

THE THIRD WAVE OF AUTOCRATIZATION IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

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From the early 2010s the East Central European countries have developed the “third-generation autocracies”. They have introduced these autocracies through the “democracy capture” with a large deviation from the EU mainstream. Compared to the previous traditional types of autocracies the third-generation autocracy has produced radical innovations with the parallel developments of the formally democratic and informally autocratic forms in the institution-building. They have created a democratic façade of the formal-constitutional institutions and have also made big efforts for the drastic control of the informal institutions, in the media, culture and communication. This paper deals with the three stages of autocratization in the last thirty years in ECE, and it focuses on the recent stage from the early 2010s in its three shorter periods.

Key words: Chaotic Democracy; Neoliberal Autocracy; De-Democratization; Autocratization; De-Europeanization.

1 INTRODUCTION

As the point of departure this paper offers a historical overview of the autocratization in a comparative ECE view in the last thirty years, indicating the contours of this backsliding from the basically weak and chaotic democracy to the modernized autocracy in three big stages of the *Easy Dream*, *Chaotic Democracy* and *Neoliberal Autocracy* in the corresponding decades. The paper concentrates on the third stage in the 2010s in its three shorter periods taking 3-4 years as *De-Democratization*, *Autocratization* and *De-Europeanization*. Accordingly, in this historical process there has been a change of focus in the democracy studies in general and in the ECE states from the democratization to the autocratization as the ruling paradigm. For the first two decades there was a general feeling of chaos and deception in ECE, but mostly focusing only on the specificity of the given country in its special crisis, generated by the controversial catching-up process in the EU. The scientific perception of the crisis led, however,

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to the recognition of the common ECE failures in the Europeanization and Democratization process by discussing the naïve hopes in the first stage and the resentment in the second stage of the chaotic early democracies. More and more the reasons of the ECE common diversion from the mainstream EU developments were discovered in these “crisis studies”, while the emphasis was shifted to the new features of autocratization, hence this new turn to autocratization was described and systematized in the 2010s. With the emerging autocratization the change of paradigms between the democracy studies and the “autocracy studies” was completed. Thus, in the third *stage* by the early 2020s both the controversial history of the early Eastern enlargement and the systemic features of the new autocracies have been formulated into a common theory (V-Dem 2021; Lührmann 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021), focusing on the new ECE autocracies in their increasing confrontation with the EU mainstream.²

After discussing the first topic of “crisis studies” in democratization as the derailment of Europeanization in ECE in the first two stages, this paper turns to the second topic, to the autocratization in ECE, to the third stage in its three *periods*. First, it will present the ECE failure in the management of the global fiscal crisis due to their missing competitiveness and the emergence of the hybrid regimes in the early 2010s as *De-Democratization*, since in the first period the constitutional foundations of democracy were attacked and weakened. Second, the rise of elected autocracies in the mid-2010s as *Autocratization* with a deepening process of oligarchization based on the politico-business networks in the formal and informal institutions with their efforts to complete the autocratization. Third, the shaky consolidation of these new autocracies in the late 2010s has deepened the Core-Periphery Divide as an open confrontation of the ECE countries with the EU in the recent period of *De-Europeanization*. However, the ongoing triple global crisis has provoked a creative crisis in the EU history, and its crisis management has produced a basic change in the EU. This new turn in the EU has given a good platform also for the *new systemic change* in ECE going through the “hell” of autocratization to the sustainable democracies in the 2020s.³

In this regional framework, this paper indicates out that Hungary has been the classical or model case of this controversial transformation process, although the other ECE countries might have performed “better” in the autocratization in some special fields. The Orbán regime has completed the state capture in these three periods, and it has performed the political capture of all social fields in several steps as a “stealthy putsch”, so the Hungarian case offers itself as the worst-case scenario for the deeper analysis of the autocratization. Altogether, this paper tries to provide the concept on the comparative autocratization in the Eastern periphery of the EU, as a turn to *zombie democracy*. This concept of

² This is the first part of a longer paper, the second part on Hungary will be published later. The theory of the third-generation autocracy has been elaborated in the V-Dem Institute (2021), but its historical itinerary has not been described in it consecutive stages so far. Therefore, to discover the ECE historical itinerary this paper has elaborated a periodization of the autocratization based on the European Studies about the ECE region. In overviewing the ECE literature I refer above all to the books and papers written by the ECE scholars on this process as a regional self-test, by also offering a wider view from the international scholarship. I have published extensively on the ECE autocratization in general, and on the Hungarian case in particular, see my recent books (Ágh 2019a, 2021) and papers (Ágh 2016, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b).

