

FRONTIERS OF DEMOCRACY IN EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: TRAJECTORIES, CHALLENGES, AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: *East European democracies stand at critical junctures characterized by simultaneous advancement and erosion. Three decades after the collapse of communist regimes, countries in the region display remarkable diversity in democratic development, ranging from EU and NATO members with robust institutions to competitive authoritarian systems demonstrating significant backsliding. This article examines the frontiers of democracy in East European countries through comparative institutional analysis, assessing trajectories of democratization, contemporary challenges to democratic consolidation, and emerging fault lines defining the region's democratic future. By analyzing Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Western Balkans, we identify common patterns—democratic fatigue, populist mobilization, judicial independence threats, media capture, and EU-state tensions—while recognizing significant variations reflecting distinct historical, institutional, and geopolitical contexts. The article concludes that East European democracies face unprecedented pressures requiring innovative institutional responses and renewed commitment to democratic values.*

Keywords: democracy, East, European, countries.

1. Introduction

The "Third Wave" of democratization that swept across East Europe following 1989 represented one of history's most dramatic political transformations (Huntington, 1991). Yet more than three decades later, the region's democratic achievements appear less assured than optimistic observers anticipated. While some countries—notably the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltics—have achieved stable democratic institutions and successful EU integration, others display alarming trajectories of democratic backsliding and institutional decay.

Poland and Hungary, once celebrated as successful post-communist transitions, have experienced significant democratic erosion under right-wing populist governments. Romania and Bulgaria continue struggling with corruption, weak rule of law, and institutional instability. The Western Balkans remain trapped in hybrid regimes combining electoral competition with authoritarian practices. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes in Russia, Belarus, and the former Soviet republics demonstrate how transition trajectories can diverge dramatically from democracy toward entrenched authoritarianism.

This article examines the contemporary frontiers of democracy in East Europe—the boundaries of democratic practice, the flashpoints of institutional conflict, and the emerging challenges defining the region's democratic future. Rather than treating East Europe as a monolithic bloc, we employ comparative analysis recognizing significant diversity while identifying common patterns and structural vulnerabilities.

The article's central argument is that East European democracies face a distinctive configuration of challenges distinguishing them from democracies in older, more stable regions. These include: (1) incomplete institutional consolidation creating vulnerability to anti-democratic actors; (2) geopolitical pressures from neighboring authoritarian powers creating

security-democracy tensions; (3) legacies of communist and post-communist authoritarianism complicating democratic culture and norms; (4) EU integration effects creating both opportunities and tensions; (5) populist mobilization exploiting genuine grievances and institutional weaknesses; and (6) emerging polarization around fundamental constitutional questions.

2. Democratic Trajectories: Divergence and Variation

2.1 The Post-1989 Consensus and Its Unraveling

The initial post-1989 transition period was characterized by broad consensus favoring democracy, market economics, and integration with Western institutions (NATO, EU). This consensus reflected: (1) rejection of communist authoritarianism and planned economics; (2) aspiration to "return to Europe" after decades of forced separation; (3) genuine enthusiasm for democratic self-governance; and (4) belief that market economics would generate prosperity benefiting all social groups. This consensus supported relatively smooth transitions in Central European countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia) compared to more violent transitions in Yugoslavia and the Caucasus. Institutional design reflected this consensus: most East European constitutions adopted rule-of-law commitments, separation of powers, and protection of fundamental rights.

However, this post-1989 consensus has progressively unraveled over three decades. Multiple factors contributed: (1) economic disappointment as market transition generated inequality, deindustrialization, and regional disparities; (2) perceived Western imperialism as NATO expansion and EU integration were experienced by some as threats rather than opportunities; (3) cultural conflicts as globalization and social liberalization conflicted with traditional values; (4) political exhaustion as the initial enthusiasm for democracy waned without delivering anticipated improvements; and (5) rise of new political actors—particularly populist, nationalist, and right-wing parties—mobilizing resentment against established elites and institutions.

2.2 Central Europe: Relative Success and Contemporary Tensions

The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia (often grouped with Central European countries despite geographic positioning) achieved relatively successful democratic consolidation and are widely regarded as the region's success stories. These countries feature:

- Stable party systems with alternation of power among competing parties
- Professional civil services and bureaucracies
- Independent judiciaries (though facing contemporary pressures)
- Robust civil societies and media sectors
- Strong EU and NATO integration with public support
- Relatively low corruption (by post-communist standards)

The Czech Republic particularly stands out. Václav Havel's moral authority, Civic Forum's institutional design, and early economic reforms established strong democratic foundations. The country has experienced genuine party competition, occasional governmental corruption scandals resulting in accountability (unlike some regional peers), and strong civil society. Yet even Central European success stories face contemporary challenges. The Czech Republic has experienced polarization around immigration and EU sovereignty, with populist parties gaining electoral support. Slovakia witnessed significant democratic backsliding under Robert Fico's governments (2006-2018, 2023-present), though institutional resilience enabled correction through 2018 elections and renewed reform efforts following 2022 elections. Despite reversals, these countries maintain stronger institutional foundations than regional peers, suggesting that consolidation, while not irreversible, provides resilience against democratic erosion.

2.3 Poland: From Democratic Pioneer to Constitutional Crisis

Poland's transition narrative reveals the contingency of democratic development. Under Solidarity's leadership in 1989-1990, Poland pioneered Central European democratization, with Lech Wałęsa's presidency symbolizing democratic renewal. The 1997 Constitution, adopted through democratic consensus, established a comprehensive framework for democratic governance.

