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Declining Democracy, a Case of Democratic Backsliding or Careening?

A Comparative Case Study of the Visegrád Four: Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and
Slovakia

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Abstract

Trends show a decline in democracy in the CEE region which has mostly been analyzed through the democratic backsliding paradigm. However, recent scholars have proposed another perspective for this trend, the careening paradigm. This paper examines the contemporary democratic development from 2018 to 2023 in the Visegrád Four to explain which theoretical perspective is the most suitable to describe democratic change in this region. It aims at answering this research question: *What theoretical perspective is more suitable to describe contemporary development in CEE? Democratic backsliding or democratic careening?* The analysis showed that the backsliding paradigm was the most suitable to explain the development in Hungary. The development in Poland also seemed to be most suitable to explain through backsliding, however, the electoral win of Donald Tusk (2023) might indicate signs of careening. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, contemporary development proved to be most suitable with the careening perspective. The findings from this thesis contribute to the existing body of knowledge in CEE development and suggest that there might be something new going on in the region, as opposed to the more frequently used perspective of backsliding.

Keywords: Democratic decline, Visegrád Four, democratic backsliding, democratic careening

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Central Eastern Europe (CEE) has been in a democratization process that has widely been perceived as successful. Scholars of the region's democratization process believed a "democratic reversal" would be unthinkable in CEE democracies (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 244). However, over the past decade, a new scholarly consensus has emerged that the democratic development in CEE is deteriorating, a trend often labeled "democratic backsliding" (Wolkenstein, 2022, p. 1).

In recent years, scholars have suggested that there is a need to reexamine and revise the research on democratization processes in the CEE region (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 66). The backsliding paradigm captures the "erosion" or "reversal" of democracy, yet this perspective has in some cases been questioned when applied to countries that experience unstable democratic development (Vachudova, 2020, p. 328). In contrast to backsliding, the concept of democratic careening has been proposed as an alternative to provide a new perspective on democratic development in CEE. Careening suggests that democratic change is more complex than linear progress along a continuum from democracy to autocracy (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 67).

A study from Cianetti & Hanley suggests that there is something new going on in the CEE region and recent developments could suggest a different development than the backsliding framework. For example, after nearly a decade in power, Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) fell short of a new mandate in 2023 (Council on Foreign Affairs, 2023). In the Czech Republic, ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) was defeated by the opposing coalition (Bube & Kouba, 2023, p. 113) whilst Robert Fico returned to power with the Social Democrat party Smer-SD (b. Politico, 2023).

This thesis will examine contemporary CEE development between 2018 and 2023 by conducting a comparative case study of the Visegrád Four (V4); Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Through revising prior empirical research the thesis will build upon this to explore which theoretical perspective is the most suitable for describing the current development in CEE. The thesis seeks to answer the following research question: *What theoretical perspective is more suitable to describe contemporary development in CEE? Democratic backsliding or democratic careening?*

Firstly, the literature review provides a basis for the theoretical frameworks of backsliding and careening in a V4 context. The theory is hence the basis for the analysis which is conducted through a comparative research design. The thesis's findings suggested that a different approach to research on democratic development in CEE is applicable.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The thesis will use the term *CEE* to refer to post-Soviet countries which today are members of the European Union (EU). These countries underwent a democratization process in the late 1990s and early 2000s, mainly as a result of EU accession, and were thereafter considered to be successful and consolidated democracies (Gati, 2007, p. 107). The term CEE is consistent with prior work, but the thesis will specifically focus on Central European countries, namely Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia – a political entity, since 1991, that goes under the name of the Visegrád Four (European Council, 2016).

The V4 has to a large extent been the focus of backsliding research, especially Hungary and Poland (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 243). By examining the V4, a group of “backsliders”, the thesis can expand upon prior research and by default set up a fair test for the careening paradigm. If there is something new going on in the region, as suggested by Cianetti & Hanley, it would be found in one of these countries.

By revising prior research and analyzing current developments in CEE the thesis will contribute to existing and future scholarly research within this field. The timeframe for the analysis will be between 2018 and 2023 as it serves as an appropriate point in time to extend upon previous research.

From a broader perspective, regional trends in CEE have shown a deterioration of democracy. Democratic decline and change in democracies are consequential for political and social life. The emergence of sophisticated autocratic strategies within democracies that oppose the values of “liberal” democracy and political rights is a cause for concern and should not go unnoticed. Democracy can never be taken for granted and deteriorating signs of progress need to be taken seriously (Levitsky & Way, 2020 p. 63).

2. Literature Review

Below, prior research of each theory will be presented to build a foundation for the theoretical framework and the analysis. The literature review is split into four parts. Firstly, a discussion of the thesis's understanding of democracy. Secondly, the concepts of backsliding and careening will be reviewed. Thereafter, case details of the V4 will be presented with similarities and differences.

2.1 Conceptual Understanding of Democracy

Democratic backsliding and careening are related to the concept of democracy. Hence, it is important to conceptualize democracy before explaining the theoretical perspectives. Minimal explanations of democracy focus on elections, while broader approaches include socioeconomic and cultural aspects (Lust & Waldner, 2015, p. 4). A general theme in the reviewed literature is the use of Robert Dahl's (1971) notion of *polyarchy* and his minimum criteria for democracy (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1096; Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 107).

The core features of democracy are participation, liberties, and accountability (Slater, 2022, p. 90). Democracies should hold free and fair elections, institutional guarantees such as universal suffrage, freedom of association and expression, and alternative sources of information (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2017, p. 1101). Institutions and voting are essential mechanisms, but their quality is dependent on the political regime and political struggles of society (Taylor, 2019, p. 276). The definition is more comprehensive than a minimal one, but less extensive than a pluralist approach where socioeconomic and cultural aspects are included. However, there is a widespread acceptance among scholars to use Dahl's conceptualization as a basis for democracy which contributes to the credibility of his definition (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2017; Przeworski et al., 1996; Bernhard et al., 2001).

