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Analyzing Dedemocratization in Central-Eastern Europe. Review of Theoretical Categories

Introduction

The widely discussed thesis of the victory of liberal democracy in post-cold war era (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 14) led to a renewed interest in studying the withdrawal of political systems from the ideal type of democracy (Cassani, Tomini, 2020, p. 272). Nevertheless, while democracy is often described as perpetually in crisis, what is unique in the present period is its apparent loss of self-correcting capacity (Krashev, 2013, p. 28). Considering effects of third way of democratization, alongside new challenges emerging in the 21st century, scholars have increasingly sought to identify and explore various forms of deviation from democratic norms. This shift reflects a growing focus on the antinomy to the last wave of democratization (Cassani, Tomini, 2020, p. 272). Much of this research has concentrated on cases particularly vulnerable to autocratization in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In this paper, this trend is referred to as “terminological inflation” a phenomenon criticized for the proliferation of categories without clear, substantive distinctions or sufficient theoretical grounding.

The aim of this paper is to review the leading theoretical categories used in analyzing dedemocratization in CEE and to assess their applicability to the changes observed during the third wave of autocratization (2008–2019). The selection of categories is based on an in-depth literature review of works related to dedemocratization in CEE and transitology. The latter is understood as a sustained, non-violent, socially legitimized transition from the dominance of one political order to another (Holzer, Balík, 2009, p. 23).

The selection criteria were defined according to the categories’ relevance to studies on dedemocratization in CEE, particularly since 2008, which marks the beginning of the third wave of autocratization, as well as their semantic correspondence with Linz’s typology. In other words, the author selected those categories that remain central to the ongoing debate on Europe’s multidimensional crisis and that draw conceptually from Linz’s seminal work.

The paper begins by outlining key debates concerning the state of democracy after the end of cold war. Democratic consolidation is then identified as the foundation for reflecting on the condition of political systems after 1989. Subsequently, the paper analyzes major theoretical categories describing the processes behind declining dem-



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ocratic quality (see: Guasti, 2021; Meka, 2016; Markowski, 2019). This is followed by an exploration of categories describing the outcomes of these processes, including illiberal democracy, hybrid regimes, flawed democracy, and patronal autocracy. Finally, the paper discusses the practical application and limitations of these concepts in empirical research.

Overall, this paper offers a review of the main concepts and theoretical categories employed in studies on contemporary political systems. Additionally, it provides reflections on the use of these categories within the framework of transitology, highlighting their foundations and innovations in comparison to Linz's original assumptions. The author deliberately chose to refer only to Linz's classical works (2000; 1996, with Stepan), which served as the main references for the analyzed categories. Subsequent modifications and interpretations (e.g., Chehabi, Linz, 1998; Coppedge, Mainwaring, Valenzuela, 1998; Kingstone, Yashar, 2012; Alderman, 2018) are treated as distinct theoretical frameworks.

The selected categories were employed in analyses of political systems in CEE during the post-transition period. Since 2008, the region has exhibited an increasing withdrawal from liberal democratic norms. Accordingly, the present review of categories is deliberately confined to the specific contextual conditions shaping regime trajectories. The author concentrates on concepts pertinent to cases that share comparable experiences as former communist states engaged in the ongoing process of democratic consolidation.

The paper seeks to systematize existing approaches and to reduce categorical ambiguity by identifying their respective limitations and areas of application in studies of political system trajectories, viewed through the lens of Linz's typology and the theory of consolidation of political competition.

From “the end of the history” to waves of autocratization. Return in transition studies

The discussion about the state of democracy in the post-cold war period was shaped by the false assumption that post-authoritarian regimes would inevitably follow the Western European model of political competition (Holzer, Balík, 2020, p. 9). This assumption stemmed from the popularization of Fukuyama's (1997) “end of history” thesis, which predicted the global triumph of liberal democracy. This assumption was also manifested in studies on changes in CEE, what stemmed from “positivist accounts over more cautious interpretivist accounts” (Dawson et al., 2025, p. 476). However, in contrary, Barbara Geddes (Geddes, 1999, pp. 115–144) proposed three possible trajectories for post-authoritarian states, including backing to nondemocracy. Among the critical factors she identified were the level of economic development (Geddes, 1999, p. 177) and the degree of political awareness among citizens (Geddes, 1989, p. 319). Deficiencies in either of these factors, or both, significantly reduced the likelihood of successful democratic consolidation. Geddes later reiterated that democratization was only one of several possible outcomes, with the others including the survival of autocratic regimes (Geddes, Wright, Frantz, 2014). Thus, shortly after the third wave

of democratization, an approach emerged that explicitly questioned the “end of history” thesis by highlighting the durability of autocratic regimes, sustained by favorable configurations of economic and social conditions. Nonetheless, such critical perspectives remained largely overlooked until the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The resurgence of interest in autocracy studies was prompted by the rise of populism and extremism, both linked to the economic crisis of 2007–2009 (Gerschewski, 2013, p. 17).