Poland's first fifteen years (1989-2004) featured genuine democratic achievements: contested elections with power alternation, independent judiciary, free media, and EU integration reflecting institutional strength. The country appeared to exemplify successful democratic consolidation.

However, the election of Law and Justice (PiS) under Jarosław Kaczyński in 2015 initiated dramatic reversal. Key developments include:

Judicial Independence Threats: PiS pursued comprehensive judicial reform, establishing new courts with government-dominated appointment processes and reducing Constitutional Tribunal independence (Venice Commission, 2017). The 2017 Constitutional Court crisis, involving attempts to prevent Constitutional Tribunal judges from functioning and invalidating judges' elections, represented unprecedented constitutional confrontation.

Media Capture: State-controlled media increasingly promoted government narratives and attacked opposition parties. Public television (TVP) became essentially a government propaganda outlet, fundamentally altering the media landscape that had previously featured pluralistic public broadcasting (Freedom House).

Rule of Law Deterioration: International assessments indicate significant weakening of rule of law, with concerns regarding judicial independence, prosecutorial politicization, and selective enforcement against opposition figures. The EU initiated Article 7 proceedings against Poland in 2017, the first such action against an EU member state since the treaty's adoption (European Commission, 2023).

Gender and LGBTQ+ Rights Restrictions: The government pursued controversial restrictions on abortion (despite 1997 constitutional protections) and refused to recognize same-sex partnership rights, creating significant social polarization.

Geopolitical Tensions with EU: Poland's resistance to EU court decisions, assertions of constitutional supremacy over EU law, and judicial independence questions created unprecedented tensions between a member state and EU institutions, challenging assumptions about institutional EU integration.

Yet Poland's situation also demonstrates institutional resilience. Independent courts (outside PiS-controlled structures) issued rulings protecting judicial independence. Civil society mobilized against constitutional violations. International pressure and EU mechanisms constrained government action. The 2023 elections resulted in PiS's electoral defeat and installation of a reformist government, suggesting that democratic electoral mechanisms, while strained, retained functionality.

2.4 Hungary: Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Drift

Hungary presents perhaps the region's most concerning democratic trajectory. Under Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government (1998-2002, 2010-present), Hungary has experienced systematic democratic erosion that international observers increasingly characterize as transition toward competitive authoritarianism or "illiberal democracy" (Levitsky et al., 2010).

Key developments include:

Constitutional Rewriting: The 2011 "New Constitutional Regime," adopted with supermajority support but without opposition participation, fundamentally revised Hungary's institutional framework. Changes included: redefining property rights to enable property

seizures; restricting Constitutional Court authority; weakening judicial independence; and establishing unilateral amendment procedures enabling further constitutional change without consensus (Venice Commission, 2011).

Electoral System Manipulation: The government altered electoral rules multiple times, creating an electoral system international observers assessed as structurally advantaging Fidesz (IDEA, 2011). Gerrymandering, manipulation of single-mandate district boundaries, and elimination of runoff provisions enabled Fidesz to maintain power despite declining vote shares.

Institutional Capture: The government systematically placed allies in leadership positions across independent institutions—constitutional court, judicial oversight bodies, election commission, media authority—effectively subordinating supposedly independent institutions to executive control.

Media Capture: State media promotion, combined with advertising pressure on independent media and ownership changes placing pro-government oligarchs in control of major outlets, created a media landscape where government narratives dominated public discourse (Reporters without Borders, 2023; Media Matters for Democracy, 2020).

Corruption and Oligarchy: Rather than reducing corruption, Orbán's government institutionalized corruption through crony capitalism, directing government contracts and EU funds toward allied oligarchs and companies. Hungarian media documented systematic corruption, yet limited judicial independence restricted accountability (Transparency International).

Attacks on Civil Society: The government pursued restrictions on NGOs, particularly those receiving international funding, establishing requirements for registration and reporting that effectively created state surveillance of civil society.

Attacks on Universities: Constraints on Central European University's operations and broader restrictions on academic freedom undermined higher education's role in democratic society.

International assessments reflect these developments. V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) project data shows Hungary's democratic quality declining to levels comparable to competitive authoritarian regimes (V-Dem Institute, 2023). EU mechanisms—Article 7 proceedings (initiated 2018) and rule of law enforcement actions—have constrained but not reversed backsliding.

Hungary's trajectory raises critical questions: At what point does democratic erosion become authoritarianism? Can electoral mechanisms, even if manipulated, retain legitimacy? How should democracies respond to internally-driven democratic collapse?

2.5 Romania and Bulgaria: Corruption and Institutional Weakness

Romania and Bulgaria present different democratic challenges than Poland and Hungary. Rather than experiencing dramatic constitutional crises, these countries demonstrate persistent institutional weakness, particularly regarding corruption and rule of law.

Romania experienced tumultuous early transitions involving violence, constitutional complications, and political instability. President Ion Iliescu's successive governments (1990-1996, 2000-2004) demonstrated limited commitment to democratic consolidation. However, EU integration catalyzed institutional reforms. Accession negotiations required anti-corruption measures, judicial independence protections, and rule of law commitments. The 2004-2007 reforms, particularly regarding the judiciary, established anti-corruption institutions including the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA).

