

## TRAJECTORIES OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITS IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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### **Abstract**

With Visegrad's accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures, bold predictions of leading Western comparative political scientists (Samuel Huntington, Philippe Schmitter, Larry Diamond, Zbigniew Brzezinski) about a former autocracies' successful democratic transit over a short 10–15 years' period came true to life. In the Visegrad Group, establishment of a normative consolidated democracy was not too complex, whereas maintaining a high-quality democracy in the countries proved more problematic. In the first decades of the 2000s, each country faced up to own integral problem of democracy: Hungary suffered from "Orbanism", Poland – from conservative sentiments and a growing number of Eurosceptics, the Czech Republic also increased its Eurosceptic potential, and Slovakia ended up amidst a political crisis and looking for "new faces" in politics. The abovementioned phenomena stipulate democracy deviations in the electoral process, the growing level of political corruption, and the party space radicalization, hence populism has become an effective political tool. There are various modifications of Central European democracy, such as illiberal democracy (Fareed Zakaria), deconsolidated democracy (Roberto Foa & Yascha Mounk), declining democracy (Attila Ágh), democracy with adjectives (David Collier & Steven Levitsky). The quality of democracy is measured by means of empirical calculations (indexing). At the level of the political system, these are the following: the world rankings such as "Nations in Transit" adapted to the group of transitive countries.

**Keywords**

Central European model of democracy; crisis of democracy; deconsolidated democracies; illiberalism; quality of democratic regime; transitology.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Following decades of transformation, the Visegrad Four (V4) countries have faced up against new democratic challenges. On the one hand, too little time has elapsed to argue that the successful Euro-Atlantic integration, having come to an end in 2004, was more of the Western world's initiative than an outcome of effective institutional reforms in the countries. On the other hand, upon the first decade of European Union membership, several V4 countries recorded certain deviations in the democratic development, which often contradicts the EU political standards.

The classical model of democratic transit proved efficient for the Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovak scenarios of the transition from post-communism to the "new democracy". The democratic transit model by Samuel Huntington (1991), Philipp Schmitter (1994), and other transitologists presupposes three main stages: conventional liberalization, democratization, and, finally, consolidation of democracy. During the 1980s - early 2004, all V4 countries, except for Slovakia<sup>1</sup>, were gradually transitioning from one stage to another. Paradoxically, the countries began to experience problems with democracy only after joining the European Union. Hence Euroscepticism has become an effective tool for conservative governments in Central Europe. As evidenced by the low level of electoral popularity of elections to the European Parliament, the Central

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<sup>1</sup> During the 1990s, Slovakia slightly slowed down democratic reforms. One of the reasons is the conservative governments of Vladimir Meciar and a high level of political populism, having distanced the country from institutional rapprochement with NATO and the European Union. According to Slovak political scientists, most problems with democracy continue in today's Slovakia, for instance, the growing polarization of the party system and rising political populism (Martinkovič 2021).

European voter is reluctant to get involved in European politics. This, in turn, increases the political influence of conservatives and populists, who are ideologically Eurosceptic. Under the declarative protection of traditional values, Eurosceptic populists frequently condemn the debatable gender policy, the complexity of the European Union's migration policy (often Islamophobia (Kalmar 2018)), the change of geopolitical orientations in the Eastern European direction, and so on. This state of affairs stipulated numerous discussions, questioning the efficiency of transitology (Carothers 2002) or reconsidering its seminal issues (Diamond, Fukuyama, Horowitz & Plattner 2014). After all, the dilemma of the future of democracy is inherent not only in Central European countries. The undemocratic turn and the populism era have occurred globally, for instance, "Trumpism" in America (Morris 2019) or "Orbanism" in Hungary (Toth 2020). Simultaneously, a view that Central European former post-communist countries are seen as traditional democracies reiterates the significance of studying the trajectories of Central Europe's democratic transit. Having joined the European Union, the V4 countries were classified as operating democracies that are slightly lagging behind the liberal democracies of Western Europe (Lane 2007). Unquestionably, this institutional imbalance had to change after the V4 countries became "accustomed" to EU requirements and made a full-fledged shift to the European Union standards. However, the decade in the European Union has contributed to the process of strengthening democracy yet steadied the level of Euroscepticism in society against the background of growing conservatism and populism in Central European governments. Thus, clarification of this democratic paradox in Central Europe and the transformation of the political elites' behaviour in the European Union are among the priority tasks of modern comparative political science (Sus & Hadeed 2021).

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

We will attempt to analyze the inconsistencies of the V4 countries' democratic transit. Not disputing the overall democratic progress throughout the 1990s and prior to the European Union accession, the timeframe we will consider embraces 15 years after the V4 countries joined the EU (2005–2020). It is during these years that peculiarities of Central European countries' democratic development are worth investigating. In fact, we are analyzing a period of "democracy post-consolidation", which, after the Visegrad Four accession to the EU, put to test democratic institutions' stability as well as democratic political regime "quality". Apart from the existing concepts, it is worth taking into account the current political situation in these countries, especially the management style of conservative and populist governments. The correlation between the conservative governments and growing Euroscepticism inevitably lead to democratic deviations.

