

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe

The Rise of Autocracy and Democratic Resilience

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic represents a new and unparalleled stress-test for the already disrupted liberal-representative, democracies. The challenges cluster around three democratic disfigurements: technocracy, populism, and plebiscitarianism—each have the potential to contribute to democratic decay. Still, they can also trigger pushback against illiberalism mobilizing citizens in defense of democracy, toward democratic resilience. This article looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic affects democratic decay and democratic resilience in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It finds varied responses to the COVID-19 crisis by the CEE populist leaders and identifies two patterns: the rise of autocracy and democratic resilience. First, in Hungary and Poland, the populist leaders instrumentalized the state of emergency to increase executive aggrandizement. Second, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, democracy proved resilient. The COVID-19 pandemic alone is not fostering the rise of authoritarianism. However, it does accentuate existing democratic disfigurements.

Keywords: autocracy, CEE, coronavirus, covid, democracy, democratic decline, democratic resilience, Visegrad Four

Around the world, autocracies are rising (Coppedge et al. 2020). At the same time, democracies – established and emerging alike – are being disrupted (Krastev 2019). The general mood is rather bleak. Liberal democracy is no longer in decline; it is in retreat, dying, or ending (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Runciman 2018). Liberal democracy became the victim of its success (Luce 2017), was killed when gatekeepers fell asleep behind the wheel (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), was only a facade (Krastev and Holmes 2019; Krastev 2019), or forgot how to adapt (Runciman 2018). Liberal, representative democracy – though imperfect and messy, the best form of



government to sustain free, innovative, peaceful, and prosperous societies (Dahl 2008) – has become disfigured (Urbinati 2014).

Three democratic disfigurements are key theoretically and empirically – technocracy, populism, and plebiscitarianism (Urbinati 2014). Technocracy promises to rescue democracy from its cacophonous partisanship with knowledge and competence, producing “optimal outcomes” (Urbinati 2014; Caramani 2017). Populism is the opposite of technocracy and pledges to reinstall the (previously excluded) people at the center of democracy (Kaltwasser 2014). Plebiscitarianism, or audience democracy, promises to “restore the concept of the people as a meaningful collective identity,” while rendering the passive citizens spectators of the political elite (Urbinati 2014: 171).

Each of these democratic disfigurements significantly redefines the notion of democracy. Technocracy narrows political competition and weakens democratic accountability. Populism reduces the diversity of the public forum, weakens checks and balances, institutional safeguards (minority protection), facilitates centralization of power, and transforms political opposition into the enemy of the people (Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019). Plebiscitarianism downplays deliberative and participative elements of democracy while undermining the division of power (Urbinati 2014: 238).

Technocracy claims that increasing complexity demands the shift of significant decisions beyond the control of the people. The populist promise is not the rule of the people, but the direct link between the populist leader and the people (cf. Bonikowski and Gidron 2015). In plebiscitarianism, executive aggrandizement undermines checks and balances in the name of the people (cf. Bermeo 2016). The leader rules unchecked, and people turn from active participants to passive viewers (Urbinati 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a new and unparalleled stress-test for the already disrupted liberal-representative democracies. The challenges to such contemporary democracies cluster around the three democratic disfigurements (and their possible mixtures):

1. Technocracy: the pandemic strengthens the role of experts (virologists and epidemiologists) and has the potential to undermine accountability.
2. Populism: populist leaders might instrumentalize the pandemic to strengthen exclusionary rhetoric and weaken institutional safeguards (minority protection).
3. Plebiscitarianism: elected leaders might use emergency powers to weaken the role of the parliaments and undermine both the opposition and civil society.

However, it would be erroneous to consider the rise of autocracy – that is, democratic decay, as the only possible outcome (cf. Weyland 2020). The

three democratic disfigurations have the potential to exacerbate democratic decay, but can also trigger democratic resilience:

4. The free press can question the choices government experts are making.
5. Courts can pushback against mitigation measures, enforce constitutional rights, and institutional safeguards.
6. Opposition can successfully demand transparency and perform oversight. Active civil society can mobilize to hold governments accountable.

With this backdrop, this article looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic is fostering the rise of authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Four Central European countries – the so-called Visegrad Four (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia are included in this analysis. As of May 2020, all four countries are governed by populist leaders: Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jaroslaw Kaczyński in Poland, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, and Igor Matovič in Slovakia. Although the extent of democratic decay in each of the V4 countries varied before the COVID-19 pandemic, all four countries were experiencing “illiberal swerving”¹ (Bustikova and Guasti 2017). For the four populist leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic represents an opportunity to consolidate power. Simultaneously, it represents an opportunity to pushback against populism and reveal democratic resilience.