³ From the recent “decline of democracy” literature, see for instance Bayer and Wanat (2021), CoE (2020a, 2021b), Coman and Volintiru (2021), Ghodsee and Orenstein (2021), Higgins (2021), Kochenov and Dimitrovs (2021), Lovéc et al. (2021), Maurice (2021), Sabatini and Berg (2021). This literature of library size has been presented and discussed in my above-mentioned publications.

autocratization gives the hope of provoking a discussion on this topic. Finally, this reconceptualization leads to the conclusion about the radical reforms of the EU in the management of the triple global crisis, which not only offers, but in fact necessitates the *redemocratization* in ECE.

2 THE COMMON ECE ITINERARY LEADING TO THE ELECTED AUTOCRACIES IN THE 2010S

The twin project of the Europeanization and Democratization in ECE has advanced in three stages of the *Easy Dream*, *Chaotic Democracy* and *Neoliberal Autocracy* in an increasing drift from the mainstream EU development with the drastically changing popular narratives and scholarly concepts. Briefly, in the first stage, after the collapse of the previous regime there was a euphoria as an *Easy Dream* about the “Return to Europe”, about the rapid and easy catching up process. In the second stage there was an increasing deception in the *Chaotic Democracy*, with a rising popular cognitive dissonance between the general ideas of the EU membership and its concrete policy processes managed by the new elites. After the backsliding of democracy this tension in the third stage has led to the emergence of *Neoliberal Autocracy* as the elected autocracies with the derailment from the mainstream European developments. The imported neoliberalism, resulting in a deepening Centre-Periphery gap between the old and new member states, has generated a dependent development not only in the economic, but in the socio-political system, too. And the long march through “the valley of tears” – in Dahrendorf’s term – the ECE has reached its most painful stage in early 2020s with the failure of the twin goals of Europeanization and Democratization.⁴

In this three-stage ECE development the first one in the nineties – called usually as democratic transition - was conceived in the concept of the path dependence (“geography is destiny”). It appeared in its positive, early version and suggested a quick process in Europeanization and Democratization, both internationally and domestically as the easy dream scenario. This democratic transition was conceived as a quick process managed basically from inside and stimulated from outside, at world system level as part of global democratization, but under the conditions of Europeanization, Domestically, there was an even more optimistic variety of the path dependence with the slogan of “Return to Europe”, since supposedly the Central European countries preserved their European heritage and were diverted from it only by the Soviet empire, therefore they will return to Europe quickly and without any pain. From the EU side the Copenhagen criteria for the accession were cast also in the terms of the positive path dependence, and they were hopelessly mistaken without indicating its lengthy process in some stages, although the danger of the reverse wave mentioned already by Huntington.

This path dependence concept was more and more questioned in the second stage and was given up in the third stage switching to the concept of the world-system initiated changes. Therefore, the discovery of the deep reasons for the ECE divergence from the EU mainstream needs a reconceptualization of democratization/autocratization studies in ECE. In the 2000s there were already

⁴ The criticism of the ECE autocracies has closely related to that of neoliberalism in the joint presentation of neoliberal autocracies see Berman (2021), Cody (2017), Dale and Fabry (2018), Kofas (2021), Lebow (2019), Means and Slater (2019) and Shields (2013).

various theories for the failure of the catching-up process with regular references to the globalization process. Path dependence was still mentioned in the analysis of Europeanization and Democratization, but this time the “alienation” of the ECE region from the EU mainstream seemed to be the cumulated result of its “negative” historical heritage. This concept has proved to be misleading because in fact the failure of catching up has mostly been the product of the special neoliberal way of Europeanization. Thus, in the 2010s there was a process of systematization in the ECE studies with a turn from the path dependence to the world-system-based theorization, parallel with the conceptual change from the democratization to the neoliberal autocratization.