Regarding backsliding, when it occurs, it is suggested that the country is moving away from democracy. A definition of democracy is thus needed to understand what a decline in democracy considers to be and it will decide the indicators of backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 97). On the other hand, careening aims to explain dynamic fluctuations of change between different political modes which can vary in the extent of democracy. It is not

necessarily about establishing whether or not a country is democratic per se, instead describing how a democracy shifts between different episodes of higher democratic quality or lower quality (Slater, 2013, p. 740).

2.2 The Concept of Democratic Backsliding

The decline in the quality of democracy, a trend often named “democratic backsliding”, has resulted in extensive literature (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 243). Scholarly interest in backsliding originates from democratization studies and the fear of reversing that progress (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 67). However, factors contributing to democratization do not have to be dependent on causing backsliding. Democratization concentrates on the process toward democracy, meanwhile, backsliding focuses the process *away* from democracy (Heidenberg, 2017, p. 10).

The process away from democracy has also been termed autocratization – the opposite of democratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2017, p. 1098). While backsliding and autocratization sometimes are used interchangeably, backsliding involves the regression of democratic qualities without necessarily leading to a complete shift to autocracy. Backsliding refers to a gradual process of democratic deterioration where the outcome will be democratic breakdown or “the serious weakening of existing democratic institutions for undefined ends”. This usually involves the implementation of autocratic policies or strategies, and could potentially lead to autocratization, but in this case, backsliding and autocratization are not used interchangeably (Bermeo, 2016, p. 6). In a backsliding process, Bermeo highlights that once autocratic policies have been integrated into a political system it is hard to achieve democratic change (Ibid, p. 6).

Within democratic regimes, backsliding is understood as a decline in the *quality* of democracy (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 95). Cianetti & Hanley explain democratic backsliding as a linear process that leads to the dismantling of democratic institutions and safeguards by elected politicians. The process of backsliding is not defined by a single incident, instead, it is a gradual development where executives disrupt institutional checks and balances which ultimately degrades political competition and democratic pluralism (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 66).

Bermeo's research findings suggest that a common way of backsliding occurs through *executive aggrandizement* (Bermeo, 2016, p. 11). This refers to an increase in the concentration of political power in the *executive* (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 168). It has become the more frequently used form of backsliding in contrast to the classic *coups d'état*, election fraud, and executive coups by elected leaders (Bermeo, 2016, pp. 6 & 10).

Backsliding as a concept has been criticized for having a binary approach. Vachudova claims that a linear trend suggests that the progress within a country is leading toward either democracy or autocratization. The binary approach might provide conceptual clarity but has been criticized for not being necessarily truthful to reality (Vachudova, 2020, p. 328).

The concept has been used in multiple contexts to describe the path of democratic degradation which has been the case in some instances, for example, Hungary and Poland. (Lust & Waldner, 2015, p. 3; Vachudova, 2020, p. 318). Bermeo also highlights the concept's potential extensiveness since it involves many different actors and processes (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5). Waldner & Lust also argue that much of the previous literature describes paths to backsliding which are relevant but they lack in providing testable hypotheses specific to explaining backsliding within democratic regimes (Ibid, p. 109).

To sum up, the debate surrounding backsliding is to some extent indecisive and there are large conceptual difficulties for the concept to have practical meaning (Bermeo, 2016, p. 6). It is thus essential to have a clear definition and to decide its indicators and measurements for the concept to have meaning. The literature reviewed in this chapter lays the foundation for the definition of backsliding for this thesis which will be further discussed in the theoretical framework.

2.3 The Concept of Democratic Careening

This chapter will discuss the concept of democratic careening and why it has received scholarly attention as an alternative perspective on the deteriorating democratic development in recent years (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 243). Democratic careening is largely referenced and based on Slater's work in 2013 (see Waldner & Lust, 2018; Cianetti et al., 2018; Cianetti &

Hanley, 2021). Although the focus is on non-European countries, for example, Asia and America (Slater, 2013; Slater, 2022) his framework has been applied in a European context by Cianetti & Hanley (2021).

Slater researches democratic development after the “third wave of democratization” and finds that most developing democracies are not consolidating (Slater, 2013, pp. 729–730). Instead, democracies are swaying back and forth in a non-linear and volatile movement. He thus proposes the term “careening” to describe this sort of “swaying back and forth from side to side” (Ibid, p. 730). Slater argues that scholars should be more concerned with theorizing how and why democracies *careen* rather than what conditions make democracies more or less likely to collapse or consolidate (Ibid, pp. 736–737).

Within the discussion of democratic development, Cianetti, Dawson & Hanley, suggest that it is rather “the complex, the uncountable, the non-linear, the multi-causal and the long-term that must come to the fore” (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 253). Cianetti & Hanley argue that the backsliding paradigm is “counterproductive” when democratic change is reduced to a linear path of development. This might be misleading when analyzing countries that experience instability but are not becoming less democratic (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 66). Similarly, Vachudova suggests analyzing democratic decline through a non-linear approach rather than a continuum between democracy and autocracy (Vachudova, 2020, p. 328). Hence, careening aims to capture the non-linear progress of democratic change and provide a different perspective on democratic development (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 67).

A “non-linear approach” can be difficult to conceptualize. In the previous research, several concepts are being used to describe this. A conflicting example is Bustikova and Guasti’s research of the Visegrád Group. Democratic decline is explained by “illiberal swerves” and “illiberal turns” (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 167). Cianetti & Hanley have used “swerve” in a careening context to describe how democracies fluctuate (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 73). But the notion of “illiberal turns” refers more to backsliding since it signifies continued changes in an undemocratic direction. Thus, it is important to conceptualize careening and distinguish it from backsliding.

