

Deconsolidation and de-democratisation: Current western Balkans experience of the transition

Abstract

This article reviews the third decade of the post-Wall transition of central and eastern Europe, paying particular attention to the western Balkans. It focuses on European integration and the indicators of deconsolidation – notably, the lack of trust which has characterised the ‘crisis of confidence’ induced by the EU’s own series of crises since the middle of the 2000s. Additionally, the rise of authoritarianism and populism across the region is often viewed as a symptom of a possible ‘de-democratisation’, or reverse wave. From a process-oriented perspective, the author suggests a rethinking of the various polarisations under which, instead of seeing democratisation and de-democratisation as opposing forces, we may recognise instead that both are actually continuous, interconnected processes related to democracy itself – and not (at least, not necessarily) to a growing state of non-democracy. Oscillation between these two states may well characterise the next decade of the transition but, if we are to address the problems that this causes, we must first understand precisely how we have got where we are.

Keywords: western Balkans, transition, EU integration, deconsolidation, democratisation

Introduction

This article, the third in a series written to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the *SEER Journal* (see also Solioz 2018a, 2018b),¹ focuses on the current state of democracy in the western Balkans – or, more precisely, the deconsolidation and de-democratisation of the region, i.e. the extent to which the current picture shows it as moving out of alignment with democratic norms. At the same time, this encapsulates a de-Europeanisation which, with Europe showing signs of being confused by the ‘Balkan Malaise’ and by its own multi-layered and polycentric nature, as well as ‘entrapped’ by a series of crises lasting already a decade and a half, looks likely to have shifted the region further away from the prospect of European integration.

If, against the background of the 2004-05 constitutional debate and the 2007-08 financial crisis, the second post-Wall decade was characterised by partial deconsolidation, the third post-Wall decade was, instead, branded by de-convergence, de-con-

1 The whole work, which has been both revised and extended, and including the contents of this article alongside material previously published by the author in his *Thinking the Balkans Out of the Box* (Solioz 2017), also revised and updated, has been published by Nomos as *Viva la Transición. The Balkans from the Post-Wall Era to Post-Crisis Future* (Solioz 2020). The text in this article has been especially edited for the *SEER Journal*.

solidation and de-democratisation across the region. Not only for the new member states in central and eastern Europe, but also for the over 500 million people living in EU states, ‘the European dream’ (Rifkin 2004) seemed to be over.

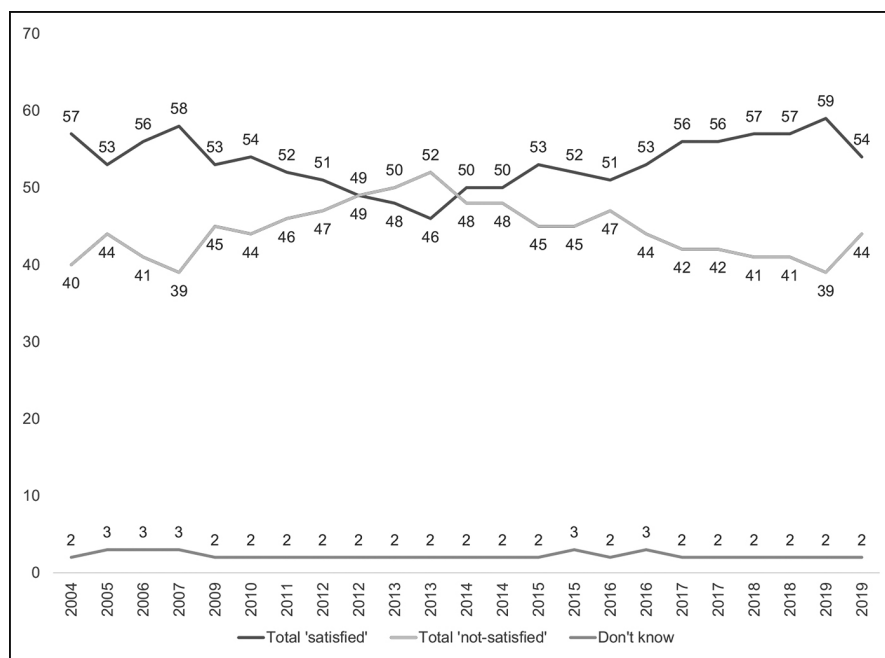
It is clear that global crisis – actually a multiple, or polycrisis: i.e. the simultaneous crises of management, the Euro, refugees and, meanwhile, Covid-19 – has brought the issue of convergence, or divergence, and the gap between the EU and the Balkans to a new level. Meanwhile, new issues have gained visibility, notably the vulnerability of the Balkans in terms of security, social disintegration and de-democratisation.

Nevertheless, crisis also carries with it the possibility of the development of a fresh perspective. The article explores the current state of the region in the search for answers to the question of how the policy debate on integration might still be shifted.

Declining trust in domestic democratic institutions

When measured by a question on their satisfaction with the way democracy worked in their country, in spring 2019 this reached its highest level since 2004 (59 per cent). Figure 1 documents the overall data on this score from 2004 to 2019 and evidences the growing dissatisfaction corresponding to the beginning of the third decade of systemic change – with a peak in 2013.

Figure 1 – Satisfaction with the way democracy works in own country



Source: European Commission (2020). Note: The survey covers the 28 European Union (EU) Member States, North Macedonia, Turkey, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and the Turkish Cypriot community.