Jan Holzer and Stanislav Balík (2009) argued that the transitions in CEE generally did not lead to democratic consolidation. Instead, most of these states experienced imperfect de-totalitarianization or developed new forms of non-democratic governance (Holzer, Balík, 2009, p. 7). They also conducted a critical analysis of dominant transitology approaches, contending that these were essentially adaptations of classical political science theories without the necessary modifications to account for the specificities of post-communist transitions (Holzer, Balík, 2009, p. 13). Their critique built upon the work of Juan Linz (Linz, 2000), asserting that after the initial phase of political liberalization, autocratic reversals remained possible, as illustrated by the example of Russia at the end of the 20th century (Holzer, Balík, 2009, p. 197). Similarly, Thomas Carothers observed that the transitional paradigm – predicting the inevitable success of democracy – had collapsed in the 21st century. He noted that many post-authoritarian states were either no longer undergoing democratic transition or had abandoned the goal of democratic consolidation, reverting instead to various forms of non-democratic governance (Carothers, 2002, p. 5).

The problem of democratic consolidation

A key challenge in studies of political system trajectories is the issue of consolidation – that is, determining which type of political competition rules hold a dominant position. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (Linz Stepan, 1996) defined the consolidation of a political order as the moment when its rules are recognized as the “only game in town.” This means that either democratic or non-democratic principles are accepted as the sole legitimate framework for political competition, enjoying broad consensus among both political elites and the public. Consequently, the emergence of “competing games” signals either the breakdown or the stagnation of consolidation. This occurs when consensus over the previously accepted rules is weakened or lost – whether partially or fully – among elites, the public, or both. As a result, these “new games” disrupt the deep internalization of certain principles at both the societal and institutional levels (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p. 5). They also noted that democratic consolidation does not follow a fixed pattern. Instead, they proposed describing it as a continuum, ranging from low to high levels of consolidation, assessed across five dimensions: civil society, political society, the rule of law, state bureaucracy, and the economic society (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p. 14). According to them, successful democratic consolidation requires the simultaneous fulfillment of several conditions: (1) procedures for the election of rulers must meet democratic standards; (2) elections must be free, equal, universal, and competitive; (3) newly elected representatives must possess legitimate authority

to govern; and (4) the separation of powers and institutional checks and balances must be effectively implemented (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p. 3).

In contrast to democratic consolidation Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk (2016) noted that post-authoritarian regimes can follow an alternative trajectory, which they describe as democratic deconsolidation. Referring directly to Linz's concept, they identified two primary drivers of deconsolidation: the crisis of welfare states in Western Europe and the rise of new forms of communication (Foa, Mounk, 2016). Together, these factors have eroded public trust in democratic and liberal institutions, leading to violations of democratic competition rules and/or increased support for anti-system political parties. In other words, deconsolidation describes a situation in which democracy ceases to function as the "only game in town."

The concept of democratic consolidation and its opposite remains the subject of ongoing debate in political science. On the one hand, scholars often use the term "consolidation" to describe a process rather than a fixed state of a political system (Dulęba, 2025, p. 200). On the other hand, some researchers challenge the assumption that deconsolidation is genuinely taking place. Łukasz Dulęba (2025) mapped two main schools of thought divided over the trajectory of democracies over the past 30 years. Erik Voeten (2017), Amy Alexander and Christian Welzel (2017), and Pippa Norris (2017) all presented critical perspectives on Foa and Mounk's thesis regarding the deconsolidation of democracy (see: Dulęba, 2025). In response to this debate, Dulęba proposed adopting the realist theory of democracy formulated by Christopher H. Achen and Larry Bartels (2016). At its core, this theory challenges the assumption of individual rationality in political decision-making – a position Dulęba views as a potential solution to the stalemate between proponents of deconsolidation and their critics (Dulęba, 2025, p. 205). From this perspective, deconsolidation is understood not as a direct consequence of declining trust in liberal democratic institutions, but rather as a result of societies losing effective control over policymaking processes. This approach does not dismiss the concept of deconsolidation outright but reframes its underlying causes. In other words, the emergence of "new games" in the political arena may have different origins than the erosion of faith in liberal institutions alone. In this view, the marginalization of the demos in policymaking plays a central role in pushing political systems towards non-democratic regimes. Dulęba's argument also suggests the need to reconsider the focus on "idealistic" factors, such as economic conditions and communication technologies, which may obscure more fundamental structural changes within political systems.

In summary, debates over the trajectories of political systems have largely centered on the establishment and durability of political competition rules. The appearance of non-democratic "games" indicates a failure of democratic consolidation and signals the advance of its antinomy. This suggests that the transitology framework has been shaped by a constant movement along the continuum between democracy and non-democracy. While the utility of consolidation as a tool for analyzing post-authoritarian regimes is broadly accepted, the idea of framing its opposite—deconsolidation—remains more contested. This ongoing skepticism reflects the enduring influence of the "end of history" paradigm, even 30 years after the peak of the third wave of democratization. According to this view, democracy may evolve but does not fundamentally collapse.