What is democratic careening? The concept is used to describe the idea of fluctuating democracies that experience political instability. It captures the idea that democracies are not

on a path that necessarily has to be linear toward consolidating democracy or autocratization but instead experience tension between opposing groups within the same society (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 75). Cianetti & Hanley present the idea of two groups that have opposing interests, for example, “authoritarian-minded liberals” and “pro-democracy” forces within a regime. Democratic careening is characterized by unsettled, changeable episodes of polarized mobilization and countermobilization which express the idea of movement that is not unidirectional (democratizing or backsliding) (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 73). Thus, the political mode within a regime can shift between more populist, democratic, or autocratic modes (Slater, 2013, p. 731). The aim is to show that democracies can take different paths that do not fit the mold of the traditional democratic *or* authoritarian categories (Ibid, p. 732). The different modes of politics are characterized by different ideas of how to implement democratic accountability where one group argues for inclusivity versus the other group which prefers constraints against unaccountable executive power (Ibid, 731).

Bustikova & Guasti and Cianetti & Hanley agree with looking beyond the traditional mold of democratic *or* authoritarian. Cianetti & Hanley further explain that, for example, populist victories are not “entry points” to backsliding, and populist setbacks are not a sign of consolidation. Instead, they argue that “rather than marking the lead-in to a new and different political game, this struggle between opposing democratic claims *is* the game” (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 74). To sum up, the framework of careening encompasses non-linear progress (Slater, 2013, p. 730). It is not as frequently used as backsliding, even so, it is often used by scholars when examining democratic development from different perspectives (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 167).

2.4 Case Details of the Visegrad Four

The V4 was established as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union (European Council, 2016). The countries joined NATO and the EU together and share a similar political and economic history, but the extent of democratic decay in each country has varied (Kowalska et al., 2018, p. 4).

Hungary

Hungary was perceived to be a consolidated democracy with a strong civil society, competitive multiparty system, and free media. Between 1990 and 2010, Hungary experienced political instability with opposition parties taking turns at being elected. Viktor Orbán and the right-wing populist and national-conservative party Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Alliance) came to power in 2010 and skillfully began to polarize Hungarian politics (Levitsky & Way, 2020, p. 60). Until 2018, Orbán has dismantled liberal checks and balances, skewed the playing field in his favor, and attacked independent agencies. Oppositional forces are portrayed as “enemies of the state” (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 244). Still, Fidesz has had substantial popular support which leads scholars to believe that the trend is hard to reverse (Ibid, p. 245).

Poland

The development in Poland has followed a similar path as Hungary. For example, Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński has attempted to replicate Orbán’s strategies to gain increased executive power (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 244). The conservative and nationalist PiS gained power in 2015 with an absolute majority in parliament thus replacing the liberal and pro-EU regime of Donald Tusk (2007–2014) (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 166). PiS has aimed to dismantle democratic checks and balances in Poland by undermining the rule of law, and election commission and by seizing control of media outlets (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, p. 41). Civil society has reacted to the government’s practices. For instance in 2017, when a man set himself on fire in Warsaw to protest the dismantling of democracy in Poland (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 166).

The Czech Republic

After the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 (Elden, 2019, p. 220), the country created a stable democracy, a vibrant civil society, and a functioning multiparty system. Since then more nationalist and populist influences have grown popular in the political system. For example, The Civic Democratic Party (ODS) led two governments from 2006 to 2013 (Pehe, 2018, p. 65). Massive corruption affected the country which paved the way for opposition parties who promised to fight corruption. One of these was ANO, created by billionaire Andrej Babiš. ANO won a landslide victory in 2017 and Babiš envisions a political system with technocratic features where executive power is centralized (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p.

169). Together with the pro-Russian President Miloš Zeman, the two have cooperated to keep ANO in government without parliamentary support. Even so, checks and balances have remained stable up until 2018 (Pehe, 2018, p. 66).

Slovakia

After the split of Czechoslovakia the country developed into an authoritarian state during the rule of Vladimir Mečiar (1994–1998) and his populist party, Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). After 1998, EU pressure facilitated democratization by strengthening the opposition and undermining his abuse of power (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 91). By 2008 Slovakia was considered to have democratized through Western assistance and EU leverage (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 128). The populist Smer-SD led by Robert Fico has ties to HZDS and has headed the government three times: from 2006 to 2010 and again since 2016, and as the single governing party from 2012 to 2016 (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová, 2018, p. 82). The autocratic tendencies of this regime have led to a drift away from democracy, but Slovakia's institutional checks and balances remained intact. Up until 2018 the multiparty system was characterized by political polarization and electoral shifts (Ibid, p. 83).

3. Theoretical Framework

Democratic backsliding and careening are defined below. In the research design, a template is presented to summarize the analytical framework which the theories are the basis for.

3.1 Democratic Backsliding in a V4 Context

The literature showed that backsliding is frequently used to explain democratic decline. The developments in Hungary and Poland have been used as a template for understanding political change in other European countries, for example, the Czech Republic (Vachudova & Hanley, 2018, p. 289). Prior research observed patterns in Hungary and Poland of Bermeo's concept of executive aggrandizement and will be the basis for how backsliding occurs (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 70).

The backsliding paradigm can be defined according to Lust & Waldner: "changes aimed at negatively affecting competitive elections, accountability, and liberties" (Lust & Waldner, 2015, p. 4). It occurs through executive aggrandizement which is a strategy that takes place through elected constitutional assemblies, existing legislation, and by gaining majority control of institutional bodies. It subdues the power of the opposition to challenge the executives in power (Bermeo, 2016, p. 10). Manipulating elections is often joined with executive aggrandizement for regimes to stay in power (Bermeo, 2016, p. 13). Backsliding has changed since the Cold War (Ibid, p. 6) and today it is rather about autocratic and populist actors who have proceeded through legal means and with more sophisticated and discrete ways to gradually change institutions and policies (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2017, p. 1108). Backsliding is illustrated as a gradual linear progress of regime change that is moving away from democracy (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 96). This definition along with executive aggrandizement relates to the understanding of democracy where the outcome weakens the core features of democracy, thus weakening the quality of democracy.

3.2 Democratic Careening in a V4 Context

Democratic careening is a complex concept and can include various ideas. For this thesis, the main idea that will be lifted is based on Slater and Cianetti & Hanley who put it in a CEE context. By analyzing how careening explains the development in V4 it can provide a nuanced perspective on (un)democratic change (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 69).