Romania's subsequent history reflects tension between reform momentum and resistance. The DNA, led by Laura Codruța Kovesi (2013-2018), pursued aggressive anti-corruption prosecutions against high-level officials, establishing unprecedented accountability. However, government response involved legislative measures restricting prosecutorial authority

and judicial independence. The government pardoned and subsequently attempted to pardon major corruption cases, generating significant civil society mobilization (OECD, 2019).

More recently, the election of Klaus Iohannis as president and his appointees has renewed reform momentum. However, persistent vulnerabilities remain: judicial independence remains limited by political pressures; corruption remains endemic in certain state structures; and organized crime maintains deep institutional penetration.

Bulgaria demonstrates even weaker institutional development. The country has experienced persistent problems with corruption, organized crime, and judicial capture. EU assessments repeatedly emphasized Bulgaria's failure to address corruption at the highest levels, particularly regarding state capture by organized crime networks (European Commission).

The COVID-19 pandemic generated massive anti-corruption protests (2020-2021) against Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's government, highlighting public dissatisfaction with institutional weakness and perceived organized crime influence. The 2021 elections resulted in governmental transition, yet institutional continuities and structural corruption have persisted. Bulgaria's situation demonstrates that formal democratic institutions (elections, constitution, courts) can coexist with severe institutional dysfunction and criminal penetration of state structures.

2.6 Western Balkans: Hybrid Regimes and Stalled Transition

The Western Balkans—Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania—present the most dramatic democratic deficits in East Europe. These countries remain outside the EU, with varying commitments to democratic development and EU integration.

Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić (2017-present, with prior influence 2012-2017) demonstrates hybrid regime characteristics: electoral competition continues, yet media capture, organizational advantages for ruling parties, and constraints on opposition result in dominant-party systems. Civil society reports ongoing restrictions on protest, journalist harassment, and limited judicial independence (Balkan Insight).

Serbia's geopolitical positioning—balancing EU integration aspirations with Russian relationships—creates contradictory pressures undermining democratic consolidation. EU accession requires democratic reforms; yet security partnerships with Russia generate countervailing pressures toward closed governance.

Bosnia-Herzegovina has experienced perpetual institutional instability stemming from its post-war constitutional structure (Dayton Agreement) establishing three-entity federation with ethnic representation requirements (International Crisis Group, 2021). This arrangement, designed to manage post-conflict divisions, has enabled persistent ethnic mobilization and prevented institutional consolidation. International oversight (Office of the High Representative) attempted to impose democratic reforms, yet without genuine local consensus, institutional development remained limited. Recent democratic developments show modest improvement, yet structural ethnic divisions continue undermining democratic consolidation.

North Macedonia experienced dramatic institutional crisis (2015-2017) involving wiretapping of senior officials, justice system politicization, and opposition party boycotts of parliament. EU mediation and pressure enabled negotiated resolution, though underlying tensions persist regarding justice sector reform and ethnic Macedonian-Albanian relations.

Albania has experienced modest democratic improvements under Edi Rama's government (2013-present), with anti-corruption efforts and judicial reforms undertaken. However, organized crime penetration remains substantial, and corruption continues at significant levels.

Kosovo and Montenegro, despite challenges, demonstrate greater democratic commitment. Kosovo, though not internationally recognized as a nation-state by all countries,

has established functioning democratic institutions and held contested elections. Montenegro achieved EU candidacy status and made institutional progress, though persistent organized crime networks and corruption remain concerning.

The Western Balkans' democratic challenges stem from multiple factors: post-conflict trauma and ethnic divisions; limited state capacity; external military intervention legacies; organized crime penetration; and insufficient economic development supporting robust civil society. EU conditionality and pressure have generated reforms, yet institutional consolidation remains incomplete.

3. Populism and Anti-Establishment Mobilization

3.1 The Rise of Populist Movements

A defining feature of contemporary East European politics is the dramatic rise of populist movements, particularly right-wing populist parties mobilizing resentment against established elites, immigrants, and supranational institutions (especially the EU).

Populist parties in the region include: Poland's Law and Justice, Hungary's Fidesz, Czech Republic's SPD (Pirate Party variants), Slovakia's ĽSNS, Poland's Confederation, Hungary's Jobbik, and numerous other movements. These parties, despite diversity, share core characteristics: anti-establishment rhetoric, nationalist appeals, religious and cultural traditionalism, and populist claims to represent "the people" against corrupt elites.

Several factors explain populist success: (1) Economic grievances from market transition, deindustrialization, and EU integration generating concentrated losses for workers in declining industries; (2) Cultural anxiety from globalization, migration, and social liberalization; (3) Distrust of established parties, perceived as corrupt and unresponsive to citizens; (4) Identity politics centered on national sovereignty, Christian values, and anti-immigration; and (5) Geopolitical anxieties regarding NATO expansion and perceived Western hegemony.

Populist parties have effectively exploited legitimate grievances while proposing authoritarian or destructive solutions. In Poland and Hungary, populist governments pursued democratic backsliding and constitutional violations. In other countries, populist parties remain in opposition, threatening democratic norms through intemperate rhetoric while not yet implementing authoritarian programs.

3.2 Populism and Democratic Erosion

Scholarly debate persists regarding populism's relationship to democracy. Some scholars argue populism represents a distortion of democratic principles, substituting "people's will" for democratic procedures and institutions (Cas Mudde, 2007). Others contend populism reflects authentic democratic grievances and can catalyze institutional reform (Rodrik, 2017).

