Rethinking the historical trajectory of ECE: From the "original sin" in democratization to redemocratization

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Abstract: *This paper treats East-Central Europe as a region and investigates its common historical trajectory in the last decades. After 30 years of systemic change and 15 years of EU membership, it is high time for the re-evaluation and reconceptualization of the Europeanization and Democratization process in ECE. It is the key to understand the false start as the original sin in democratization and the reasons of ECE divergence from mainstream EU developments in order to prepare the redemocratization process. The progress of the Europeanization and Democratization process in ECE has been widely described in official documents, but for a balanced and complete picture it is necessary to present also the De-Europeanization and De-Democratization process from the very beginning. Basically, after the collapse of the bipolar world order in 1989, the Eastern enlargement was an economic and political necessity as a substantial part of the EU deepening and widening policy. The EU needed the extension of its economic space and political system that had also been pre-programmed in the mission statement of the Rome Treaty. At the same time, the new member states (NMS) needed the "Return to Europe" for their reintegration into the Western world. However, the capacity for this extension was actually missing on both sides, and it has remained so during the last 30 years of systemic change or the 15 years of EU membership. Altogether, this controversial process has produced a colorful picture of successes and failures in all NMS that will be analyzed in an ECE context.*

Keywords: ***reconceptualization, De-Europeanization and De-Democratization, upward convergence, redemocratization***

Introduction: The ECE Road from Europeanization to De-Europeanization

The ECE historical trajectory is exemplary, showing clearly the complexity and the controversial character of both Europeanization and Democratization. *Europeanization* has been a complex concept, as a two-way – both top down and bottom up – process embracing the entire society and presupposing EU-wide homogenization, while preserving country specificities. The entry conditions of the EU were formulated in the "conditionalities," given that in international relations theory conditionality means to impose conditions for the provision of benefits. In the Eastern enlargement only the *ex-ante* conditionalities were elaborated in the Copenhagen criteria and the *ex-post* conditionalities were missing, since both the compliance, the positive attitude to the implementation of the further integration measures, and the linear development of NMS with a point of no return were taken as evident.[1]

Democratization was also considered a rather simple legalistic concept for NMS based on free and fair elections, as a relatively easy process in the legal--constitutional formalities after the collapse of the former "communist" regime. There has been a long and painful process moving from this "minimalist" definition ("free" in Freedom House terms, FH, 2019) to the "maximalist" definition (*thin* democracy versus *thick* democracy in EIU, 2019). The full complexity of democracy with its large socio-economic and cultural-civilizational foundations was only later seriously discussed in the 2010s due to the tragic backsliding of the weak and chaotic democracy in ECE. Similarly, by the late 2010s it had also become crystal clear that the conditionality in the Copenhagen criteria was not enough, and even compliance with all incoming changes was not sufficient within the EU, since the formal-legal, top down democracy does not work either. Thus, the new member states have to move from the "minimalist" to the "maximalist" meaning of democracy in their re-democratization efforts. Therefore, nowadays ECE countries are searching for a new concept of sustainable Europeanization and Democratization because "Economic Europe" has created the brutal dominance of stronger states over the weaker states within the EU that has produced structural socio-economic weaknesses and autocratic political systems in ECE. In a drastic statement it has also formulated in the West: "There was a brainless rush to absorb as much of eastern Europe as possible" (Mason

1 The concept of Europeanization, Democratization and systemic change will be discussed in the paper, based on the Bertelsmann (2019), EIU (2019), FH (2019), ISEA (2019) and V-Dem (2019a, b) concepts, these preparatory statements indicate only the short overview as these concepts emerged historically. This paper uses the term East-Central Europe (ECE) for the 5 states of this region (as CZ, HU, PL, SI and SK) and that of the new member states (NMS) for the all 11 states joining the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013. All other states to the East – except for Russia – have been called Eastern Europe (EE), or with the often-used term of Wider Europe. In my view, the large term of "Central and Eastern Europe" is very confusing, since usually it is not clear, which states belong to it.

2020: 2). All in all, Economic Europe has defeated "Political Europe" and deeply wounded "Social Europe." In fact, it has degenerated the Europeanization and Democratization of ECE. Consequently, for genuine Europeanization across the EU the recovery of Political and Social Europe is also needed to balance and correct the oppressive role of Economic Europe.[2]

Systemic change has also been a very complex and controversial process in its three – political, economic, and social – dimensions. As Dahrendorf (1990) explained in the early nineties: the basic legal-political change needed six months, the economic one needed six years, and the social one needed sixty years. Indeed, the fundamental political-constitutional transformation as the very first step to Europeanization and Democratization in ECE also took place rather quickly in the early nineties. The economic transition from the planned to the market economy with privatization and reintegration into the world economy was finished in the same decade, while the social change obviously needs a much longer time. Actually, it has not yet been completed in the first 30 years. Dahrendorf has also indicated that systemic change as a simultaneous transition would be a very controversial process with many contradictions between these dimensions, which is vital in the emergence of De-Europeanization and De-Democratization.

In the past decades, however, the ruling idea in systemic change was functionalism, with the basic idea that supposedly the positive feedback works as a "spillover" from one social field to another. Above all the economic development "automatically" strengthens the political democratization and vice versa. Although these sequences of positive feedback have also worked, the entire history of systemic change in ECE can still be better described as a chain of negative feedback between the economy, society, and politics. The EU capacity in terms of economic competitiveness, modern society, and strong democratic tradition was missing in ECE, hence there was a weak start of Europeanization and Democratization leading through the negative feedback to gradual De-Europeanization and De-Democratization. Looking back from the early 2020s, the nineties were dominated by a deep *economic* crisis with the restart of economic growth only in the late nineties. The 2000s gradually produced a *social* crisis due to the polarizing effect of the new dependent market economy, provoking the neopopulist *political* crisis that led to the emerging authoritarian systems in the 2010s. Beneath the surface of the legal-political and institutional transformations in Europeanization and Democratization there has been a complex and controversial backsliding socio-political process that makes it understandable why all ECE countries – first of all Poland

2 The concept of democracy or democratization has changed tremendously in the last decades that gives the theoretical adventure of the entire paper. This paper relies to a great extent on two parallel papers (Ágh 2019c; 2020) about the ECE regional developments and it tries to avoid the repetitions of theoretical arguments and references to the ranking institutes.

and Hungary – deviated drastically from the EU mainstream development in the 2010s.[3]

The real starting point of the analysis is that a sufficient EU capacity was missing in ECE in the nineties and it has not been created since then. In fact, ECE development has derailed from mainstream EU developments; hence, EU capacity building has been a failure of original expectations. The historical trajectory of EU membership has usually been characterized as a simple catching-up process, but the recent EU concept is upward convergence (Eurofound 2018, 2019a, b,c), which is not a *quantitative*, but a *qualitative* process since this convergence is much more than economic growth in GDP terms. First, convergence as the proper capacity building means structural change in the socio-economic situation from a late industrial society to a knowledge-based society with an innovation driven economy based on human investment (sustainable economy). Second, convergence is "upward" only if it leads to a more equitable society with social justice and to a new "green" way of life with an emphasis on well-being (sustainable society). Third, it has to produce an inclusive, participative democratic order with a multilevel governance structure and patterns of civic political culture (sustainable democracy). Hence, in the qualitative development the new members have to be "converging" not with the past of the developed countries, but "upward" with their present situation in order to get their EU capacity.