After the conceptual trap of the evolutionary or linear development of democratization within the EU, that has haunted the EU literature for decades, there is a need for the reconceptualization based on the new paradigm of autocratization as the continuous decline of democracy since 2010. This “easy dream scenario” with facilitating role of the EU in the democratic transition was dominant in the nineties despite the increasing difficulties and was resuscitated to some extent by the expectations of the EU membership in the early 2000s. The Western approach was double-faced already in the nineties since there was a clash between the scenarios of the enlightened Westerners like Dahrendorf and the neoliberal prophets like Fukuyama. While Fukuyama preached the inevitable and final victory of liberalism throughout the world, Dahrendorf already pointed out that this was a lengthy process of about sixty years with several – legal-political, economic and social – consecutive changes. The optimistic scenario of the quick evolutionary development suffered from the credibility crisis in the second stage, reaching the opposite conclusion of the ECE scenario in the late 2000s, when the path dependence approach came back with a vengeance from the negative side as the eternal fate of the European periphery. Hence, the collapse of credibility in the short democratic transition and the widespread deception in the systemic change was indeed a relatively quick process due to the cumulated social and human deficit in the first two decades.

For sure, the first theoretical reaction to the decline of democracy in ECE was the return to the good old common-sense about path dependence negatively in the second stage. This was also the typical Western fallacy as the usual polite accusation or tough stigmatization of the ECE citizens for this crisis of democracy. Supposedly, they were still “unmature” for democracy, although allegedly the West did everything to promote democracy in the East. Altogether, there was a strange ambivalence between these two extreme approaches for decades. Officially, in the EU documents the positive external effect of Europeanization has been emphasized, whereas domestically, in the popular mind the negative path dependence in the decline of Democratization has become the dominant approach. This paper endeavours to outline both approaches in a more nuanced way, with their positive and negative sides by supporting the “recombination” approach, meaning the synthesis of the old and new elements into “a social world in which various domains were not integrated coherently” (Stark 1996, 994).

This switch from the positive/optimistic to the negative/pessimistic version of the path dependence approach indicates the radical changes in the world system and the intensive effect of the “running globalization” in ECE. So, it must be emphasized that with the increasing waves of globalization the external influence has played a more and more direct and intensive role as the radical external challenge for all regions, much more in the late 20th century than in the case of the former world-system changes. Therefore, in my view, the two big global

crises – the fiscal crisis from the late 2000s and the triple crisis from the early 2020s – have been the great turning points in the contemporary EU history, and especially in the ECE history. No doubt that the full picture about these global crises for the workings of the EU also needs the discovery of their internal mechanism. In the first case of global crises the failure of the crisis management based on the neoliberal principle produced the crisis of crisis management in the late 2000s generating the autocratization from the early 2010s. In the second case of global crises the management of the triple of global crisis in the early 2020 has led to the fundamental reform of the EU that necessitates the redemocratization in ECE.

Namely, in the second stage of *Chaotic Democracy* the failure of Europeanization after twenty years generated a deep deception, culminating at the outbreak of the global fiscal crisis. The elite deception and the popular dissatisfaction produced the collapse of the Europeanization cum Democratization scenario after the global fiscal crisis that showed the weak resilience of the new member states. It caused a drastic change in the popular narratives, the dominant EU-centric democratization narrative lost its credibility in the 2000s and the traditional nation-centric narrative as a successful political myth of reinventing the past – in a somewhat “modernized” form – became the dominant narrative instead, with many cognitive dissonances in the public opinion. The increasing cognitive dissonance can be explained with the terms of the diffuse and specific support in the Easton concept, in which the *diffuse* refers to the support of the entire political system and the *specific* to that of specific public policies. Based on this conceptual construct, the general-symbolical narrative about the EU has not been shaken in ECE by the failure of the catching-up process due to the long-term tradition of the European identity in ECE, despite its clash with the particular-policy narratives, causing an increasing cognitive dissonance.

Altogether, from the ECE side, the euphoria about the collapse of the Bipolar World System hides away that after the collapse of the Soviet empire the ECE states were in fact in a social and political vacuum, and they were defenceless against the Western “invasion” both in its positive and negative meaning. Therefore, the starting point was, in plain terms, that the West reconquered the East. It was such a benevolent process that disguised the penetration of the Western neoliberal economy switching the East to another dependence, although it was less damaging, and more encouraging and promising. This paper briefly presents the controversial process of the neoliberal economic integration of ECE that has also been essentially a socio-political process of disintegration, as it has been discovered in the recent years during the crisis of the neoliberal universe. Accordingly, due to this discovery of the controversial effect in the Europeanization, there has been a shift from the dominance of the path dependence concept to the global systemic change concept. The first one has put the blame for this EU divergence entirely on the ECE region’s “backwardness” by stigmatising Central Europe, but the second one has recognized that the comparative regional weakness and the late arrival has just given the opportunity for the neoliberal Economic Europe to reconquer the East and to build up a system of dependent, “low-wage-low skill economy”, generating social deficit and socio-political polarization. Altogether, “EU economic integration, together with globalisation, has been allowed to run amok through our societies” (Little 2016, 3).