However, even if the concept of deconsolidation requires refinement, its outright rejection risks repeating the analytical mistakes of the 1990s, when most scholars failed to anticipate alternatives to the success of liberal democracy. The reluctance to construct theoretical categories that directly challenge the narrative of liberal democracy's general success can thus be seen as a form of idealistic thinking about the state of democracy. The trajectories of former autocracies provide evidence that it is not the idea of deconsolidation itself that is misleading, but rather the assumption that what we are witnessing is merely a transformation of democracy's nature, rather than its potential erosion.

Decay, erosion or regression vs. backsliding of democracy

At the outset of the debate on the antinomy of democratic consolidation, two of the leading theoretical categories were democratic erosion and democratic regression. Philip P. Cerny identified the former as a stage in which, despite the formal establishment of democratic rules of political competition, antidemocratic forces can gradually gain power. In his view, following the third wave of democratization, the erosion of democracy stemmed primarily from increasing social inequalities and the fragmentation of effective governance structures (Cerny, 1999). Similarly, Gero Erdmann and Marianne Kneuer (2013) conceptualized democratic erosion as a "slow death" of democracy, in contrast to the "rapid death" associated with democratic regression. Kneuer defined democratic erosion as the systematic efforts of anti-democratic actors within the political system to weaken its institutional structures in ways that facilitate its eventual transformation into a non-democratic regime (Kneuer, 2021, p. 5). The essence of this process involves anti-democratic forces assuming power, supported by loyal social groups, and using their position to create opportunities to alter institutional frameworks in order to secure their dominance (Kneuer, 2021, p. 16). This triangulation of factors makes the concept of democratic erosion particularly useful for analyzing developments in post-communist states. It means that the erosion of democracy in CEE (Guasti, 2021) rising from presence antidemocrats in post-transition period and using new political institutions against democratic rules of competition. Therefore, in post-communist states following factors were necessary to "slow death" of democracy: surviving authoritarian actors, breakdown of economic conditions in new market environment and weakness of rules about political competition and established institutions. The latter were captured by antidemocrats to undermine post-transition regime. In turn, economic conditions led to rising inequalities, which create a support for enemies of democracy. As a results, after 20 years post-transition regimes were on course to re-established undemocratic political competition there.

In contrast, democratic regression has been understood as the transition from democracy to one of three possible outcomes: (1) a decline in democratic quality within existing democracies, (2) the emergence of hybrid regimes, or (3) the re-establishment of autocracy (Erdmann, Kneuer, 2013). In other words, regression refers to a deterioration in the quality of democracy without the full introduction of "new games in town" – that is, without the establishment of new rules of political competition or the

overt replacement of democratic frameworks with non-democratic ones. This broad, outcome-focused category emphasizes the end state rather than the process leading to it. A related perspective was presented by Johannes Gerschewski, who emphasized the specific characteristics of the decline in democratic quality. He argued that democratic regression is typically a long-term process characterized by low intensity and gradual change (Gerschewski, 2021, p. 53). This observation led him to distinguish regression from the concepts of democratic erosion and democratic decay, noting that decay is primarily driven by internal factors, whereas erosion is typically influenced by exogenous forces (Gerschewski, 2021, pp. 43–44). This suggests that regression, unlike erosion, represents an indeterminate process whose outcome remains open and contingent upon the activation of additional causal factors, particularly the agency of domestic actors. In this context, external pressures – such as those exerted by third states or international organizations – may intensify the dynamics of political change; however, the direction and stability of the resulting transformation remain uncertain.

Finally, a mixed approach – describing the “slow death” of democracy driven by internal factors – was proposed in the concept of democratic decay (Šipulová, Kosař, 2024, pp. 1577–1595). Its core feature is the progressive weakening of democratic rules of political competition. According to Petra Guasti, the concept of democratic decay is semantically close to that of democratic backsliding (Guasti, 2020, pp. 474–475). It means that the decay seems to regression with lower dynamic. However, it is a challenge to indicate a caesure between low and high dynamic of changes. There is a significant flaws of using these categories to tracing trajectory of political systems in CEE. In the specific context of post-communist states in the post-war period, it is notable that instances of rapid democratic collapse due to external threats, such as military coups, have not been observed.

Table 1
Theoretical categories applied to exploring process of withdraw democracy in post-communist states, taking into account dynamics and origins of changes

Theoretical category	Dynamic	Origins of factors
erosion	low	external
regression	high	internal
decay	low	internal

Source: Own study.