A novel methodological approach in political science serves as a theoretical background for exploring the democratic transit trajectory. The abovementioned approach attempts to determine the problematic aspects of the democratic regimes' progress in the former post-communist countries. These are the concepts of illiberal democracy (Fareed Zakaria), deconsolidated democracy (Roberto Foa & Yascha Mounk), declining democracy (Attila Ágh), democracy with adjectives (David Collier & Steven Levitsky). Each of these theories emphasizes the democratic decline in the V4 countries, proving that these countries are reverting to a "state of transit".

The empirical basis for either confirming or refuting the V4 countries' democratization is the "Nations in Transit" monitoring of democratic transformations by Freedom House. This monitoring focuses on the transitive regions of the world (post-socialist and post-Soviet space of Eurasia). Transformation processes are looked into through prism of the seven institutional characteristics: 1) National Democratic Governance, 2) Electoral Process, 3) Civil Society, 4) Independent Media, 5) Local Democratic Governance, 6) Judicial Framework and Independence, and 7) Corruption. Each country under survey is assessed by each characteristic (indicator) and is

ultimately classified according to a specific type of political regime, of which there are five: 1) Consolidated Democracies, 2) Semi-Consolidated Democracies, 3) Transitional or Hybrid Regimes, 4) Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes, and 5) Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes (Nations in Transit 2020). The highest democratic score of a transit country is the status of a consolidated democracy regime, the lowest – the regime with consolidated authoritarianism, respectively. A great advantage of Nations in Transit monitoring is that their analysis methodology constantly updates and improves. In 2019, the methodology drastically changed due to the shift from a quantitative to qualitative analysis. As a result, each country does not receive points for democracy/authoritarianism. Alternatively, the percentage segment of the country's democratization is measured. Therefore, the maximum of the country's democratization is 100%, whereas the minimum is 0%. According to the Nations in Transit methodology, we determine and compare the democratic development indicators in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia during 2005–2020.

Under the research problematics, we have formed the following hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1.** *The period of “post-adaptation” of the Visegrad 4 countries in the European Union testified to the general decline of their democratization.*

By “post-adaptation”, we mean the period after five years of EU membership. In other words, this is the time when the legal and political adaptation of post-socialist countries to EU standards has completed but the likelihood of the first disappointment with the EU realities in society is high. Each Visegrad country has undoubtedly followed its own dynamics of democratic fluctuations. However, we can outline two variants of democratic regression: 1) “creeping regression”, obviously caused by the alignment of the political forces, such as the populists and conservatives (Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland), and 2) “rapid regression” that may result from power authoritarianisation processes and systemic violations of democratic procedures (decreasing competition in the political system through pressure on the opposition (Hungary)). Moreover, it is important to understand that, given the “rise” of conservatives and populists in Central European countries, the “Visegrad democracy model” has potential.

**Hypothesis 2.** *Due to the policy of “orbanism”, since 2020, Hungary no longer belongs to the countries with an institutional democratic regime.*

After the 2010 parliamentary elections in Hungary, Viktor Orbán gradually established his own management model, based on the strengthening of the executive branch, the dominance of one political force, and right-wing populism. In brief, this management can be defined as “orbanism” (Toth 2020). Of course, with the strengthening of Orbán’s position as Prime Minister, and the diminishing political competition, democratic principles are beginning to play a lesser role in the Hungarian reality. The question arises, how long will the current Hungarian government be able to balance between the EU status and flirting with an authoritarian leader?

**Hypothesis 3.** *A high level of Euroscepticism in society has little effect on the level of democratic regression of the Visegrad 4 countries.*

The concept of Euroscepticism is a broad category that can manifest itself in different ways and at different stages of democratic transit. For instance, in a post-socialist society, Euroscepticism can be equated with a democratic reforms’ rejection and a weak trust in the prospects of a democratic regime (Haerpfer 2001). Also, there are two known models of party Eurosceptics: hard and soft Eurosceptics (Rovny 2004). To measure the level of Euroscepticism, we used Eurobarometer data, which we believe are a universal sociological tool for measuring public opinion in the European Union. Simultaneously, we focused on determining the number of Euro-optimists (citizens who trust the European Union) and Eurosceptics (citizens who do not trust the European Union).

### **3. ILLIBERALISM, DECONSOLIDATION OR ANTI-DEMOCRATIC REVERSE?**

Despite thriving democracy in the conditions of postcolonialism and the collapse of socialist political network, numerous countries illustrate ambiguous dynamics of political regimes. Zakaria observes an alarming trend that has transformed into a new format of democratic governance, i.e. “illiberal democracy”. It presupposes that political elites, elected according to democratic

procedures (elections and referendums), do not comply with the rules of constitutional liberalism (broad guarantee of citizens' rights and freedoms, parliamentary traditions, etc.). At first glance, illiberal democracies retain a high level of regime legitimacy, as political elites form under democratic law and following electoral procedures. The threat to democratic values stems from a low quality of governing democracy, fairly discrediting democratic governments (Zakaria 1997, 42). Illiberal democracies frequently fail to pursue the task of securing a range of civil liberties, resorting to populism. Political populism has always polarised society into moderate citizens and radicals, anxious for instant and drastic change. In such an environment, long-standing conflicts may escalate, whereas new disputes may emerge on political, religious or ethnic grounds. Amongst the Central European countries, where illiberal democracy installed in the mid-1990s, Zakaria singles out only Slovakia (Zakaria 1997; 41). The scholar's logic absolutely corresponds to the political processes that occurred in the country in the conditions of "Meciarism" (Leška 2013, 78). Unlike the rest of its V4 partners, Slovakia, along with the need to implement effective economic reforms, had to cope with the legacy of post-socialism, successfully exploited by the party leadership of the "Movement for Democratic Slovakia". The demand to re-rotate Slovak political elites increased in the 1990s in response to diminishing euphoria with independence from Czechoslovak federalism, the chaotic behaviour of the economy, and de facto distancing from the Euro-Atlantic structures.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, transformational developments in the Central European region expectedly led to the establishment of consolidated democracy regimes. Consolidation of democracy has steadied the party system, setting "universal rules for the game of democracy"<sup>1</sup>. Most importantly, in the early 2000s, democratic regimes operated as a sustainable governance mechanism with a high level of legitimacy. In fact, the democracy consolidation set democratic rules at the level of society. The higher the citizens' observance of

