The paradox of minority accommodation: Eastern Europe after 30 years

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Abstract
The article discusses some of the paradoxes of minority accommodation in Eastern Europe 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the course of doing so, it focuses on four specific issues: volatility, sequencing, a shift from nationalism (group) to social conservatism (grid), and on the radicalisation of mainstream parties. Volatility is tied to the ebb and flow of shifts in the status quo associated with minority accommodation, which elucidates both why radical right mobilisation accelerates and why it loses steam. The expansion of minority rights leads to political ‘extreme reactions’. Sequencing matters since minority accommodation coincided with democratisation in Eastern Europe, so the struggle over minority rights is confounded with a concurrent regime change. Shifts from group to grid refer to the recent rise in socially conservative issues as sources of polarisation. Finally, extremist parties can threaten democratic pluralism. Nevertheless, large radicalised mainstream parties that control parliaments, not small extremist parties, subvert the institutions of democratic oversight. The threat originates from the mainstream and is exacerbated by the fact that liberal democracy has not ‘locked in’ in most of Eastern Europe.

Keywords Central and Eastern Europe · Liberal democracy · Polarisation · Minority rights · Radical right

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the East European political landscape is filled with contradictions.¹ Eleven of the post-communist countries and East Germany are now among the 27 members of the European Union (EU), and many more are within Europe’s geo-political orbit. Although the EU accession presented East Europeans with many new opportunities, it also drained the newly opened countries

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of their human capital, some more than others, since millions of young and skilled workers migrated to the West. Between 1991 and 2015, for instance, the Baltic States and Bulgaria lost more than one-fifth of their populations. While stores have been flooded with new merchandise, Eastern markets have also become a dumping ground for consumer goods of inferior quality. New parliaments in the region swiftly embedded the _acquis communautaire_ in their laws, yet politicians weaponised new democratic institutions against their political opponents (Vachudova 2019).

Courts were intended to safeguard the rule of law but remain politicised. Chief justice of the Slovak Supreme Court Štefan Harabin threatened a former justice and interior minister Daniel Lipšic from an opposition political camp with a public statement: ‘you will go to jail, bastard’. Harabin, who seamlessly affiliates with both mainstream and extremist parties as an independent jurist, also argued during his presidential run in 2019 that gender ideology is a perversion that leads to the degeneration of the nation. Media boards instituted after 1989 were designed to oversee free press. Tracing recent politics of media regulation in Poland, Surowiec et al. (2020) show that captured public media facilitate illiberalism. Free markets are vulnerable too, since state advertising can be used as a powerful tool of political favoritism. Bátorfy and Urbán (2020) demonstrate how media market distortions strengthen Viktor Orbán’s grip on power in Hungary. A newly appointed ombudsman for human rights in the Czech Republic, Stanislav Křeček, stated that ‘everybody is claiming some sort of rights these days’ and pleaded to defend ordinary citizens against ‘the harassment of state institutions that defend minority rights’ (Tabery 2020). After 3 decades, liberal democracy took a shallow root in Eastern Europe.

The process of expanding minority rights presents us with perhaps the greatest paradox of all. After 1989, Eastern Europe marched forward rapidly in the domain of minority rights, but simultaneously witnessed the emergence and growth of new radical right parties. By 2020, most national boundaries in Eastern Europe have been settled (Siroky and Hale 2017). Most countries have overcome the initial wave of nationalist mobilisation (Beissinger 2002) and then endured protracted negotiations over majority-minority relations (Jenne 2014). Minority protection and diversity, especially after the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, has become a cornerstone of European values, and is required of all acceding states, including all of the aspiring states (Vachudova 2005). However, the emergence of this powerful new international norm has caught many countries off guard, and in some cases political polarisation and backlash has ensued, leading some scholars to question the prospect of an illiberal turn among Eastern European democracies.

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In discussing some of the paradoxes of minority accommodation in Eastern Europe, I wish to focus attention on four primary issues: volatility, sequencing, shift in focus from ethnic groups toward sexual minorities, and the radicalisation of mainstream parties.