The article proceeds by first comparing the intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic in the V4 countries. Second, the effects of the governmental measures on democracy in the V4 will be analyzed. Here the focus will be on accountability, minority protection, checks and balances, and civil rights. Third, the conclusion summarizes the findings and provides inference from the four cases for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democracy – focusing on democratic decay and democratic resilience.

COVID-19 in V4

The V4 countries are experiencing COVID-19 with varying intensity and adopting different measures to manage the pandemic. In all four countries, the first COVID-19 patient was diagnosed at the beginning of March, and the first measures were adopted shortly afterward (Table 1 provides an overview using the neighboring Austria and Germany as a baseline). The exception is Slovakia – the first measures were introduced before the first case – on the eve of parliamentary elections (February 28, 2020). All four countries introduced a state of emergency – Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic 6–11 days after the first case, Poland, 2 days prior.

Table 7-1: COVID-19 timeline in V4, Austria and Germany

Country	First case	First measures	State of emergency	Time from 1st case to emergency	Schools closed to emergency	Full lock-down	Mandatory Masks
Slovakia	6.3.2020	28.2.2020	12.3.2020	6 days	8.3.2020 regional	8.4.2020 – 14.4.2020	25.3.2020
Czech Republic	1.3.2020	6.3.2020	12.3.2020	11 days	10.3.2020	15.3.2020	18.3.2020
Poland	4.3.2020	10.3.2020	2.3.2020	- 2 days	12.3.2020	24.3.2020	16.4.2020
Hungary	4.3.2020	7.3.2020	11.3.2020	7 days	16.3.2020	16.3.2020	n.o
Austria	25.2.2020	10.3.2020	16.3.2020	22 days	17.3.2020	16.3.2020	13.3.2020
Germany	27.1.2020	28.1.2020	n/a	n/a	13.3.2020	22.3.2020	27.4.2020
			16.3.2020 Bavaria	45 days in Bavaria			

Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus> compiled by the author

The intensity of the pandemic differs across the four countries. Measured by a number of cases per million inhabitants – Slovakia has the least cases and the Czech Republic the most (Table 2 provides an overview using neighboring Austria and Germany as a baseline). However, compared to Austria and Germany, all four countries had significantly fewer COVID-19 cases. There is a significant variation in the death rate – Slovakia having the lowest fatality rate among the V4, within the EU, and globally (comparable to New Zealand), while Hungary has a significantly higher fatality rate – comparable to Italy and Spain, the worst COVID-19 affected countries in Europe.

The fatality rate can be explained by state capacity to manage the crisis (including the capacity of the healthcare system; cf. Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci 2017). It is not yet possible to draw a causal link between the significantly higher mortality in Hungary and its weaker measures. The state capacity includes the ability of the government to assess the capacity of the healthcare system. The capacity of CEE healthcare systems is weaker than those of their neighbors – Austria and Germany. Thus, V4 countries adopted stricter mitigation measures faster than Austria and Germany. Testing is another proxy for the state capacity. We find significant differences between Hungary (low testing) and the Czech Republic and Poland (high testing), Slovakia had a similar number of cases per million inhabitants as Hungary, but tested significantly more. Overall, Slovakia never reached a pandemic curve; the Czech Republic and Hungary were able to bend the curve, while Poland continues its efforts to bend the curve.

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Democracy

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all V4 countries had been experiencing symptoms of democratic decay, including assaults on an independent judiciary, the colonization of public administration by political proxies, and increased political control over media.² Hungary was on the verge of undergoing an “illiberal turn,” while the remaining three countries were experiencing illiberal swerving – Poland the most, Slovakia the least, with the Czech Republic in the middle (Bustikova and Guasti 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic represented an opportunity for the populist V4 leaders to undermine liberal democracy further.