In the early 2010s, after the failure of management of the global financial crisis, there was a quick change of paradigms in the European Studies. The Western

criticism of the aggressive neoliberalism has become the main trend both globally and regionally. The EU history has been rewritten with its three chief actors in the policy triangle of the Economic, Social and Political Europe. The leading EU-based research institutes – Eurofound and European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) have pointed out that the main reason of the ECE divergence from the EU mainstream has been the dominance of the neoliberal Economic Europe, generating social deficit and provoking autocratization. This “disintegration” of the EU has been discussed and it has been amply theorized since the early 2010s by the big Brussels-based institutes – European Policy Centre (EPC), Centre for European Public Policy (CEPS) and Bruegel – preparing the crisis management of the triple crisis to a great extent. This concept has also been the general background of the new analysis of the ECE developments. In the *third stage of Neoliberal Autocracy* in the ECE development the criticism of the neoliberal economic invasion to the new member states has become the mainstream trend in the ECE theories, first in the West, and much later in the “East”, in the ECE countries themselves,

Consequently, the deeper economic and social reasons of the decline of democracy and the weak competitiveness in ECE have basically been discovered only in the third stage. The workings of the neoliberal Economic Europe have been discovered with the recombinant socio-political system in the global fiscal crisis management. Due to this critical EU approach the deconsolidation became a fashionable term in the 2010s. Namely, this democracy backsliding comes from the economic history of the EU, from its new dependency structure creating deep social and political polarization in ECE. This third stage of ECE development, as the process of reconceptualization from the dominance of path dependence to that of the global changes, will be discussed below in its three short periods based on the internal transformation of the EU through the relationships of Economic, Social and Political Europe, leading to the creative crisis in the early 2020s.

3 THE DIVERGING PERIODS OF ECE FROM THE EU MAINSTREAM IN THE 2010S

In the euphoric days of the accession of ECE countries the convergence was the basic term, but later the divergence between the East and West has become deeper and wider and its recognition in the EU has been hopelessly delayed. Finally, in the turmoil since the early 2010s three periods can be distinguished with the deepening socio-economic and political crisis in ECE that will be discussed as the De-Democratization, Autocratization and De-Europeanization periods. In plain terms, the De-Democratization period was “destructive” or “negative” by ruining the foundations of democracy, the Autocratization period was “constructive” and “positive” by building a new political system, and finally, the De-Europeanization period was “offensive” and “conflict-seeking” representing the interests of this newly emerged autocratic system against the EU. The *first* period was framed by the failed effort for the fiscal crisis management in the EU that was a prolonged process with its peak of the euro-crisis in the early 2010s. The global fiscal crisis was also the first big historical test of the missing crisis resilience in ECE and the end of its “convergence dream” (Darvas 2014). It was also the borderline in democracy studies between the first and second period, between the decline of democracy and the emerging new systemic features of the autocratization. The World Bank issued a warning already in the early 2010s that the “Convergence Machine” in the EU did not work in this period of the deep socio-economic crisis. Accordingly, the warning about

the political reverse wave was indicated clearly also by the ranking institutes - EPC and CEPS -, but in vain. In the early 2010s the critical voices about the new ECE legal-political developments and the missing EU reaction were echoed also by many experts. When analysing the “unhappy EU” in the process of the failed global crisis management, the warning was raised with justification that “if major institutions of liberal democracy in one member state radically deviate from the EU’s member states’ constitutional traditions, and undermine the rule of law, this is an issue that the EU needs to address directly.” (Bugaric 2014, 25). But this EU response did not happen, although the leading EPC experts coined the term and theory about Fragmented Europe and raised the call for the “Re-unite EUrope” (Emmanouilidis 2018).

The ECE decline of democracy as De-Democratization, as the serious case of deviation from the mainstream EU developments was formulated first by the Tavares Report passed by the European Parliament on 3 July 2013 with a large majority. This Report was the first important EU document on the decline of democracy in ECE. The Tavares Report asked for organizing a “Copenhagen Commission” in the Hungarian case, but it was set in an all-European context because the Report requested “the establishment of a new mechanism to ensure compliance by all Member States with the common values enshrined in Article 2 TEU” (Tavares 2013, 15). As a summary of the first period, The Economist’s *Democracy Index 2014* already noted that “Democracy has also been eroded across east-central Europe. (...) although formal democracy in place in the region, much of the substance of democracy, including political culture based on trust, is absent.” (EIU 2015, 22). Still, the beginning democracy capture by the emerging autocratic elites in ECE was completely neglected by the EU, and in fact no official action was made.