The polycrisis has often been presented as a ‘crisis of confidence’ featuring a lack of both credibility and trust. It is demonstrable that political trust across the wider region is lower than in western Europe – a feature that could weaken the processes of democratisation and Europeanisation. Among the scholars involved in exploring this is Claus Offe, who pointed out long ago that a burdensome transition process in relation to east and central Europe could detract from trust (Offe 1994). Meanwhile, various studies have contributed to a better understanding of this concept, highlighting that countries across the region suffer from a strong ‘institutional deficit’ and that their citizens have lost trust in the new institutions and elites.

The Democracy Index 2019 produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) confirms that the trajectory of the region as a whole has, overall – since the EIU created its index in 2006 – been one of regression, leaving the Balkan region in particular without a single country experiencing what the Unit refers to as ‘full democracy’. Taking into account its surveys over various years, the EIU’s overall assessment is:

The formal institutions of democracy are in place in all countries of the region. However, rulers operate through informal power structures, patronage and control of the media. The region’s politics are characterised by weak checks and balances and politicised judiciaries. *Surveys consistently reveal low levels of public trust in political institutions* and a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the post-communist transition after 1989. (EIU 2018: 8, emphasis added)

Trust can be captured in more specific terms as ‘institutional trust’. Medgyesi and Boda analyse changes in institutional trust from 2011 to 2016, aggregating data from Eurobarometer and the European ‘Quality of Life’ Survey – a way of overcoming the limits of using only one method. The results highlight that trust in national political institutions (parliament and government) declined significantly between 2007 and 2011, although note that some countries, Bulgaria among them, ‘saw no (or only minimal) decline in trust in political institutions during the crisis years’ (Medgyesi and Bolt 2019: 344). All in all, the collected data show that the decline in confidence was not a lasting one. Nevertheless, ‘in most EU countries institutional confidence in 2016 remained at below the levels seen before the economic crisis’ (Medgyesi and Bolt 2019: 355).

The World Economic Forum (WEF) annual ranking offers a different, more global, picture – notably marked by the introduction in 2018 of Index 04, providing new concepts and extensive new data. In particular, qualities such as human capital, innovation, resilience and agility are captured through a number of new, critically key concepts (e.g. entrepreneurial culture, multi-stakeholder collaboration, critical thinking and social trust). Table 1 highlights for Balkan countries the ranking of the level of public trust in politicians for 2016; social capital – a concept that captures the quality of personal and social relationships, the strength of social norms and the level of civic participation in society – for 2019; and global competitiveness for 2016 and 2019. The Global Competitiveness Index measures national competitiveness – defined as the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity.

Table 1 – Public trust in politicians, social capital and competitiveness

	Trust (2016)	Competitiveness (2016)	Social capital (2019)	Competitiveness (2019)
Rank (out of)	137	137	141	141
Albania	56	75	123	81
Bosnia and Herzegovina	117	103	n/a	92
Bulgaria	88	49	87	49
Kosovo	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Montenegro	59	77	83	73
North Macedonia	n/a	n/a	120	82
Romania	113	68	85	51
Serbia	87	78	71	72

Source: WEF, *Global Competitiveness – Reports 2017-2018, 2018 and 2019*.

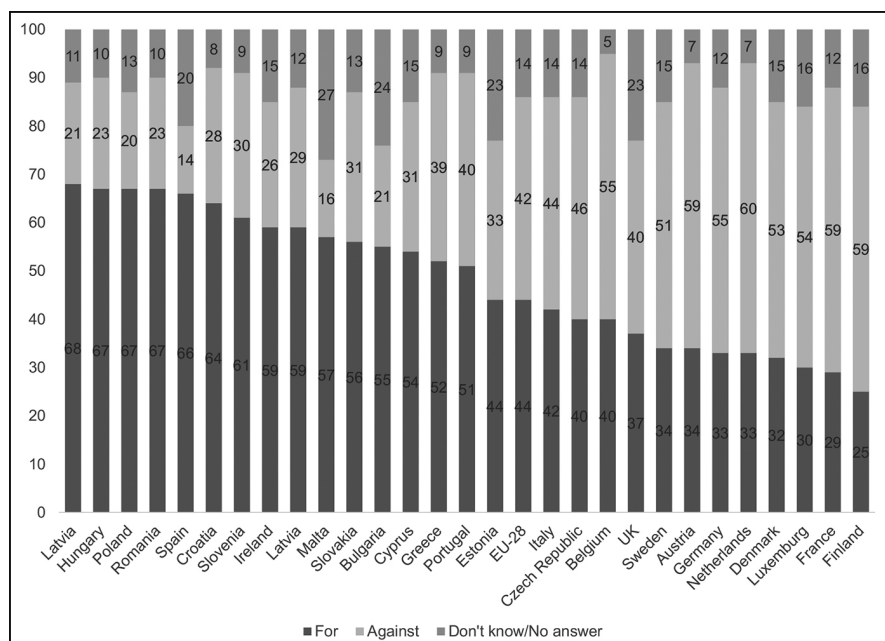
Note: n/a – data not available.

The EU and enlargement

Concerning the EU’s further enlargement – i.e. to the Balkans – the 2019 Eurobarometer reports that 44 per cent of respondents favour it while 42 per cent are against. Nevertheless, there is a relative majority favouring further enlargement, albeit occasionally not a particularly significant one, in 16 member states with several new EU members, including Romania, Croatia and Slovenia, showing the highest support (all with more than three out of five people in favour).