Democratic careening in this context is defined as a form of political instability that aims to explain how democratic development is based on fluctuating dynamics within a regime that does not necessarily fit into the traditional categories of democracy or autocracy. Instead, development is characterized by dynamic and unsettled episodes of different political modes (Slater, 2013, p. 732). The main idea that the countries will be analyzed based on is that political instability is caused by a dynamic struggle between opposing democratic claims. Both sides have democratic validity in their ideal perception of democracy but neither of them has the weight to enforce stable changes according to their democratic ideals. In a V4 context, this is played out by, on one side, a “populist” claim to channel a democratic majority, typically one including previously excluded groups and concerns whose will overrides institutional constraints. On the other side, a “liberal” claim is to defend institutions, transparency (accountability), constitutionality, the rule of law, and the rights of minorities (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 73).

The struggles between opposing partisan actors result in unpredictable patterns of political change and a path that is not defined by autocracy or democracy. Downward trends of democracy in a country, which usually is labeled as backsliding, might instead be careening democracies because of political instability within a regime. The opposing democratic claims can take different forms depending on the case, for example, struggles between civil society and an autocratic regime, or opposing partisan groups within a regime.

To sum up, careening suggests that democracies may exhibit flaws or shortcomings but these deficits display different forms of insufficiency in their democratic functioning (Slater, 2013, p. 741). Despite possible setbacks or progress, it does not directly mean that democracy is consolidating into autocratic or democratic rule, instead they are *careening* (Ibid, p. 731).

4. Research design

The theoretical framework of careening and backsliding is the foundation for the analysis of contemporary development in V4. Below, the case selection is motivated. Followed by a discussion of the material and a summary of the comparative case study analysis.

4.1 Comparative Case Study

The research design is a comparative case study of the V4 in the form of a small-N study. These are appropriate to test theories which is the aim of this research. It allows for in-depth analysis of each case whilst providing room for contextualization of the CEE region (Heath & Halperin, 2020, p. 238). By extending prior research by examining contemporary development from 2018 to 2023, the result of this thesis will contribute to research within this field.

The research design follows a deductive approach by testing the existing theoretical frameworks of backsliding and careening to empirical data, to conclude which one is more suitable to explain contemporary development in CEE (Teorell, 2007, p. 53). The theories act as different explaining factors for democratic development in the V4. Previous research and the theoretical framework explain the key indicators of backsliding and careening to examine what is happening in the V4 countries. The thesis thus aims to discuss whether or not theoretical causal relations and outcomes can be supported by empirical data from the V4 (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p. 41).

The analytical framework has been designed based on the theories of backsliding and careening. The theoretical indicators of each perspective are compared to the data in each. Since both theories aim to explain democratic change, it is logical to choose key concepts of democracy to examine how each theory would explain the development of each case.

4.1.1 Case Selection

The case selection is based on a *Most Similar Systems Design*. The cases share many similarities such as common history, economic development, and geopolitical ideas which have manifested themselves in the form of V4 cooperation (Kowalska et al., 2018, p. 4). During the early 2000s, they achieved democratic consolidation and joined the EU. The difference is that they have all experienced democratic decline but to a different degree (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 249). Hence, the countries differ in their dependent variable by showing a variation in the degree of democratic decay (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 253). The prior research also showed that these countries are generally referred to as “backsliders” which makes them a suitable choice for this study. By choosing these countries the thesis will by default put up a fair test for the theories to describe the current development (Heath & Halperin, 2020, p. 236).

Besides this, the cases are representative of broader trends of democratic decline in the CEE region, in terms of previous research. The cases have therefore been strategically chosen since the aim is to test which theory might be more suitable to explain the development in the CEE (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p. 102).

4.2 Material and Data Collection

The thesis’s material is based on a wide range of qualitative and quantitative secondary data from Freedom House. The quantitative material works as a complement to the qualitative analysis. With secondary data, it is important to consider how it was originally collected, by whom, and why to ensure reliability and validity regarding data collection (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 201). The literature review is based on prior academic research of each theory and the V4 countries. Important research for this thesis was collected by Cianetti & Hanley (2021), Waldner & Lust, (2015 and 2018), and lastly, Bermeo (2016). Their research and the theories of backsliding and careening provide guidelines for what data to collect for the analysis (King et al., 1994, p. 51).

The material for the analysis consists of media articles, previous research, and assessments from Freedom House, especially the *Nations in Transit* country reports. The media articles were gathered through Retriever Research to find valid sources of information from the media. *Nations in Transit* evaluates the state of democracy based on seven indicators

including electoral process, institutional functioning, and the state of civil society. The democracy score from Freedom House encompasses the conceptual understanding of democracy for this thesis, hence, the score is appropriate for providing a broad overview of the democratic development in each country from 2018 to 2023. The score is based on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 is the lowest and 7 is the highest (a. Freedom House, 2023).

4.2.1 Analytical framework

The analytical framework is designed according to the theories. The key indicators of each theoretical framework are compared to the data in each case to establish what perspective is the most suitable. The analysis will examine three concepts of democracy: electoral outcome & institutional change, civil liberties, and lastly, the current trend of democratic development to examine how each theory explains development in each country. Since institutional change is a consequence of the ruling government it has been chosen to examine these two concepts under the same category. The analysis will focus on the similarities and differences in each country's development and examine which perspective is the most suitable. Below is a summary of the comparative case study.

Table 1: Summary of comparative case study

Key areas of Democracy / current development in key areas of democracy	Key Indicators of Democratic Backsliding	Key Indicators of Democratic Careening	Operational Measurement
Electoral Outcome	Continued concentration of power in the executive.	Shifting dynamics in electoral outcome.	News reports and Freedom House reports.
Institutional Changes	Negative changes that impact the quality/functioning of democracy.	Opposing democratic claims that lead to political instability.	
Civil Liberties	Restriction of civil liberties, e.g., independence of free media and opposition from civic society.	Opposing democratic claims that lead to political instability.	News reports and Freedom House reports.
Current Democratic Development	Gradual negative linear development toward illiberal practices.	Unpredictable development. Linear progress might obscure the dynamics of careening.	Freedom House (Nations in Transit): Democracy score (scale of 1 to 7).