The first period of democratization literature described the ECE diversion only on its surface, without discussing its deeper reasons, just asking what was missing in ECE from “Europe”. This was the first step to overcome the Western fallacy about the “automatism” of civil society, as Gellner (1996, 10) warned about it: “Civil Society is simply presupposed as inherent attribute of human condition.”, and Innes (2014, 90) pointed out that this mature civil society was simply not yet existing in ECE. This step of investigation in ECE was necessary to overview the basic features of divergence between the legal-political and social-cultural matters. The process of emptying the ECE democracy was discussed for instance by the Rupnik-Zielonka (2013) paper. Basically, for explaining the reasons of “democratic regression”, Rupnik and Zielonka put the contrast of formal and informal institutions at the centre of their analysis. They offered fresh approach to the history of democratization by focusing on the contradiction that the big formal-legal constitutional institutions were not supported by the “positive” informal institutions of the mature civil society. Just to the contrary, the “negative” informal institutions, the comprehensive system of “closed party patronage” undermined the big formal institutions and created a lack of transparency in the workings of the political system. Hence, these non-transparent clientele or corruption networks between politics and economy were responsible for the declining democracy.⁵

⁵ The colonization of civil society may take several forms (see Amnesty International 2015), therefore there has been a large academic literature about “uncivil society” and/or “bad civil society”. This paper refers to the “negative” corrupt clientele networks that have dominated over the “positive”, democracy-supporting informal institutions in NMS.

Rupnik and Zielonka considered that so far, the “political scientists have devoted considerable attention to the study of formal institutions in the region such as parties, parliaments and courts. However, informal institutions and practices appear to be equally important in shaping and in some cases eroding democracy, and we know little about them.” (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013, 3). They pointed out the weaknesses of the former assessments by referring to the simple fact that the political debates across the ECE region missed “the role of informal politics in undermining formal laws and institutions”, although the formal democratic institutions “perform differently in different political cultures because of informal codes and habits” (ibid., 12). This new approach in the criticism of the democratization literature in the last two decades opened a new field of analysis by continuing the “recombination” approach and pointing out the false combination of the new big formal institutions based on the EU constitutionalism and the old informal institutions based on the traditional patterns of the political culture: “Over years, students of Central and Eastern Europe have acquired a comprehensive set of data on formal laws and institutions, but their knowledge of informal rules, arrangements, and networks is rudimentary at best.” In such a way, the reason for backsliding of democracy in their view was that the “informal practices and structures are particularly potent of Central and Eastern Europe because of the relative weakness of formal practices. Informal practices and networks gain importance when the state is weak, political institutions are undeveloped, and the law is full of loopholes and contradictions.” This discussion of the negative informal institutions indicated already the oligarchization as the hard core of autocratization. All in all, they concluded that “cultural anthropologists are probably more suited than political scientists to study social networks.” (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013, 13–14).

In the *second* period, in the mid-2010s the reasons for the democracy crisis were analysed more systematically by pointing towards the emerging system of Autocratization. For instance, Ramona Coman and Luca Tomini specially investigated the development of scholarship on ECE in a Special Issue of *Europe-Asia Studies* and they concluded that the most important issue was “How can we explain the democratic crises in the new member states” (2014, 855). Based on the general trend of democracy decline, they noted that “the Orbán government in Hungary has attracted the attention of the other European countries and the European Union because of the authoritarian and majoritarian concept of democracy” that was accompanied by a “systemic destruction of checks and balances in the government” (Tomini 2014, 859). This systemic analysis already exposed the process of oligarchization behind the changes of the informal institutions, thus the emergence of oligarchs was in the focus of the emerging autocratization literature in the second period. The ECE literature described the decline of democracy in the conceptual framework of politico-business networks, in general as the historical trajectory from corruption to state capture. When the social policy-based redistribution was replaced systematically with the political elite-based redistribution, this state capture turned to be a “democracy capture” by the ruling elite, since the informal clientele or corruption networks of oligarchs produced a new kind of political system, often called façade democracy. The big formal institutions proved to be “Sand Castles” built on the moving sand, or they were transformed to a mere façade, reducing this new political system to some kind of Potemkin democracy without any transparency. The system of checks and balances was already paralysed, hence finally the ECE countries ceased to be real democracies. It was realized that the corruption in ECE was not marginal phenomenon, but it was the very essence of the kleptocracy system in

the “normal” workings of the Potemkin or facade democracy. This system of power was based *de facto* on the joint politico-business groups with a tight fusion between economy and politics. The social clientele networks formed the subordination pyramid for mutual support and protection in exchange for certain privileges. In sum, the second period in the ECE historical trajectory generated the common systemic deviation in the East from the West with blatant violations of EU values in the Autocratization period.

