Declining Democracy in East-Central Europe:
The Divide in the EU and Emerging Hard Populism
(Edward Elgar, 2019)

Attila Ágh

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333394435_Agh_Declining_democracy_in_East-Central_Europe_Short_overview_260519)

Short overview of the book

Introduction: From Democracy Decline to Democracy Renewal

The Introduction gives a short summary of the book about East-Central Europe that has been considered as a historical and actual region with its common basic features. In the nineties the Democratization cum Europeanization scenario appeared as an easy dream narrative, but by the end of the 2010s the democratic order has collapsed in ECE. My former book at Elgar (1998) was conceived in an optimistic mood and after two decades there is a need for reconsidering the ECE developments. The main message is that historically Central Europe has moved in the cycles of Westernization and Easternization as the repeated modernization processes, and has recently joined the EU but failed in the catching up process. The key question is why this 'democracy from above' has finally collapsed in ECE in the 2010s and how the 'democratization from below' as redemocratization can be set in motion.

Key words:
ECE region, Europeanization, Democratization, catching up, declining democracy and redemocratization

Part I: Democratization and Europeanization in the Old World Order

Chapter 1

Systemic change in the Old World Order

The collapse of the bipolar World Order in the late eighties and the transformation in the world system has opened the historical opportunity of systemic change for ECE. This chapter defines the Old and New World Order as the big periods of the world system with the rise of the NWO following the global crisis. These world systems have given the international frame of ECE developments in two stages with a big turning point in Europeanization and Democratization around 2010 from the chaotic democracy to the emerging authoritarian systems. The Euro-Atlantic integration of ECE produced the

illusions of rapid democratic transition that has evaporated and now it is high time to discover the entire controversial development in its two main stages of declining democracy resulting in its actual collapse in ECE.

Key words:
Old and New World Order, Euro-Atlantic integration, systemic change, two stages of ECE developments

Chapter 2

Socio-economic transition and the social disintegration

This chapter begins the presentation of the special conceptual framework of the ECE region by arguing that historically the ECE society had a dual face of Western and Eastern features, with a strong state and weak civil society. The point of departure for the new democracies was a simultaneous transition of legal-political, economic and social transformations having different time horizons and producing deep conflicts. Originally it was supposed that these transitions would support each other, but the triple crisis - three consecutive crisis periods: transition crisis (nineties), EU accession crisis (2000s) and global crisis (2010s) - has generated an increasing social frustration and democratic malaise of ECE populations. The failure of catching up process has become evident after the global crisis and it has led to a serious credibility crisis, since the controversial socio-economic development has resulted in the weak 'democratization from above' described in the following, third chapter.

Key words:
Triple crisis, legal-political, economic and social transition, socio-economic polarization and mass resentment

Chapter 3

Political transition and the crisis of representative democracy

This chapter proves that the conventional terms and theories of the international political science cannot be applied in ECE, since in the first stage of developments there was only an External Democratization with the empty legal structures and there was no Internal Democratization with mass participation in the political institutions. The great historical achievement of democracy from above in macro-politics and rule of law without

the genuine social and political participation resulted in the gradual emptying of democracy. This early success turned later to failure with the decline of democracy, since the elitist democracy produced only fake consolidation and final deconsolidation in the first two decades. The rising crony capitalism and increasing corruption in the hybrid neoliberal system generated weak governments and poor governance in ECE. By elaborating a new conceptual framework, this chapter characterises the ECE parties and governments in the stage of soft populism.

Key words:

Democracy from above, participative/inclusive democracy, first party system, soft populism

Part II: The Collapse of ECE democracies in the New World Order

Chapter 4

The New World Order and the desecuritization process in ECE

Due to their lack of crisis resilience, there has been a deep impact of the global crisis on the ECE countries, but it has remained a 'forgotten crisis' for the West by marginalizing it. The New World Order has provoked a controversial EU crisis management producing the eruption of neopopulism in the EU. Thus, in the first years of NWO there has been an Age of Uncertainty, in which the EU has only dealt with the Core priorities. This situation has produced the Juncker Paradox for ECE because paradoxically the neglectence of the special ECE crisis management has markedly been counter-productive. It has resulted in the increasing alienation of 'East' and it has widened the manoeuvring room for the Eurosceptic ECE governments. In the second stage of ECE developments the Core-Periphery Divide has deepened in the EU with the victory of the hard populism and its traditionalist-nativist narrative.

Key words:

Age of Uncertainty, Core-Periphery Divide, Juncker Paradox, benign neglectence, traditionalist narrative

Chapter 5

The failure of catching up and the credibility crisis in ECE

The global crisis has resulted in the complete failure of the 'convergence dream' for ECE in the EU. Although some quantitative catching up has taken place in GDP terms but without a qualitative catching up to the Core in the terms of the new, innovation driven economy and global competitiveness. There has been no transition from the GDP based 'welfare' approach to the 'well-being' universe of the West either. Due to the loss of economic, social and legal-political security and the exclusion of ECE populations from the results of economic growth, people have lost trust in political elite and political institutions. In this process of 'desecuritization' unhappy, low trust societies have emerged in ECE with heavy problems of disinvestment in human and social capital. The societal frustration has exploded in a deep credibility crisis of the Europeanization and Democratization scenario.