5. Analysis

The analysis of contemporary development (2018 to 2023) is structured according to the table above. The analysis will answer the research question: *What theoretical perspective is more suitable to describe contemporary development in CEE? Democratic backsliding or democratic careening?*

5.1 Hungary

Electoral Outcome and Institutional Change

Prime Minister Orbán and the Fidesz party have stayed in power since 2018 with large positive voter support (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, p. 49). A coalition, led by Fidesz, with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), won the most recent election in 2022 with a two-thirds parliamentary majority (Végh, 2023). In line with executive aggrandizement, the government has made legislative and institutional changes that allow it to secure control over Hungary's independent institutions, for example, the judicial system (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 73). Thus, the regime has managed to tilt the playing field in its favor by manipulating elections and undermining institutional checks and balances to obscure fair political competition. This obstructs the power of the opposition to fairly compete with the regime and has resulted in a weak opposition and hence makes elections unfair (Végh, 2023). The party has operated through sophisticated autocratic strategies in combination with popular mobilization of voters to stay in power. Fidesz's election campaign has mobilized populist anti-elite sentiments to gain broad public support and the parliamentary majority (Levitsky & Way, 2020, p. 59). While Orbán still has complete control over the constitutional rules that control elections, he and the Fidesz party can remain in power (Scheppelle, 2022, p. 45).

Civil Liberties

In Hungary, critical civil society organizations are intimidated and exposed to defamation campaigns by the regime (b. Freedom House, 2023, p. 6). Fidesz has further hindered the power of the opposition by undermining the independence of media and NGOs despite organizing rallies. Still, the legislative actions and propaganda campaigns against them have made their position very weak in Hungarian society (Végh, 2023). The media environment is

dominated by Fidesz allies and undermined by state-run outlets and censorship. For instance, in 2018, the regime was in control of more than five hundred media outlets which makes it difficult for opponents to reach audiences (Levitsky & Way, 2020, p. 61). Fidesz has also secretly politicized media channels and driven international media groups out of the country to control the narrative of Hungary's democratic path (Végh, 2023).

Current Democratic Development

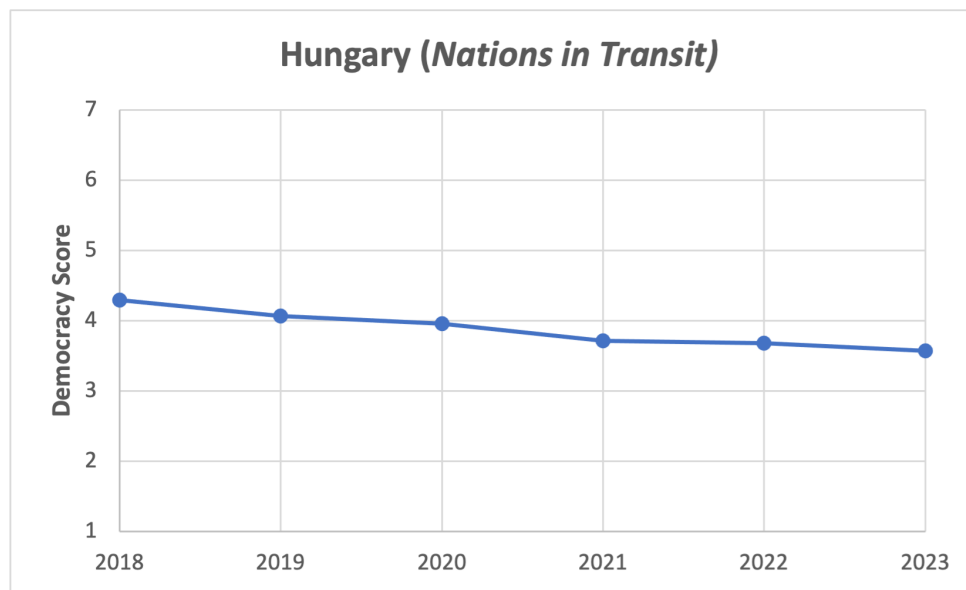


Figure 2: Democracy score scale of 1 to 7 (Freedom House)

The current development in Hungary follows a trend of declining democracy with scores worsening each year. In 2023 the score showed yet another decline from 3,68 to 3,57. But trends can disguise dynamics within a regime that would suggest careening. But, in the case of Hungary, the backsliding paradigm is suitable to explain the current progress since the regime follows a strict program of executive aggrandizement where significant autocratic features have been deeply entrenched in the country's executive and legislative branches (Scheppelle, 2022, p. 46). The elections are heavily skewed in favor of Fidesz which does not allow any room for opposition forces in the political system or civil society. The development and dynamics within the regime follow a path away from democracy. Orbán continues to adjust and tweak laws and the democratic system to suit him and the Fidesz party. This is illustrated in the election of 2022 which certified that no legal change is beyond Orbán's reach (Ibid, p. 58).

5.2 Poland

Electoral Outcome and Institutional Changes

The threat of illiberal progress has continued since the populist conservative PiS gained power (Levitsky & Way, 2020, p. 62). Yet, according to Freedom House (2023), national governance remains democratic, unlike Hungary. However, the regime led by PiS has exercised significant influence over Poland's institutions and slowed down the country's democratic progress. Similar to Hungary, elections are free but not fair due to attempts of election manipulation by using public funds to finance the ruling majority's electoral candidates (Freedom House, 2022). The country appears to have followed the path of Hungary in the line of executive aggrandizement with a decline in democracy. PiS has further aimed at judicial independence which has resulted in backlash from the European Commission during 2023 (b. Freedom House, 2023, p. 31).