East European evidence supports a nuanced view: populist mobilization reflects genuine frustrations with established elites and institutions; yet populist leaders frequently employ anti-democratic methods (constitutional violations, institutional capture, media suppression) once in power. Rather than reforming institutions as promised, populist governments have typically deepened institutional dysfunction.

The relationship between populism and authoritarianism appears particularly concerning in East Europe. Populist leaders—Orbán, Kaczyński, Vučić—have utilized populist rhetoric to justify authoritarian measures framed as "returning power to the people." This rhetorical strategy—populist justification for anti-democratic action—represents a distinctive threat to East European democracies.

3.3 Social Basis of Populism

Research on East European populism identifies its social basis: primarily working-class and rural populations experiencing economic decline, cultural displacement, and status anxiety (Goodwin et al., 2020). These groups, having suffered from market transition, supported populist parties promising to restore national greatness, protect traditional values, and challenge cosmopolitan elites.

Regional variations reflect different economic trajectories. Poland's PiS found particular support in rural areas and declining industrial regions; Hungary's Fidesz similarly mobilized among economically disadvantaged populations. Czech populist movements have attracted similar constituencies.

Notably, educational polarization characterizes East European politics: university-educated, urban populations tend to support liberal parties and EU integration; less educated, rural populations support populist, nationalist, and Euroskeptic parties. This polarization creates challenges for democratic consensus and makes institutional compromise difficult.

4. Threats to Democratic Institutions

4.1 Judicial Independence and Rule of Law

One of the most significant contemporary challenges across East Europe involves threats to judicial independence and rule of law. Governments in Poland, Hungary, and Romania have undertaken measures restricting judicial autonomy, politicizing appointments, and subordinating courts to executive control.

These threats take multiple forms:

Appointment Procedures: Governments have altered judicial appointment procedures to favor candidates aligned with ruling coalitions. Poland's National Council of Judiciary reorganization, Hungary's Constitutional Court restructuring, and Romania's periodic efforts to control appointment processes exemplify these tactics.

Retirement Age Modifications: Poland lowered retirement ages for Supreme Court judges, enabling government replacement of jurists; Hungary employed similar tactics. These changes enabled rapid transformation of judicial composition without requiring explicit removal of inconvenient judges.

Structural Changes: Governments have created new court structures outside traditional judicial hierarchies (Poland's Chamber for Extraordinary Review and Public Affairs), staffed with government-aligned judges and possessing authority over sensitive cases.

Prosecutorial Independence: Politicization of prosecutors offices has undermined independent investigation of governmental corruption and crimes. Hungary, Poland, and Romania have all experienced concerns regarding selective prosecution against opposition figures while protecting government allies.

These developments fundamentally threaten rule of law. If courts cannot function independently of political control, property rights become insecure, contracts unenforceable, and political opponents vulnerable to arbitrary punishment. The judicial capture that these reforms enable represents a fundamental threat to democratic governance.

4.2 Media Capture and Information Disorder

Across East Europe, governments have undertaken efforts to control media narratives and restrict opposition information access. These include:

Public Media Politicization: State-controlled television and radio, ostensibly independent public broadcasters, have been subordinated to governmental control, becoming essentially propaganda organs. Poland's TVP provides the most egregious example, though Hungary's media environment similarly reflects state influence.

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Advertising Pressure: Governments have directed state advertising toward favorable media while withdrawing advertising from critical outlets, creating financial pressure on independent media.

Ownership Concentration: In several countries (Hungary particularly), pro-government oligarchs have acquired controlling interests in major media outlets, creating media landscapes favorable to government narratives.

Digital Campaigns: Governments have employed social media manipulation, bot networks, and coordinated disinformation campaigns to amplify government messages and suppress opposition narratives.

Journalist Harassment: Physical attacks, legal harassment, and public delegitimization of journalists have created hostile environments for investigative reporting on government corruption and abuses.

These developments have created information environments where citizens receive systematically distorted information about political realities. Public television, traditionally trusted institutions, now serve governmental propaganda functions. This media capture undermines citizens' capacity for informed democratic choice and eliminates institutional constraints on governmental power.

4.3 Electoral Manipulation and Democratic Distortion

While most East European countries continue holding elections, some governments have undertaken measures undermining electoral democracy:

Electoral System Changes: Multiple governments (Hungary, Poland, and others) have altered electoral systems to advantage ruling parties while disadvantaging opposition. Hungary's hybrid electoral system has been particularly criticized for structural advantages favoring Fidesz.

Gerrymandering: Electoral district boundary manipulation has enabled governments to win supermajorities despite declining vote shares. Hungary and Poland provide examples of sophisticated gerrymandering reducing opposition influence despite substantial electoral support.

Voter Suppression: While overt voter suppression remains limited compared to some democracies, governments have pursued subtle measures constraining opposition supporters' voting: residency requirement enforcement, voter registration complications, and reduced polling locations in opposition-dominated areas.

Campaign Inequality: State media bias and advertising advantages for ruling parties create unequal campaign conditions advantaging incumbents.

These electoral distortions fundamentally undermine democratic legitimacy. If electoral systems are systematically manipulated to predetermine outcomes, elections become theater rather than genuine democratic choice. Citizens' capacity to express preferences through voting becomes compromised.

4.4 Civil Society Constraints

Governments in Poland, Hungary, and other East European countries have undertaken measures constraining civil society organizations, particularly NGOs receiving international funding and advocacy organizations critical of government policies.