Within the region, a number of Gallup’s *Balkan Monitor Surveys* suggest that western Balkan citizens are likely to become more sceptical the closer their country gets to EU accession. Identification with Europe was, in 2010, highest in Albania (93 per cent); meanwhile, in Croatia, those who would vote against their country’s accession – prior to becoming a member state – outnumbered those who would vote ‘yes’ (43 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively). All in all, EU accession is still supported, but not as fervently (Gallup 2010: 21-25).

Figure 2 – Further enlargement of the EU



Source: European Commission (2020: 105).

Naturally, politicians in the western Balkans will take such trends into account and align their political campaigns accordingly. In this context, it is interesting that this year’s *Balkan Barometer*, published by the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council, highlights progressively positive sentiments on EU membership since 2015 – see Table 2.

Table 2 – Sentiments on EU membership (in per cent)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Good	42	41	44	49	56	59
Bad	20	21	19	15	12	11
Neither	35	33	32	30	28	26

Source: RCC (2020) *Balkan Barometer 2020. Public Opinion*, p. 40.

In this respect, Ivan Krastev’s comment on the novel *Seeing* (2004), written by José Saramago – the Portuguese writer and recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Literature – deserves to be re-quoted:

Reading the results of the latest *Balkan Monitor* poll, the parallel with Saramago's parable is striking: one has the feeling that Saramago's anywhere is the Balkans' everywhere. In *Seeing*, people vote by rejecting all choices; in the Balkans, they speak loudly in favour of any organisation that is not linked to their government. The survey shows that citizens of the Balkan democracies believe in the Church, the EU and the UN, but deeply distrust the institutions that govern them. (Gallup 2020: 5)

The first resistances to the rethinking and renewing of European strategies for south-east Europe can be traced back to the first EU-Western Balkans Summit, held in November 2000 in Zagreb. Nevertheless, at the second Summit, organised within the framework of the Thessaloniki European Council (June 2003), there was formal political commitment to offer western Balkan states a perspective on accession under a country-by-country (regatta) approach. Containment was supposed to be replaced by integration; the paradox being that 'unfinished states', some still struggling to establish their sovereignty, are simultaneously involved in an accession process which relativises their sovereignty. To cap it all, the region's pragmatic or moderate nationalists were tasked with the job of delivering integration into the EU.

That same year, the *Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung*, identifying that progress regarding the region had reached a stumbling block, called therefore for a 'determined rethinking and a renewal of European strategies for South Eastern Europe' (CAP 2003: 1). Eight years later, in the same vein, Jacques Rupnik wrote:

The EU is seen as fussy about the process but uncertain about the outcome. For such doubts to be dispelled, two complementary things are needed. Firstly, a strong positive signal from Brussels, in the form of an accelerated and coherent EU regional expansion policy in the Balkans. Secondly, and no less importantly: the capacity of local actors to tackle the European reform agenda not just as something that is imposed from outside, but as domestic homework for any democratic European society in the twenty-first century. (Rupnik 2011: 28)

Other than for the accession of Croatia (2013), of course, the next wave has never happened.

'Enlargement fatigue' in the EU met, not least in partial consequence, 'accession fatigue' in the Balkans. In the region, accession became increasingly only a declarative goal and a smokescreen for politics as a business model (Rupnik 2011: 27) but, at the Union's political level, a decision was nevertheless made in which enlargement is frozen until 2025 – a point clearly made at the 2015 Riga Summit and confirmed at the Sofia EU-Western Balkan Summit in 2018. This is a decision which clearly favours the dominant traditionalist narrative as well as the authoritarian regimes in the region.

We may question whether western Balkan states really have adequate structural capacity in place to adopt and implement in full the core EU values and norms (Petrovic 2020). Even so, the Union's strategy in the second post-Wall decade had, despite the rhetoric, been more obstructive than supportive. Note that the EU document *Copenhagen Twenty Years On* points out clearly that 'the accession process today is more rigorous and comprehensive than in the past. This reflects the evolution

of EU policies as well as lessons learned from previous enlargements' (European Commission 2013: 2) – rule of law and effective implementation were the new keywords under the 'fundamentals first' approach. Attila Ágh comments:

The negative experiences alarmed the EU into being much more cautious in dealing with the West Balkans and EaP, but were not serious enough to make it rethink its ECE policies in the depth of global crisis. Anyway, in the deteriorating international situation, further Balkan enlargement was temporarily given up, owing to the polycrisis in the EU and the worsening conditions in the countries concerned. (Ágh 2019: 110-111)

The next window for the western Balkans is thus 2025. The Paris-based Institute for Security Studies has presented three contrasting scenarios (Čeperković and Gaub 2018: 5-7) that have to be taken into consideration and which are summarised here:

- the 'hour of Europe' scenario: Montenegro and Serbia become members of the European Union while the remaining Balkan countries have made irreversible progress towards European integration. The region has become a credible partner for the EU by initiating sustainable reforms and achieving positive results in key areas
- the 'Balkans in limbo' scenario: Balkan countries are still on the path to EU integration but are making slow progress in implementing reforms due to a lack of political will
- the 'ghosts of the past' scenario: the EU integration process has slowly slipped off the political agenda while geopolitics and violent conflicts are resurgent. The countries of the Western Balkans remain as disconnected and as fragmented as they were in the 1990s.