Party system stability is a precursor to democratic stability (Kitschelt et al. 1999). Volatility, on the contrary, can undermine young democracies (Tavits 2008). Volatility shortens time horizons, which undermines the credibility of elaborate policy promises and motivates voters to seek populist short-cuts. It is, therefore, important to understand its origins and consequences. As I have previously argued, radical right mobilisation is inherently cyclical and sporadic (Bustikova 2020). As minorities and their advocates are pushed back, the perceived urgency of reifying the dominant ethnic group and its leading position diminishes. However, power-seeking minorities eventually regroup and offer their services to major parties in exchange for favors, and new demands arise. With time, new identities may emerge and new issues may enter the political arena. As a result, minorities that have been silent in the past have incentives to adapt to national and global circumstances and to issue fresh demands. Radical right mobilisation mirrors such situational shifts, and thus any theory must incorporate these dynamics if it aims to predict the variable fortunes of radical right parties over time.

Volatility is a dynamic process that mirrors animosity between political friends and foes. As long as minorities and their advocates seek and secure concessions from the majority, radical right parties are here to stay. If radical right parties are already vocal, mainstream parties need to consider how best to fine-tune policies that grant concessions to minorities. This iterated dynamic of minority demands and majority pushback over several electoral cycles can create an equilibrium that eventually satisfies both the dominant and the minority group, and can gradually expand minority rights in the long run. Iterated cycles of contestation can eventually reduce polarisation of the party system. In the short run however, if mainstream parties are prepared to accommodate the demands of a politically mobilised minority, they ought to be prepared for the ensuing backlash as well. In Eastern Europe, parties quarrel over language policies; elsewhere, politicians argue over head-coverings and housing subsidies for ethnic minorities. The vehicles of accommodation change with the context, but the fact that the accommodation of minorities polarises the electorate and creates a political backlash is universal.

For example, in the span of just a few years, the radical right party Jobbik, which is now the second largest party in Hungary, shifted its platform away from the one that was antagonistic toward Jews, toward a platform that mobilised against Islamic refugees from the Middle East. Yet, a political opportunity arose to weaken Prime Minister Orbán’s party Fidesz and Jobbik seized it. In 2016, Jobbik rejected Orbán’s referendum on the EU’s compulsory refugee resettlement quota. Jobbik chairman

6 Paradoxically, if minorities stay silent and nobody advocates on their behalf, radical right mobilisation should not follow. On the relationship between European Union’s advocacy on behalf of minorities and backlash see: Hlatky (2020).
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Gábor Vona called the referendum an ‘extortion’ and called on Orbán to resign if the referendum fails.⁷

Jobbik also went on to declare its support for the Palestinian state and (conservative) Christian European values, while simultaneously drawing on support from rebellious youth movements and rock-bands. Jobbik’s vitriolic incitement against Roma, which constitutes an important part of their anti-minority platform, has also fluctuated over the years from severe to rather mild. These quick, reactive shifts reflect the strategic nature of identity politics and the erratic salience of minority groups in domestic politics.

If contestation of minority rights polarises party systems, it can be destabilising. At the same time, it broadens inclusion and creates new forms of accountability. Younger and older democracies may react differently to such framing. Older democracies ought to be more resilient, having lived through decades of political contestation and having already successfully absorbed (some) ascending minorities into the mainstream in the past through the democratic process. Resilience can also arise from a deeply internalised memory of overcoming past democratic breakdowns associated with violent, state-sponsored, killing of minorities (e.g., Western Germany). Paradoxically, the absence of a self-reflection over a historic trauma can leave some democracies unprepared to deal with right-wing mobilisation. Similarly, if national narratives have not been subjected to scrutiny, they often default to the victimhood of the majority.

For example, the director of the Lidice Memorial in the Czech Republic, Martina Lehmannová, was forced to resign in January 2020 because she challenged the dominant narrative of victimhood in the Czech Republic.⁸ Lidice was a small village, razed to the ground in 1942 by Nazis. Its inhabitants were killed or transported to concentration camps as punishment for the assassination of Acting Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich by the Czech resistance movement. The Memorial is a symbol of Czech suffering. However, the (now) former director of the Memorial did not immediately dismiss a historical study of Lidice, which suggested that one of the Lidice victims reported her Jewish tenant to the Gestapo a week before the tragedy. As the Czech liberal weekly Respekt summarised it: ‘as a Jewess, she is not part of the tragedy’ (Lauder 2020:10).