In turn, Nancy Bermeo (Bermeo, 2016, pp. 5–19) introduced a counter-proposition in the form of the concept of democratic backsliding. Its core idea is the reduction of democratic quality through the weakening of the institutions upon which the political system is founded. Bermeo’s framework encompasses six variants of this process (see: Bermeo, 2016). Examples of democratic backsliding include legislative changes affecting electoral procedures (Eisen et al., 2019; Skrzypek, 2020) and efforts to strengthen the executive branch at the expense of other institutions (Markowski, 2018; Cianetti, Dawson, Hanley, 2018). This process may occur in various configurations, with no fixed dynamic or predetermined outcome. However, the semantic scope of

Bermeo's concept precludes the assumption that democratic backsliding necessarily results in a political system adopting autocratic characteristics. As Licia Cianetti and Séan Hanley (Hanley, 2021, p. 77) pointed out, this category addresses only the trajectory within the democratic continuum itself, overlooking shifts beyond that framework. Thus, democratic backsliding should be understood as a theoretical category describing a multivariate process of deviation from democracy without specifying a final outcome. This omission – the lack of a clear endpoint – limits the applicability of democratic backsliding for studying the long-term trajectories of political systems. This indicates that Bermeo's framework is valuable for identifying the symptomatic manifestations of democratic withdrawal through the various forms of backsliding she distinguishes. However, it presents certain limitations when applied to the analysis of the long-term trajectories of political systems. In other words, while the framework effectively captures the range of potential actions undermining democracy, it offers limited insight into the eventual outcomes or systemic consequences of such processes.

Applying the earlier matrix based on the dynamics and origins of change, Bermeo's concept accounts for both external and internal factors, potentially leading to either the slow or rapid decline of democracy. Consequently, her proposition is too complex to be positioned clearly within the previously discussed spectrum. To sum up, when selecting a theoretical category to describe the process of democratization reversal, it is necessary to evaluate the relative importance of these factors. An alternative perspective has been proposed by scholars who advocate focusing directly on the movement of political systems toward autocracy, rather than merely on the decline in the quality of democracy.

Autocratization

A theoretical category gaining increasing attention in transitology studies is autocratization (Hanley, Cianetti, 2024). Andrea Cassani and Luca Tomini defined autocratization as a process of regime change toward autocracy, characterized by the weakening of executive constraints, the limitation of civil rights and freedoms, and the reduction of equality in political competition and participation (Cassani, Tomini, 2020, p. 281). They emphasize that autocratization is the conceptual opposite of democratization, though it does not necessarily culminate in the full consolidation of an autocratic regime. Cassani and Tomini distinguished between “radical” and “moderate” forms of autocratization: the former leads to the establishment of a consolidated non-democratic system, while the latter results in defective democracies (Cassani, Tomini, 2020, pp. 267–279). Notably, autocratization does not predetermine its final outcome, assuming instead a spectrum of potential endpoints between defective democracy and consolidated autocracy. In this sense, autocratization conceptually aligns with democratic regression, which also allows for multiple potential outcomes. Moreover, this framework does not incorporate criteria for assessing dynamics, such as regression or erosion. Consequently, it is most useful for tracing trajectories with a focus on ultimate outcomes rather than on the constituent elements or the pace of change. It further implies that the uncertain outcomes tended to converge toward non-democratic regimes

rather than liberal democratic consolidation. In other words, autocratization can be understood as a process predicated on the breakdown of democratic consolidation and the continuation of reversal dynamics within the political system.

Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg (2019) developed the concept by analyzing autocratization through successive waves. Their approach, inspired by Huntington's waves of democratization, identifies each wave as a period during which the number of democratizing states decreases while the number of autocratizing states rises (Boese, Lindberg, Lührmann, 2021, p. 1202). A wave ends when autocratization episodes decline and democratization episodes increase (Lührmann, Lindberg, 2019, p. 1111). Consequently, their framework positions waves of autocratization as the conceptual mirror image of democratization waves, facilitating analysis of deviations from liberal democracy. This suggests that these scholars offer a periodization of democratic withdrawal on a global scale. However, their approach is primarily quantitative and tends to overlook the qualitative distinctions between successive waves. In other words, it provides limited insight into the specific characteristics of subsequent episodes of autocratization, offering knowledge only about their temporal breakpoints.

Their approach, however, has been criticized. Erik Skaaning questioned the criteria used to delineate wave boundaries, arguing that these should be based on the sustained consolidation of autocratic regimes (Skaaning, 2020, p. 1536). Luca Tomini also challenged the usefulness of periodizing autocratization, proposing instead that it should be understood as a continuous process (Tomini, 2021, p. 1191). In response, proponents of the waves model argued that clear classification criteria are essential for theoretical categories to remain analytically useful. They contended that waves can naturally overlap without being mutually exclusive, as one wave need not conclude before another begins (Boese, Lindberg, Lührmann, 2021, p. 1205). Lührmann and Lindberg's concept offers a structured attempt to explain the processes driving the retreat from democracy, reflecting the pattern identified by Huntington, wherein younger democracies are particularly susceptible to reversals (Huntington, 1995, p. 24). This indicates that the concept of waves of autocratization has not been as widely adopted as the original proposition by Cassani and Tomini. As noted, the quantitative orientation of this approach limits its capacity to capture the qualitative essence of successive waves and their distinguishing features beyond scope and duration. Nevertheless, it may prove useful as a criterion for selecting cases in comparative studies, particularly when considering the temporal and regional dimensions of change, as exemplified by CEE since 2008, where some determinants exhibited a transnational character.