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<sup>1</sup>The concept of "democracy consolidation" by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan likewise, established the rule of "only game in town" (Linz & Stepan 1996).

democratic rules, the steadier the regime. Moreover, the accession of post-communist countries to the European Union was considered the de facto end of the democracy consolidation period (Tomini 2014). However, institutional consolidation of democracy completed, democratic governments faced the problem of a gradual legitimacy loss. In the face of continuing political crises around corruption scandals, anti-immigrant and populist rhetoric and rising levels of Euroscepticism, voters began advocating radical political forces and populist politicians. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of liberal or social democratic governments that facilitated the accession of the V4 countries to the European Union were replaced by conservative and populist governments. The stability of “pro-European” governments has been undermined by the adaptation period of the European Union and the growing popularity of radical rights. In recent decades, the former anti-systemic forces have by and large permeated the national parliaments of recent convocations: “People’s Party – Our Slovakia” in Slovakia, “Freedom and Direct Democracy” in the Czech Republic, “Jobbik” in Hungary, and “Confederation Liberty and Independence” in Poland. In addition, one should keep in mind that the ruling parties pursued a conservative policy for the sake of preserving the “national identity” of Slovaks (SMER-SD), Czechs (ANO-2011), Hungarians (FIDEZ), and Poles (“Law and Justice”). As Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk argue, the democracy deconsolidation as a domestic political process is not yet capable of undermining the foundations of democratic governance but already is quite curbed in guaranteeing civil liberties and political rights (Foa & Mounk 2017; 10). Therefore, it will help decrease political competition. Another side of the democracy deconsolidation is the violation of democratic governance procedures and constitutional reform at the behest of the dominant forces’ political interests. Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk single out two representative cases amongst the countries of Central Europe. The first case relates to the Hungarian constitutional reform initiated by FIDEZ in 2011 (Foa & Mounk 2017, 8). According to the Venice Commission, the unilateral adoption of the Constitution in Hungary resulted in an imbalance of checks and balances, the introduction of mechanisms of state control over the electoral process, and a strict state policy in the field of media (European Commission for Democracy



through Law 2011). The second case is the rebate of the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and the introduction of state control over the media space in Poland in 2015, initiated by the ruling "Law and Justice". Under the Venice Commission, this act significantly threatens the independence of the judiciary branch as well as the foundations of civil society (European Commission for Democracy through Law 2016).

Crucial in understanding the nature of deconsolidated democracy is its latency and the enormous potential for the destruction of traditional democratic mechanisms. Deconsolidation emerges in a successful democratic regime. All the V4 countries successfully joined the European Community in 2004, exhibiting the efficiency of democratic governments. The current government crises<sup>1</sup> were not a result of systemic errors in the democratic organization of countries, but rather situational consequences of the post-socialist reforms' lapses. Simultaneously, after a decade of adjustment to the European conditions, anti-systemic and populist parties, that polarize society into liberal values supporters and hard Eurosceptics, are gaining momentum in Central European countries. Notably, in the party systems of post-socialist countries, Euroscepticism has always been a strong political argument. The political group of Eurosceptics traditionally falls into the political forces with their own vision of the European Union and their place in it (Soft Euroscepticism), and political forces that, during the 1990s, declared non-membership in the European Union, and at present advocate the departure from it (Hard Euroscepticism) (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2000). To maintain democratic traditions, it is important for the

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<sup>1</sup>For post-socialist countries, anti-corruption scandals have become the most spread cause of government crises. We have to mention a long-term government crisis in Hungary in 2006–2009, caused by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány's "confession of lying to voters". The political crisis in Slovakia is related to the "Gorilla scandal" in 2011 (let alone the fateful political battles of the late 1990s in the format of "Meciarism - anti-Meciarism" (Leška 2013; 78)). Several corruption scandals also occurred in the Czech Republic over the personality of Prime Minister Stanislav Gross (2005) and people close to the Government, such as Petr Nečas (2013). Poland also finds itself amidst corruption scandals, such as the one around Vice-Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński in 2007, or the wiretapping of government officials by Donald Tusk in 2014.

moderate society beyond the political poles not to elect right-wing radicals. In such a case, deconsolidation as a process of mild decay of democratic governance may as well become an immediate threat to the very idea of democracy. Not only had the 2004 accession of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia to Euro-Atlantic structures confirmed the European Community's acknowledgement that the recent autocracies managed to achieve consolidated democracy, but also led to a new phase of transformation in Central Europe. The V4 countries had to pass a test on the consolidated democracy regime stability in dynamics. Attila Agh believes that the initial decade of EU membership is the best catalyst for understanding the quality of democracy in Central European countries, given the noticeable descending trends in recent years (Ágh 2014). As the scholar claims, after joining the European Union, two consolidated democracy determinants form in the V4 countries: 1) economic modernization leads to fragmentation of the regions exhibiting economic growth and focus on economic cooperation with Western Europe (mostly western regions), whereas another group of regions persists in economic stagnation or depression (mostly separated from the European Union eastern regions)<sup>1</sup>; 2) continuous democracy consolidation resulted not only in the political system stabilization but in amplifying disintegration processes in the former transitional societies (Ágh 2014).