This structural change in the three dimensions described above has been set in motion in the advanced European democracies in the past decades. It is clear, however, that in the last 30 years ECE has not converged with, but diverged from these EU developments, so the gap has increased and not decreased. Again, this has been mainly due to the weak start and the mistaken EU enlargement policy that has been tilting towards "Economic Europe" with the oppressive rule of the overwhelming market forces producing a dependent economy with social disinvestment in ECE. The result is the unilateral dominance of stronger EU economies over ECE, in which the *hard* economic policy defeated the *soft* social policy, i.e. Economic Europe has first defeated Social Europe and then Political Europe. Namely, "an imbalance has grown in Europe over the last few decades because markets have integrated to a greater extent than European level of policymaking" (Papadia and Cadamuro 2020: 1). This is the true nature of the false catching-up trajectory that can be seen not simply in its up-and-down cycles, but in its essence of controversial development, in both Core-Periphery context and within the domestic structures of the ECE countries. The lack of

3 I have analysed the ECE developments through the triple crisis in three periods in my latest book (Ágh 2019a) with its 104 Tables (Ágh 2019b) in great detail. This triplet gives the backbone of this paper without embarking here on their detailed presentation. The Table I in this paper shows the characteristic profile of the ECE countries with slight changes within 2019 and the Table II the current rankings of seven NMS countries.

the real upward convergence has been the same for all ECE countries, although their actual performance has still been somewhat different.

Actually, the reason for the false start in the EU was the ruling idea of full competitiveness between the strong and weak economies. The result is that the new "free" market economy with its partial modernization emerged in ECE at the high price of a dependent economy with a subservient role to the Western economies, mentioned often as "cheap workshops of the West" (Krakovsky 2019: III). In general, the newly liberated countries played a functional role in the domestic economy of Western partners and/or in the workings of the given multinationals. The historical tradition of the European semi-periphery is that their partial and controversial modernization produced a special kind of dependency with deep economic and social polarization in the ECE countries. Earlier it took place in the open form of political dependence on the West, but this time it has been a voluntary process of ECE countries by building their own dependency structures, hence this can be characterized as soft and/or *self-colonization*. It has happened to them in the framework of the profound contradiction between Economic Europe on one side and Social and Political Europe on the other. Economic Europe has created a strong economic dependence with brutal social consequences that have partitioned the ECE countries into "West of the East" and "East of the East." It produced the general desecuritization that first damaged Social Europe and later ruined Political Europe in the countries concerned. In principle, Political Europe has offered a perspective of democratization and transnational integration, but in reality this opportunity has been prevented by the radical socio-economic distortions caused by Economic Europe.

Based on this contrast between dreams and reality, the main interest of this paper is to explore the high historical trajectory of Europeanization and Democratization in ECE by pointing out the intrinsic failures and inherent limitations of this process in order to prepare the way for a big historical correction that can be termed as "re-entry" to the EU and to reach a real, effective membership instead of a formal-legal membership. All in all, indicating the successes and failures of EU membership in big outlines – on the positive side there has been a "Return to Europe" as an integration to the Euro-Atlantic world and a modest quantitative economic catching-up to the EU average, on the negative side the key issues are the emergence of a neoliberal hybrid with a deep socio-economic crisis leading to the change of the dominant narratives from "illusory Europeanization" to the "national sovereignty" scenario. The outbreak of the global crisis clearly showed the structural weakness of the chaotic democracy in the first twenty years of systemic change and produced a sharp turn in the political system to "illiberal democracy." This drastic turning point gives the periodization of current ECE history, in which a new downward political spiral of systemic change was finally put in motion in the 2010s. Due to the deep socio-political

deconsolidation it has been a reverse wave from a chaotic democracy through internal Easternization to a new authoritarian system.

Pre-accession as the preparatory stage of the EU membership (1989–2004)

In the international framing structures, the pre-accession stage embraces the first 15 years between 1989 and 2004, while the EU membership stage embraces the second 15 years, in which the institutional cycles of the EU – Barroso I. and II. Commissions (2004–2009 and 2009–2014) and the Juncker Commission (2014–2019) – give the external frame of ECE developments within the EU. Therefore, EU membership has to be analyzed in two main periods, the early accession years before the global crisis and the decade after it. The first 15 years need an overview of the starting situation in the pre-accession process as creating the preconditions of EU membership. Preconditions and conditionalities have to be distinguished. *Preconditions* presupposed the large antecedent socio-economic, legal-political, and cultural-civilizational dimensions for the preparatory process of Europeanization and Democratization, whereas *conditionalities* depended on the actual political decisions and strategic perceptions of the EU policy makers, and its permanent correction will be discussed in the terms of the Copenhagen learning process. This distinction is vital, yet it was not perceived by the EU at the start of the Eastern enlargement, although their divergence was huge due to the missing EU capacity in ECE, given the weak competitiveness of ECE in the "free world." As to conditionalities, all basic EU decisions were made under the Western neoliberal pressure of "Economic Europe" as a soft invasion to get new productive fields and markets, while the ECE population expected the "Return to Europe," which meant for them a return to "normalcy" by creating supposedly harmonized relations between sustainable economy and inclusive democracy. Finally, "For many Central Eastern Europeans, 'leading a normal life', similar to that of Westerners and synonymous with prosperity, has proved to be much more difficult than expected" (Krakovsky 2019: II).

The pre-accession process was a dynamic period with several steps in the framework of the Accession Partnership. The EU decided immediately, in December 1989, on the economic assistance with the Phare (Poland – Hungary Assistance for the Reconstruction of Economy) program, followed by association in the Europe Agreement, whereas the strategic decisions were made by the Copenhagen criteria (1993) and Agenda 2000 (EC 1997). The *Agenda 2000* was a long document issued on 15 July 1997 about the bright future of an enlarging EU by reacting to the "challenge of enlargement." In this optimistic era the EU considered the Eastern enlargement a long process embracing the whole continent in subsequent waves, including Eastern Europe (EE). The pre-accession has usually been described as the process "from Copenhagen to Copenhagen,"

since it took place between the EU Summits in June 1993 and December 2002. It had essentially begun with the Copenhagen criteria and was completed by the decision on the accession at the Copenhagen Summit.[4]

The Europeanization and Democratization process had a long prehistory before EU accession. Establishing a market economy and the key legal-constitutional institutions was the very first step, in which basic socio-economic and political transformations laid the foundations for further developments. Although the legal base was more or less durable, the situation was still precarious since those crisis features that were thought to be *transitional* in the nineties, proved to be *permanent* in the 2000s by becoming the *systemic features* of the new society. Thus, under the pressure of the increasing social contradictions, the legal foundation of the new democratic order eroded rather rapidly, since this start was faulty in many respects. Well, the road to the hell is paved with good intentions. At least it is valid for the nineties when after the collapse of the former regime there was some kind of power vacuum in ECE with economic stagnation and this simplified linear narrative of Europeanization became the only hope. No doubt that the EU compensation mechanisms were also designed in the cohesion policy, but they have not worked properly, as the World Bank warned in 2000 about the polarization between the winners and losers (Tang 2000) and largely documented it in the early 2010s (Gill and Raiser 2011) by pointing out that the "Convergence Machine" did not work. Since then there has been a strong connection between the renewal of the cohesion policy and the deep structural reforms in the EU with many recent reform strategies (see EPC projects like Huguenot-Noel et al. 2018 and Hunter 2019), but no meaningful reform has taken place so far and the EU cohesion policy still produces structural divergences (Bachtler and Ferry 2019). Therefore, the critical approach to the half-made cohesion policy goes through this paper, finally referring to the contrast between the theoretical innovations in the late 2010s and the missing actions to create the real preconditions for the upward convergence.