For the EU, 'deepening' and 'narrowing' (Brexit) became an issue, as did security in the neighbourhood (the Ukrainian crisis). Now at stake is the establishment of a tailored and credible Eastern Partnership (EaP) and a transformed architecture for the Union – as a supranational *non*-state. Together with a further, more effective enlargement round, these are key challenges for the post-2019 cycle, i.e. the new European Commission (2019-2024), moving beyond the post-Wall decades and tackling the challenges of the 'transition era'.

Chief among these challenges is that the divergence of the region from the EU mainstream, provoked by the global crisis, has further grown. Additionally, repeat experience points out that we would be well to question the extent of the EU's transformative power post-enlargement and the sanctions which may selectively be taken in cases of subsequent non-compliance with democracy standards. Here, specific instruments and mechanisms in case of 'reversibility' in a post-accession scenario and/or to prevent further backsliding should be considered (Börzel and Lebanidze 2017: 112).

Data from the EU's own Regional Competitiveness Index shows few countries from the broader region demonstrating improving performance over time, let alone improved competitiveness, after accession. It is thus clear that the east-west gap is widening in qualitative terms: beyond economic performance, this also concerns socio-cultural dimensions – health, education, social welfare and other issues not captured by GDP.

Furthermore, the various built-in structural imbalances related to the European integration process need to be acknowledged. First, economic policies have been progressively Europeanised, but social protection (social welfare policies) remain at national level. This explains the increasing ‘perverse’ asymmetry between policies promoting market efficiencies and those promoting social protection and equality (Scharpf 2010). Second, the current crisis has amplified citizens’ perceived ‘space inconsistency’: political measures are required to apply locally and not ‘far away’. And, third, the classic ‘time inconsistency’: short-term strategies are welcomed but citizens resist and obstruct long-term ones.

It is difficult to envision how to spring the trap. Almost unexpectedly, however, a major change has occurred against the background of the Covid-19 crisis. First, Wolfgang Schäuble – a key figure in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and, at the time of writing, President of the German parliament – indicated in a landmark op-ed that this was the time for a shift from the austerity-cure roadmap to achieve a significant strengthening of European integration and EU sovereignty. Second, the European Council announced an ambitious deal for post-pandemic economic recovery: a €750bn recovery package. This reflects the biggest ever joint borrowing and, more even than that, a major shift towards ‘more Europe’ and possibly the greater federalisation of the EU. This could, of course, assist with structuring the forthcoming ‘transition era’.

From transition to consolidation

Ten years on from the fall of communist rule, most assessments on the transition and democratisation processes across the border region of east-central Europe which were made by ranking institutions and scholars were overwhelmingly positive. To pick just one: Geoffrey Pridham foresaw that most were well on the road to full-fledged democracy: ‘Most countries in this region have moved from transition and settled into early consolidation’ (Pridham 2001: 88). In the Balkans, it is evident that Yugoslavia and Albania did not follow the same path in the early 1990s, a period dominated by wars and state collapse (Ramet 2005), followed by the perils of war-to-democracy transitions (Jarstad and Sisk 2008), but the region nevertheless experienced a relative democratic breakthrough at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s. In the same period, regional cooperation also gained momentum through the Stability Pact (established in 1999 at the initiative of the EU and superseded by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in 2008), while the perspective of joining the European Union became more credible.

By the mid-2000s, the success story narrative mentioned countries across the region, with the exception of Mečiar-era Slovakia (1994-1998), as examples of successfully transformed and consolidated democracies. This illustrated perfectly the ideal-type sequencing which had been formulated in the theory – accommodation, liberalisation and transition – and anticipated consolidation, the next focus of democratisation studies, as the last stage of this construct. In the western Balkans, war was behind and peace in sight. *Mission accomplie* was the narrative at that time.

In the early 1990s, in contrast to the sunny presentation of the Wall’s end and the demise of state socialism, some political scientists nevertheless presented an alarm-

ing catalogue of the disasters waiting to happen. A strong wake-up call came from Ken Jowitt, who writes with great verve that the end of communism:

Should be likened to a catastrophic volcanic eruption, one that initially and immediately affects only the surrounding political 'biota' (i.e. other Leninist regimes), but whose effects most likely will have a global impact on the boundaries and identities that for half a century have politically, economically, and militarily defined and ordered the world. (Jowitt 1992: 310)

So: dangerous times ahead; welcome to the 'new world disorder' – a time of crisis and trauma (Jowitt 1991). Soon, borders were significantly redrawn and the break-up of Yugoslavia confirmed Jowitt's prediction of 'movements or rage'. Jowitt posts an important reminder, however: first, not all post-socialist regimes were engaged significantly in transition from authoritarian rule; second, not all were headed for democracy; and third, for some countries (albeit perhaps temporarily) de-democratisation was an immediate option.