Making inferences from the Western critical political science, Attila Agh outlines three issues of post-socialist countries democratization that may account for the "quality" of new democratic regimes. The first predicament of democracy is the disparity at the national and regional levels of democratization in a transitive country. This political phenomenon existed in post-socialist countries in the

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, in Slovakia in the post-socialist period, there was a polarization between a group of western regions (Bratislava, Trnava and Nitra regions) that showed more sustainable economic development and were electorally supportive of European-positive political forces, such as the Slovak Democratic Coalition or OĽANO. On the contrary, a group of eastern regions (Presov and Kosice regions) were transforming slowly, demonstrating a high unemployment rate and the lowest incomes across the country. Slovaks in the east have always focused on social democracy with signs of populism, such as the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia or SMER-SD.

1990s and resulted in the emergence of two conventional groups of countries: 1) countries with no resistance to democratization in the regions. Respectively, their societies managed to reach a compromise on the democratic future; 2) countries that rejected democratic change at the regional level, thus eventually contributing to the emergence of hybrid regimes (Ágh 2014, 12). The second dilemma of democracy in post-socialist countries is the non-synchronous course of democratic transformations. For example, political and economic transformations proved successful in the 1990s, yet new democracy should not be referred to consolidated democracies since society was not unanimous about the very issue. In the 2000s, the countries were further building up their democratic potential<sup>1</sup>, while the level of society's integration around the country's democratic future had hardly changed, if not worsened. This circumstance predetermined anti-democratic sentiments along with scepticism about the democratic prospects (Ágh 2014, 13). Thus, the declining support for democracy in post-socialist societies, trending in the 2020s, stems from the nature of post-socialist democratic transit. Eventually, the ultimate dilemma of democracy is the global crisis of the ideal democratic governance due to several reasons. For instance, the great 2008 financial crisis was a test for both the European Union and for each country in particular (Ágh 2014, 13).

Notably, the issue of post-socialist transit has been unfolding since the countries' last decade of EU membership and onwards, when post-socialist regimes began to transform. The most remarkable inconsistency in the democratic transit trajectory is that the democracy level in societies of the V4 countries lags markedly from the pace of their political and economic democratization. Having successfully implemented institutional democratization and de-facto completing democratic transit, the governments of the V4 countries failed to ensure a sufficient democratization level for society. Some Polish, Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak citizens (mostly from underdeveloped and economically depressed regions) did not withstand the pace of democratization and strong competition

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<sup>1</sup>This was confirmed by the biggest enlargement of the European Union in 2004 when eight former socialist autocracies became new member states, i.e. the V4 countries, the Baltic group, and Slovenia.

in the European Union. In the 1990s, many such citizens had inflated expectations of the country's accession to the European Union, expecting immediate financial preferences. A continuous loss of a social position and slipping beyond the middle class compelled Eurosceptic citizens to seek alternative ways of developing the country. After joining the European Union, the situation aggravated deepening Eurosceptic sentiment, as the radical 1990 Eurosceptics (often adherents of the socialist past) effectively merged in the electoral field with new Eurosceptics, frustrated with the EU's immediate lack of membership. As a result, democratic governments began to fall short of legitimacy, while right-wing radicals and populists have been gaining electoral support. Since the second decade of the 2000s, populists have become active members of the V4 government coalitions or participated in influential opposition parliamentary groups: Kukiz'15 (2015), Confederation Liberty and Independence (2019) in Poland; in Hungary, since the 2010 parliamentary elections, it has traditionally been Jobbik; in the Czech Republic these are political projects by Tomio Okamura (2013, 2017); in Slovakia - "Ordinary People and Independent Personalities" (2012, 2016, 2020), Marian Kotleba's party (2016, 2020), "We Are Family" (2016, 2020). Concurrently, the declining democratization level does not presuppose either the fall of democratic governance foundations or the Central European governments' reconsideration of the all-European path of development. Undoubtedly, democracy deconsolidation and growing numbers of Eurosceptics in society over the past few years have displayed an overall regress of democracy in the V4 countries. Eventually, the conceptual roots of the deviations of the post-communist countries' democratic development may stem from the subtypes of democracies that constitute the group of "democracy with adjectives". Recognised political comparativists David Collier and Steven Levitsky (Collier & Levitsky 1997) proposed this term. Notably, this idea had initially concerned Latin American countries, so it is hardly appropriate to adapt subtypes of democracy to post-communist countries. However, it is important to understand why the logic of democratic transit needs to be updated and clarified. Thus, Collier and Levitsky discuss two crucial tasks of applied political science in explaining democratic transits: 1) search for the best models of the transition to democracy in various

regions of the world; 2) the problem of conceptual validity in the democratic transit analysis (Collier & Levitsky 1997, 430). The challenges transitologists faced in the early 1990s had hardly changed over the past 30 years. To a greater or lesser extent, each of the V4 countries exhibits “democracy with adjectives”, forming a group of democratic political regimes based on post-communism. The amplitude of democratic fluctuations during and due to democratic transit in the V4 countries confirms the need to take into account a comparative empirical methodology.