Again, no doubt that in the nineties this Western fallacy of the harmonious, self-reinforcing economic, social, and political developments worked as some kind of ideological drogue in the populations and intellectuals of the countries concerned. The Western fallacy had an effect of the "symbolical violence" by this simplified and over-promising narrative, hence there was no resistance against this false itinerary, only naïve dreams about the rapid and evolutionary Europeanization, though mainly the emerging comprador domestic elites benefited

4 The Copenhagen criteria contain (1) the political conditionalities: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; (2) the economic conditionalities: existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union; and (3) the acceptance of the Community *acquis*: ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

from it. It would be high time to launch a serious discussion on whether ECE had had an opportunity at all for an alternative solution of the independent and sustainable development in the early years of systemic change. This historical moment passed, the Soviet rule collapsed in all ECE countries and later also in *Wider Europe*, so these defenceless countries received the common treatment of Europeanization through the dictate of Economic Europe, which turned out to be only a mirage of economic freedom.

Thus, the so-called democratic transition in the nineties had a dual face, namely the early Democratization in the nineties was a preparatory Europeanization only on the surface. In the depths of the Europeanization process the "marketization" of socio-economic processes was the return to the traditional dependency situation as some kind of De-Europeanization with its dire social consequences. First, in the nineties, the economic crisis produced only a "silent" and latent social crisis, since there was some kind of popular understanding that the new distortions would only be transitory and the legal-political transformations were in the focus of the popular attention and discourse. The social crisis, however, became "loud" and manifest in the next decade when it turned out that these distortions were not transitory at all, but they proved to be the basic features of the new socio-economic system. No doubt the EU leaders – and EU public opinion – sincerely believed that they had triggered an automatism of genuine Europeanization, yet this was not the case. The socio-economic mechanism was installed in the nineties, but its real nature with the detrimental workings had still not been recognized in the late 2010s by the ruling circles of the EU. They were shocked later by the negative political results of the socio--economic crisis in the 2010s, and still lack the time and energy to discover the original sin of introducing an unsustainable economy. Thus, the pre-accession period can be best characterized by the start of cumulated conflicts between the basic socio-economic, legal-political, and cultural-civilizational changes.[5]

First, as to the *socio-economic* Europeanization through a neoliberal hybrid, Jadwiga Staniszkis (1991) had already described this rising "political capitalism" in the early nineties. It is not just about the continuity of nomenclature with some mixture of old and new rulers, but also by pointing out that the new kinds of rulers were political and business actors at the same time in their tight politico-business networks (see also Stark, 1992, 1996). Similarly, the leading experts of ECE socio-economic history, Bohle and Greskovits (2019: 2–3) have characterized "the EU's neoliberal restructuring" in ECE as follows: "foreign rather than domestic companies were quickly occupying the commanding heights in the new capitalist system. Foreign penetration ran also deeper than in the other regions of the globe… transnational organizations also took over

5 This summary below in three points relies on my book, see e.g. (Ágh 2019a: 214–223), see also on the Tables in Ágh, 2019b, and Tables I–II attached to this paper the about the comparative ECE development.

the banking, energy and retail sectors, and even the media. All in all, what emerged in the East was dependent capitalism that differed significantly from its western counterpart." The ECE neoliberal hybrid emerging in the nineties was very different from the Western market economy and it was strengthened with the EU entry, and even more after the global crisis that has generated authoritarian reflexes in the new ECE elites: "The turbulence after 2008 exposed the drawbacks of dependency and launched a new era of hierarchical economic surveillance in the EU. It is against this background that some governments in the East and beyond have started to revolt against economic and political liberalism and embraced nationalism." Finally, ECE governments made a strict deal in the 2010s with the multinationals, in which the new authoritarian systems accepted the "low wage – low skill economy" in exchange for the support of these business giants in their Western governments in the conflict between ECE governments and EU authorities. This alliance is the "open secret" of the security of the authoritarian governments within the EU despite all the loud conflicts with EU authorities.[6]

In fact, the emergent semi-peripheral "low wage – low skill economy" has only appeared in the modern part of the dual economy with the strong ties to the world economy through the Western – mostly German – firms. The domestic part of the economy – above all the SMEs, small and middle size enterprises – has remained underdeveloped and isolated from the external modernization waves in this non-Western development. Accordingly, ECE society disintegrated in the nineties, and it has been gradually reintegrated later into this polarized economy with a growing gap between winners and losers, in which one third of the society has become much poorer as victims of this De-Europeanization. The social polarization has taken place not only vertically among the social strata, but also – and even deeper – horizontally, since the "West of the East" enjoyed some advantages of this Western economic penetration, while the "East of the East" suffered new disadvantages. Altogether, as an EPC expert analysis has pointed out, some modest quantitative catching up has taken place in GDP--based statistical terms, but no upward convergence can be seen in systemic terms. In general, in the late 2010s the divergence was so big among the old and new member states that "it seems as if Europeans are almost living on different planets" (Emmanouilidis 2018: 16).

Second, as to the *legal-political* Europeanization, after the rise of democratic order the weak and chaotic democracy was followed by illiberal, fake, or facade democracy, since the contrast between the Europeanization narrative and the naked reality has been even bigger in the ensuing political system than in the

6 Here I describe this first basic feature briefly relying on the theoretical essay of Bohle and Greskovits (2019), reflecting the lessons of 30/15 years. I focus later on the short presentation of the two other features, returning to them in the analysis of the recent developments in the 2010s.

new socio-economic structures described above. The normative power of the EU was still big in the nineties and the EU image was the center of gravity in all matters. Actually, when Economic Europe defeated Political Europe, the normative power of the EU eroded, since it works only if the official statements are followed with proper actions, otherwise it turns out to be empty rhetoric. From both the hardware side of political institutions and the software side of political culture, ECE citizens react to this contrast drastically that resulted in the systemic distrust in the "Europeanization for all" project and it led to a serious credibility crisis. This widening gap explains the political transformation in ECE from the software side, and the electoral success of the authoritarian forces in the early 2010s created a new autocratic institutional system from the hardware side. Accordingly, EU membership basically has two different periods, not only by the change of governments and/or the political course, but first of all in the relationship to the Europeanization and Democratization as the convergence with – or divergence from – the EU mainstream. It can be seen most clearly in the political transformations that Europeanization and Democratization has turned more and more to De-Europeanization and De-Democratization. Therefore, there are high expectations in ECE for the EU reforms towards Cohesive/Converging Europe in the new institutional cycle that could facilitate the deep domestic transformation as the return to Europeanization and Democratization based on the lessons of 30 years of failed systemic change and 15 years of half-made and conflictual EU integration.