Registration and Reporting Requirements: Governments have imposed burdensome registration and financial reporting requirements on NGOs, creating state surveillance of civil society.

Funding Restrictions: Laws restricting foreign funding of NGOs have eliminated resources for organizations receiving international support while leaving government-aligned organizations unaffected.

Physical Intimidation: Activists have experienced harassment, physical attacks, and public delegitimization for advocating controversial positions.

Legal Harassment: Strategic lawsuits against critics (SLAPPs) have targeted journalists, activists, and opposition figures, using litigation threat to suppress criticism.

These constraints undermine civil society's role as institutional check on governmental power and advocate for citizen interests. Vibrant civil societies characteristic of successful democracies require freedom of association, expression, and access to resources. Constraints on civil society eliminate these democratic prerequisites.

5. The European Union and Democratic Development

5.1 EU Conditionality and Democratic Reform

The European Union has significantly influenced East European democratic development through conditionality mechanisms. EU accession required adoption of Copenhagen Criteria—democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights protection—creating powerful incentives for institutional reform prior to membership (Copenhagen European Council, 1993).

This external conditionality produced genuine institutional improvements. Central European countries undertook comprehensive judicial reforms, adopted human rights protections, and established independent institutions to satisfy EU requirements. The promise of EU membership provided motivation for democratic consolidation that internal factors alone might not have generated.

However, post-accession conditionality has proven far weaker. Once member states joined the EU, external pressure to maintain democratic standards diminished. The EU lacked effective mechanisms for enforcing democratic standards among member states. Article 7 proceedings (initiated against Poland and Hungary) provide mechanisms for suspension of rights, yet require unanimity or near-unanimity, making enforcement difficult when multiple states resist.

5.2 Contemporary EU-Member State Tensions

More recently, EU-East European member state relationships have become increasingly contentious regarding democratic standards and rule of law. Key tensions include:

Rule of Law Disputes: The EU, through the European Court of Justice, has issued rulings requiring member states to maintain judicial independence, respect EU law supremacy, and cease discriminatory practices. Poland and Hungary have resisted these rulings, claiming national constitutional supremacy and sovereignty (CJEU cases: Case C-619/18 (Polish Judicial Independence); Hungarian cases regarding constitutional supremacy and EU law).

Conditionality Linkages: The EU has increasingly linked funding (EU budget allocations, recovery fund distributions) to rule of law compliance, creating financial pressure on member states to maintain democratic standards. However, member states have resisted this linkage as infringement on sovereignty.

Geopolitical Tensions: East European countries' historical experiences with Russian dominance create security anxieties driving NATO and EU integration. However, EU policies (migration, energy, climate) sometimes conflict with member state preferences, generating frustration with supranational governance.

Cultural Conflicts: EU policies on LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and religious freedom conflict with culturally conservative governments' priorities. Poland and Hungary's resistance to EU requirements regarding LGBTQ+ rights reflects genuine cultural conflicts, though framed through sovereignty assertions.

These tensions suggest that EU democratic conditionality, while significant, has limits. Once member states gain EU status and negotiate favorable terms, coercive pressure diminishes.

The EU's mechanisms for enforcing democratic standards among members remain underdeveloped.

5.3 The EU's Democratic Legitimacy

East European democratic crises also raise questions regarding the EU's own democratic legitimacy. If the EU, supposedly a union of democracies, proves unable to prevent member state democratic backsliding, what does this suggest about EU institutions?

Some scholars argue that the EU's supranational governance structure, with limited direct democratic accountability to citizens, creates legitimacy problems that undermine its ability to enforce democratic standards (Streeck, 2016). If EU institutions themselves lack democratic legitimacy, their claims to protect democracy ring hollow.

Others argue that EU mechanisms, while imperfect, have constrained member state backsliding more effectively than alternative approaches would have. Without EU pressure, Poland and Hungary might have pursued even more aggressive democratic erosion.

The relationship between the EU and East European democracy remains complex and contested, suggesting that supranational institutions can facilitate but not guarantee democratic consolidation.

6. Nationalism, Geopolitics, and Democratic Constraints

6.1 National Identity and Sovereignty Claims

A significant dimension of contemporary East European politics involves renewed emphasis on national sovereignty and identity. This partly reflects legitimate historical experiences: Russian imperialism, communist domination, and post-communist dependence created strong desires for national self-determination.

However, contemporary nationalism has created tensions with democratic institutions. Nationalist parties claim to represent "true" national interest against foreign (EU, Western, liberal) interference. This nationalist framing positions supranational institutions and international human rights standards as threats to national sovereignty rather than as democratic enhancements.

The EU's existence as supranational governance structure creates legitimate tensions: to what extent should national majorities accept limitations on their sovereignty imposed by supranational institutions? At what point does protection of democratic minorities and minorities' rights infringe legitimate national self-determination?

These questions remain unresolved in East European political theory and practice. Nationalist governments exploit sovereignty claims to justify constitutional violations; yet genuine concerns about external imposition and cultural preservation motivate nationalist movements.

6.2 Geopolitical Pressures and Security Dilemmas

East European countries face distinctive geopolitical pressures reflecting proximity to Russia and historical experience of Russian dominance. The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) crystallized these security concerns, transforming abstract discussions of NATO and EU integration into immediate survival questions.

Geopolitical pressures create security-democracy tensions: governments facing external security threats often justify restrictions on domestic freedoms as necessary for national survival. Countries bordering Russia employ security arguments to justify military buildups, intelligence expansion, and domestic surveillance.