#### 4. V4 IN TRANSIT

Amongst numerous empirical dimensions of transformations in the world, Nations in Transit by Freedom House stands out for its universality<sup>1</sup>. There are several reasons for this, e.g., Nations in Transit adjusts exclusively to the countries of the former post-communist space. Secondly, the programme conducted several dozen annual surveys, confirming the likelihood of understanding the logic and dynamics of democratic transits. Ultimately, the monitoring chronology will cover the period of transformation from 1996 to 2020, embracing the most important events in the political life of the V4 systemic institutional changes in the 1990s, the peculiarities of Euro-Atlantic integration in the late 1990s – mid-2000s, a decade of EU membership, as well as the democratic deviations of recent years. To understand the perspective of modern transformations in the post-communist space, it is sufficient to read the overall thesis of the latest monitoring of Nations in Transit-2020: “Dropping the Democratic Facade in Europe and Eurasia” (Nations in Transit 2020). Undoubtedly, the conclusion about a significant democracy decline in most

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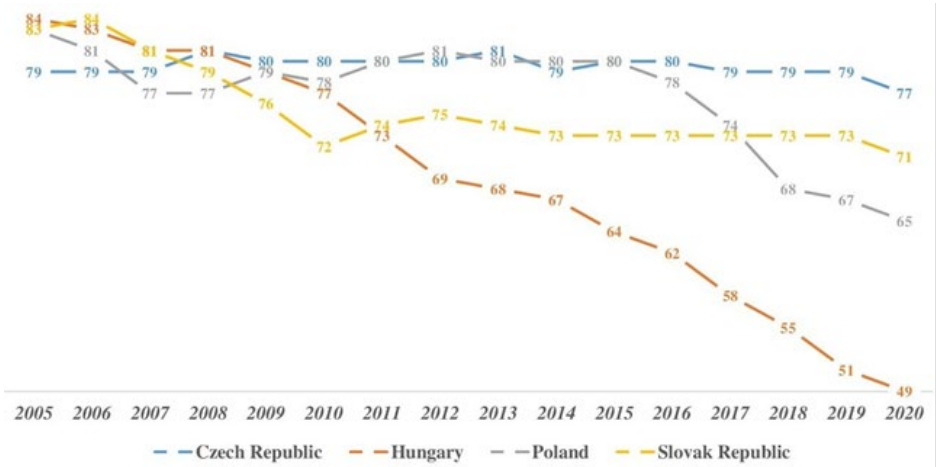
<sup>1</sup> The methodological framework of the Nations in Transit indexing and the empirical advantages of the monitoring are explained in the methodological section.

transitive countries is the result of years of monitoring<sup>1</sup>. Freedom House experts observe a continuous erosion of democratic institutions not only in the Central Asian post-Soviet countries but in relatively new EU members (for example, the V4) as well. Simultaneously, the first and second waves of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic also affected certain democratic procedures due to strict quarantine restrictions. We will contemplate the democratic development dynamics of the V4 countries during the democratic transit based on the Nations in Transit monitoring. It is worth mentioning that we are examining the period of transformation following the countries' accession to the European Union – from the first year of being an EU member (2005) to the most recent monitoring (2020) (Figure 1)<sup>2</sup>.

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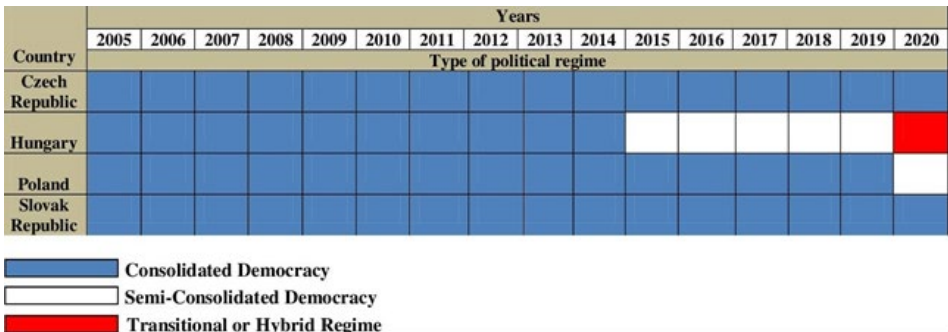
<sup>1</sup> Freedom House experts have been warning about democratic deviations for the past few years. In particular, the slogan of the Nations in Transit 2017 report was “The False Promise of Populism”, and “Confronting Illiberalism” – in 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The matter is that the 1990s became a perfect example of post-communist transformation for all V4 countries with indispensable institutional reforms related to two factors: 1) a farewell to the communist past, 2) modernization to meet the demands of Euro-Atlantic integration. Three countries (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) proved more successful, whereas the Slovak Republic had to overcome the period of “Meciarism” (Leška 2013). One way or another, the most unpredictable trajectories of democratic development began only upon successful completion of Euro-Atlantic integration.



