavior of democratic parties—their lack of ability to satisfy constituents and to organize and keep together solid coalitions—rather than with voter behavior. Turnout for national elections in new EU member countries continues to hover around an average of 60 percent—well below the unsustainably high rates of the transitional elections of the early 1990s and lower than in Western Europe, but still quite respectable by global standards.

Regional surveys confirm that the problems for democracy stem from elites, not voters. The New Democracies Barometer (NDB) of 2005, the latest in an excellent series of regional surveys, provides ample evidence. Citizens of Central and Eastern Europe's problematic countries

are quite critical toward their institutions, with a majority of them distrusting parliaments and political parties, but they are committed democrats, rejecting such nondemocratic alternatives as "strongman" leaders, the shutting down of parliaments, or army rule. A majority rates the current political system above the communist one, as well as above an authoritarian regime. Democracy is clearly not the issue. Rather, governance is the issue: Two thirds of the voters complain of corruption and weak rule of law, and perceive their governments as unfair

Trends in the NDB and in the Eurobarometer do not show a sudden deterioration after EU entry. For example, trust in political parties and in politicians varies greatly across Europe, but is generally stable over the years in any particular country. In the problematic cases we discuss here, social capital is low, but it is consistently low and does not vary due to accession. While citizens of Central and Eastern Europe feel prodemocratic and are pro-Europe, they remain poor. A majority declares the economy of their household as "bad or very bad" (90 percent in Bulgaria, 75 percent in Hungary). Real wages trailed behind the 1990 level for most of the transition and accession years. Even if the economy is performing well at the macroeconomic level, it is difficult to be happy at the household level when your 2006 purchasing power barely matches that of 1990, as in Romania. Moreover, the difference in development status between "old" and "new" Europe remains largely the same. Most economies of the countries that acceded to the EU in 2004 and 2007 have not yet started to converge with those of "old" Europe, despite achieving some excellent economic results. Even optimists recognize that convergence might still be half a century away.

In short, Central and East Europeans have not turned their backs on democracy. Rather, these highly educated and democracy-minded citizens (at least compared to citizens in other regions of the world) held inflated expectations as their countries transitioned toward democracy after communism, and they are now waking up to reality. They seem fed up with the behavior of the improvised political class that has governed the region since 1990, a class which in some countries has shown a remarkably low capacity for political learning. Either this political class will reform itself so as to become more accountable, or else voters are bound to turn to new alternatives. And these will frequently be populists of some stripe who capitalize precisely on this accountability deficit and who claim that they can offer a different brand of politics and politicians.

The Effects of Accession

Further insights can be found in *Nations in Transit* (NIT), a Freedom House project that provides detailed and attentive monitoring of postcommunist Europe and deeply analyzes various aspects of democrati-

Table 2—Democratic Evolution After Transition in Freedom House *Nations in Transit* Scores

Country	Score 1999–2000	Number of Downgrades	Change During EU Negotiations	Score in 2007
Bulgaria	3.58	1	0.40	2.89
Czech Republic	2.08	2	-0.60	2.25
Estonia	2.25	1	0.25	1.96
Hungary	1.88	3	-0.30	2.14
Latvia	2.29	0	0.15	2.07
Lithuania	2.29	1	0.15	2.29
Poland	1.58	4	-0.15	2.36
Romania	3.54	3	0.15	3.29
Slovakia	2.72	1	0.65	2.14
Slovenia	1.88	0	0.25	1.82
Average	2.40	1.7	0.095	2.32

Source: Computed on the basis of *Nations in Transit, www.freedomhouse.org*.
Legend: Scores from 1 to 7, with 7 the worst quality of democracy; Number of Downgrades = number of times scores were downgraded by Freedom House since 2000; Change During EU Negotiations = averaged across categories measured.

zation, including the electoral process, independent media, corruption, civil society, and judicial independence. Table 2 presents democracy scores at the beginning of the EU-accession process (averaged across 1999–2000), democracy scores in 2007, the number of downgrades during this interval, and the change in scores[1] during negotiations with the EU, when EU coaching and conditionality were at their height. NIT scoring awards 7 points for the worst performance and 1 for the best, but to facilitate reading Table 2, signs are changed in the progress column so that progress is marked with positive signs and regress with negative signs. The minimum unit of progress or regress is 0.25, and smaller units in the table result from averaging across different scores.

The analysis of NIT data shows that these postcommunist democracies had quite a varied pattern of evolution during their EU-accession years. The Baltic states and Slovenia started with remarkably good scores (NIT considers consolidated democracies to be between 1 and 2), showed linear progress through all the years leading up to and during accession, and thus ended with slightly better scores than the ones with which they started. A second group comprises countries that embarked upon accession negotiations with excellent scores (the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland), but ended with scores worse than those with which they had started. Especially during the negotiation years, they all suffered important downgrades, with Poland topping that list (having been downgraded four times). One may suspect that analysts overestimated the democratic performance of these countries at the start, and indeed they might have.

As for the "laggards," Bulgaria and Slovakia started with bad scores but then evolved in a basically linear fashion, with Slovakia progressing fairly well and Bulgaria making a smaller improvement. Romania progressed even less than Bulgaria, was downgraded three times, and ended with a very small gain. Only Romania remained in the area of semiconsolidated democracy, but due to the downgrading of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, the distance between Romania and Bulgaria (which entered the EU in 2007) and the Visegrád countries (which entered the EU in 2004) narrowed considerably.