Key words:
Desecuritization, credibility crisis, low trust societies, bonding and bridging social capital

Chapter 6

The rise of hard populism and the collapse of democracy in ECE

The critical elections in ECE around 2010 ended with the entry of the second generation of parties, which have been 'Golem' parties controlling all social sectors from the economy to the media in a special 'party-state'. The lack of participative democracy generated low systemic trust in political elites with the formation of an 'Apathy Party' for the marginalized large masses. The soft populism has shifted to hard populism in the ECE as the synergy between crony capitalism (economy), strong state with overcentralized government (politics) and control of media (culture). In the second stage of the ECE developments the authoritarian governments have created a new neoliberal hybrid combining the support for the multinationals with the dominance of the nativist 'predatory' capitalism and its systemic corruption, while waving the flag of national sovereignty.

Key words:
Second party system, Golem parties, hard populism, new neoliberal hybrid, nativist capitalism, systemic corruption,

Chapter 7

The ECE political system: velvet dictatorship with façade democracy

The second party system has brought the emergence of velvet dictatorships with façade democracies. Velvet dictatorships work with the dominance of soft power instead of hard power, with a weak and formalist democracy facade instead of the genuine system of checks and balances. The authoritarian governments have acted systematically, they have elaborated a 'masterplan' of demolishing this European democratic order, as a De-Europeanization step by step. In this three-stage model (1) the state machinery, (2) judiciary and intermediary institutions, and (3) civil society and cultural institutions have been the consecutive targets. For this De-Europeanization and De-Democratization project the hard populist regimes have needed an internal and external enemy image, therefore they have propagated hatred and xenophobia. So 'protecting' national sovereignty and the traditional European values has become the main campaign slogan of hard populist elites to get strong legitimacy in the Age of Uncertainty.

Key words:

Velvet dictatorship, façade democracy, soft power of media, competitive authoritarian systems, politico-business oligarchs

Chapter 8

The ECE regional politics and the increasing Core-Periphery Divide

The Core-Periphery Divide has deepened in the EU after the global crisis between the most developed Core countries and the ECE countries that has been most manifest in the deep violations of rule of law by Poland and Hungary. The 'Copenhagen Dilemma' has emerged in the EU because after the accession the EU has no legal tools to correct the divergence from democracy in ECE. As the increasing conflicts have demonstrated, the legal toolkits – the infringement process and the Article 7 procedure – have not been effective to enforce rule of law in ECE. The refugee crisis has increased the regionalization process in ECE, but at the heavy price of the confrontation with the EU mainstream developments. It is a big challenge for both the next EU leadership to solve this problem of divergence in ECE and for the ECE governments to comply with the EU rules and values.

Key words:

Rule of law violations, Copenhagen Dilemma, perverse regionalization, 'family quarrels' in V4

Chapter 9

The civilizational crisis in the ECE region

The final chapter gives an overview of the relative backsliding of civilization in ECE in social and human capital, creating a civilizational crisis. At the beginning of systemic change ECE had already a 'civilizational incompetence' compared to the West, this historically cumulated gap was an absolute civilizational deficit. With the EU membership it has increased into a relative civilizational deficit, given the rapid development of the innovation driven economy in the West and the low level of human investment in ECE. This deficit appears in the relative backwardness of public services, first of all in education and health care, therefore the large part of population has not been able to develop a Western way of life in general and competitive skills in particular. It has resulted in the decreasing competitiveness of ECE in the 'new economy' and the mass Exodus to the West of the ECE population.

Key words:
Absolute and relative civilizational deficit, 'civilizational incompetence', mass Exodus, well-being, social progress

Postscript: Democracy Renewal and alternatives for redemocratization

After the dreams of the evolutionary, 'easy' integration as the 'Western fallacy' a new, realistic scenario has to be outlined for the catching up with the West and the redemocratization of ECE region. Despite the populist pressure by the ECE governments accusing 'Brussels' for all problems, the European identity of the ECE population has strengthened. The last decades have been a period of the long learning process in democratization. A new generation has entered in these troubled decades, socialized in democratic values, capable and ready to restart the Europeanization and Democratization process in the New World Order. The millions of 'Easterners' living in the West can also initiate and support the redemocratization in ECE by mobilizing the Europeanized strata and young people at home for making a new historical turn to join the European mainstream as some kind of 're-entry' to the EU.

Key words:
New generation, democratic learning process, democratization from below, redemocratization and the 're-entry' to the EU