Third, as to the *civilizational* Europeanization, the cultural-ideological change can be shown with the confrontation of two value system in the dominant – the Europe-centric Modernization and the Nation-centric Traditionalization – narratives. The first narrative was a simplified evolutionary or "linear transition" model of Westernization (Palonen 2018: 310) promising an easy Europeanization process with increasing democracy and welfare combined, but in fact with neoliberal modernization set in motion in the background with its distorted socio-political system building. The second one was an old domestic narrative in strong continuity with the resistance against Soviet rule oppressing national sovereignty and cultural traditions, and focusing on the restoration of national sovereignty-identity after the external "Easternization." The pro-EU Westernization narrative was based on combining general legal-political Europeanization with welfare-oriented socio-economic expectations. The Western fallacy meant an easy dream about copying the model of the developed countries by catching up quickly to the EU average. The nation-centric traditional narrative was based on the priority of national sovereignty in combination with restoring some kind of the historical continuity with its traditional value system. The historical trajectory of these dominant narratives shows that originally there was an elite consent and popular support behind the Europeanization project with a pro-European rhetoric, since the European narrative had high expectations and optimism, in which democracy was combined with welfare. However, in

the 2000s social security was put under strain and popular disappointment increased. Thus, the EU narrative declined gradually and evaporated in the 2010s, and finally it was replaced as the dominant narrative with the nation-centric, sovereigntist approach. This paper tries to show that the final result of the first 30 years of systemic change has been a cultural/civilizational Easternization or De-Europeanization of ECE populations.

The Bumpy Road from the EU accession to the global crisis (2004–2010)

The description of EU membership between 2004 and 2010 needs only be given a cursory view, since this analysis focuses on the present period between 2010 and 2019. The historical overview of membership has to start with the outlines of the external conditions because it is important to note that the 15 years of the pre-accession period (1989–2004) took place under much more favorable external conditions within the world system than the 15 years' period of membership (2004–2019), especially after the late 2000s when the disintegrating world order was overburdened with serious tensions and convulsions. Therefore, despite the cumulated problems discussed below, the early years of EU membership were still a relatively optimistic era in contemporary ECE history, although they were followed rather rapidly from the late 2000s by the painful years of global crisis with the ensuing domestic socio-economic and political crisis. Accordingly, the cycles of the Prodi Commission (1999–2004) during the accession negotiations and the Barroso I. Commission (2004–2009) in the first membership period were together an optimistic era, which switched suddenly to the era of increasing pessimism due to the radical crisis management. In the decomposition process of the former world order the EU leadership and the Core countries have neglected the special ECE crisis, resulting in the marginalization of ECE within the enlarged EU. Thus, the second membership period starting in the early 2010s has been under the conditions of the EU polycrisis in a changing world system and it has also been a period of deepening confrontation between ECE and EU authorities.

In the domestic processes, therefore, there has also been a clear contrast between the first period of membership with an intensive – but awkward – adjustment to the EU rules and the second period with a partial – but conflictual – adjustment. It gives a clear distinction between the Bumpy Road and the Rocky Road of Europeanization and Democratization that will be discussed in its main outlines. The entry in May 2004 was preceded by a referendum and followed immediately by the first EP election. This formal accession was vital from a legal vantage point, but in fact the actual accession as an adjustment process was long and gradual in all fields and it took place to some extent before the legal accession. Although the legal and political adjustment process was in-

deed intensive, the socio-economic process became more and more overloaded with the contradictions between the legal forms and their social content, or between the "official layer" of Europeanization on the surface and that of the real "everyday life" in the depths of society with increasing De-Europeanization. The ECE region in competitiveness terms was not really prepared for the EU membership, and the Copenhagen criteria have not been helpful to enhance the EU capacity either, therefore ECE during the 2000s reproduced its former historical peripheral status in a new form.

The ECE development trajectory showed from the very beginning that ECE did not really "return to Europe," but in fact it diverged in many ways from mainstream Europe. Although this serious divergence was realized on both sides of the political spectrum only belatedly as the "Fault Lines" of the EU have deepened (Wöhl et al. 2019). Even Habermas (1990a, 1990b) has argued that the historical events in ECE have been some kind of "repeating revolutions," i.e. covering the same Western road somewhat later. Similarly, both the EU leadership and ECE governments were flying blind, since the new member states remained a blind spot for the EU as to the regional specificities of their convergence process. Therefore, the internal challenge of the development could be described by overcoming this overgeneralized "liberalization" within the EU, in which the strong old and the weak new member states were supposed to compete under the same conditions as a "mission impossible." These fake equal conditions – called by Fritz Scharpf (2015) as a simple "judicial integration" by common legalities on the surface – have led to a Fragmented Europe (Emmanouilidis 2018) with a divergent social and political landscape. Indeed, this fetish of legal formalities, by neglecting their social preconditions and consequences, has produced many collateral damages and unwanted results, so this adjustment process worked for a while and has finally blown up under the pressure of the cumulated tensions.[7]

The basic fact is that in ECE in the 2000s – beneath the democratic surface of the legal-political institutions – the neoliberal socio-economic system was completed and consolidated. The new system was a dual economy with a polarized society that resulted by 2006 in a social deconsolidation and the eruption of political discontent, which has continued after 2010 in a gradual backsliding of democracy. In the 2000s there was already a growing gap between the modernized "big" economy, almost completely controlled by the multinationals, and the traditional "small" economy of SMEs, without any organic contact between them or having the tendency for the harmonization into one system of national economy. Similarly, the same growing gap as a "continental drift" appeared in the polarized society between the winners and losers. Paradoxically this dualism of two main strata of the rich upper third and the poor lower third of the

7 About the discussion of convergence process (see for instance Andor 2019; Bargaoanu and Volintiru 2019; Darvas 2019; Darvas et al. 2019).

population was reinforced by the "islands" of precariat in-between, moving up and down in full uncertainty. In the 2000s there was already a sharp contrast between the consolidation of the new dominant neoliberal economic system and the deconsolidation of the new polarized socio-political system with the ensuing volatile social policy of the weakening governments. In the "official" political system this produced a chaotic democracy with the increasing influence of the "informal" politico-business patronage networks beneath the surface, due to the missing separation between the sectors of economy and politics, i.e. between the private actors in business and the public actors in politics.

The deviation from the EU mainstream was considerable already in the 2000s as an unwanted and largely unnoticed divergence in terms of economic competitiveness and socio-political sustainability. The main test of divergence from the EU mainstream was legally joining the EU as a purely judicial integration, though not joining the new EU type of socio-economic development based on a knowledge society, since ECE was still focusing on the GDP-based quantitative development of the outgoing industrial society. The dual economy excluded the possibility of switching to qualitative development, since even the modernized part of the ECE economy tended towards the "low skill – low cost" dependent economy of multinationals. This peripheral development pattern did not demand structurally high social investments in education and health care, quite to the contrary, and, in addition, even the low-level human investments were radically reduced twice by the crisis management measures.