Hungary – From “Illiberal Democracy” to Indefinite Authoritarian Rule

On March 30, 2020, the Hungarian National Assembly passed a law adopting an indefinite state of emergency and allowing Prime Minister Viktor

Table 2: COVID-19 overview — cases, testing, and death

Country	Confirmed cases	Deaths	Fatality rate	Population	Testing	Cases per million	Tests per million
Slovakia	2368	29	1.2	5.45	267117	433.73	48962
Czech Republic	17286	383	2.2	10.65	706441	1614.16	65969
Poland	48149	1738	3.6	37.97	1980000	1272.21	52333
Hungary	4553	598	13.1	9.77	346962	471.31	35916
Austria	27472	719	3.3	8.86	916778	2384.08	101792
Germany	212000	9168	4.3	83.02	8010000*	2530.58	96482

Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>, calculations by the author, all data as of As of August 5, 2020; * as of July 26, 2020

Orbán to rule by decree. No elections, by-elections, or referenda can take place during the state of emergency. The law also instituted a five-year jail sentence for “obstructing the crisis efforts by disseminating misleading information,” and a three-year jail penalty for breaking the rules of the quarantine (see Vegh 2020; Bruszt 2020).

The effects of the law are chilling – the rule by decree is the ultimate form of executive aggrandizement (cf. Bermeo 2016). The indefinite character of the law (and the two-third majority of the ruling parties) prevents parliamentary oversight (which takes place by regular reauthorization of a fixed-term state of emergency). With the parliamentary opposition sidelined, the jail penalties provide the government tools against the remaining opposition – the free press and civil society. One of the first measures adopted was the introduction of “gender at birth” – a de facto ban on transgender citizens changing their gender, and redirection of local government revenues to the central government. Hungarian citizens have lost a significant part of their civic rights and gained very little protection against COVID-19.

Viktor Orbán seized the pandemic moment to move from his pre-pandemic “illiberal rule book” of “illiberal democracy” (cf. Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Bogaards 2018) to an authoritarian rule (Bruszt 2020). However, this does not make handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary effective. The main problem is the low capacity of the underfinanced healthcare system.³ With all power concentrated in Orbán’s hands and the majority of media under government control, the citizens are at the mercy of the state.

Poland – Illiberal Swerving in the Times of Pandemic

On March 2, 2020, two days before the first COVID-19 case was officially diagnosed, the Polish parliament adopted a new special law for managing infectious diseases via administrative, budgetary, and epidemiological measures.⁴ The law strengthened the power of the executive by weakening checks and balances, parliamentary oversight, and the courts. Unlike the Hungarian law, the Polish law instituted a 180-day state of emergency, despite the constitutional state of emergency rules only allowing 90-days.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Polish parliament commenced discussion of two legislative proposals – further limits on legal access to abortion and criminalization of sexual education (with up to a three-year jail sentence for teachers). These proposals were “holdover bills” from the previous parliament, and the deadline for their first reading was May 10, 2020. When first submitted, these civic initiatives led to nation-wide protests. This time, with the severe limitations on protests due to COVID-19,

civil society became more innovative.⁵ Protests were held online, on balconies, and in windows. Drive-bys and congestions of the main crossroads in cities like Warsaw took place. Individuals holding signs formed long human snakes around key institutions in order to socially distance while protesting the rise of autocracy (cf. Ciobanu 2020; Kentish 2020).

The democratic decay in Poland is perhaps most visible in an attempt of the ruling party (Law and Justice) to hold presidential elections, initially planned for May 10, 2020, amid the pandemic. After the opposition rejected Law and Justice's proposal to lengthen the president's term of office by two years, Law and Justice decided to switch to a postal vote ignoring the constitutional restriction on changing electoral rules less than six months before elections. The government also moved ahead to print the ballots, without approval from the national electoral committee. In preparation for the postal vote, the Polish Post started to gather the private data of 30 million Polish citizens, violating GDPR and existing laws by requesting city councils to provide the information via regular, non-encrypted email.

At the time of writing it is still not clear when Poland will hold its 2020 presidential elections. On May 5, 2020 Polish Sejm (Upper Chamber of the Polish Parliament) rejected the government's proposal to hold a postal vote.⁶ The public surveys indicate stable support for Duda's reelection, but also critique of the shambolic elections.⁷ In the meantime, the Polish president is using the pandemic response as a campaign tool⁸.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – an election watchdog, reviewed the proposed amendments to the electoral law and concluded that it would not be conducive to free and fair elections and constitutes a breach of the principles of legality and the rule of law.⁹ It is not clear if the Polish government chooses to listen. The Law and Justice party is open to cutting legal corners and instrumentalizing the COVID-19 crisis to aggrandize power further and undermine liberal democracy. Polish citizens are mounting innovative protests within the limits allowed by the pandemic.¹⁰