Indeed, by 1996, of the countries which had then emerged from socialist rule in east-central Europe and the former Soviet Union, only nine could be considered as 'reasonably' democratic; ten were navigating between democracy and authoritarian rule; while nine had opted for an authoritarian regime. Among them, Bosnia and Herzegovina and pre-independence Kosovo were polities that functioned quite problematically. These results amount to a wake-up call. Herbert Kitschelt and his colleagues make an appeal to reason:

This state of affairs is quite sobering in light of widespread exuberance in 1989 about the 'end of history' and the decisive victory of Western economic liberalism and political democracy over rival ideologies with alternative conceptions of socio-political order. (Kitschelt *et al.* 1999: 15)

Other warnings came from the field of politics. In a famous speech from December 1997, Václav Havel provided a mixed assessment of the state of democracy in his country. While the private sphere had significantly improved, the other side of the coin, the public sphere, provided worrying indications:

This side of life indeed shows a rather gloomy face at the moment. Many people – the opinion polls corroborate this – are disturbed, disappointed or even disgusted by the general condition of society in our country. Many believe that – democracy or no democracy – power is again in the hands of untrustworthy figures whose primary concern is their personal advancement instead of the interests of the people. [...] The prevalent opinion is that it pays off in this country to lie and to steal; that many politicians and civil servants are corruptible; that political parties – though they all declare honest intentions in lofty words – are covertly manipulated by suspicious financial groupings. An increasing number of people are disgusted by politics, which they hold responsible – and rightly so – for all these adverse developments. As a consequence, they have begun to feel suspicious of us all, or even take an aversion to us – notwithstanding the fact that they freely elected us for our offices. (Havel 1997)

Furthermore, experts such as Phillippe C. Schmitter and Guillermo O'Donnell – familiar with the emergence in the 1970s of 'new authoritarianism' in Latin America

– had already emphasised even before the fall of the Wall that transitions do not necessarily lead to democracy; they may equally as well lead to authoritarian regressions, to revolutions or to hybrid regimes (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Samuel Huntington additionally reported in the early 1990s on regime changes from democracy to authoritarianism, in particular that ‘the problems of consolidation could lead to further reversions in countries where the conditions for sustaining democracy were weak’ (Huntington [1991] 1993: 16). It is notable here that his model of waves of democratisation includes reverse waves – see Table 3.

Table 3 – Huntington’s model of waves of democratisation

First, long wave of democratization	1882 – 1926
First reverse wave	1922 – 1942
Second, short wave of democratization	1943 – 1962
Second reverse wave	1958 – 1975
Third wave of democratization	1974 –

Source: Huntington [1991] 1993: 16.

The emergence of diverse forms of – and even deviation from – democracy paved the way to a plethora of new concepts, including: ‘uncertain democracy’ (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986); ‘illiberal democracy’ (Zakaria 1997); ‘semi-democracy’ or ‘pseudo-democracy’ (Ágh 1998); ‘defective democracy’ (Merkel 2004); ‘post-democracy’ (Crouch 2004); ‘Potemkin façade democracy’ (Schippele 2013); and ‘clientelistic democracy’ (Klíma 2019). Many more similar terms have followed: ‘low-intensity democracy’; ‘democracy by default’; ‘quasi democracy’; ‘poor democracy’; ‘poorly institutionalised democracy’; ‘empty democracy’; etc. And there are, no doubt, more to come.

Behind the debates over word choices, David Collier and Steven Levitsky put their finger on the main issue: ‘Diminished subtypes are useful for characterizing hybrid regimes, but they raise the issue of whether these regimes should in fact be treated as subtypes of democracy, rather than subtypes of authoritarianism or some other concept’ (Collier and Levitsky 1997: 450). Are we in the presence of democracy, non-democracy or post-democracy?

These subtypes indicate simultaneously a hesitancy, a willingness not to take sides while nevertheless suggesting one’s choice. This indecision was supposed to be treated in the mid-1990s by the shift from ‘transitology’ to ‘consolidology’: consolidation as the institutionalisation of the new rules of the ‘political game’. This meant establishing a new consensus and a stabilising of the political order, the whole acting as a deep and widespread legitimisation of democracy. At stake is a tricky issue: determining the cut-off point separating democracy from non-democracy. As for the shift from transition to transformation, the debates here were again heated and divergences surfaced (Diamond and Plattner 2001).

From consolidation to de-consolidation

While not all scholars agree about de-consolidation or non-democracy, there is consensus that the quality of democracy is decreasing and that the functioning of institutions is problematic. We turn directly here to the position in the western Balkans.

Florian Bieber, referring to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index data,² notes that the situation of the western Balkans is slightly different to that of the broader region of east-central Europe: 'Given that none of the countries in the region could be considered consolidated democracies, regression within the large bracket of hybrid regimes is less noticeable' (Bieber 2020: 6). The term 'stabilitocracy' mirrors the idea of stagnation, summarised by the 2017 report of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group:

The result has been the rise of a regional 'stabilitocracy', weak democracies with autocratically minded leaders, who govern through informal, patronage networks and claim to provide pro-Western stability in the region. As this study details, the status of democracy is weak, and declining. The safeguards, such as independent media and strong institutions, are failing, and clientelism binds many citizens to ruling elites through cooption and coercion. (BiEPAG 2017: 7)

In the same vein, Bieber outlines the following sequencing paving the way to new brands of authoritarianism: the delayed collapse of communist rule (compared to east-central Europe); semi-authoritarian regimes in the 1990s; late democratisation; and the absence of consolidation in the 2000s (Ramet 2005; Jarstad and Sisk 2008). As with any periodisation, this one could also be misleading but Bieber has the merit of developing a truly dynamic understanding of authoritarian rule:

The cases we are discussing are not consolidated democracies (a somewhat misleading term in itself) becoming hybrid regimes with authoritarian features, but a move toward more authoritarianism within the sizeable gray zone where most countries find themselves. (Bieber 2020: 8)

Bieber further highlights the eight key mechanisms of authoritarian regimes in the region: the constant state of crisis; the dynamics of stabilitocracy; the rise of new external actors; state capture and weak institutions; weak opposition and civil society; strongmen being in charge; nationalism; and a loyal media. Of course, they are present in each country in a different way, varying according to the period being taken into consideration. Following the individual regimes over time, observing when and how they became more or less authoritarian, the author also insists on the paradox that authoritarianism is increasing as the region formally moves closer to the EU.