Hence, while *External* Europeanization as the legal face of all sectors was advancing through the institutional transfer with the basic constitutional changes and legal harmonization, *Internal* Europeanization as their social content was more and more in trouble due to declining social investment and political participation. In such a way the Europeanized political culture also lagged behind the formal-legal, institutional changes and the new democracy was already gradually emptied in the 2000s. The participation was low in all other respects of civic and public activities. Although at the formal-legal level there were some efforts for building a multilevel governance, but these weak structures became mere formalities, therefore the performance of governments was low and without meaningful public participation. A chaotic, weak democratic polity emerged, in which the new ruling class was sunken into an early socio-political senility, not realizing the radical changes in the world economy in the 2000s. They kept the outdated model of GDP-based development with the old type of economic growth and welfare instead of a model based on well-being and human investment. There was no effort to strategically plan for sustainability, since both the good governance in general and human or social investment in particular needs complexity management, well beyond the ruling capacity of this new polity.

Nevertheless, following the transformation crisis of the nineties, the economic growth returned in the early 2000s when EU accession took place. Af-

terwards, the latent accession crisis turned to the open post-accession crisis even before the eruption of the global crisis. Conversely, no solid Europeanized social structure emerged with a wide and stable middle class to serve as a social and civilizational base for the new democracy. Moreover, due to the global crisis the most painful crisis management program came in 2009–2010, in which the new fragile social structure suffered further decomposition and so did the democratic order. The subsequent austerity programs exhausted the population, causing wide disappointment and deep resentment, resulting in a fateful credibility crisis. In the fight of the two dominant narratives, the traditionalist-nativist narrative defeated the simplified, evolutionary, and linear Europeanization narrative. The ongoing desecuritization of society and the victory of the traditionalist narrative made the citizens defenceless against the aggressive neopopulism. As a result, the Bumpy Road of Europeanization and Democratization turned into a Rocky Road around 2010, and there was a sharp turn from Europeanization and Democratization to De-Europeanization and De-Democratization (see e.g. Daly 2019; Krastev and Holmes 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Solska et al. 2018).

The Rocky Road of ECE from democracy to autocracy (2010–2019)

In the Europeanization as the accommodation to the "ever closer Union" or to the process of EU federalization, there are two opposite periods in ECE, and the turning point in the historical trajectory was in the early 2010s. Previously, the ECE governments and the political elites made large efforts to follow the adjustment process, although they underperformed to a great extent in this role and passively accepted the "policy taker" position in the EU. The new governments in turn basically diverted from the EU mainstream in the 2010s and have been deliberately looking for a confrontation with the EU in order to build up a new authoritarian system. They have opposed further federalization and propagated the idea of "Europe of the strong nation states" as their main slogan of De-Europeanization. In general, even if they cannot change the position of "policy taker" in the "freedom fight against Brussels," they have appeared more and more in the role of the "negative policy maker" by fervently opposing the policy reforms in the EU. Therefore, this adjustment path has turned from the former latent and unwanted divergence to the manifest and conscious divergence through a series of open conflicts. The short description of this ongoing *process* is an overview of the present *situation* in the EU-ECE relationship with the analysis of the priority issues.

The ranking institutes like V-Dem have applied "systemic perspective on democracy" (V-Dem 2019b: 4) by elaborating a comprehensive system of indicators. Hence, the overview of the de-Europeanized ECE needs a short analysis in its three key dimensions, covering the present political, socio-economic, and cultural-civilizational situation. It has to start with the politics, since politics

has been the main factor in all other transformations. A modern "cast-system" has emerged from above within a politically re-organized society. This distorted, deeply polarized socio-economic structure has led finally to a civilizational crisis, or a backsliding of civilization as the deprivation of the citizens from a proper European way of life. Basically, the qualitative catching up scenario has failed because the main factors of global competitiveness – the level of education and health care, R & D and innovation – have plummeted in ECE (WEF 2018, 2019).[8]

First, as the recent literature also argues (Mattlak et al. eds 2018), when analyzing the De-Europeanization of the *political* system, we have to change the vocabulary from the Western type of political science to the language of façade democracy, autocracy, or velvet dictatorship, given the fact that the original terms in the EU institutional transfer have lost their original meaning in ECE. This transformation of the key legal institutions into a democratic facade concerns all constitutional institutions (Bogdandy and Sonnevend 2015 and CoE 2018). The De-Europeanized political-administrative structure has also gradually embraced the meso-level institutions and actors. In most cases the leading representatives of interest organizations represent the interests of government versus their members, and the increasing part of the staff in state administration has been made similar to an army of loyal humanoid robots. The tringle of corruption, increasing socio-political inequality, and political overreach are the main characteristics of the new autocracy. Namely, there is state supported corruption from above, a politically arranged deep socio-economic polarization between winners and losers and a constant effort to occupy the entire political space to oppress the autonomy of all social and cultural fields. In the distortion of political system, the social desecuritization and/or fight against the external and internal "enemies" has been an important factor in the electoral success of neopopulist parties (see in general, Bernhard et al. 2019). The survival of the autocratic regimes in ECE has also been secured by conquering the communicative space in the 2010s with "a skewed media landscape where publicly funded media produce a discourse that paints the government as the guarantor of the national sovereignty and the opposition as the country's enemies" (Krakovsky 2019: XI). In the media capture the "private" property of oligarchs has been used for the "public" interests of the authoritarian government. Thus, the velvet dictatorship that has been supported and maintained to a great extent by the soft power of the media. The new authoritarian regimes have completed the colonization of citizens' everyday life by controlling the public space.[9]

8 See OECD (2019a, b), WJP (2019), and also (Darvas, 2019 and Darvas et al. 2019). Concerning the global competitiveness, the WEF data (WEF 2018, 2019) are the most indicative, but one has to note that WEF changed its scoring system in 2018, so the scores before 2018 give better overview.

9 See WJP, 2019 and EIU, 2019, also EC, 2019d with the EU Justice Scoreboard. The World Justice Report was published first in 2012 and its index structure was finally elaborated in the mid-2010s.