Furthermore, Russian influence operations—disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, support for anti-democratic parties—represent external threats to East European democracies distinct from internal governance challenges. Russian interference, documented in

multiple democracies, complicates assessment of whether democratic erosion stems from internal factors or external manipulation.

The Ukraine war has intensified these dynamics. Democratic countries on Russia's borders (Poland, Baltic states) have pursued security measures that, if pursued indefinitely, could undermine democratic institutions. Balancing security imperatives with democratic protections remains an unresolved challenge.

6.3 NATO Expansion and Democratic Divergence

NATO expansion into East Europe has catalyzed both democratization and reaction. For Central European countries, NATO membership became synonymous with democratic development and Western integration. Countries meeting NATO standards (rule of law, civilian control of military) simultaneously met EU accession criteria.

However, NATO expansion also created reaction. Russia views NATO expansion as threatening, generating security competition that affects East European geopolitics. Furthermore, NATO membership for countries like Poland and Hungary has created contradictions: these countries joined NATO expecting Western support for democracy, yet NATO (focused on security cooperation) has limited capacity to enforce democratic standards among members.

The broader point is that geopolitical pressures create incentives that may not align with democratic consolidation. Security dilemmas can justify restrictions on freedoms; external threats can unite populations around nationalist leaders; and military security cooperation can proceed despite democratic backsliding if security interests align.

7. The Role of Civil Society and Democratic Resistance

7.1 Civil Society Mobilization Against Democratic Erosion

Despite numerous threats, East European civil societies have mobilized substantially against democratic backsliding. These mobilizations demonstrate that democratic resistance remains possible even under significant constraints.

Poland: The 2015-2016 "Black Protests" against abortion restrictions mobilized hundreds of thousands in demonstrations, becoming the largest protests since 1989. The 2017 Constitutional Court crisis generated sustained civil society mobilization defending judicial independence. The "Committee for the Defense of Democracy" (KOD) organized sustained opposition to constitutional violations. While unable to prevent PiS legislation, these movements maintained democratic discourse and enabled the 2023 electoral victory against PiS.

Hungary: Despite more severe constraints on civil society, civil society organizations have organized sustained opposition. The Momentum party emerged from civil society mobilization, winning surprising electoral support in 2022. Anti-Orbán coalitions formed to oppose the government, though hampered by election system manipulation and media disadvantages.

Romania: Anti-corruption protests (2016-2017, 2020-2021) against government attempts to weaken anti-corruption institutions mobilized hundreds of thousands. These demonstrations demonstrated public commitment to rule of law and anti-corruption despite modest political representation for anti-corruption constituencies.

Czech Republic: Civil society mobilization contributed to the 2018 election victory against populist parties and sustained pressure on subsequent governments regarding rule of law and anti-corruption.

These mobilizations demonstrate that even under constraints, democratic resistance remains possible. Civil society organizations, labor unions, religious institutions, and cultural organizations have organized sustained opposition to democratic backsliding, maintaining democratic values despite institutional challenges.

7.2 Institutional Resilience and Unexpected Strengths

One significant finding from East European experience is that democratic institutions often prove more resilient than anticipated. Courts operating outside government control have issued rulings constraining executive power. Constitutional tribunals have occasionally ruled against governments on democratic principles. Professional civil services have resisted complete politicization.

In Poland, despite judicial capture efforts, some courts have issued decisions protecting constitutional rights and limiting government authority. Constitutional Tribunal judges outside government control have issued dissenting opinions articulating constitutional principles. Lower courts have occasionally ruled against government interests based on legal principle.

In Hungary, despite Fidesz's supermajority and constitutional rewriting, opposition parties have competed in elections and won representation. Civil society organizations continue functioning despite constraints. International pressure and EU mechanisms, while imperfect, have constrained government action.

These examples suggest that even significantly compromised democracies retain institutional capacities for resistance. The expectation that democratic capture would be complete and irreversible has sometimes proven incorrect.

7.3 Education and Generational Change

Long-term democratic resilience may depend on generational replacement and education. Younger East Europeans, educated after 1989 in democratic systems (however flawed), may possess different democratic consciousness than older generations shaped by communism.

University education, despite government efforts to constrain academic freedom, remains a space where democratic ideas circulate. Student movements have mobilized against government overreach (Poland, Hungary, Romania). Educational institutions' resistance to complete politicization provides some institutional continuity for democratic values.

8. Comparative Challenges and Patterns

8.1 The "Unfinished Business" of Post-Communist Transition

A common theme across East European democracies is incomplete institutional consolidation. Unlike established Western democracies where institutional development occurred gradually over centuries, East European democracies required compression of institutional development into decades.

This acceleration created vulnerabilities. Parties, judiciaries, and civil services established relatively recently lack the deep roots and institutional cultures characteristic of century-old institutions. Consequently, these institutions proved susceptible to capture and politicization when strong actors attempted to control them.

Furthermore, economic transformation accompanying political transition created substantial dislocations that ongoing institutional development struggles to manage. The "winners" and "losers" of market transition include constituencies with fundamentally different interests regarding democracy, further complicating institutional consolidation.

8.2 Corruption and State Capture

Persistent corruption and state capture plague East European democracies to varying degrees. Post-communist privatization, conducted with limited rule of law protections, created opportunities for corrupt appropriation of state assets. Subsequent decades witnessed criminalization of the state, with organized crime networks infiltrating state structures.