**Figure 1.** Trajectories of Democratic Transformation in V4 Countries by Nations in Transit (2005–2020)  
 Source: Nations in Transit 2020

The first overall conclusion from the general dynamics of the V4 countries’ democratic development is that the democratic political regime remains the defining political reference point (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Classification of the V4 Countries’ Political Regimes based on Nations in Transit (2005–2020), Source:Nations in Transit 2020

The above graph outlines the monitoring of 2020, namely the significant democratic regress of Hungary and the first time for Poland to join the group of countries with semi-consolidated democracy. If we examine the types of political regime typical of each country, we can notice the following pattern: each of the countries balances between a group of consolidated and semi-consolidated democracies. For instance, neither the Czech Republic nor Slovakia has ever fallen beyond the group of consolidated democracies, displaying a fully operating democracy. Since 2015, Hungary has been descending closer to semi-consolidated democracies, but *de jure*, it remains a democratic country with some problems in the performance of a democratic regime. Against this background, Hungary's transition to hybrid regimes in 2020 is more of a political deviation. On the other hand, the previous five years of monitoring (2015–2019) classified Hungary as explicit democratic regression, which eventually became a reality. Thus, currently, Hungary does not belong to the group of democratic countries<sup>1</sup>.

Further on, we will attempt to elucidate the trajectories of democratic development on the example of each country V4<sup>2</sup>.

#### 4.1 The Czech Republic: nearly perfect transit trajectory.

The country remains the most democratically steady among the V4 countries and one of the leaders in the democratic development among post-socialist and post-Soviet countries. The average score of the country's democratization is 79%. The lowest score of democratization was 77% in 2020, whereas the highest was 81% in 2018, 2012 and 2013. That is the difference in democratization scores

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<sup>1</sup>The group of countries with "Transitional or Hybrid Regime" also includes Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania.

<sup>2</sup> We deliberately do not detail the features of the socio-political development of countries that have primarily influenced the dynamics of democracy, as this can be found in the annual reports of Nations in Transit 2005 - 2020.



estimates only 4%, confirming the stability of the democratic regime against the background of the political elites' and society's reluctance to search for alternative undemocratic development. The Czech Republic has exhibited exemplary democratic transformation, so we can state that the current democratic shortcomings result more from political populism (Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and President Miloš Zeman) than the institutional crisis of the Czech democracy model and the increasing level of Euroscepticism in Czech society. After all, according to the latest data, a little more than half of Czechs express their distrust of the European Union (Standard Eurobarometer 93 2020).

#### 4.2. Hungary: hybridity as an alternative to democracy

Hungary is the complete opposite of the Czech Republic in terms of democratic development. Paradoxically, Hungarian democracy never recorded an increase between 2005 and 2020, constantly declining. The average score of the country's democratization is 68%, but, in practice, it does not reflect much, as the general democratic regress trend is noticeable. The lowest score of democracy is 2020, when, having overcome the psychological democracy limit of 49%, Hungary nearly withdrew from the group of democracies. The best result of 84% was in 2005. The difference in democracy scores estimates 35%, this fact pointing at either a systemic political crisis in the country or a general departure from the democratic principles of the country organization and overall radicalization of society. With the democracy decline being gradual and the democracy rate deteriorating by several per cent each year, it is worth discussing a certain failure in the performance of the democratic mechanism. At the same time, from 2005 to 2009, Hungary experienced a weak democratic decline with a 1-2% drop in the democracy scores. The greatest democratic regress coincides with (or is caused by) the beginning of one of the three terms of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In the decade of Viktor Orbán's presidency, on a national populist basis, "Orbanism" emerges as a specific government with authoritarian attributes (Krzyzanowski&Wodak 2017). It is a broad-context political construct that excludes consensus in the state decision-making (e.g., the FIDESZ's initiative

and the subsequent approval of the new Constitution in 2011 without the required political and public consultations), change of the overall democratic rules of the game (adoption of the parliamentary election legislation, favourable for the ruling FIDESZ in 2012), creation of a broad political platform of political allies, committed to a conservative (Christian Democratic People's Party) or radical right-wing ideology (Jobbik), reacting to opposition media or grant funds (eg Ökotárs Foundation, EKINT Institute for Politics), or higher education institutions (Central European University), anti-Soros strategy and policy of Euroscepticism, supported by anti-immigrant rhetoric and traditional nationalist appeals. The Nations in Transit findings and the events in Hungary in the last decade display that the Hungary in its current status of an undemocratic country is not an exception but rather a regularity.

#### 4.3. Poland: Conservatism and Populism as Factors Leading to Authoritarianism

It is the country with successfully completed democratic transit, but, like most post-socialist countries, it experienced various problems with democracy in different segments of politics and society. The average democratization score is 76%. The lowest democratization scores of 65% occurred in 2020, whereas the highest was 83% in 2005. The difference estimates 18%, indicating, on the one hand, that the country experiences certain problems with a democratic regime, but, on the other hand, these problems are not related to the general crisis of democracy as a decision-making system in the country. The situation with Poland is quite ambiguous because, in 2016, democratic indicators began to deteriorate. It is during 2016–2020 that Poland noticeably regressed and joined the group of “semi-democratic countries”. Given the insignificant democratic deviations in Poland, we can attribute the mini-crisis of democracy not to the institutional problems of democracy, but rather to the conservative “content” of the Polish political system. Since 2015, the Conservatives of “Law and Justice”