Even if the concept of autocratization waves is rejected, Cassani and Tomini's broader category remains analytically valuable. Compared to democratic backsliding, autocratization encompasses a wider semantic field, capturing all deviations from the ideal model of liberal democracy. While Bermeo's framework primarily describes a system's deviation from democracy without specifying its endpoint, Cassani and Tomini emphasize the directionality of change toward autocratic consolidation (Cassani, Tomini, 2020, p. 277). Thus, whereas democratic backsliding potentially leaves political systems in an undefined "grey zone," autocratization more explicitly frames the process as leading toward entrenched autocratic rule. This distinction highlights

the limited applicability of democratic backsliding within transitology compared to the more outcome-oriented approach of autocratization.

To sum up, the emergence of autocratization as a theoretical category and its proposed periodization booster renewed debate within transitology. As noted earlier, these concepts challenge the assumption of the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy, revealing the inadequacy of existing frameworks for analyzing deviations from it. With its broader analytical scope, autocratization offers greater applicability than the more narrowly defined concept of democratic backsliding. The trajectories of political systems in CEE demonstrate that the core of these changes has not been merely the retreat of democracy but the active advancement of autocratic practices by political elites (Markowski, Guasti, Mansfeldová, 2018, pp. 95–118; Cianetti, Dawson, Hanley, 2018; Vachudova, 2018).

Theoretical categories related to results of dedemocratization

Illegitimate democracy

Chronologically, one of the earliest theoretical categories used to describe not fully consolidated democracies was illiberal democracy. In the face of an emergence of post-authoritarian regimes in post-cold war era Fareed Zakaria defined it as a political system that formally maintains universal suffrage, using elections to re-legitimize the power of ruling elites. However, in such systems, governing elites deliberately ignore the constraints typically imposed by liberal constitutionalism (Zakaria, 1997, pp. 22–23). One key weakness of illiberal democracy is lack of explanatory depth regarding the nature of the political systems it describes. This concept essentially highlights the absence of liberal principles but offers little insight into how the system operates beyond its electoral facade. Elections in illiberal democracies, while maintained as a procedural ritual, are neither free nor fair – disqualifying these systems from being classified as genuinely democratic. This suggests that illiberal democracy seeks to present itself as a democratic regime by maintaining the outward appearance of political competition typical of liberal democracies. However, the concept's conceptual impoverishment has led to its treatment more as a journalistic label than as a rigorously defined category within political science. The following paragraph further elaborates on these limitations.

Jan Zielonka (2018) argued that illiberal democracy should be understood as a reaction to the crisis of liberal democracy, not its cause. Andrzej Antoszewski similarly observed that proponents of illiberal democracy do not outright reject democratic rules but advocate for their reinterpretation, primarily to sidestep constraints imposed by the rule of law (Antoszewski, 2018, p. 13). Thus, illiberal democracy emerges more as a political project aimed at weakening liberal principles than as a stable regime type. It means that both scholars emphasize that illiberal democracy should not be treated as a theoretical category, but rather as a political practice or project. For them, illiberal democracy is better understood through existing analytical frameworks rather than

as a distinct conceptual tool. This distinction between political rhetoric and scientific terminology should be viewed as a necessary and appropriate separation.

Illiberal democracy characterize by serious limitations as a framework for analyzing political systems. A main flaw is the difficulty of situating it within the established spectrum between democracy and non-democracy. It could be categorized as a type of flawed democracy, a hybrid regime, or a form of unconsolidated autocracy. Antoszewski (Antoszewski, 2018, pp. 24–25) even argued that systems identified as illiberal democracies tend to evolve into openly authoritarian regimes over time. Additionally, Roman Bäcker (Bäcker, 2020, pp. 35–46) argued that democracy must, by definition, vest decision-making sovereignty in the political nation itself. From this perspective, illiberal democracies fail to meet even this minimal definitional criterion of democracy, as sovereignty is effectively controlled by ruling elites rather than the populace.

To sum up, illiberal democracy remains too ambiguous and normatively charged to serve as a robust analytical category in empirical research. Its vague defining features and rhetorical origins mean that it functions more effectively as a journalistic or political label than as a scientific term. Rather than illuminating the structural mechanics of hybrid or authoritarian systems, it often obscures their undemocratic nature behind the façade of procedural elections.