It was a quagmire of the original scenario for Europeanization and Democratization that finally, in the *third* period turned to *De-Europeanization* with an open conflict with the EU in the deepening Core-Periphery Divide. The ECE political system was usually called politely hybrid democracy, although the term of democracy was used less and less for the ECE states during the 2010s, and in the late 2010s the V-Dem experts introduced the term of “the third-generation autocracies” – mostly but not exclusively - for the ECE polities. Paradoxically, in the last years East and West have moved in the opposite direction about the neoliberalism. After the failed crisis management in the early 2010s the mainstream EU turned more and more to the criticism of the neoliberal Economic Europe, and it has resulted in its partial overcoming in the West when the triple global crisis management has begun. Just to the contrary, its building up continued in ECE states that were further weakened by the new global crisis. By the late 2010s the new polity of the neoliberal autocracy emerged in ECE, since the politico-business elite developed a peripheral neoliberal economy with an autocratic political system. It was based on the “unholy alliance” of the multinationals with their “low-wage and low-skill economy” representing the dependency structure and the local autocratic comprador politico-business elite that received protection from the multinationals pressuring their governance to accept the serious violations of EU rules and values in the new autocracies. This unholy alliance has only been disturbed by the triple global crisis and it may be broken by it, as this paper tries to argue in the Conclusion.

Thus, in the *third*, recent period the divergence between the EU mainstream and the ECE region has widened even more, altogether, it has been a clear case of *De-Europeanization*. The special new polity, the neoliberal autocracy has made serious efforts for its consolidation. This situation has triggered an increasing confrontation between the EU mainstream and ECE. The most marked feature of the third period is that these elected autocracies have been in the *open conflict* with the EU after the passing the Sargentini Report (EP 2018). In the international arena the autocratic regimes and their ruling parties tried to organize themselves in the alliance of extreme right parties during the EP elections in 2019, and afterwards within the EU as a forming a new faction in the EP. In the famous “Eastern opening” to the other autocratic regimes outside the EU from China through Russia to Turkey, they have generated serious conflicts within the EU in its global politics. This Core-Periphery Divide has not yet reached the breaking point but sharpened to that extent that after thirty years of benevolent neglect the EU must deal with the ECE crisis, since this deepening tension has become an obstacle for the development of the entire EU.⁶

⁶ The closest parallel process of the Hungarian autocratization has been in Poland, where the main difference is that there has been no parliamentary supermajority to complete the state capture. However, the widespread dissatisfaction with the post-communist transition was felt already in the early 2010s, see e. g. Shields (2013), and Poland was an eminent case of the autocratization since then in the international literature, reinforced by the so-called “legal” Polexit.

4 THE TRIPLE CRISIS AS A CHALLENGE FOR REDEMOCRATIZATION IN ECE

Nowadays, the classical statement of Monnet that “Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises.” (Monnet 1976) has been quite often mentioned. In this spirit of Monnet, the triple global crisis has been a creative crisis since it will bring the solution for the deep EU conflicts. The triple – socio-economic, ecological and pandemic – global crisis has induced radical changes in all the three interdependent dimensions of this complex crisis. However, so far just these new achievements have generated a deeper tension in the EU between the Core and Periphery. Originally, the establishment of the neoliberal dependency system in the new member states has been the systemic failure of the EU that by now has turned into the systemic threat to the EU, since the ECE countries are on the wrong side as an obstacle to the completion of this crisis management. The ongoing reorganization of the EU at the higher level of integration/federalization has led to a fateful confrontation between the Core and Periphery, in which even the alternative has emerged that some new member states must redemocratize or leave the EU. The project of “Re-unite EUrope” has been on the agenda since the early 2010s and by now this process has become unavoidable.⁷

