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The Decline of Democracy in East-Central Europe

Hungary as the Worst-Case Scenario

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All of the East-Central European countries have been diverging from the European Union (EU) mainstream in recent years, but Hungary most of all. This paper offers a country study of Hungary, focusing on both internal and external political transformations and on the “de-democratization” and “de-Europeanization” process as a serious divergence from mainstream EU developments due to the socio-economic and political crises of the past quarter-century. Hungary has become a “defective” or “Potemkin” democracy: since the 2010 elections the formal institutions of democracy have been nothing more than a façade for nondemocratic, authoritarian rule.

INTRODUCTION: THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY IN ECE AND HUNGARY AS THE “WORST CASE”

Discussion of the academic literature and its paradigmatic change on the subject of the decline of democracy in East-Central Europe (ECE) is facilitated by the fact that so many evaluations of the past quarter-century have been published recently. In their analysis of developments in scholarship on ECE in a special issue of *Europe-Asia Studies*, Ramona Coman and Luca Tomini conclude that the most important current theme is “How can we explain the democratic crises in the new member state of the EU” (Coman and Tomini 2014, 855). Regarding the general trend of democracy decline, Tomini notes that “the Orbán government in Hungary has attracted the attention of the other European countries and the European Union because of its authoritarian and majoritarian concept of democracy” accompanied by a “systematic destruction of checks and balances in the government” (Tomini 2014, 859; see also Coman and Tomini 2014, 855). Indeed, rejecting the idea of a “rapid democratic consolidation” in ECE since the 2000s (Merkel 2008), many scholars have focused recently on “re-evaluating the post-communist success story” and explaining the worst-case scenario in Hungary (Herman 2015), which János Kornai has termed a “U-turn” (Kornai 2015).¹

In a recent paper Lise Herman pointed out that the minimalist definitions of democracy with a “procedural minimum” in the workings of the major formal institutions have a limited explanatory power. Supposedly, well-designed formal institutions provided a guarantee against the erosion of democracy in ECE, but in fact this thin democratic façade has not been effective in the absence of a vibrant civil society and deeply ingrained democratic norms (Herman 2015, 4, 9, 13). Western institutions have been transferred to ECE without their socio-cultural environments, that is, without the proper social embedment; hence sustainable democracies have not emerged in the ECE region. The deepening contrast between formal and informal institutionalization provides a key to understanding the failures of democratization and Europeanization, since the new democratic institutions have remained “empty shells without substance,” as Antoaneta Dimitrova explains it: “If formal and informal rules remain different and do not align, institutionalization will not take place” (Dimitrova, 2010, 138–39).²

For the ECE countries the EU accession process entailed institutional transfer from the EU, because establishing all EU *formal* institutions is a precondition for membership. This institutional transfer has created the formal institutions for competition in the emerging democracies, but this can only result in providing the opportunity for participation if the proper *informal*—mobilizing and protecting—“civil rights” institutions and patterns of civic political culture are created in the further EU adjustment process. This quarter-century has shown

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