According to the World Justice Project the rule of law index has dropped in ECE. WJP has elaborated 8 specific indexes: (1) Constrains on Government Powers, (2) Absence of Corruption, (3) Open Government, (4) Fundamental Rights, (5) Order and Security, (6) Regulatory Enforcement, (7) Civil Justice and (8) Criminal Justice – and the composite index gives their summary, which reflects the decline of democracy in detail. The main issue is, however, the deepening confrontation between the EU and ECE due to the rule of law violations by the ECE governments. The worsening RL violations in Hungary and Poland have resulted in a political pressure on the EU and the demand has risen in EP to introduce an annual Democracy Report about all member states that has recently come back as a vital task for the new Commission. In a series of conflictual meetings, after the European Parliament and the Commission also the Council began to discuss the rule of law violations by the Hungarian and Polish governments. It has only been the first phase of a long procedure, so it will be on the EU agenda for a long time.[10]

Second, analyzing the De-Europeanization in the socio-economic development trajectory, it is important to switch from the Western model of sustainable economy and society to the vocabulary of an outdated and dependent post-industrial society. The ECE case has been based on a compromise of the neoliberal multinationals and domestic oligarchs producing a huge contrast between the quantitative and qualitative catching-up process, therefore the socio-economic processes have been closely interwoven with the cultural--civilizational decay discussed below. In the late 2010s there was a painful return to "normalcy" of economic growth after ten years of global crisis management with some kind of fragile socio-economic consolidation. But ECE nowadays is in a worse situation than it was a decade ago to alter its course from quantitative to qualitative catching up. This is due to the deterioration in the vital fields of investment in human and social capital and in R & D as innovation driven development (Eurofound 2018, 2019a, 2019b). The last decade presents a serious decline in the input side of the social investments of education, research, and health care because they have been chronically underfinanced. Moreover, they have been overburdened with the increasing governmental centralization, but even more on the output side of the decreasing performance level of human capacity and skills, cumulated as an educational decline. This presentation can be easily based on the Commission's evaluation of the 2019 National Reform Programmes and 2019 Convergence Programmes of the ECE countries (see e.g. EC, 2019a), or on the latest OECD Reports (2019a, b). These EU and OECD documents directly uncover the painful reality, since the EU institutions are

10 In the long and open history of the rule of law violations it will be high on the agenda in the coming years. The rule of law violations have been the show case of the De-Europeanization and De-Democratization process, therefore a lot of attention has been paid to it within the EU (see e.g. some key documents EC, 2019a, 2019b; EP, 2020b and Helsinki Foundation 2019) and also in the international political science (see e.g. Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018, 2019a, b; Halmai 2019a, b; Muis and Troost 2018).

very cautious in their political assessments, but are rather open in criticizing the socio-economic issues due to the increasing social disinvestment in public services. All in all, the Core-Periphery Divide has increased in the last decade owing to the social disinvestment that has become the biggest obstacle to a sustainable economy, and the EU authorities have not been busy at all to discover its reasons and to elaborate a strategy to overcome it (Gorzelak 2019).

The Economist (2019) has strongly criticized not only "the patchy record on political reform" in ECE, but it has also pointed out the special external conditions of the relatively rapid economic growth referring also to the incoming limitations of the quantitative catching up process: "Four main external forces have driven the remarkable successes of the four extremely open V4 economies. The first is their access to generous subsidies from the EU, which make up a sizeable chunk of their respective national incomes. Second is the munificent flow of remittances from millions of expat V4 citizens who now live and work in the EU, especially in Germany, Austria or Britain. A benevolent recent economic environment has also helped, especially the success of the German economy, by far their most important trading partner and the biggest or second-biggest investor in each country. And lastly, the four all started from a low base, enabling them to serve as cheap workshops for more developed economies. The danger is that all four of these factors are now petering out." The recent analyses have underlined, indeed, the controversial character of the dependent development in ECE. In ECE there has been a widespread debate on the dubious German role in the "low wage – low skill" economy and the liaison between their multinationals and the domestic regimes. In the dependent, dual economy a polarized society has emerged between the political winners and losers, with the politico-business networks united into a patronage system of the ruling party. The political ties permeated all socio-economic relations and changed their internal logic when the "free" marked turned into a state-controlled market, therefore, the entire society has been permeated by hypocrisy. The latest YouGov survey gives a composite picture about the "doom and gloom" in ECE (see Bui-Wrzosinska 2019).[11]

Third, as to the ensuing civilizational-cultural development trajectory, we have to change the vocabulary again to contrast the description of the Western "post-materialist" well-being-type with that of the outdated ECE "materialist" welfare-type of universe to properly describe the huge gap between East and West in the way of life, public service systems, and patterns of political culture. The ECE governments have followed some kind of a "welfare strategy" instead of a "well-being strategy," since in the last years the personal income of the population has modestly increased, but since the early 2010s the resources for the public services in the GDP terms have drastically decreased. It can be contrasted as the "private" income versus the "social" income, or even as

11 On the German role see e.g. Book (2018), Kováts and Smejkalova (2019), Ozsvath (2019) and Fabry (2019).

"material" consumption versus "non-material," public or social consumption. Namely, in the socio-economic strategy people have been organized into a low-level consumption society by purchasing slightly more things "privately" on the market, but they have been mistreated more and more "publicly" by being deprived of public services – like education, health care, and social services (child care, old care and all kinds of social redistribution) – as social beings. As a result, the missing/declining public services have also become "privatized," i.e. proper services can only be reached from the private service firms. In this way the social polarization has been completed, since the large part of society could no longer afford these "normal" services in health care and education, not even in a "private" way. So on the surface there has been some kind of pseudo-Europeanization with a modest increase in the material consumption for the "private" individuals, but in the depth of the social transformation in the well-being terms there has been a De-Europeanization for the "social" beings. The decreasing level of health care, education, and social services for the majority of the ECE population has been largely documented in the EU and OECD reports.

The Eurofound documents have pointed out the organic links between the quality of society and the public services in the long series of the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) since 2003. The latest flagship report as the fourth EQLS report has emphasized that "the results present an uneven picture regarding service quality," namely "the continuing inequalities between countries and different social groups." Although it is a vital issue for all member states, since "Public services are recognised as a cornerstone of the European Pillar of Social Rights." In fact, the high quality and effective public services are the test for the substantive social inclusion and/or social cohesion instead of the formal-legal social inclusion, given the huge gap between the formal and real citizenship. Especially in the transition from the outgoing post-industrial society there has been an increasing demand for social investment in the human capacity building. Public service is not only as an administrative or moral issue, but "as a key factor in well-being and social cohesion" it is first of all a socio-economic issue of international competitiveness with its political consequences of support for and trust in the democratic system. All in all, "investment in human capital and capabilities throughout of life course is delivered through provision of quality services – childcare, education, preventive healthcare and social services" (Eurofound 2019d: 1, 3).

In this respect ECE is still at the "pre-accession stage," or what has been even worse, it has been backsliding not only in Democratization, but even more in the provision of quality public service by fatally damaging the Europeanization of ECE population (see e.g. Buljan et. al. 2019). This social disinvestment has produced a cultural-civilization crisis because of the drastic deterioration of the everyday lives of citizens in all dimensions. In the last ten years there has been a chaotic, unpredictable, and defective public service system in everyday life, so not only has the democracy been emptied at the macro-level, but the

human universe at the micro-level depriving the common people to develop a European capacity as a real, not only legal citizenship in the EU. Beyond the drastic "pauperization" of public services by offering poor service, the internal organization of public services has also been ineffective. Therefore, in search of a better quality of life, "these countries have been experiencing a mass population exodus. It is often the youngest, most educated, and most enterprising people who leave. Differences in living standards and salaries (which can be increased four- to tenfold just crossing over the border) incite these departures. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, cumulative net migration over the last thirty years has exceeded 10% of the population" (Krakovsky 2019: III).