The year of 2020 was a crucial phase in the EU, since the basic decisions were made in the triple crisis management. The early 2020s will still be a turbulent time for the EU to accomplish the “recovery” and to reform its decision-making institutions for the better governance to accomplish its new strategy. The EU must introduce the majority principle in the high-level decision-making and to give more space for the European Parliament and less for the Council. Among many other factors, the next elections – first in Germany and France – will be very important for the future of the EU in elaborating the long-term strategy and forwarding its implementation. But this is not enough. The biggest task ahead of the EU is the *citizenization*, extending the social rights of citizens as “social citizenship” in order being able to behave as true citizens. Namely, social citizenship involves two main dimensions in their strong synergies. First, *participatory democracy* as the citizens’ participation in all steps of the policy-making process of initiation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation, for the substantial/sustainable democracy and full transparency in the political life. Second, this must be accompanied – in the favourite term of Eurofound – with the “*upward convergence*” of the EU citizens, based on human and social investment, which has been rightly the most advertised goal of the Next Generation EU.⁸

⁷ Obviously, after the German elections on 26 September 2021 there will be a general assessment of the “Merkel epoch” in Germany and in the EU. So far it has been pointed out – as for instance Greubel and Pornschleger (2021, 2) argued – that Merkel had a good skill for the crisis management, but she had also a lack of strategic vision for the EU, that has been critical in the recent crisis management: “While crisis management is an important skill, Germany’s actions throughout Europe’s crisis decade was not embedded in a broader strategy. German EU policy is mostly defined as ‘muddling through’ the crises. In some cases, such as the euro crisis or authoritarian regression in Hungary and Poland, Merkel’s tactic of patience even deteriorated the situation. ... It was only with the COVID-19 recovery plan that the Franco-German engine seemed back on track.” All in all, the German politics observers have usually noted that Merkel will be remembered as a calm and rational crisis manager, a shrewd political tactician, and a natural consensus builder, who in the last years has lacked a bold vision for Germany and the EU.

⁸ There has been a long story preparing the role and responsibility of EU as the provider of social citizenship that has been culminating in the Porto Social Summit on 7-8 May 2021 (Council 2021).

The ECE autocracies are still going into the opposite direction. The current *State of the Union* public opinion survey in September 2021 shows this controversial situation quite clearly, both the diverging road between the EU democratic mainstream and the ECE autocracies on one side and the increasing tension within the ECE autocracies between the ruling elite and the population. The “*State of the ECE countries*” is that all ECE countries have developed their own “homegrown” disease, although to some extent they have also been “infected” in this ECE pandemic by the Hungarian – and/or by the Polish - disease of the more advanced aggressive autocracy. However, the mass dissatisfaction of the ECE population with their autocratic regimes opens the window of opportunity with a large popular drive for redemocratization.

The ECE societies are basically striving to the participatory democracy based on human investment, to reach the status of social citizenship. From Warsaw via Prague, Bratislava and Budapest to Ljubljana there is an increasing pressure of the citizens to return to the mainstream EU democratic developments. In general, as this *State of the Union* survey reports, the EU has a positive image among the ECE citizens, at least around the EU average. Moreover, this positive attitude is much more marked in concrete public policies, usually well above the EU average. Namely *first*, the ECE citizens are more satisfied with the EU solidarity in the pandemic than the EU average, *second*, their large majority – above 70 per cent – agrees that “the EU should only provide funds to Member States conditional upon their government’s implementation of the Rule of Law and democratic principles”, *third*, more than 80 per cent of the ECE citizens think that “there must be transparency and effective control on how the ‘NextGenerationEU’ funds are spent”, and finally, *fourth*, just about one-third of the ECE population have the opinion that “my government can be trusted to use the ‘NextGenerationEU’ funds properly” (EP 2021c, 7–8, 21–22, 33–34, 51–52). The picture is clear, there is a widening/deepening gap between the ECE autocratic regimes and the ECE populations in the most salient questions. Therefore, the rule of law debate in the EU between the EU institutions and the ECE autocratic regimes is not marginal or legalistic, but it is vital and essential, in which the EU institutions – first the EP – represent the genuine interests of the ECE citizens in their efforts for redemocratization.⁹

The birth pangs of the “Re-unite Europe” strategy could have also been felt in the State of the Union speech of Leyen in the EP on 15 September 2021. Following the tradition of the Commission’s the conciliatory approach as the usual conceptual frame, the drastic rule of law violations in the ECE countries have been marginalized. This issue has only been briefly discussed at the end of this official Report. Leyen has argued that the “dialogue” comes first, and it should lead to the “result”. The tragedy is that the EU institutions have dealt with the “dialogue” about the rule of law violations – or the divergence of the new member states from the EU mainstream development – already in ten years, at least since the Tavares Report in 2013, but without any “result”. Leyen has formulated the Commission’s approach in the usual vague terms: “This is why we take a dual approach of dialogue *and* decisive action. This is what we did last week. And this