Hybrid regime

The concept of the hybrid regime has gained prominence as a key analytical tool for describing political systems situated within the so-called “grey zone” – a broad spectrum of political formations located between fully consolidated democracies and outright autocracies (Antoszewski, Herbut, 2006). It capture the structural ambiguity and coexistence of democratic and autocratic practices within a single political framework. Maryana Prokop offered a precise definition of hybrid regimes as systems where democratic institutions formally exist but function largely as facades for authoritarian modes of governance (Prokop, 2020, p. 10). According to her, such regimes stabilize within their ambiguity: neither democratic nor autocratic actors actively pursue transformative regime change. Instead, it reflect a deliberate stasis where democratic and autocratic norms coexist without clear evolution towards either pole on the democracy-autocracy continuum (Prokop, 2020, p. 44). This suggests that the concept of a hybrid regime characterizes political systems situated “between” democracy and its antonymy, where outcomes remain indeterminate and multiple scenarios are possible. Moreover, the dynamics of change in such systems are more pronounced than in states where the rules of political competition – successfully established or otherwise – have already stabilized. In other words, this concept is particularly useful for analyzing cases in which democratic consolidation is ongoing and the system continues to contend with authoritarian tendencies.

In turn, Roman Bäcker treated hybrid regimes as transitional stages within the trajectory of regime transformation. He claimed that no political system can maintain a stable coexistence of two sovereign sources of power. It means that every regime leans toward either democracy or autocracy, even if it temporarily embodies features

of both. Nevertheless, he acknowledged the heuristic utility of the hybrid regime as a descriptive category for analyzing periods of systemic instability, especially where the sovereignty of the political nation appears contested (Bäcker, 2020, p. 46). This suggests that a hybrid regime should not be regarded as a distinct type of political system, but rather as a characteristic of regimes situated along a continuum between democracy and autocracy. Even if one accepts Bäcker's position, the category remains useful for describing specific points along a regime's trajectory. For this reason, it offers a more analytically robust proposition than the concept of illiberal democracy.

The conceptual distinctiveness of hybrid regimes lies in their temporal and structural positioning. Whereas categories like democratic erosion, regression, or backsliding emphasize either the weakening or retreat of democracy, hybrid regimes mark a consolidation of systemic ambiguity. In other words, hybrid regimes signify not the erosion of democracy as such, but rather the establishment of an alternative mode of political competition – one governed simultaneously by democratic and autocratic principles. Elections might still occur, but their competitive nature, fairness, and significance in determining actual power are fundamentally compromised. Importantly, hybrid regimes describe a stage beyond the failure of democratic consolidation. They are not necessarily transitional moments preceding autocratic consolidation or democratic recovery; instead, they may persist indefinitely as self-reinforcing systems where democratic and autocratic elements are interwoven.

In summary, the concept of the hybrid regime emerges from the theoretical need to describe political systems that do not fit neatly into the democracy-autocracy dichotomy. Unlike labels such as “defective democracy” or “illiberal democracy,” the hybrid regime avoids framing the system primarily through its democratic deficiencies. Instead, it emphasizes the coexistence and interaction of competing rules of political competition. This semantic neutrality allows the category to focus on the actual mechanisms of governance rather than normative assumptions about democracy's ideal state. In transitology studies, recognizing hybrid regimes as distinct stages or structural conditions enriches understanding of post-authoritarian trajectories, especially in cases where the consolidation of either democracy or autocracy remains uncertain.

Flawed democracy or patronal autocracy?

Flawed democracy was popularized by the authors of the Democracy Index reports, published by The Economist. It is characterized by free and fair elections, while civil rights and freedoms are respected. However, in contrast to consolidated democracies, flawed democracy struggle with the politicization of the media and repression of political opposition, which are emblematic of autocracy. Therefore, elections are a façade of democracy there, but political competition is not organized according to democratic rules. The latter stems from unfinished democratic consolidation, due to low levels of citizen engagement in political life (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). Therefore, it is another result of failed democratic consolidation, close to the hybrid regime and not a separate type. As a result, ruling elites use elections to legitimize their position, concentrate, and maintain power. Similar to illiberal democracy, flawed democracy

assumes that elections are a sufficient condition for considering a political system as democratic. However, as Linz and Stepan (1996) pointed out, they also occur in non-democratic regimes. Moreover, many of the relevant features cited above overlap with the catalogue of features of hybrid regimes. This indicates that the concept of flawed democracy largely replicates the essential features of existing categories, such as hybrid regimes, without providing substantial new insights into the study of political systems in the “grey zone.” This exemplifies the previously noted phenomenon of “terminological inflation,” in which new labels are applied to political systems without identifying genuinely distinctive characteristics.