There are of course many variations of authoritarian regimes: this can be tested empirically, but they can also be normatively evaluated. Referring to 'competitive

- 2 The BTI's definition of democracy goes beyond free elections and political participation: it includes the functioning of the rule of law and the state as well as the acceptance, representation and political culture of the democratic system.

authoritarian regimes’ – regimes that combine competitive elections with serious violations of democratic procedure (a concept coined by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010)) – Bieber considers, on the one hand, Serbia since 2012, Montenegro, and North Macedonia between 2006-08 and 2017 as three examples of clear competitive authoritarian regimes; on the other hand, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are partially competitive authoritarian regimes (Bieber 2018: 340).

All in all, the second post-Wall decade (2000s) showed the return, or otherwise the persistence, of an authoritarian pattern; a trend that was consolidated in the third post-Wall decade (2010s). Developing his analysis further, Bieber considers that ‘the region varies in terms of the extent of autocratic rule, but the patterns that autocrats draw upon are similar’ (Bieber 2020: 33). This brings him to distinguish various types of autocratic rule, as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 – Bieber’s types of autocratic rule in the western Balkans

Montenegro	Continuing change from within
Serbia	Return to semi-authoritarianism
North Macedonia	New semi-authoritarianism
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Ethnocratic authoritarianism
Kosovo	Authoritarianism under international tutelage
Croatia	Conservatism without authoritarianism
Albania	Structural polarization

Source: Bieber (2020: 33-35).

In global perspective, populism, extremism, organised crime, corruption and the influence of external actors are – beyond the above-mentioned variations – common trends in the Balkans. This suggests the existence of a mutually-enforcing ‘snowballing effect’, or contamination, as prominently illustrated by the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia.³ That said, autocrats follow their own path according to whether or not others cooperate with their interests. When needed, the ties to authoritarian regimes elsewhere are there. Of course, authoritarianism is a worldwide trend and not a regional particularism of central and eastern Europe.

While the mechanisms are limited to the few mentioned, the shared causes are manifold and amount to a shopping list:

- successive interwoven crises (the transformation crisis, the (post-)accession crisis and the global competitiveness crisis)
- the fragility of imported institutions
- the absence of multilevel governance and multidimensional governance
- the power of informal networks

3 In November 2018, Nikola Gruevski, escaping a prison sentence for abuse of office, received asylum in Hungary.

- rebranded nationalism (that can be partly attributed to the ever-expanding process of European integration)
- the (re)depoliticisation and (re)demobilisation strategy (Ágh 2019: 160)
- governments working in a ‘crisis management’ style
- vulnerability in the emerging new world order
- the often neglected urban-rural divide
- regional networks working below and above state level.

These trends, as well as those delivered by the detailed investigations available in the academic literature, suggest three comments. First, when focusing on a country-by-country approach, no one-size-fits-all type emerges. Second, when opting instead for a comparative method, the common trends become evident. Furthermore, Bieber recognises that ‘many similarities exist between the Western Balkans and the “Eastern Balkans,” that is, Romania and Bulgaria, as well as Central Europe’ (Bieber 2020: 5). Third, the conceptualisation may fluctuate but, overall, we can conclude we are in between ‘democratic breakdown’ (i.e. transition from democracy to a hybrid or authoritarian regime) and ‘democratic regression’ (i.e. transition through a loss of democratic quality).

At this point, we may ask if we are assessing the warning signs of a forthcoming third reverse wave. Relying on the records of the first and second reverse waves, Huntington ([1991] 1993: 292-293) identifies six potential causes of a third reverse wave:

1. the systemic failure of democratic regimes to operate effectively could undermine their legitimacy
2. more specifically, a general international economic collapse on the 1929-30 model could undermine the legitimacy of democracy in many countries
3. a shift to authoritarianism by any democratic or democratising great power could trigger similar snowballing actions in other countries
4. even if a major country did not revert to authoritarianism, the shift to dictatorship by several newly democratic countries because they lacked many of the usual preconditions for democracy could possibly undermine democracy in other countries where those preconditions were strong
5. if a non-democratic state greatly developed its power and began to expand beyond its borders, this too could stimulate authoritarian movements in other countries
6. as in the 1920s and the 1960s, various forms of authoritarianism could again emerge that seem appropriate to the needs of the times.

From deconsolidation to de-democratisation

The arguments presented in this article tend to demonstrate that the causes of a reverse wave, as suggested by Huntington, retain their relevance today and suggest that we are facing a de-consolidation of democracy and, indeed, de-democratisation.