⁹ At the same time there has been a growing dissatisfaction among the ECE citizens with the marginalization of, and inaction in, the ECE crisis management in the EU decision-making bodies. As for instance Bánkuty-Balogh (2021, 181) has recently pointed out in an overview of media that the criticism of the “two-speed Europe” has recently been growing substantially in the V4 populations. Obviously, the ECE citizens know that they must cope with their own autocratic and corrupt elite, but they expect more active behaviour from the EU, too.

is what we will continue to do. Because people must be able to rely on the right to an independent judiciary. The right to be treated equally before the law. Everywhere in Europe. Whether you belong to a majority or a minority.” (EC 2021c, 11).

In the management of the triple crisis there has been an increase of criticism of the Merkel’s conciliatory approach toward the “friendly” autocracies in Hungary and Poland (see e. g. Kluth 2020, 2021a,b). It has been reaching its peak in the evaluation of the Leyen Commission since it has been following the Merkel’s conflict-avoiding policy. This approach has especially been very critical in EPC, above all by Riekeles analysis (2021a), representing the view of EPC, and finally in his outright criticism of Leyen’s State of Union speech (2021b). Many other reactions have also been very negative about this annual Report, for instance Rodrigues (2021, 2), since in her opinion “the President was shy about the main issue. For the new phase of its project, Europe needs to make a democratic transformation of the way its democracy works at various levels. Firstly, in the light of the current authoritarian drifts, to ensure that the fundamentals of the rule of law are respected throughout its territory.” Altogether, this “dialogue” has reached the critical point, since although the Commission has rejected the Hungarian application for the “recovery” resources, but without a detailed, well-argued and public condemnation of the destruction of democracy in Hungary with the long series of the deep rule of law violations. It applies also to Poland, and to some extent to all ECE countries. Indeed, the conciliatory approach only aggravates the problem with a vague reference in the speech to “some member states” and to the “age old” dialogue. In the present situation of this “age old” dialogue, the Commission has not been ready to start an open discussion about the rule of law violations in those “some member states” as it has been demanded from the EP. The tension between the two institutions has been so high that the EP has threatened the Commission, if further avoiding this direct confrontation with the ECE autocracies, to take this key issue to the European Court of Justice.¹⁰

This acute conflict between the basic EU institutions reveals that the rule of law violations in the ECE countries, first in Hungary and Poland are not marginal, but vital for the strategy of “Re-unite EUrope” and for the prosperous Next Generation EU recovery program. Although this debate will be continued for some time, but the necessity of the restructuration in the EU through its decision-making mechanism and for the recovery plan will soon prevail. As to the new member states, the first historical test was at their entry, and the second historical test for them is nowadays to take the opportunity offered by the management of the triple global crisis for the “re-entry” to the EU through their serious redemocratization.

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¹⁰ See the bumpy road leading to this speech with deepening conflict between the Commission and the EP in EC (2020, 2021a, 2021b) and in EP (2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), also in EUCO (2021) or the current report on the ECE autocracies (EIU 2021).

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TRETJI VAL AVTOKRATIZACIJE V VZHODNI IN SREDNJI EVROPI

Vzhodno-srednjeevropske države so od začetka 2010-ih let razvile »tretjo generacijo avtokracije«. Te avtokracije so uvedli z »ujetjem demokracije« in z velikim odklonom od glavnine EU. V primerjavi s prejšnjimi tradicionalnimi tipi avtokracije je tretja generacija avtokracije ustvarila radikalne inovacije z vzporednim razvojem formalno demokratičnih in neformalno avtokratskih oblik pri izgradnji institucij. Ustvarili so demokratično fasado formalno-ustavnih

institucij in si močno prizadevali za drastičen nadzor nad neformalnimi institucijami, v medijih, kulturi in komuniciranju. Ta članek obravnava tri stopnje avtokratizacije v zadnjih tridesetih letih v Vzhodni in Srednji Evropi in se osredotoča na najnovejšo stopnjo v treh krajših obdobjih iz zgodnjih 2010-ih let.

Ključne besede: kaotična demokracija; neoliberalna avtokracija; dedemokratizacija; avtokratizacija; deevropeizacija.