Under normal circumstances, this conflict would run its due course among academics, civil society, the victims and public officials. Yet Lidice, as an example of Czech victimhood, had always played an important role in the communist interpretation of the past, which minimised suffering of other ethnic or religious groups during the war. It is therefore no coincidence that the leadership of the communist party, which is now in a silent coalition with the far right, the ruling party ANO and social democrats, pressured the Minister of Culture to sack the director. The


social democrats, the junior partner of ANO, were in a vulnerable situation, since the coalition depends on the support of communist MPs in the parliament. Minister Zaorálek thus forced Director Lehmannová out. This seemingly trivial ‘quibble’ reflects a much deeper political schism between the successors of the authoritarian communist regime, who have rejected any notions of historical contestation, and those who are willing to broaden the category of victims in the Czech lands. Even today, the communist regime divide determines the outcome of majority-minority contestations in a new democracy.

**Sequencing** matters because it frames the culpability of elites in the eyes of the voters. In older democracies, electoral democracy gradually evolved into a liberal democracy. The suffrage expanded and over time, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities have demanded rights and become incorporated into diverse voting coalitions. Political institutions adapted. In the East, the sequence was fast, because regime change and democratisation just barely preceded changes in minority rights. The process of democratisation immediately facilitated the expansion of minority rights, following the collapse of autocratic regimes across the region, and soon a plurality of voices entered competitive political arenas. In Western and Southern Europe, by contrast, the democratic opening occurred much earlier, and the struggle over minority rights was not associated with a concurrent regime change. In the eyes of nationalistic politicians such as Paweł Kukiz, Jarosław Kaczyński, Marian Kotleba, or Tomio Okamura, liberal political elites who committed new democracies to the protection of minority rights betrayed national sovereignty.

Radical right parties—both in Western and Eastern Europe—respond to the political successes of minorities and seek to counterbalance their political gains (Bustikova 2020). Whereas radical right parties in Western Europe often target immigrants, this is less the case in Eastern Europe with the exception of a short-lived over-reaction to the 2016 refugee crisis. In general, the logic of the argument applies to all groups that mobilise on identity (e.g., religious groups, sexual minorities, immigrant groups), as long as these groups find advocates and allies willing to fight for their advancement, and this results in a (real or threatened) shift in the status quo. On this count, any such politicised accommodation can provoke a political backlash that benefits radical right parties. I argue that accommodation polarises party systems.

Democratic decay is often attributed to polarisation (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Vachudova 2019; Guasti and Mansfeldová 2018), although it is still not clear whether polarisation precedes or follows democratic backsliding (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; cf. Chiru et al. 2018). The effects of polarisation can be conditional on party systems. Polarisation in centripetal systems can facilitate democratic decay if one party dominates and seizes power. Polarisation in centrifugal systems can paradoxically curb decay. Larger parties must compromise with junior partners such as ethnic parties, radical right parties or other small political entities. Fragmentation weakens the majority. Therefore, if polarising identity politics strengthens a radical right niche party, it can also inadvertently act as a wall against the dominant rule of a large radicalised mainstream party. Radicalised mainstream parties cannot dismantle counter-majoritarian institutions and cannot wipe out small competitors in centrifugal party systems. In centripetal systems, on the contrary, they build party machines via executive aggrandisement (Bermeo 2016) in order to lock in
constitutional changes that curb pluralism and political competition (e.g., Aprasidze and Siroky 2020). Large unconstrained parliamentary majorities can emerge in a disproportional electoral system that over-compensates winners with seats, eliminates veto players and gerrymanders districts.

Illiberal civil society can also contribute to democratic decay, particularly when it steers political discourse toward intolerance, stigmatises compromise as treason, and transforms illiberal activism into voting for parties with illiberal agendas (Minkenberg, 2015; Pirro et al. 2019). Mobilised illiberal civil society emboldens illiberal political actors. In its extreme form, it can even contribute to democratic collapse (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Berman 1997; Fritzsche 1990; Bernhard 2020; Greskovits 2020; Kopecky and Mudde 2003; cf. Gzymala-Busse 2015; Guasti 2016). However, if the liberal opposition mobilises in response to illiberal assaults, illiberal mobilisation may stimulate civic participation (O’Dwyer 2018a, b; Bustikova et al. 2020). The actions of illiberal civic society can increase civic activism and can motivate citizens to more actively defend liberal democratic values (Bernhard et al. 2020). Ultimately, the effect of illiberal civil society on democratic decay is contingent on its ability to shape party competition as well as on the ability of the liberal civil society to respond in kind and to mobilise voters.