The story of democracy during the negotiation years and after accession is far from simple. There seems to have been some backsliding immediately after accession in the Central European countries, though not in the Baltic states or Slovenia. Once negotiations start, it is presumed that countries will fulfill the so-called Copenhagen political criteria required by the EU. Thus the European Commission pays less attention to democracy issues than to the institutional integration of the *acquis communautaire,* which forms the core of negotiations. Some subjects, such as the media, fall out entirely from the EU negotiation agenda.

The NIT downgrades given to Central and East European countries were mostly due to setbacks in media freedom. As the media proved to be such a remarkable force during the early transition years, various interest groups learned their lesson: They acquired media outlets simply to use them as bargaining tools in the battle for political and economic influence, thereby increasingly squeezing the space for genuine public expression. This phenomenon of *media capture* has progressed quite dramatically in the region. Yet because media capture is an elusive phenomenon resulting from informal developments, it escaped attention during the negotiations, and so the EU failed to initiate a policy response. For example, the Commission did not ask any government to take decisive steps to make media ownership transparent. The Commission was more assertive in trying to protect public broadcasting from political intervention, but because there is no provision for this area in the *acquis communautaire* (and because the practice is quite bad in some "old Europe" countries as well), it failed entirely. There were also some persistent problems in the crucial area of elections, from the use of administrative resources by parties in power for electoral campaigning, to attempts to manipulate electoral legislation in favor of incumbents.

Other NIT-monitored areas of democratization, such as judicial reform and governance, feature prominently on the EU-accession agenda. Yet progress in these areas during negotiations—the years when EU conditionality is at its height—was extremely modest or altogether missing. Accession countries on average have recorded progress of 0.13 in the electoral process (less than Albania, a nonaccession country with 0.75); they regressed on both media freedom and governance (while Albania progressed); and they dragged their feet on the judiciary (0.05 average

progress in accession countries compared to 1.00 for Albania). Commission insiders would not be surprised by these results, as the Commission's elaborate monitoring procedures depend upon an overall "prescription mechanism" according to which countries are evaluated by the number of measures adopted from detailed Commission "roadmaps" rather than by indicators measuring real changes on the ground. This is as if a doctor evaluated a patient by the number of prescribed medicines taken, rather than by measuring the patient's fever to check on the *effect* of the medicines. Both the adequacy and the impact of such measures in each country were presumed rather than demonstrated.[2]

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At the end of day, we seem to see confirmed once again the liberal principle that incentives, as opposed to planning, can deliver the goods. The *incentive* of EU accession led countries to the remarkable scores that they achieved in the early 1990s, when great progress was made in just a few years. The EU's coaching and assistance (through the Commission and twinning programs with member countries during negotiations) did not deliver much. Enlargement is nearly miraculous as an *incentive,* but quite sluggish and ineffective as an assistance *process*.

The picture described here was also affected by the historical strains on the whole accession process after 2000. The Commission had to move fast in preparing countries for accession, so as not to lose the favorable political momentum. It was also quite unprepared to act as a development agency—its original task was to work on integration, not on democracy promotion or development. As countries with unfinished transformations (from Lithuania to Bulgaria) received invitations to join the EU, the Commission had nonetheless to play a role for which it was unprepared.

It was difficult for the Commission to try to be a democracy referee (it was supplanted in part by the EP). Country directors in the Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement were evaluated according to the performance of the accession country, making them actual stakeholders in the country's success. Interest in promoting democracy could not have been great under these circumstances, and it was not. Where a government lagged seriously behind in negotiating the *acquis communautaire,* as Poland did prior to 2001, a change of government was welcomed.[3] For the rest of the countries, elections and changes of government during the negotiation years were seen as necessary evils, as Commission country teams, especially where negotiations progressed well, had come to have a vested interest in the continuity of the political and bureaucratic elites with whom they had been working closely and feared that fresh elections would slow down negotiations.

As for the day after accession, when conditionality has faded, the influence of the EU vanishes like a short-term anesthetic. The political problems in these countries, especially the political elite's hectic behavior and the voters' distrust of parties, are completely unrelated to EU accession. They were there to start with, though they were hidden or pushed aside because of the collective concentration on reaching the accession target. Political parties needed to behave during accession in order to reach this highly popular objective, but once freed from these constraints, they returned to their usual ways. Now that countries in the region have acceded to the EU, we see Central and Eastern Europe as it really is—a region that has come far but still has a way to go. Many compliments can be given to the process of EU accession, but it does not herald an end of history.

NOTES

1. More specifically, column three shows the difference in scores between the year that a country started negotiations and the year that it concluded them and signed the accession treaty. The intervals measured are unequal, as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia were first invited to start negotiations at the Luxembourg 1997 EU Council and commenced negotiations in 1998. The rest of the countries (including Romania and Bulgaria), which were considerably less developed on all counts, only received the invitation to begin negotiations in 1999 at the Helsinki summit. Ten countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, along with Cyprus and Malta) became EU members in 2004, and Romania and Bulgaria signed their accession treaties in 2005 (and joined the EU in 2007).

2. For a fuller discussion of this matter, see Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, "European Enlargement and Democratic Performance," in Michael Emerson, ed., *Democratisation in the European Neighbourhood* (Brussels: CEPS, 2005), 15–38.

3. See Graham Avery, "The Enlargement Negotiations," in Fraser Cameron, ed., *The Future of Europe: Integration and Enlargement* (London: Routledge, 2004), 52.