Czech Republic – Courts Push-Back and Civil Society “DIYs” Masks

The initial COVID-19 response in the Czech Republic was technocratic – driven by experts adopting swift and aggressive measures, including the closure of borders, a travel ban (citizens not allowed to leave the country), and compulsory masks. As the critique of the government's chaotic response mounted,¹¹ the PM backtracked to the standard emergency response enabling the Minister of Interior (junior partner in the coalition government) to lead the crisis response body. Nevertheless, even then,

the personal protective equipment (PPE) acquisition continued as a form of political competition between the coalition partners. The price was transparency and clientelism. The pushback against the handling of the pandemic – lack of PPE, testing, and chaotic communication – grew.

The parliamentary oversight and investigative journalism were crucial in identifying problems in the government response to COVID-19. In addition to the lack of transparency and corruption, the government also initially attempted to instrumentalize the pandemic to push through legislation benefiting the prime minister. The pushback by the unified opposition – which threatened not to reauthorize the state of emergency – led the government to withdraw the bill. Similarly, when a group of senators announced the intention to bring the travel ban to constitutional review, the government abandoned the policy.

Perhaps the most significant pushback against the government came from the Prague municipal court. On April 21, 2020, the court ruled four emergency measures, including the limits on freedom of movement, travel ban, and compulsory closure of large shops, illegal. The ruling stipulated that the measures were arbitrary, chaotic, and incomprehensible. It highlighted the need to protect the health of the people, as well as the health of democracy.¹² The government was provided one week to mitigate the situation and given legal recourse. After an initial hesitation and attempt by the president and the prime minister to blame the court for endangering the people, the government fully accepted the ruling and amended the situation.¹³

In sum, while the Czech government occasionally swerves towards illiberalism, political opposition, media and courts provide an effective bulwark against the rise of autocracy. Czech civil society, universities, and startups were able to mitigate the scarcity of PPE effectively. Investigative journalists provided information about gaps in the pandemic response. Political opposition unified and held the government accountable. The parliament functions as an effective check by rejecting the indefinite state of emergency. The courts ensure that the pandemic response does not undermine democracy and the rule of law.

Slovakia – Turning Lemons into Lemonade

In Slovakia, the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the coalition-building of a new government. The initial response (until March 20, 2020) was coordinated by outgoing Prime Minister Pellegrini's government via an emergency response body across different government agencies. Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová played an essential role in simultaneously facilitating a smooth transition of power, coalition negotiations, and

an effective COVID-19 response. By the end of April 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was over in Slovakia (at least for now). And so was the peaceful transition of power – on April 29, 2020, the new government led by Prime Minister Igor Matovič won the vote of confidence in the Slovak parliament.

While Slovakia adopted similar types of measures to the Czech Republic, the measures were applied only in regions and localities experiencing an outbreak. As approximately 1,500 inhabitants from 33 high-density Roma settlements returned from countries experiencing COVID-19 outbreaks (especially the UK), military medical staff were deployed to prevent a possible outbreak. The marginalized Roma communities with limited access to water and electricity were identified as hot spots. The government launched a compulsory two-week quarantine and testing. Breach of quarantine in one of the communities led to lockdown under military supervision, while every inhabitant was tested (over 2,000 tests were performed).¹⁴

The local and central governments brought in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to help foster trust between the Roma and the authorities. The government provided alternative accommodation to the settlements' inhabitants voluntarily. By April 25, 2020 lockdowns of most Roma settlements were lifted, and Prime Minister Matovič praised the settlements' residents as examples of responsible citizens.¹⁵ The president went one step further, noting that the COVID-19 pandemic showcased the urgent need for more social justice. She encouraged unity in the face of the pandemic and more tolerance and inclusion toward Roma. Some media and civil society were critical of the government handling of the outbreak. But the major critique is directed against the long-term exclusion of Roma in Slovakia.¹⁶

In sum, Slovakia managed not only to bend the curve but to quash it. Slovak democracy proved resilient in combining pandemic response and transition of power. It remains to be seen whether the post-pandemic response will include more social justice for Roma.

Conclusions

In the V4 and around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a major stress-test for liberal-representative, democracy. While populist leaders govern all V4 countries, their responses to the COVID-19 crisis differed. Two patterns can be identified: the rise of autocracy and democratic resilience. First, in Hungary and Poland, the populist leaders instrumentalized the state of emergency to increase executive aggrandizement.