Attempting to define the concept of de-consolidation, the members of the five-year research project *Challenges to Democracies in East Central Europe* – published in 2016 – proposed to take indicators of consolidation and reverse the definition:

Democracy starts to deconsolidate when it undergoes at least two elections marked by violence, when changes of government are not accepted by the main political camps, when electoral volatility rises, when anti-system parties not only exist but increase in relevance, and finally, as Linz put it, when democracy promotion as ‘the only game in town’ declines. (Dufek *et al.* 2016: 7)

Andrew Roberts questions this conceptualisation of de-consolidation. Referring to the five selected elements (i.e. populism, extremism, organised crime, corruption and the influence of external actors), he asks if they are ‘the causes of deconsolidation, a part of deconsolidation itself or the consequences of deconsolidation?’. The answer is not obvious and the author goes on to suggest that ‘a broader account of consolidation, however, might be able to encompass some or all of these elements’ (Roberts 2016: 132).

Two arguments are to be made here. First, democracy cannot be reduced to mummified institutions: the institutional settings are various and evolving, changing over time (Rosanvallon 2008: 2). Nor can democracy be reduced to indisputable categorisation. As a matter of fact, democracy itself – as a reality and as a concept – is, instead of stable, essentially ‘floating’, as Rosanvallon insists upon in this key text:

It is thus on the basis of its indeterminacy, its tensions, and its contradictions that one must build a theory of democracy. Far from simply referring to a practical uncertainty concerning the conditions under which it is organized institutionally, *democracy’s floating meaning is fundamental to its essence*. It evokes a *type of regime that has never ceased resisting undeniable categorization*. This is, moreover, the source of the distinctive malaise which underpins its history. The parade of deceptions and the sense of betrayal that have always accompanied it have been all the more intense insofar as its definition continues to be incomplete. This vagueness is the inner spring of a quest and dissatisfaction that struggle, by the same token, to become explicit. To understand democracy, one must begin with this fact, in which the history of a disenchantment blends into the history of an indeterminacy. (Rosanvallon 2019: 28 – emphasis added)

As Bieber also recalls – in the framework of a process-oriented analysis encompassing gradual changes – de-democratisation occurs ‘within a large gray zone between consolidated democracy and authoritarianism’ (Bieber 2020: 7) with back and forths. In this way, western Balkans regimes can be seen as surfing between waves of formal democracy and informal authoritarianism.

In a broader framework, but absolutely in line with what has just been exposed, Charles Tilly pinpoints that: ‘Democratization is a dynamic process that always remains incomplete and perpetually runs the risk of reversal – of de-democratization. Closely related processes, moving in opposite directions, produce both democratization and de-democratization’ (Tilly 2007: ix). This may or may not occur simultaneously. For the latter, the case of France may be remembered: from 1789, the country underwent at least three periods of de-democratisation. Overall, the history of France is thus made up of democracy and its reversals. Switzerland and other countries also illustrate similar oscillation. Of greater concern to our regional focus, large clusters of regimes in Europe experimented between 1900 and 1949 with a hot-tempered back and forth between democratisation and de-democratisation. Recent develop-

ments in the western Balkans, notably the case of Serbia, illustrate a very similar wavering.

Second, and close to a path dependency approach, understanding (de-) democratisation requires us to combine formality and informality. Explaining democratic backsliding in central and eastern Europe, Jacques Rupnik and Jan Zielonka highlight that informal networks – often clientelist networks rooted in corruption, or networks of party patronage – are particularly potent ‘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’ (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013: 12).

There are thus two aspects that matter herein: the role of informal networks but also, and above all, the combination of formality and informality at state, society and community levels.⁴ Actually, it is the mixture of both that drives the process of the emptying-out of democracy. Meanwhile, the social and political fabric – semi, full, soft, hard – of authoritarian regimes in the wider region is determined in several ways: by simultaneously gaming on several levels; the state of permanent oscillation between democratisation and de-democratisation; a democratic façade hiding autocratic internal workings; the rhetoric of change and ‘stabilitocracy’; and formality and informality.

Bieber, focusing on the western Balkans, reloads this approach and includes a time machine: ‘As the democratic breakthroughs [of the late 1990s] were incomplete revolutions, they left many of the structural features and the personnel of the previous regimes in place.’ Accordingly, ‘by the late 2000s, new authoritarian patterns had emerged that synthesized the authoritarianism of the 1990s with their democratic successors’ (Bieber 2020: 28). Digging into the social fabric, we can somehow approach what Roberts alluded to in his reference to a ‘broader account of consolidation’.

As with other objects of study – privatisation, welfare state reforms, system of governance, regional dynamics, etc. – so here with defective democracy, authoritarianism and de-democratisation, we can see that the three structural elements in the analysis highlighted by François Bafoil are at work. First, there is ‘The absence of a complete break in historical trajectories.’ Second, we need to explore ‘the capacity of individuals and groups, who find in their own experiences and former trajectories the necessary resources to resist or to cushion the effects of the new rules of the game.’ And third, we have ‘the possibility of incorporating the notion of change or innovation into the very heart of causal series regarded as so many recomposed lines of development that are, ultimately, open to sudden bifurcations’ (Bafoil 2009: 13-14). I would add a fourth, often neglected, dimension: the specific role of fear and political hysteria in central and eastern Europe – magisterially studied by István Bibó who, in the late 1940s, sent us his warning message: democracy is a fragile phenomenon; in

4 My analysis of (in)formality focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina was first presented in September 2003 at Brown University and in 2004 at Humboldt University (see Solioz 2007: 68).

some historical constellation it collapses and sinks into the vortex of fear and communal hysteria (Bibó 2015).