In the first 2 decades after the fall of the Berlin wall, contestation over ethnicity was a predominant source of polarisation. However, the polarising power of ethnicity seems to be receding and contestation over socially conservative issues is on the rise. New battle lines are formed around reproductive rights, sexuality and religious minorities. According to a recent study, ‘[Eastern Europe] has unexpectedly become a battleground for the social-conservative agenda and actors that support traditional families…[and] is now caught in between two significant currents—global cleavages that pitch liberal and illiberal global forces against each other’ (Guasti and Bustikova 2020:16).

As Eastern Europe faces demographic decline due to low birth rates and out-migration, reproduction and female representation in politics become politicised (Rashkova 2020). Future labor shortages and pressures on welfare states due to aging can be resolved either by robots, in-migration or higher birth rates. Since both contemporary populists and even most mainstream politicians in Eastern Europe are not interested in robots and have rejected migration, they have to opt for policies that support so-called ‘traditional families’ with the hope that it will lead to higher birth-rates. Natality has become a serious political concern in all Visegrad four countries. In the last 2 years, the ruling party SMER in Slovakia, ANO in the Czech Republic, Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland, substantially boosted child allowances to support families.

Social conservative agendas coupled with benefits are well received by the electorate. According to Szczerbiak (2019), the popularity of the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland can be attributed to their child subsidy program. It provides ‘a significant and clearly identifiable financial boost to many low-income households who felt frustrated that they had not shared sufficiently in Poland’s post-communist economic transformation.’ In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has promised that women who have four or more children will never pay income tax again. In his annual address, he added: ‘In all of Europe there are fewer and fewer children, and the answer of the
West to this is migration … We Hungarians have a different way of thinking … we want Hungarian children. Migration for us is surrender.' 9

Liberal democracy and its cornerstone, minority protection, have lost appeal due to the perfect storm of three major events. The wave of refugees from the Middle East to Europe coincided with the aftershocks of the 2008 economic crisis. In addition, massive demographic contraction, accelerated by out-migration of young, skilled workers to the West, opened the doors for the spread of illiberal ideas of radicalised mainstream parties, spearheaded in Eastern Europe by Hungary and Poland. Radicalised mainstream parties are aspiring dominant parties (Greene 2007; Magaloni 2006; Buštíková 2018) with a wide portfolio of issues, typically combining economic populism with exclusionary identity politics. Examples of such parties include Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, SMER in Slovakia, ANO in the Czech Republic, and Georgian Dream in Georgia.

First, the 2008 economic crisis undercut the legitimacy of mainstream politicians as problem solvers. It also exposed the limits of global economic integration. Second, the 2016 refugee crisis politicised minority inclusion and unleashed deep-seated anxieties of dominant majorities that nation states are under attack. Third, faced with labor shortages and reduced fertility, radicalised mainstream parties embraced pro-natality policies, traditional gender roles and anti-LGBT rhetoric to replenish their respective nations. Illiberal ideology was also utilised instrumentally to justify power grabs (Bustikova and Guasti 2017).

It has often been assumed that threats to experiments in democratic pluralism originate from (left or right) extremist parties. In Eastern Europe, such niche parties do not have the muscle to subvert the institutions of democratic oversight but mainstream parties do. Redistributive radicalised mainstream parties threaten the liberal trajectory that has characterised recent decades. They either adapt or strategically use the rhetoric of minority exclusion to achieve political power and to roll back liberal democratic institutions. The threat originates from the mainstream, and is exacerbated by the fact that liberal democracy in most of Eastern Europe has still not ‘locked in’ after 30 years.

References


9 Source: Viktor Orbán: No tax for Hungarian women with four or more children. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/10/viktor-orban-no-tax-for-hungarian-women-with-four-or-more-children.


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