Corruption undermines democracy by: (1) reducing citizen trust in institutions; (2) enabling criminal networks to influence policy; (3) distributing public resources to connected

elites rather than citizens; and (4) creating perception that democratic institutions serve oligarchs rather than people.

Addressing corruption requires sustained institutional development, prosecutorial independence, and international cooperation. Partial successes (Romania's DNA anti-corruption campaign, Latvia's limited reforms) demonstrate that progress remains possible. However, entrenched interests resist comprehensive anti-corruption efforts, and backsliding remains possible (as Romania experienced with government efforts to constrain prosecutors).

8.3 Polarization and Democratic Compromise

A distinctive challenge across East Europe is political polarization that undermines democratic compromise. Polarization takes several forms:

Ideological Polarization: Fundamental disagreement regarding constitutional principles, EU integration, and national values creates divisions difficult to bridge through negotiation. Polish divisions regarding judicial independence versus democratic majority sovereignty, Hungarian divisions regarding EU integration versus national sovereignty, reflect incompatible visions.

Identity Polarization: Divisions along urban-rural, educated-uneducated, and cosmopolitan-nationalist lines create polarization difficult to reconcile through democratic procedures. Voters divided on fundamental identity questions struggle to compromise.

Institutional Polarization: When political actors lack shared commitment to democratic rules, institutional procedures become weaponized. Opposition parties refuse to participate in proceedings they perceive as illegitimate; governments utilize procedures to delegitimize opponents; mutual disrespect for institutions undermines democratic practice.

Addressing polarization requires restoration of shared democratic commitment and mutual respect among political competitors. Some East European democracies (Czech Republic's post-2018 coalition-building, Slovakia's anti-Fico mobilization) have demonstrated capacity for cross-partisan cooperation. Others (Poland, Hungary) remain mired in zero-sum polarization where compromise appears impossible.

9. International Responses and External Support for Democracy

9.1 Democracy Promotion by Western Institutions

Western democracies and institutions have invested substantially in East European democratic development. The National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, international democracy support organizations, and bilateral aid programs have provided resources and expertise for democratic capacity-building.

These efforts have achieved mixed results. Democracy promotion assistance contributed to institutional development and civil society capacity-building in early transition period. However, as East European institutions have matured and geopolitical tensions have increased, democracy promotion has become increasingly contested.

Governments pursuing democratic erosion (Poland, Hungary) view democracy promotion as foreign interference in national affairs. Aid organizations' focus on rule of law, human rights, and LGBTQ+ rights conflicts with conservative governments' priorities. Furthermore, democracy promotion's effectiveness remains debated; external resources cannot substitute for internal commitment to democratic consolidation.

9.2 Sanctions and Coercive Democracy Promotion

As democratic backsliding has intensified, Western democracies and institutions have employed sanctions and coercive mechanisms:

EU Sanctions: The EU has threatened and implemented funding cuts, rule of law conditionality, and various sanctions against Poland and Hungary. However, sanctions'

effectiveness remains limited: despite financial pressure, governments have continued backsliding, suggesting sanctions cannot reverse determined antidemocratic action.

Visa Restrictions: Some democracies have imposed visa restrictions on officials responsible for democratic abuses, creating consequences for perpetrators. However, these targeted sanctions remain limited in scope and impact.

International Court Referrals: Proposals for international prosecution of officials responsible for systematic democratic abuse remain largely aspirational. International criminal mechanisms focus on war crimes and crimes against humanity, not democratic violations per se.

These coercive mechanisms raise difficult questions: At what point should democracies intervene in other democracies' internal affairs? Do external sanctions effectively promote democracy or merely entrench anti-democratic actors? These questions remain unresolved.

9.3 Support for Civil Society and Independent Media

External support for civil society and independent media represents less coercive but potentially more effective democracy promotion. Organizations supporting journalists, civic organizations, and human rights defenders provide resources enabling continued democratic resistance despite constraints.

International media networks (Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists) document journalist harassment and provide support. International funding for civil society organizations enables continued operation despite government constraints. University networks maintain academic exchange and scholarship supporting intellectuals and students from restrictive contexts.

These support mechanisms, while limited, sustain democratic alternatives even when governments pursue systematic democratic erosion.

10. Scenarios and Future Trajectories

10.1 Consolidation and Democratic Renewal

In some East European countries, trajectories toward consolidated democracy remain possible. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, despite setbacks, maintain institutional capacity for democratic correction. Poland's 2023 election demonstrates that electoral mechanisms can produce anti-authoritarian verdicts even after years of democratic erosion.

Scenarios for democratic renewal require: (1) electoral defeat of anti-democratic movements; (2) institutional restoration through reformed governments; (3) international pressure and support; and (4) renewed civil society mobilization. Poland's post-2023 trajectory, with institutional reform and anti-corruption prosecutions, potentially exemplifies this pattern.

10.2 Managed Decline and Competitive Authoritarianism

More pessimistic scenarios involve trajectories toward competitive authoritarian regimes—systems maintaining electoral competition and formal democratic institutions while fundamentally limiting democracy through institutional capture, media control, and civil society constraints. Hungary increasingly approximates this model, as do several Western Balkans states.

In competitive authoritarian systems, elections continue, opposition parties persist, yet ruling parties' structural advantages make their defeat unlikely. Citizens retain formal voting rights yet limited meaningful choice. International observers certify elections as formally proceeding even while identifying systematic irregularities.