Poland is further affected by the division between liberal, pro-European parties and those allegedly defending Polish interests and traditional Catholic values (c. Freedom House, 2023). In the election of 2023, PiS surprisingly fell short of the mandate and could not gain a majority in the parliament (Council on Foreign Affairs, 2023). Previous Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who led the opposition, returned to his leadership of the liberal-centrist Civic Platform (CO) and won the election whilst gaining a majority in December 2023 (Landguiden, 2023). Despite PiS's attempt to get an electoral advantage through legislative changes, defamation campaigns, and aiming to create polarization in society by holding referendums on critical voter issues (Smeltzer, 2023). Yet, the ruling coalition will need to deal with the previous regime's abuse of power and provide striking evidence to the public to gain sufficient voter support for future elections (Notes from Poland, 2023).

Civil Liberties

In Poland, the backlash from civil society has been robust and deeply polarized over government policies. Although public funds are heavily skewed towards organizations sharing PiS views and freedom of assembly is limited, national demonstrations have had an impact. For example, civic opposition made sure that PiS failed to achieve solid electoral majorities in 2019. The polarization in society is noticeable in civil demonstrations on key

voter issues, for example, abortion (2022) and LGBT+ rights. Polish society has remained polarized over government policies which has led to fluctuations in support of PiS and the opposition (Freedom House 2022).

Like in Hungary, media pluralism is threatened by PiS. Independent media outlets have been replaced with biased and pro-PiS voices that promote government messages and discredit the opposition. For example, the state broadcaster TVP portrays government critics and NGOs as foreign forces that are threatening the country (Freedom House, 2022).

Current Democratic Development

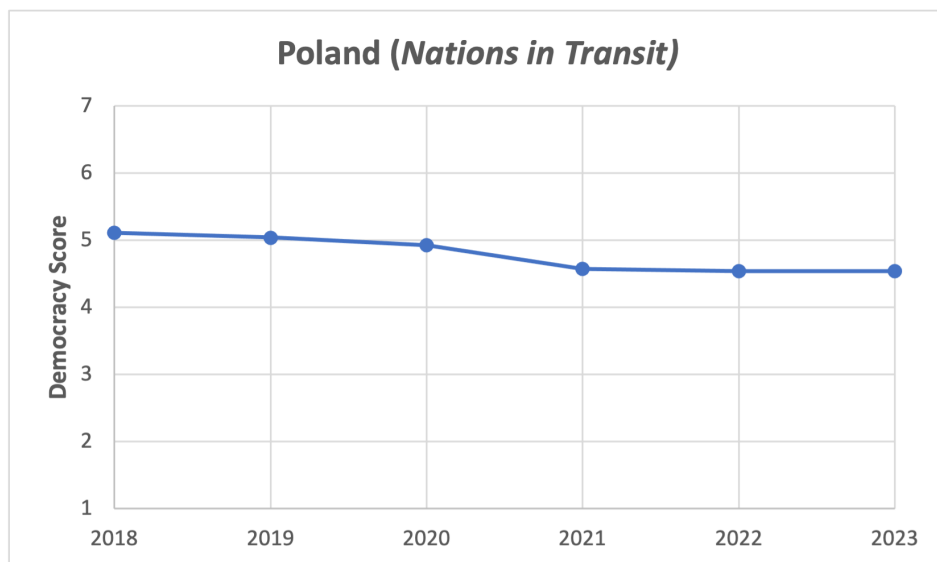


Figure 3: Democracy score scale of 1 to 7 (Freedom House)

Since 2018 the country has followed a path of democratic deterioration. In 2022 they had their lowest democracy score yet with 4,54 which has remained in 2023. The patterns in Poland have, since PiS came into power, suggested backsliding in the form of executive aggrandizement with instances of election manipulation, changes in executive and legislative branches, and attacks on independent institutions. Still, there has been backlash from civil society in the form of civil protests and from the political opposition. The electoral win of Tusk is a surprising turn of events which could indicate a sign of careening. The apparent clear trend of democratic decline might instead be caused by opposing democratic interests in the partisan opposition and civic society which in turn results in political instability. It could

be that Poland is experiencing democratic decline in the recent period whilst democracy is not fully disappearing (Slater, 2013, p. 740).

From the perspective of careening, tendencies toward authoritarian populism (PiS) and the opposing liberal pushback figure as opposing democratic claims where none of the sides have enough leverage to keep one side in place, instead causing political instability. Whereas the win of Tusk could be perceived as “backsliding avoided” it could be more perceived as the Polish democracy is not moving decisively forward or backward instead Poland’s “liberal” and “non-liberal” sides are weaker than they seem. Rather than focusing on setbacks versus progress careening suggests that this tension in Poland is what constitutes a careening democracy. On the other hand, it may be too soon to tell what this new development leads to. The previous progress has suited the backsliding paradigm to a large extent, yet, for continued backsliding the incumbents must be given unprecedented power to stay in power. Whereas the progress before this seems to resemble backsliding to a large extent, from a careening perspective, the new win of Tusk should not be seen as backsliding avoided or a move in the right direction, but instead as careening. With the win of liberal-centrist Tusk, this may simply just prepare the ground for another swing back in the opposite direction.

5.3 The Czech Republic

Electoral Outcome and Institutional Changes

In the Czech Republic, the technocratic populist government led by Prime Minister Babiš’s ANO and left-nationalist President Zeman appeared to follow a similar backsliding path as Hungary and Poland (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 74). Especially the period of 2018 to 2021 when populist and far-right features were dominating in parliament. As with PiS and Fidesz, ANO rallied voters through populist features by portraying themselves as one of the “people”. Opposition parties and critics thus become illegitimate and even dangerous for the country’s democracy and must be kept out of office (Vachudova, 2020, p. 327).

Babiš differs from Orbán in that he has had limited electoral support and has not managed to change the institutional checks and balances which has allowed for a relatively strong plural system, in comparison to Hungary. The independence system has for example remained

independent in comparison to Hungary and Poland. Still, Babiš has attempted to gain control of institutions such as the Senate but has failed (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 74).

