

Editorial

Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests in Central and Eastern Europe: An Introduction

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Abstract

This editorial introduces readers to the thematic issue on organized interests in the context of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords

civil society; democratic backsliding; organized interests; post-communism; social movements

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests in Central and Eastern Europe” edited by Michael Dobbins (University of Konstanz) and Rafael Labanino (University of Konstanz).

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1. Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests: A New Research Agenda

The regression of democratic quality and the emergence of competitive authoritarian regimes have been among the main political phenomena across the globe over the past 20 years (Levitksy & Way, 2020). There is, however, a large variance in the severity of de-democratization between regions and countries as international indices of democratic quality attest (Coppedge et al., 2022; Repucci, 2020). As Bermeo (2016) emphasizes, democratic backsliding in the 21st century so far does not necessarily lead to full dictatorships. Most regimes, even the more repressive ones, retain basic institutions of electoral democracies. Apart from Russia and Belarus, in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) the nature of the power grab and re-engineering of political institutions are more subtle. Scheppele (2018) called the strategy of these governments of constant constitutional and legal tinkering to achieve authoritarian ends—and attacking and capturing institutions supposedly checking the executive—“autocratic legalism.”

Nevertheless, CEE governments have visibly and increasingly engaged in state capture to the extent that parties either monopolize key state institutions

such as courts and enterprises or that “public power is exercised mainly for private gain” (Sata & Karolewski, 2020, p. 208). Indeed, much scholarly attention has been devoted to the nature and development of democratic backsliding and the hybrid regimes in CEE (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Buzogany, 2017; Enyedi, 2020; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Magyar, 2016). Observers have emphasized that there is no uniform neo-authoritarian recipe for governance in the region. While Hungary has been characterized by overtly authoritarian nationalism centered around Viktor Orbán since 2010 (Kelemen, 2017; Scheiring, 2020), Poland exhibits somewhat more pluralistic dynamics both between rivalling factions within the governing party and within the party system in general (Sata & Karolewski, 2020). Under Andrej Babiš’ Ano party, Czech politics has, by contrast, been characterized by a newer brand of managerial populism purportedly based on technocratic and entrepreneurial principles (Buščíková & Guasti, 2019).

Yet we still know relatively little about how democratic backsliding has re-shaped the linkages between governments and civil society. Indeed, a few recent studies have addressed some aspects of the effect of backsliding on civil society in CEE. Greskovits (2020) and Ekiert (2019) explored the grass-roots support for illiberal

incumbents, the emergence of “illiberal civil society organizations,” and networks aligned with authoritarian and nationalist objectives. Geró et al. (2020) demonstrated that the closure of the political opportunity structure (POS) in Hungary is prompting regime-hostile groups to withdraw from policy-makers altogether. In a Polish-Slovenian comparison, Kamiński and Riedel (2021) conclude that Polish organizations are currently enduring greater existential threats than their Slovenian counterparts. Yet, an analysis by Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021) also showed that Polish interest groups are well capable of enhancing their networking strategies to navigate the increasingly authoritarian context.

Despite these advancements, there are still few theory-driven accounts on how backsliding affects such key themes of interest group research such as organizational development, lobbying strategies, access to policy-makers, or interest articulation. This is surprising as backsliding clearly affects the deliberative component of democracy crucial for interest articulation, representation, and intermediation. As the Varieties of Democracy Indices shows (Coppedge et al., 2022), the deliberative component of democracy has declined since EU access—on average by 0.11 points on a scale from 0 (*low*) to 1 (*high*) in 11 CEE member states. We graphed the yearly scores for the six CEE countries the contributions in this thematic issue cover (Figure 1).

Nevertheless, the widely observed closing of the political space, the strengthening of the executive,

and political centralization may have a counter-effect, namely jumpstarting anti-regime civic activity and prompting organizations to re-calibrate and enhance their advocacy strategies. In other words, democratic backsliding may stimulate the “coming of age” of interest groups as more defiant, responsive, and strategically diversified organizations, a development potentially stimulated by the coronavirus and the associated shift towards digital technology. Furthermore, the closure of the political opportunity structure may contribute to social mobilization strategies of NGOs excluded from decision-making structures.

However, even if many interest groups show so far remarkable resilience to even the odds, after a certain level, de-democratization might threaten their very existence. To keep on struggling can eventually prove to be futile in an increasingly closing and hostile political environment, amid harassment from the authorities, attacks by government-controlled media, and ever scarcer financial resources. This would truly be a tragic outcome in a region, where civil society groups played a definitive role in bringing down communism and in the subsequent democratic transition just three decades ago.