Summing up, instead of democratisation and de-democratisation being forces in opposition, we observe that both are, instead, continuous and interconnected processes related to democracy and not (necessarily) to non-democracy. Of course, this simultaneity manufactures an ambiguity characterising what different authors conceive of as the ‘politics of uncertainty’ (Scoones and Stirling 2020). These truly process-oriented dimensions are precisely what I am attempting to express using the term of (de-)democratisation.

While having clarified some points, one question remains open, however: how do we distribute countries on a continuum from non-democracy to democracy?

It matters that we capture the ‘software’ involved in this specific dialectical process. Tilly suggests that three central clusters of changes could explain democratisation and de-democratisation:

- (1) Increase or decrease of integration between interpersonal networks of trust (e.g., kinship, religious membership, and relationships within trades) and public politics.
- (2) Increase or decrease in the insulation from public politics of the major categorical inequalities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class, caste) around which citizens organize their daily lives.
- (3) Increase or decrease in the autonomy of major power centers (especially those wielding significant coercive means) such as warlords, patron-client chains, armies, and religious institutions with respect to public politics. (Tilly 2007: 23)

One issue is of particular interest within the western Balkans. Looking at past reversals of democracy, what strikes us is the speed: de-democratisation occurs much faster than democratisation. What the history books tell us is that, even where citizens’ passivity facilitated the dismantling of democracy, rapid de-democratisation resulted not from popular disaffection with democracy but chiefly from elite defection. As for the opposite, revolution or similar shocks accelerate democratisation. In summarising the issues at stake, Tilly prompts this interesting insight:

De-democratization occurs in the course of rulers’ and elites’ responses to what they experience as regime crises, most obviously represented by threats to their own power. Democratization usually occurs in state response (however reluctant) to popular demands, after crises have eased. As a result, de-democratization generally occurs more rapidly, and with much greater central direction, than democratization. (Tilly 2007: 58)

At the time of writing, we can scarcely see any possibility of a ‘shock’ in the region. The 2014 Bosnian protests did not last and neither did they initiate a ‘Balkan Spring’ (see also Bieber 2013, referring to an earlier bout of protests). Diverse, autocratic regimes admittedly seem to be able to absorb such movements and carry on with their strategy of emptying-out democracy – which, of course, reinforces demobilisation and citizens’ passivity and offers the ‘prospect’ only of emigration.

I would thus be very cautious at predicting a process of re-democratisation for the forthcoming decade. What will more probably be the case is an ongoing oscillation between democracy and non-democracy.

Conclusions

Almost twenty-five years after the fall of state socialism Ivan Krastev writes, in assessment of the post-1989 order:

The post-1989 liberal order is unraveling before our eyes, in three distinct but interrelated ways: 1) The West is losing power and influence in the international system, as reflected in a rising China, a resurgent Russia, and a proliferating number of armed conflicts in different parts of the globe. 2) The Western model of market democracy is losing its universal appeal, as we can see from the widespread backlash now taking place against globalization, understood as the free movement of goods, capital, ideas, and people around the world. 3) The West's own liberal-democratic regimes are facing an internal crisis that is usually summed up as 'the rise of populism'. (Krastev 2016: 5)

While nationalist populism is a trans-European phenomenon, the roots of illiberal populism in east-central Europe and the Balkans 'lie in the closing of the post-1989 liberal cycle, accompanied by the exhaustion of ideological projects inherited from the twentieth century and the parallel erosion of the hitherto prevailing party system' (Rupnik 2017: 83).

In between democracy and non-democracy, populism remains an ambivalent phenomenon; it is playing with this ambivalence that renders it its strength. Rosanvallon considers populism as a symptom of the intrinsic malaise of democracy, a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of democracy and a response to the failure of democratic representation and the transformation of modern society. For all that expressing indignation, denouncing and opposing may make sense, what matters more is to give an answer on the merits. To denounce the authoritarian and illiberal trends of populism convinces only those who are already convinced.

Populism presents the (ideal) people as a homogeneous unit, but the (social) people never speak with one voice. It matters that we are capable of capturing this distinction between 'ideal' people and 'social' people, as well as – albeit at another level – another one: between the majority will and the general will. While populism promises the merger of both dimensions, democracy promises to connect them by elections and representation. Rosanvallon considers that populism envisions the affirmation of totality – i.e. the re-establishment of a homogeneous unity. But democratic society is too diverse, too plural and too transformable to form a coherent unit; the voice of the majority will never be the expression of the general will.

Rosanvallon's concept of 'democracy's floating meaning' relates to 'democratic indeterminacy' and thus expresses the idea that democracy is an open-ended project. Opposing counter-democracy supposes that we are able to offer an alternative. Among the options proposed by Rosanvallon as counterbalance to the simplistic temptations of populism are to complicate and to multiply democracy instead of seeking to simplify it (Rosanvallon 2020: 252). In this way, we should extend the rights of citizens, increase the plurality of voices and expressions to let the people speak and, in consequence 'multiply... the terms of a continuous democracy', making it polyphonic. Populism rests on exactly the opposite. Democracy remains, the same as Europe itself, *An Unfinished Adventure* (Bauman 2004).

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