These scenarios, while deeply concerning from democratic perspectives, at least retain institutional possibilities for democratic change should elite interests or geopolitical circumstances shift.

10.3 Democratic Breakdown and Authoritarianism

The most pessimistic scenario involves democratic breakdown: abolition of elections, elimination of opposition parties, and establishment of overt authoritarianism. This scenario, characterizing Belarus under Lukashenko and Russia under Putin, remains possible in East European contexts, particularly if geopolitical crises create security justifications for authoritarian measures.

However, this scenario appears less likely in EU member states, where institutional constraints and international oversight create barriers to complete democratic breakdown. Competitive authoritarianism appears more probable than full authoritarianism in these contexts.

11. Democratic Requirements and Institutional Reform

11.1 Rule of Law and Judicial Independence

Genuine democratic consolidation requires restoration and protection of rule of law and judicial independence. This requires: (1) reversal of judicial capture reforms; (2) establishment of transparent, merit-based judicial appointment procedures; (3) protection of prosecutorial independence; and (4) strengthening of constitutional courts' authority and protection.

International standards (UN Principles on Independence of Judiciary, Council of Europe Rule of Law Standards) provide frameworks for judicial independence. Implementation requires political commitment and sustained international monitoring.

11.2 Media Pluralism and Information Freedom

Democratic consolidation requires genuinely pluralistic media landscapes with free, independent news organizations. This requires: (1) protection of editorial independence for public broadcasters; (2) prevention of ownership concentration; (3) strong defamation and libel protections preventing use of legal mechanisms to suppress journalism; and (4) protection of journalists from harassment and violence.

Some jurisdictions (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) have maintained relatively strong media pluralism; others (Poland, Hungary) have experienced significant deterioration. Restoration requires both legal reform and international pressure against media capture.

11.3 Civil Society Protection and Democratic Space

Democratic consolidation requires protection of civil society and democratic space. This requires: (1) freedom of association and assembly; (2) elimination of arbitrary restrictions on NGOs; (3) protection of international civil society engagement; and (4) protection of vulnerable populations (minorities, LGBTQ+) from discrimination and violence.

International human rights mechanisms (European Court of Human Rights, UN mechanisms) can support civil society protection, though limitations on enforcement remain.

11.4 Electoral System Reform

Some East European countries require electoral system reform to eliminate structural distortions. Gerrymandering, electoral system manipulation, and voter suppression require correction through: (1) independent electoral commissions; (2) transparent electoral rules; (3) international election observation; and (4) protection of voting rights.

Addressing electoral system manipulation remains difficult because incumbent governments benefit from existing systems and rarely voluntarily reform them. Reform requires either external pressure or electoral defeat enabling reform-oriented governments to restructure systems.

12. Conclusion: Democracy at Critical Junctures

FRONTIERS OF DEMOCRACY IN EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: TRAJECTORIES, CHALLENGES, AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

East European democracies stand at critical junctures characterized by simultaneous vulnerability and resilience. While several countries have achieved relatively robust democratic consolidation, others face serious risks of democratic erosion or transition toward competitive authoritarianism. The region's diversity—ranging from Czech democratic success to Hungarian authoritarian drift—suggests that democratic trajectories remain contingent on institutions, leadership, and societal commitment rather than inevitable.

Several conclusions emerge from this analysis:

First, the post-1989 consensus favoring liberal democracy, market economy, and Western integration has substantially eroded. While this consensus facilitated initial transitions, its exhaustion has enabled populist and anti-democratic mobilization. Renewal of democratic commitment requires addressing genuine grievances (economic dislocation, cultural change, geopolitical anxiety) that populist movements exploit.

Second, East European democratic vulnerabilities stem not from inevitable regional characteristics but from incomplete institutional consolidation. Institutions established within decades lack the deep roots characteristic of century-old systems. However, this also suggests that institutional strengthening through reform remains possible.

Third, democratic backsliding, while serious, has proven reversible in some contexts. Poland's 2023 electoral defeat of PiS demonstrates that even significantly compromised democracies retain electoral mechanisms enabling course correction. This provides grounds for cautious optimism.

Fourth, international mechanisms (EU conditionality, international courts, external support for civil society) have significance but significant limitations. External pressure can constrain but not reverse determined anti-democratic action by governments controlling state resources and media. Democratic consolidation ultimately requires internal commitment.

Fifth, civil societies across East Europe have demonstrated significant capacity for democratic resistance. Sustained mobilization against democratic backsliding, despite constraints, demonstrates that democratic values retain salience and that resistance to authoritarianism remains possible.

Sixth, the relationship between security concerns and democracy deserves greater attention. Geopolitical pressures (Russian threats, regional instability) create legitimate security imperatives that sometimes generate anti-democratic pressures. Balancing security and democracy remains unresolved in East European contexts.

The frontiers of democracy in East Europe are not fixed boundaries but dynamic spaces of ongoing contestation. Whether these frontiers advance toward consolidated democracy, retreat toward authoritarianism, or stabilize in hybrid competitive authoritarian systems depends on choices made by political actors, civil societies, and international institutions in coming years.

The stakes are substantial. East European democracies' fates will significantly affect Europe's democratic future and the global competition between democratic and authoritarian governance models. Renewed commitment to democratic consolidation, coupled with realistic understanding of challenges and vulnerabilities, offers the best foundation for navigating democratic frontiers toward more stable and robust democratic futures.

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