have headed both the legislative and executive branches of government<sup>1</sup>. In terms of a single political actor's dominance in the political system ("Law and Justice"), Poland is quite similar to modern Hungary, dominated by FIDESZ. At the same time, there are many differences as well, e.g., in 2019, "Law and Justice" loses in the upper house of the Senate, giving way to the opposition Civic Platform and a group of independent candidates (Krajowe Biuro Wyborcze 2019). In the second round of the latest presidential election in 2020, a conservative Andrzej Duda overtook the Civic Platform representative by only 2.06% (Krajowe Biuro Wyborcze 2020). Therefore, Poland maintained one of the most important principles of democratic governance, namely political competition at the highest levels of government. On the other hand, the parliamentary mono-majority of conservatives "Law and Justice" generates numerous actions, incompatible with liberal democracy: a controversial judicial reform criticized within the European Union, advocating traditional values for Polish society and cultivating Euroscepticism as an efficient tool to win the electorate. Most importantly, Poland's transition to semi-consolidated democracies should not mark the way to the end of the Polish consolidated democracy model.

#### 4.4. Slovakia: Political Crisis and Populism

This is a V4 country that has followed its own peculiar democratic development trajectory, which is neither steady (a Czech version), nor declining (Hungarian and Polish versions). The average democratization score is 75%. The lowest democratization threshold of 71% was recorded in 2020, the highest – in 2006

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<sup>1</sup> So far, upon the 2019 parliamentary elections, the situation has hardly changed, as "Law and Justice" won 235 seats out of 460 seats in the Sejm (Krajowe Biuro Wyborcze 2019); a coalition formed around "Law and Justice", and one of their political leaders, Mateusz Morawiecki, resumed the powers of the head of government. In 2020, the delegate from "Law and Justice" Andrzej Duda was elected for a second term (Krajowe Biuro Wyborcze 2020).

(84%). The difference in democratization scores estimates 13%, indicating the steady democratic development of the country, with possible governmental or political crises, but without the “crisis of democracy”. The democratic development of Slovakia over the last 16 years has occurred in waves<sup>1</sup>, thus we may highlight two regularities: 1) the decline of democracy (2005–2009), and 2) the rise of democracy (2010–2019)<sup>2</sup>. The democracy decline coincides with the first cadence of Prime Minister Robert Fico and the dominance of SMER-SD in the parliamentary and political system. For the modern Slovak Republic, the figure of Fico is highly ambiguous. Having been prime minister three times, he was repeatedly accused of political corruption and authoritarian leadership inclinations (Kern 2019). Against the same “anti-Fico” political background in 2020, quite a poly-ideological force led by the odious Igor Matovič came to power. Personally, Matovič was unable to lead the country out of the deep political crisis that began with the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak in early 2018 (Cuprik, Kapitán& Filo 2018), holding the post of Prime Minister for a little over a year. Therefore, we cannot classify Robert Fico’s presidency as more resembling “Orbanism” or rather the political ambitions of Polish conservatives. Eventually, neither Fico nor his close party circle from SMER-SD seriously threatened the democratic principles by changing the Constitution or the electoral system or by implementing a controversial judicial reform. At the same time, Fico’s rule was marked by several political scandals and a high level of social populism. These factors have hardly contributed to the full operation of liberal democracy.

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<sup>1</sup>We cannot avoid analogies with Samuel Huntington’s waves of democratization (Huntington 1991).

<sup>2</sup>We do not mention the last monitoring in 2020 because this year displayed the largest democratic regress, which is still hard to explain. It is supposed to indicate the beginning of a downward wave, but findings for only one year cannot either confirm or refute a particular trend.

## 5. CORRUPTION AS A CONSTANT ATTENDANT OF POST-SOCIALIST TRANSITS

In the light of certain indicators of the democracy index, it is worth mentioning that a high level of corruption has remained an urgent problem for all V4 countries. The practice of post-socialist transformations shows that the prevention or effective fight against corruption frequently directly leads to a consolidated democracy (e.g., Estonia, Latvia). Conversely, post-socialist countries with a high level of corruption often change the vector of development towards oligarchy and hybrid regimes (e.g., Ukraine, Serbia, Moldova). It presupposes that corruption is a long-term phenomenon, requiring not only institutional reforms (adoption of anti-corruption legislation, creation of a network of anti-corruption bodies, etc.) but also a transparent anti-corruption policy of the country's leaders. Of all the indicators of the overall democracy scores, the level of corruption remained the most critical for all Central European countries. In fact, it is the most "undemocratic indicator of democracy" in the former post-socialist countries. The situation barely changed even after the countries joined the European Union. The amplitude of fluctuations with the corruption level indicator for the period 2005–2010 being insignificant, we will determine the average score of corruption for each country.

In the *Czech Republic*, the average corruption scores for the past 16 years was 4.59. Even though the Czech Republic has not changed its status as a country with a consolidated democracy regime, the country has never met the index of consolidated democracy in terms of corruption. The situation with corruption in *Hungary* needs a deeper insight, as the dynamics of the corruption score are quite noticeable. The average corruption score is 4.28, classifying Hungary as a country with the corruption level matching the score of a semi-consolidated democracy. However, this is the case when the average score does not reflect an objective situation. The main pattern of the Hungarian corruption score is its declining nature over the last 16 years. Moreover, the corruption situation never improved, remaining unchanged at best. In the period 2005–2010, Hungary

belonged to one of the following three groups of countries in terms of corruption: consolidated democracy (2005), semi-consolidated democracy (2006–2015), and hybrid regime (2016–2020<sup>1</sup>). Hungary received the status of a hybrid regime country only in 2020, although the level of corruption has matched this status even earlier, since 2016. *Poland* has shown a steady corruption level with an average score of 4.68. In the last 16 years, Poland has never been in a group of countries with a consolidated democracy in terms of corruption. The country secured itself a position in the group of semi-consolidated democracies, yet demonstrating the worst score of 4.25 in 2019 and 2020. At such a pace, the level of corruption in the country is likely to correspond to the hybrid regime.