2. Introducing the Articles in This Issue

The thematic issue systematically addresses the impact of democratic backsliding on organized interests in the post-communist region. It comprises a diverse selection

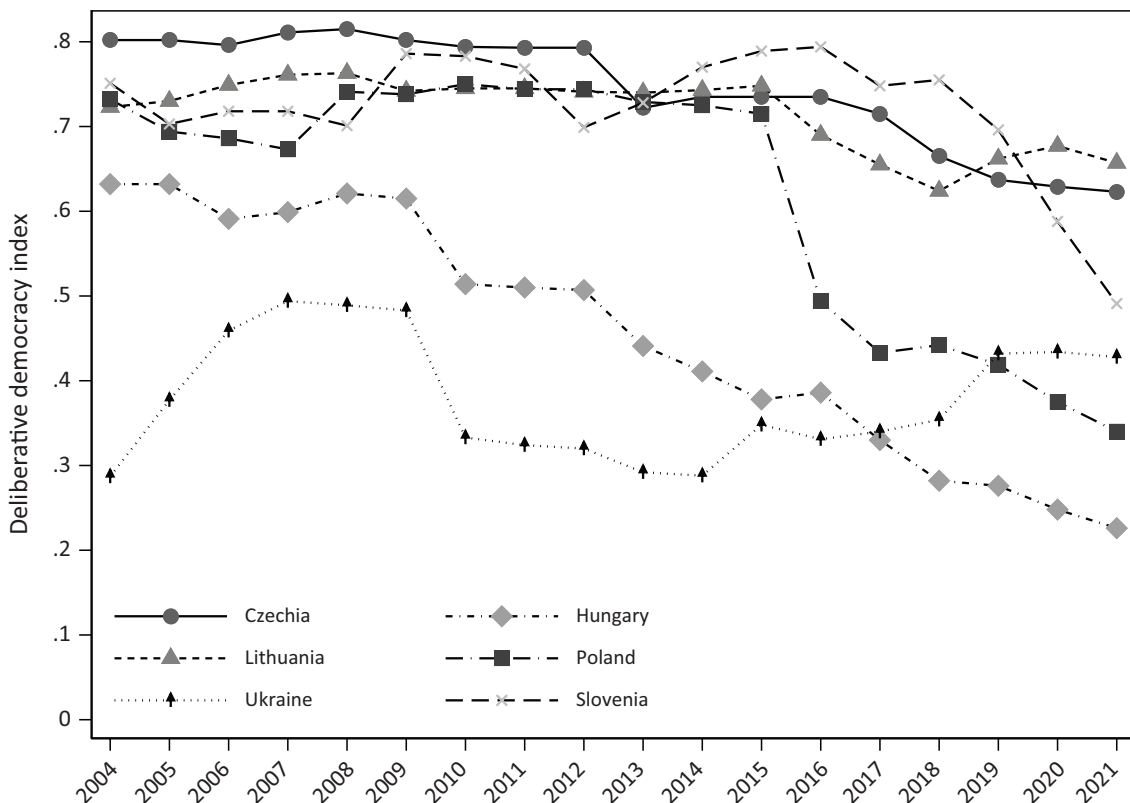


Figure 1. Annual development of the V-DEM deliberative democracy index in selected CEE countries, 2004-2021. Source: Coppedge et al. (2022).

of theory-driven empirical accounts embedded in current interest groups and civil society research from scholars based both in Eastern and Western Europe. The six articles cover six countries across CEE: Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Slovenia.

Four articles in the issue are single case studies based both on interviews and secondary sources. Richter (2023) explores how vested interests were the drivers behind democratic backsliding with a focus on anti-corruption reform processes. The analysis highlights that civil society actors allied with Western pro-democracy donor organizations played a pivotal role in the containment of backsliding attempts in Ukraine. Geró et al. (2023) find that the Orbán government applies sector-specific strategies against civil society organizations. In general, the closing of opportunity structures seems to enhance participatory activism in Hungary, while “Gongoization”—i.e., co-optation by the illiberal incumbent—is most pronounced among “traditionalist” women’s organizations.

Two articles investigate how the Janša government’s attempt at an illiberal power grab, between 2020 and 2022, affected interest groups in Slovenia. In their contribution, Novak and Lajh (2023) provide a systematic analysis of the repressive measures against civil society organizations and the different modes of civil mobilization against them. Janša made it much more expensive for CSOs to function because of an increased administrative burden. At the same time, he restricted their financial resources: both funds in general and for their services were reduced. Fink-Hafner and Bauman (2023) compare the responses of Slovenian trade unions and environmental NGOs. Their study finds that the ideational homogeneity of trade unions enabled them to jointly shift towards outside lobbying strategies, namely, protest. In contrast, the fragmented environmental NGOs could not develop any joint perception of illiberalism and, thereby, failed to adapt.

Two articles are comparative studies. Berkhout et al. (2023) examine the internal democracy of interest groups. Based on the Comparative Interest Group Surveys (Beyers et al., 2020) they examine the internal decision-making processes of Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese, Swedish, Polish, Slovenian, and Lithuanian interest groups. They find that post-communist interest groups have more internally organized influence on policy-related organizational decision-making compared to their Western counterparts, where members have a weaker voice.

Finally, based on a new survey of 428 Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovenian interest groups (Dobbins et al., 2022), Labanino and Dobbins (2023) explore whether backsliding turns interest groups away from lobbying at the national level towards the EU or the regional levels. Their article finds that it is rather the closure of the political opportunity structure in general than a lack of individual group access to policy-makers that explains moving away from the backsliding national level towards the supra- or sub-national levels. However,

on a more positive note, they also find that internal development (professionalization) and domestic inter-group cooperation are key organizational resources even in the context of democratic backsliding.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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