In the catalogue of “political systems with adjectives” Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics (2020) present patronal autocracy as a contemporary form of non-democratic regime in the post-Soviet area. Its essence is the domination of the public sphere (primarily political and economic) by informal networks and structures. Next, populism is an ideological framework and basis for constructing the legitimacy of power and the concentration of executive power. Both of these features serve to realize the main goals of ruling elites, which are subordinating public interests to their own interests. Authors named this a fusion of private and public interests, realized by patronal and clientelist ties (Magyar, Madlovics, 2020, p. 71). It suggests that the key characteristic of patronal autocracy is the nature of the relationship between ruling elites and other actors in the public sphere, and the limited access to decision-making by the latter. The presence of these phenomena is an essential feature of Linz’s definition of autocracy, without the need for it to be explicitly emphasized in the form of a new ideal type. This suggests that Magyar and Madlovics also grounded the core of their proposition in Linz’s work. Their contribution lies in situating it within the context of post-communist states during the multidimensional crisis following 2008. However, it remains difficult to consider these specific circumstances as sufficient justification for introducing a new term, given its close resemblance to existing conceptualizations.

Summarizing, flawed democracy is based on maintaining the minimal criteria of democracy, such as elections and civil rights and freedoms, while the media sphere and rules of political competition are close to autocracy. It suggests that it becomes democracy in form, but changes into autocracy in practice. Therefore, referring back to Linz and Stepan’s typology, flawed democracy is closer to a non-democratic regime than to a democratic one. In turn, patronal autocracy is non-democratic regime. Its essences as patronage and limited policymaking by the opposition were also indicated in Linz and Stepan’s typology. Therefore, the Author of this paper does not share the assumption about the necessity of constructing new theoretical categories, even if some essential features are more visible than before the third wave of autocratization. Linz and Stepan’s typology has a broad semantic field, which takes into account all the aforementioned characteristics of non-democracy.

Conclusions

From the beginning of the third wave of democratization to its most recent reversals, political systems have faced three possible scenarios: democratic consolidation,

a return to autocracy, or becoming stuck in the “grey zone.” These developments have become a central topic in the renewed field of transitology. The failure of the “end of history” has triggered reflections that have led to new theoretical frameworks. A significant portion of these works has focused on phenomena in CEE, offering critical perspectives on the existing state of the art (e.g., Holzer, Balik, 2009) and calling for a thorough revision of theoretical and methodological frameworks. Approaches and theories previously considered adequate for exploring different varieties of deviations from liberal democracy have been increasingly replaced by new categories, with varying degrees of applicability in political system research. As a result, the observed “terminological inflation” has introduced confusion regarding the use of particular categories.

New debates have focused on the problem of democratic consolidation and its antinomies. While some scholars argue that the establishment of “democratic games” in former autocracies has failed, prompting reflections on ongoing deconsolidation in the globalization era, others reject this assumption, claiming instead that what is occurring reflects changes in the nature of democracy itself. This latter position seems to reflect a continued faith in the “triumph of liberal democracy” rather than an analysis of the actual trajectories of political systems. A median position calls for attention to alternative sources of the crisis of liberal democracy, without rejecting the thesis of deconsolidation.

Some scholars have avoided using Linz’s typology of non-democratic regimes to avoid acknowledging that post-communist states have returned to non-democratic rules of political competition. Their efforts have focused on constructing a distinction between former non-democracies and new forms of political systems located in the “grey zone.” The side effects of democratic consolidation have been described using a catalogue of new terms: “political systems with adjectives.” This trend of adding adjectives to democracy or autocracy/authoritarianism has contributed to conceptual noise, blurring the analytical frameworks of transition studies. The referred categories have been constructed around different factors: (1) sources of threats to post-transition systems and the dynamics of changes; (2) forms of withdrawal from liberal democracy; (3) outcomes; (4) imposed rules of political competition; (5) maintaining minimal criteria for democracy or autocracy; and (6) presenting political projects as theoretical frameworks. In this paper, the Author has demonstrated that many of these terms either duplicate essential features of Linz’s typology or attempt to construct scientific foundations for political projects or publicist narratives. The debate over how to label the outcomes of unsuccessful transitions from non-democracy to democracy has thus been structured around the problem of democratic consolidation.

The concepts and theoretical categories evaluated in this paper represent a broad spectrum of assumptions for exploring the trajectories of modern political systems. Concepts related to the process – such as democratic regression and erosion of democracy – focus on the origins of threats to democracy and the period over which these influences operate. In contrast, autocratization emphasizes outcomes, framing the return to non-democratic regimes as a process. Meanwhile, democratic backsliding focuses on deviations that lead to weakened democratic institutions and the strengthening of executive power, assuming that dedemocratization has a multi-deviation character.