While the country has received plenty of scholarly concerns for following Hungary, there has been little concrete evidence of a democratic erosion of Czech democracy despite recent years' trend of democratic decline (Bube & Kouba, 2023, p. 108). In the 2021 general election, ANO was defeated by the center-right SPOLU coalition due to successful coordination among the opposition parties (Bube & Kouba, 2023, p. 113). Zeman was defeated in the presidential 2023 election by pro-western Petr Pavel (a. Politico, 2023). Babiš also ran for president in the recent election whilst being on trial for corruption of EU subsidy (Sybera, 2023). The comparison to Hungarian and Polish ruling parties as Babiš being an unprecedented threat to democracy is not quite accurate. Although he has “borrowed” autocratic and populist strategies from Orbán the impact has not been as great and the outlines are much more vague in Czechia than in Hungary. It is rather the quality and transparency of democratic governance due to major corruption scandals that have been at stake in Czechia (Bube & Kouba, 2023, p. 114).

Civil Liberties

The Czechian civic society has proved to be strong with grassroots opposing the ANO regime. This resulted in stronger opposition against the threats to institutional checks and balances (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 74). Similar to Hungary and Poland, Babiš has tried to subdue influential media outlets by buying them which has given him a tool for attacking critics and deflecting attention from his corruption scandals (Bube & Kouba, 2023, p. 111). The major incidents of corruption have triggered the social protest movement *A Million Moments for Democracy* which protested against the regime in 2019 and ultimately contributed to Babiš electoral defeat in 2021 (Rovny, 2023, p. 1422).

Current Democratic Development

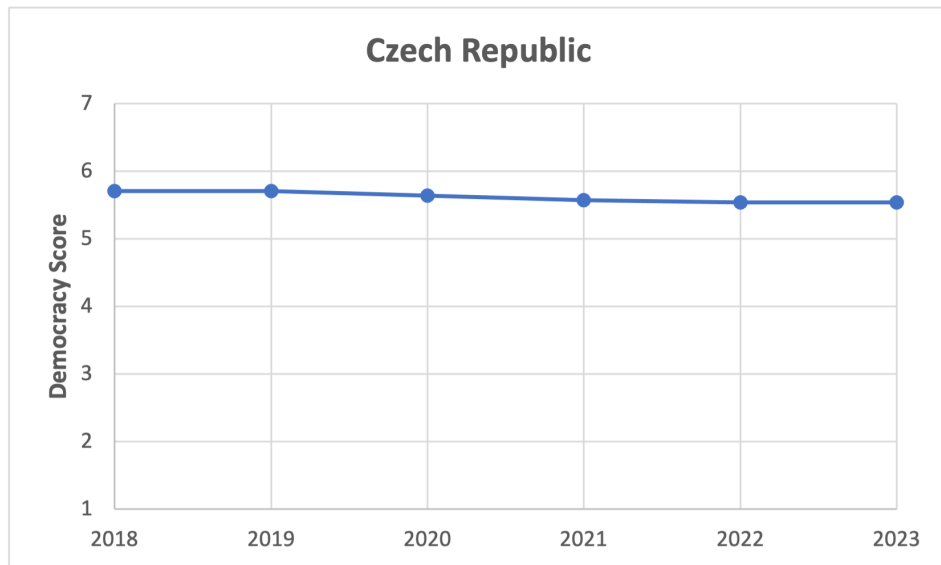


Figure 4: Democracy score scale of 1 to 7 (Freedom House)

The democratic trend in the Czech Republic shows a rather stable development but with a minor gradual decline. The first step of backsliding is the electoral success of democratically populist parties or leaders, in this case, Babiš and ANO. However, in this case, democratic development can be explained through the perspective of careening. Babiš's populist challenges to Czech democracy have proven to be too weak and unsystematic to push the development decisively in the direction of an undemocratic direction. Political instability in the Czech Republic is caused by opposing democratic claims from the regime and political opposition, for example, through civic society. This results in an unpredictable development where neither populist claims nor pro-democracy forces have the political weight to firmly consolidate democracy (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 73). According to backsliding, the liberal movement in Czechia can be seen as an instance of avoided backsliding. While populist forces in the Czech Republic were pushed back by civic protests and institutional constraints (Ibid, p. 74), the opposition has still failed to give rise to a well-established liberal political movement and the political opposition remains fragmented. The Czech democracy is thus careening and the current dynamics of politics with growing far-right political parties still make the future of democracy uncertain in Czechia (Sybera, 2023)

5.4 Slovakia

Electoral Outcomes and Institutional Changes

National governance remains relatively democratic in Slovakia, although populist and autocratic tendencies affect the country. Institutional conflicts lead to polarization, instability, and public mistrust of the regime (Hlatky, 2023). The liberal leader Zuzana Čaputová of the pro-Western party Progressive Slovakia was elected in 2019 which was a backlash for the left-populist and pro-Russia Smer-SD which long dominated Slovak politics. The party lost the parliamentary elections in 2020 (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 74). The Smer-SD regime was heavily affected by corruption in combination with populist and elitist tendencies (Zvada, 2023, p. 188). Slovakia's path has been shaped by political polarization with political competition and opposing camps of advocates of liberal-democratic values and those who favor illiberal and autocratic approaches (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová, 2018, p. 79). In the September election of 2023, the Smer-SD party defeated the Progressive Slovakia party which exemplifies the political instability and tensions in the country (b. Politico, 2023).

Political disputes, both within the coalition and between government and opposition parties, lead to public dissatisfaction and mistrust in government institutions. Slovakian politics has experienced further instability with governing parties lacking in a stable majority, inefficiency, and illiberal attempts to change the electoral process. Efforts at anticorruption and judicial reform have been impacted by political influence with politicians publicly arguing the decisions of judges and prosecutors. Yet, in 2022 anticorruption made progress with the prosecution of Fico and the former interior minister Robert Kaliňák (Hlatky, 2023).