At the start of the Europeanization process there was a rather big "absolute" civilizational deficit between the developed Western member states and the new member states. With the EU entry, however, an increasing "relative" civilizational deficit has also emerged, measured in the composite terms way of life, quality of life, or well-being in the EU/OECD concept. There has been a growing gap between East and West as the delay of social and human capital investment compared to the new demands of EU membership can easily be concretized as the "subjective" challenge of international competitiveness. The ECE societies have tried to enhance their EU capacity, but in vain, but this gap has increased more in the last decade due to the systemic pauperization of public services, resulting in the systemic distrust in the "Return to Europe" scenario. Only one third of ECE citizens have crossed the border line between this outdated and defective universe of the late industrial society and the Europeanized way of life with some kind of a knowledge society. Another one third, the precariat, has been "nomadizing," moving back and forth between them or has taken refuge in the West: "if Europe does not come to us, we go to Europe." The lowest one third of the ECE population has been lost "for Europe" during the 30-year journey, and it suffers from several kinds of poverty with deep cultural deprivation that leads in most cases to the absolute civilizational deficit.[12]

All in all, the *relative* civilizational deficit, which has only been applicable for the upper two-thirds of the population, has significantly increased with a huge gap between the EU as "the lifestyle superpower" (Gill and Raiser 2011) and frustrated ECE citizens. Moreover, the cumulated *absolute* civilizational deficit in the one-third of the population is even worse than it was 30 years ago due to the drastic De-Europeanization in the ECE periphery that have been "falling out of Europe." Here the analyses of the socio-economic distortions of dependent development have come back with a vengeance in their heavy cultural consequences that in turn deteriorate the economic development in the era of

12 This controversial and polarized "cultural-educational" Europeanization of manpower has been largely documented by the annual EU and OECD Reports quoted above (see also Dauderstädt and Keltek 2017; Dauderstädt 2019a, b).

knowledge-based societies. All in all, the socio-economic, legal-political, and cultural-civilizational development path shows the deep divide between the External and Internal Europeanization in all fields, resulting in a massive De--Europeanization, i.e. developing only a thin and controversial European façade of ECE society. In fact, after 15 years of membership there is a huge and growing contrast between the half-made Europeanized part on the winner side and the gloomy De-Europeanized one on the loser side, combined into a frustrated and unhappy country. Altogether, in a birds' eye view, the fragmented society has produced cumulated systemic incompatibility into a sustainable society for an upward convergence in the EU. From the governance side it has been the result of the missing complexity management and the counterproductive political measures with collateral damages among the various policy fields.

Conclusion: The "love-hate" relations of ECE with the EU

The historical trajectory of the relationship between ECE and the EU can be best summarized as some kind of often slightly changing love-hate relationship with the EU, since this long-lasting commitment combined with bitter historical resentment has been a much more complicated issue than the level of support for EU membership according the Eurobarometer data. Its basic contradiction can be explained through the Eastonian terms of diffuse versus specific support. Diffuse support is an enduring support for the political regime in general, originating from the socialization and connected with general values and attitudes, whereas specific support depends on the actual performance of the given government and other organizations in their particular policy fields. In the Europeanization and Democratization in the last decades we have witnessed a big gap between diffuse and specific support, namely between the support for Europeanization in general and the dissatisfaction with some specific EU policies in particular, as well as between the support of Democratization in general and the growing distrust in the workings of democratic institutions in particular. The enduring general-symbolic support for the EU has been accompanied on the other side by strong criticisms by ECE citizens about particular EU policies with their ups and downs. Similarly, the support for democracy as a system in general and the dissatisfaction with democratic performance of the given government in particular shows the same dualism. Moreover, in both cases in the ECE populations there is a large variety of cognitive dissonance between/among the support for the different policy fields.[13]

Although this construct of diffuse and-specific support seems to work in the ECE analysis, the twin processes of Europeanization and Democratization

13 I have dealt with this issue much more in details in my recent book, including the Yalta syndrome in ECE, i.e. the feeling being abandoned by the West in the crucial periods of their history, like after the WWII and in the global crisis management (see e.g. Ágh, 2019a: 131–132).

have still a rather different historical trajectory. "Europe" has been the basic normative concept, being the real anchor for the ECE populations in the last centuries, whereas the building of the democratic order as the full democratization of the entire society is a relatively new historical project. This current image of democracy has been eroded to a great extent by the practice of chaotic democracy before 2010 and even more by façade democracy afterwards. Therefore, even the diffuse support for democratic system has been somewhat weakened due to the cumulated effects of the low democratic performance, when the centuries-long feeling of belonging to Europe cannot be hurt deeply by any special confrontation. Hence, the diffuse support for democracy has only decreased during the troubled history of the last 30 years, but not for Europe, since Europe has remained the sacrosanct value.[14]

Thus, the support for domestic democracy has usually been lower than that for the EU, due to the inherent democracy deficit from the very beginning of systemic change. As a result of the tension between the formal and informal institutions, or between the hard institutional and the soft cultural factors, the original naïve expectations with systemic trust in Democratization has turned into bitter systemic distrust in the political order at the national level. The trust gap between the EU and the national level, or between the EU institutions and domestic institutions can also be explained by Easton's thesis on diffuse and specific support. Diffuse support or trust in the EU institutions may change slightly from time to time, but it has remained within a constant positive trend. Specific support or trust in the domestic institutions, above all in the governments concerned, however, has been drastically changing in ECE. It has been fallen due to the growing social and civilizational polarization, the poor governance, and the huge gap between the official promises and the dire realities. In general, the perception of population is that there has been no "deep ploughing" as a profound democratization of the political system, just formal changes on the surface, turning from bad to worse in the 2010s. This has caused a deep resentment, therefore "the past defeated the future." Namely the "Great History that Never Was" narrative elaborated by neopopulist forces defeated the naive European narrative of "Illusory Future that Never Comes," promised originally by pro-European forces. Thus, the neopopulist project of the search for national identity/sovereignty based on the glorious past has become a refuge for the pains of the present for ECE populations obscuring their future.[15]

14 It can be seen both in the comparative ECE overview (Table I) with the latest Eurobarometer results (EB, Eurobarometer 2019a, b; see also EB, Eurobarometer 2019c, d). The Pew Surveys 2019a, b) have also confirmed the strong attachment of ECE to EU-Europe, despite the controversies in policy matters, above all concerning the refugee crisis.

15 The politics of historical memory has become a common practice of the changing governments in ECE, analysed in a huge literature, but is goes beyond the scope of this paper.