This is perhaps most evident in Hungary, which moved ever closer to a dictatorship (cf. Bruszt 2020). In Poland, the government was not yet able to reach its goals but keeps on pushing to undermine liberal democracy. Second, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, democracy proved resilient. In the Czech Republic, the parliamentary opposition, media, civil society, and the courts ensured that the health of the people does not come at the price of democratic decay. Slovak democracy proved able to face the pandemic and manage the peaceful transition of power.

In all four countries, COVID-19 was a shock to the established order, with the potential to deliver a change. In Hungary, the change is a shift from defective (“illiberal”) democracy to an autocracy. In Poland, it remains to be seen if the Polish democracy proves to be resilient – the handling of the presidential elections amid the pandemic will be an important indicator. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, populist leaders were held accountable by the functioning system of checks and balances. The Czech case highlights the need for oversight (of politicians and experts) – a process in which free press and civil society are indispensable. In Slovakia, the pandemic highlighted the need to address issues of social justice for marginalized communities and the power of leadership in addressing these issues.

In the V4, the COVID-19 pandemic alone is not fostering the rise of authoritarianism. The COVID-19 pandemic does, however, accentuate the existing democratic disfigurements. The technocratic populists in the Czech Republic strengthened the role of experts but were unable to undermine accountability. Populist leaders in Poland and Hungary used the emergency powers to weaken institutional safeguards and, in the case of Hungary, dismantled democracy – at least for the time being. In Slovakia, the new populist leader resisted exclusionary rhetoric and strengthened minority protection.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a dual challenge for public health and democracy. It is an opportunity for democratic decay because states of emergency significantly expand executive power and enable temporary curbs on civil liberties in the name of public health. It is also an opportunity for democratic resilience if four conditions are present – free press critically assessing information by the government; independent courts making sure mitigation measures and restrictions remain within the constitutional framework; effective parliamentary opposition performing government oversight; and active civil society mobilizing to defend democracy (cf. Weyland 2020). More data is needed to compare various regime types and establish causal links between the efficiency of different regime types in handling the pandemic. The argument put forward here is that future research should investigate the costs of pandemic measures in terms of democracy, as well as public health.

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NOTES

1. Swerving recognizes volatility and uncertainty as an integral part of democracy, without necessarily drawing a causal link to a regime change. The trajectory of illiberal swerving depends on previous episodes, and indeed is often a reaction to the previous episode(s) of a liberal expansion (Bustikova, 2014, Bustikova and Guasti 2017, Guasti 2018).
2. On deterioration of the rule of law in Poland and broad support for democratic decay cf. Sadurski 2018 and Markowski 2020; for democratic decay in Hungary and limits of external constraints see Buzogány 2017; Enyedi 2018; Bogaards 2018; on ‘swerving’ between populism and liberalism in Slovakia see Bútorová and Bútorá 2019, Deegan-Krause et al. 2019; for the evolution of Czech democracy see an excellent edited volume by Lorenz and Formánková 2020; for comparative analysis of the CEE see Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018; Stanley 2019).
3. In April 2020, the Minister of Health ordered state hospitals to vacate 60% of hospital beds to make space for COVID-19 patients. Patients with chronic illnesses and injuries were mostly sent home.
4. <http://prawo.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20200000374/T/D20200374L.pdf>
5. www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52301875
6. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-poland-election/polands-senate-leader-ac-cuses-ruling-pis-of-election-by-post-trickery-idUKKBN22H28Z>
7. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,25906161,badanie-swps-duda-wygrywa-ale-polacy-nie-chca-wyborow.html>
8. On July 12, 2020 Andrej Duda won the second round of the Polish presidential elections with 51.03%. The turnout was 68.18%
9. www.osce.org/odihr/elections/poland/450856?download=true
10. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/22/europe/poland-protest-abortion-lock-down-intl/index.html>
11. The lack of PPE was criticized, and citizens were forced to “DIY” masks for themselves, their families, and essential workers. The drive to provide masks was driven by civil society, with public figures and artists making masks and videos on how to make masks.
12. www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/koronavirus-mestsky-soud-rozhodnuti-vladni-opatrena-cely-dokument_2004241545_kno

13. <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/nezakonne-rekl-soud-o-omezeni-pohybu-obchodu-a-sluzeb-vlade/r~d6f28340854c11eab408ac1f6b220ee8/>
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