In *Slovakia*, corruption score also remains one of the most problematic issues. The average corruption score is 4.46, which is typical of a country with a semi-consolidated democracy. The Slovak Republic has never been in the group of consolidated democracies in terms of corruption, nearly approaching this score in 2005 and 2006 (5.00), and digressing from it from 2013 to 2020 (4.25).

Ultimately, in the light of Nations in Transit monitoring, it is worth outlining a threatening trend in the V4 countries, which directly concerns democracy prospects. In 2020, all countries showed the worst democratization score over the past 15 years of monitoring. However, one-year monitoring can hardly become a trend, and only further monitoring will determine whether 2020 was a deviation from the democratic development or a pattern of democratic regression for Central European countries.

## 6.CONCLUSIONS

The likelihood of democratic regress remains a crucial issue in the V4 countries' transformation. It is apparent that due to the latest trends in political life, the

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<sup>1</sup>In 2020, Hungary received the lowest corruption score in the group of countries with a hybrid regime (3.00). A minimal deterioration of the situation will lead to the country's joining the group with a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime (rating scale 2.01 – 3.00) in terms of corruption.

countries are currently experiencing a democratic decline. The latest monitoring of countries in 2020 reflects systemic problems of democracy in Central European countries.

We can outline several aspects of the democratic decline in Central European countries.

*Firstly*, one of the arguments in favour of the undemocratic prospects in Central European countries is the strong influence of conservatives and populists. In all V4 countries, those political forces, having aggravated the regression of democratic development, have remained in power (the Czech Republic – Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and ANO 2011, and President Miloš Zeman; Hungary – Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ, Poland – Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and “Law and Justice”; Slovak Republic – Prime Minister Eduard Heger and OĽaNO). Unless there are serious political crises, each of these political forces will control the government for most of the term (in the Slovak Republic until 2024, in Poland until 2023, in Hungary until 2022), except for the steadiest Czech Republic, where elections will be held in October 2021. The conservative or populist component of Central European governments is unlikely to cease playing a vital role. On the other hand, a vast amount of populism in Central European governments destabilizes the political system and polarizes society. Such governments are often unsteady, especially if they arise due to a political crisis. The recent government crisis in Slovakia, leading to the resignation of Igor Matovič as Prime Minister, serves as proof. Although the ruling coalition has preserved, its current capacity and future are questionable.

*Secondly*, it is necessary to discuss the tense relations of the European Union with Hungary and Poland. A political confrontation between the conservative government of Victor Orbán and Brussels has a long history. Relations between the European Union and the conservative Polish government led by “Law and Justice” have also remained strained. However, Eurosceptic rhetoric gradually transforms into practical action. Thus, after FIDESZ left the European People’s Party in the European Parliament, Orbán initiated a new anti-systemic right-wing Eurosceptic movement in Europe in March 2021 (DW.com 2019). It is likely the largest hard Eurosceptic formation based on the right ideology, which can

unite both traditional conservatives (FIDESZ and “Law and Justice”) and right-wing radical politicians (Northern League and Brothers of Italy).

*Thirdly*, Euroscepticism, associated with declining public confidence in European democratic institutions, is noticeable not only at the political level but also in the societies of the V4 countries. Thus, according to the Eurobarometer in 2020 (Standard Eurobarometer 932020), a strong group of Eurosceptics has formed in each country, causing an ambiguous situation. For instance, the largest number of Eurosceptics is concentrated in the Czech Republic (56% of citizens do not trust the European Union) that is invariably classified as a consolidated democracy. Another consolidated democracy is Slovakia (about half of citizens distrust the European Union – 46%). Conversely, in the V4 countries with negative democratic fluctuations, there are fewer Eurosceptics. In Hungary, slightly more than a half of citizens trusts the European Union (53%), while 40% of Hungarians have a sceptical view of European structures. In general, Poland is one of the five countries with the highest number of Euro-optimists. In Poland, 56% of citizens support the European Union, and only a third (32%) distrust the European Union.

Thus, the democratic decline is peculiar for all V4 countries, yet each of them displays different features and manifestations of this phenomenon. The 2020 showed that the countries are at a crossroads between the Central European model of consolidated democracy, having facilitated their collective accession to the European Union, and newer forms of Eurosceptic and conservative democracy. All the countries have significantly deteriorated their democratic performance, but the crisis of democratic institutions is an inherent factor in modern Hungary. In Poland, the elements of the conservative policy are beginning to prevail over democratic consensus, thus bringing the country closer to single-party leadership. Slovakia suffers from political crises that are not the crisis of democratic values, but that of political leaders. The Czech Republic remains the most democratically steady, only slightly suffering from populism and Euroscepticism. Unless the V4 countries’ governments take further steps and society fragmentation centres on European identities, we will not be able to confirm or refute the regularity of the ongoing democracy erosion.



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