Civil Liberties

Civil society in Slovakia remains strong. The murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018 led to civic protests against Fico's government due to corruption in the state and the rule of law. This resulted in Prime Minister Fico's resignation who had dominated the political environment for over a decade (The Guardian, 2018). Simultaneously, Fico portrayed himself as an advocate for Slovakian democracy and fighting threats from unelected institutions and civic movements (Cianetti & Hanley, 2021, p. 75).

Current Democratic Development

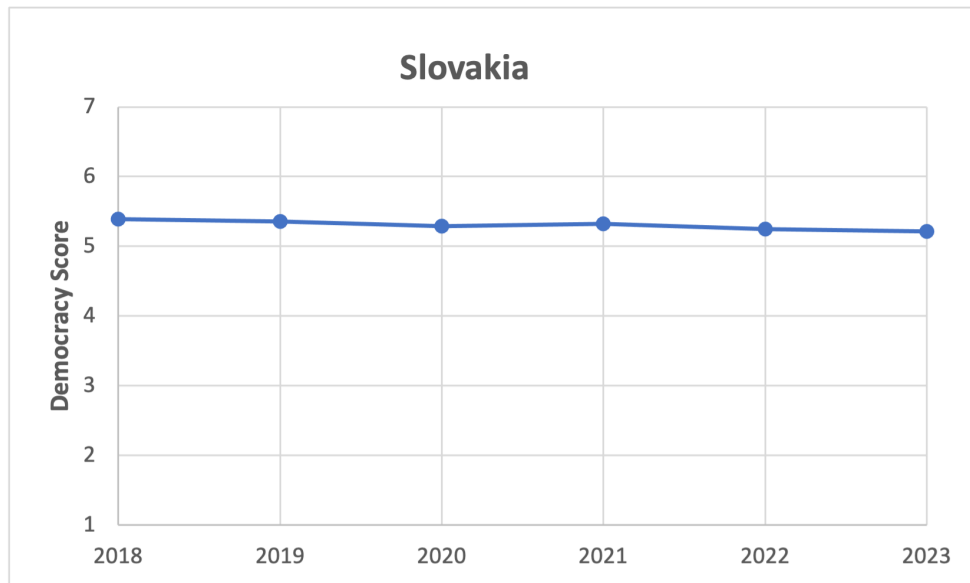


Figure 5: Democracy score scale of 1 to 7 (Freedom House)

Similar to Czechia, Slovakia has had a relatively stable trend but with more fluctuating scores. In 2021 the score increased but soon declined leading to a score of 5,21 in 2023 (Hlatky, 2023). Slovakia is usually seen as the “least” serious case of democratic decline amongst the V4. The win of the liberal president in 2019 and Smer-SD’s electoral loss in 2020 would from a backsliding perspective be seen as a pro-democracy win. However, from the careening perspective, pushback from civic society does not translate into a political reset. The return of Smer-SD in 2023 could be interpreted as a new starting point for backsliding, yet this fluctuating democratic development in Slovakia shows signs of careening caused by political instability. The mass protest in 2018, caused by Kuciak’s death and dissatisfaction with the Smer-SD-led regime’s governing shows signs of opposing liberal pushback and populist claims from the regime and civic society. The progress in Slovakia is neither going forward nor backward, instead, the development is going back and forth proving that the “liberal” and “populist” camps are not strong enough to have a coherent impact on democratic development. It is especially clear that even when political development suddenly careens to one side’s advantage, it can easily swing back in the opposite direction (Cianetti & Hanely, 2021, p. 75). Slovakia is moving in an indecisive direction becoming neither less nor more democratic (Slater, 2013, p. 731).

6. Discussion

The findings from the analysis conclude that even though trends of democratic decline may at first glance look similar, there are underlying dynamics within the regime that display nuanced interpretations about what is causing democratic development in each country. In the case of Hungary, democratic progress is most suitably described through the backsliding paradigm. Hungary has followed a clear path of executive aggrandizement which has led to negative changes affecting elections, civil liberties, and the functioning of governance. What makes Hungary stand out in comparison to the rest of the V4 countries is the strong positive voter feedback which is potentially something to investigate further (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, p. 49). Poland has followed in the same footsteps as Hungary albeit with more fluctuating dynamics within the country and oppositional forces. The unexpected win of Tusk could indicate that the development in Poland could be careening or might develop into a careening democracy. However, it is too soon to tell, and will need further research in the future.

The careening paradigm was the most suitable in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as was predicted in 2021 by Cianetti & Hanley. Even though they are similar to Hungary and Poland in experiencing recent democratic decline, though to a lesser extent, the implications of this thesis suggest that there is something new going on in the CEE region. Whereas analyzing CEE democracies through the lens of backsliding has been widely popular among scholars, the careening paradigm provides a different approach to research on democratic decline. To properly generalize and conclude that there is something new going on in more countries in the CEE region, there must be more research conducted. This thesis focused on the core features of democracy yet multiple more factors could be observed in this context, such as the role of public opinion, the role of institutions in governing the careening and backsliding dynamics, and also diving deeper into the dynamics of resisting oppositional forces in civil society (Waldner & Lust, 2018; Cianetti & Hanley, 2021).

7. Conclusion

This thesis aims to answer the research question: *what theoretical perspective is more suitable to describe contemporary development in CEE? Democratic backsliding or democratic careening?* The study was conducted through a comparative case study of V4. The analysis examined electoral outcome and institutional change, civil liberties, and the overall trend of democratic development in each country. It can be concluded that the perspective of backsliding was the most suitable to explain contemporary development in Hungary in line with the concept of executive aggrandizement. Regarding Poland, the development up until 2023 seemed to be most suitably explained by backsliding, however, the electoral win of Tusk in 2023 might indicate careening in that the populist party PiS has proven to be weaker than it was believed to be. The careening perspective was the most suitable for explaining the current progress in Slovakia and the Czech Republic where politics are influenced by shifting dynamics between populist and liberal camps which results in an unstable development where neither side is strong enough to affirm their ideal visions on democracy. The findings from this thesis contribute to the existing body of knowledge in CEE development in terms of how to analyze current developments as opposed to the frequently used perspective of backsliding

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