As to the expectations for the next EU institutional cycle (2019–2024) only a very cautious optimism is allowed, since the EU has not yet developed any feeling for the regional or country specifics, and ECE countries have remained a Blind Spot for the Core. The EU workings have been based on the developed countries where the "normalcy" mentality emerged in the post-war "golden" decades building a solid base of welfare, representative democracy, and a strong civil society. In this spirit, "The founding fathers of the European project were convinced that social convergence will arise spontaneously through economic convergence" (Eurofound 2018: 6). Hence, its logic originally tilted very much in favor of Economic Europe with drastic preferences for neoliberalism, accompanied by modest compensations of Social Europe and supported by Political Europe. Although this "normal" world of welfare society has mostly been shaken even in the developed countries in the following decades, but it has been transformed there into a well-being society. Hence, the idea of automatism between the introduction of "market economy" and the emergence of "democratic politics" has still remained evident in the EU circles of the developed member states. In this spirit they have elaborated the conditionalities for the Eastern enlargement and have adjusted the "differentiated integration" from time to time. They have not considered at all that "Some wealthier Member States or regions may benefit more than others from the process of integration – in part due to the effects of specialisation and of centre–periphery dichotomies" (Eurofound 2018: 5). Thus, this false functionalist construction has been extended beyond the Core to the Periphery as an expectation for the rapid democratization of ECE without its socio-economic foundation.

This attitude with the high expectation for the illusory organizing principle of "spill-over" has not changed in the process of Eastern enlargement despite the series of "spill-back" effects. It has not been regionally specified even in the several stages of the Copenhagen learning process with the long debates about the "differentiated integration" (see EP 2018 or e.g. Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2017). The slower steps were allowed in this approach, but the basic automatism between the economic growth in the GDP terms and the sustainable democratization has remained the main expectation despite the lessons learned about the negative spill-over and its collateral damages. The EU strategic thinking has kept its top-down model of the overgeneralized formal-legal rules and models elaborated as an oversimplified functionalism that has caused a failure of cohesion policy not leading to the "upward convergence" at all (Bachtler and Ferry, 2019 and Hunter, 2019). Namely, "Critics underlined the lack of explanation provided by the neo-functionalist literature with regards to the ways and modalities through which the process would take form, and the almost faith-like assumption political spill-overs would eventually take place" (Bevaqua 2019: 21). This may run into the danger of the two-speed EU scenario for the 2020s, putting all ECE into a Deepfreeze because it has always been easy to find important

reasons why not to deal with the specific crisis in ECE due to the permanent urgency of many vital issues for the Core. Nowadays there is indeed a drastic transition from the Old World Order to the New World Order with the deep desecuritization of the international relations on one side and the need which has emerged for the reorientation of the EU funds to the new policy fields to increase the global competitiveness of the EU on the other. This paper has tried to document that there has been a huge and alarming literature on the failure of the upward convergence in ECE in vain because the EU follows its "business as usual" course and has not invited the "audiatur et altera pars" solution.

The continued benign neglectence as a functionalist "modernization" EU strategy is possible in mid-term, since the economic importance of ECE countries is small, they give much less than 10% of the EU GDP. So the new institutional cycle can accelerate the EU economic development at the price of the further polarization within the EU in all respects. This can be legitimized, indeed, by arguing for the populations of the Core countries with the justification that ECE countries have misused the EU transfers. At least they have not used them efficiently and a significant percentage has disappeared in the corruptive politico-business networks as the power pyramids of the ECE governments. In this situation there are two options, either talks by referring to this justified criticism, while neglecting the special regional approach for ECE, or starting strategic actions for reforming the "upward convergence" project in all member states. Moreover, the EU's strong confrontation with the corrupt policies of the autocratic regimes may also give encouragement also to the domestic democratic forces. When the danger of the world economic recession has been widely discussed in the global media, an easy escape has been offered for the new EU leadership to again delay this confrontation with the new authoritarian systems, but only at its own peril because this crisis in the EU periphery will come back with a vengeance after five years in the next institutional cycle at a higher level.[16]

The new EU leadership has obviously recognized that this form of Eastern enlargement so far has been a failure and it cannot be continued as expected in the 2000s, although the EU ruling circles and main powers have not yet recognized that the real solution would be the deep reform of the Core-Periphery relations with a renewed enlargement strategy in ECE based on its regional specificities. However, there is a big historical opportunity, since on 9 May 2020, according to the interinstitutional agreement, a two-year negotiation process starts with the participation of the Council, Commission, and European Parliament at a Conference on the Future of Europe (EP 2020a) that gives some optimism

16 In the late 2019 the crisis around the Eastern enlargement in the West Balkans was high on the political agenda of the EU (see e.g. EC 2019c, or Blockmans 2019 and Góra et al. 2019), but this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

on the EU side. At the same time, as reported in the international media (see e.g. Hopkins and Shotter 2019 in the Financial Times), the Alliance of the Free Cities between the V4 capitals has been organized against the authoritarian ECE governments that indicates the emerging redemocratization wave on the ECE side. With the incoming new Commission, and with the serious task of the repeated global crisis management after the global financial crisis, a new institutional cycle has also begun in the ECE history in the EU, its analysis with the new hopes in redemocratization is already the job of the next paper.

Table I: EU landscape in a comparative view of the ECE citizens
(positive-negative views in the early 2019 and in the late 2019)

Country	IM	TR	SD	MV	FE	EC	EM
CZ	29–27	36–55	54–38	37–56	54–43	58–41	26–67
HU	52–11	55–40	63–31	55–42	68–28	84–15	57–17
PL	54–7	54–35	70–18	69–24	74–18	84–14	35–55
SI	44–15	45–50	56–39	55–40	69–28	77–23	88–9
SK	36–15	44–46	56–34	61–30	70–27	80–18	77–14
EU28	45–17	44–46	55–36	56–39	61–14	73–26	62–30

Country	IM	TR	SD	MV	FE	EC	EM
CZ	31–24	39–52	56–38	32–63	67–28–	65–35	27–68
HU	53–10	52–39	61–31	51–47	75–21	80–19	60–30
PL	50–9	49–37	67–22	56–38	80–15	81–17	33–51
SI	44–16	46–48	54–41	49–47	62–34	76–24	87–9
SK	33–12	45–44	50–41	49–46	73–20	79–19	81–10
EU28	42–20	43–47	52–40	45–50	70–24	70–29	62–29

IM – image of the EU, TR –trust in the EU, SD – satisfaction with the EU democracy, MV – my voice counts, FE – future of EU (2019a) and Europe voice counts in the world (2019b), EC – European citizenship, EM – Economic and Monetary Union.

EB (2019a) Standard Eurobarometer 91, August 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/index#p=1&instruments=STANDARD

EB (2019b) Standard Eurobarometer 92, November 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2255

Table II: The rankings of political and policy performance in 7 NMS out of the 41 states in the OECD and EU

Country	Dem	Gov	Acc	Cap	Pcy	Ecp	Sop	Enp
BG	36	36	30	36	32	15	40	34
CZ	20	27	15	30	17	16	22	20
HU	40	37	40	35	34	18	38	37
PL	37	34	31	32	31	34	31	27
RO	38	40	38	40	36	22	39	38
SI	16	31	23	38	20	12	17	31
SK	27	35	32	34	29	19	32	33

Dem – democracy, Gov – governance, Acc – accountability, Cap – executive capacity, Pcy – policy performance in general, Ecp – economic policy, Sop – social policy and Enp – environmental policy

Bertelsmann Foundation (2019b) Policy Performance and Governance Capacities in the OECD and EU: Sustainable Governance Indicators 2018, https://news.sgi-network.org/uploads/tx_amsgistudies/SGI-2018-Englisch.pdf

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