Categories related to outcomes differ regarding the role of elections and the nature of political competition. Illiberal democracy assumes the maintenance of democratic institutions, while ruling elites employ non-democratic methods of political competition to prolong their power. Later studies have shown that illiberal democracy tends to reject liberal constraints and evolves into a system where the will of the majority is not limited as it is in liberal democracies. In contrast, the hybrid regime is characterized by the coexistence of democratic and non-democratic rules – a feature of post-transition political systems where the internalization of democratic values has failed. In other words, the outcome of the transition remains uncertain in such cases. Conversely, flawed democracy is similar to illiberal democracy but, according to its proponents, results specifically from failed democratic consolidation. Finally, patronal autocracy identifies clientelism in the public sphere and restricted political competition as defining features of modern non-democratic regimes.

Thus, two dominant schools of thought in conceptualizing post-transition systems can be identified: one that recognizes the maintenance of elections as a necessary condition for using the label “democracies with adjectives” (as in illiberal democracy and flawed democracy) and another that emphasizes the role of rules in political competition (as in hybrid regimes and patronal autocracy). This paper has also confirmed that one of the primary challenges for transitology and political system studies is the conceptual chaos created by the proliferation of similar, yet inconsistently applied, categories. The key to selecting the most appropriate analytical tool lies in understanding each concept’s essential features, limitations, and theoretical foundations. The growing popularity of “political systems with adjectives” increases the risk of deepening this confusion. For these reasons, the Author proposes returning to Linz’s typology and closely tracing the processes of consolidation and deconsolidation in post-transition political systems to better understand the nature of the changes being observed.

The paper provides guidance for applying the theoretical categories discussed above, while also delineating their limitations and semantic boundaries. The author aims to contribute to clarifying terminological confusion and to highlight the conceptual shortcomings of the propositions under review. A comparison of their essential features, with reference to Linz’s works, demonstrates that “terminological inflation” has done little to advance understanding of contemporary changes in political systems. Instead, it has largely reinforced the tendency to downplay shifts toward non-democratic trajectories by framing such phenomena as more moderate forms of autocracy. Even though the outcomes of democratization in CEE states did not result in consolidated autocracies in Linz’s sense, the concept of hybrid regimes remains a useful analytical category for capturing political systems in the “grey zone.” Proposals employing adjectives – such as flawed, illiberal, or patronal – seek to suggest that one of the two dominant modes of political competition has persisted or gained influence, albeit with modifications. In reality, however, the contest between democratic and non-democratic rules remains unresolved. Consequently, the paper provides arguments that reaffirm classical theoretical foundations in transitology while simultaneously highlighting the erosion of analytical clarity in contemporary conceptual frameworks.

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to review the leading theoretical categories used in analyzing dedemocratization in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and to assess their applicability to the changes observed during the third wave of autocratization (2008–2019). In this article Author reviewed following theoretical categories and concepts related to the process of withdraw liberal democracy: democratic consolidation and deconsolidation, erosion of democracy, regression of democracy, decay of democracy, democratic backsliding, and autocratization. Next, analyzing terms related to the outcomes of these processes consist of illiberal democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime and patronal autocracy. The paper offers a review of the main concepts and theoretical categories employed in studies on contemporary political systems. It also provides reflections on the use of these categories within the framework of transitology, highlighting their foundations and innovations. Additionally, the article shed lights on observed biases in studies about political systems, and a tendency to producing terms called "political systems with adjectives".

Key words: third wave of autocratization, deconsolidation of democracy, democratic backsliding, hybrid regime, dedemocratization

Analiza dedemokratyzacji w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Przegląd kategorii teoretycznych

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przegląd wiodących kategorii teoretycznych wykorzystywanych w analizie dedemokratyzacji w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej (EŚW) oraz ocena ich przydatności do zmian obserwowanych podczas trzeciej fali autokratyzacji (2008–2019). W niniejszym artykule Autor dokonał przeglądu następujących kategorii teoretycznych i pojęć związanych z procesem odejścia od typu idealnego demokracji liberalnej: konsolidacja i dekonsolidacja demokracji, erozja demokracji, regresja demokracji, rozpad demokracji, *democratic*

backsliding i autokratyzacja. Następnie, omówiono pojęcia związane z rezultatami tych procesów: demokracja nieliberalna, demokracja wadliwa, reżim hybrydowy i autokracja patronalna. Artykuł zawiera przegląd głównych pojęć i kategorii teoretycznych stosowanych w badaniach nad współczesnymi systemami politycznymi. Przedstawiono również refleksje na temat wykorzystania tych kategorii w ramach tranzytologii, podkreślając ich podstawy i wkład w rozwój nauk politycznych. Dodatkowo, artykuł wskazuje na zaobserwowane uprzedzenia w badaniach nad systemami politycznymi oraz tendencję do tworzenia terminów zwanych „systemami politycznymi z przymiotnikami”.

Slowa kluczowe: trzecia fala autokratyzacji, dekonsolidacja demokracji, democratic backsliding, reżim hybrydalny, dedemokratyzacja

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