

Gergely Rajnai

# Consolidation of Power in Post-socialist Central European Countries

## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the different kinds of consolidation of power in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism. It first introduces the concept of consolidation of power by drawing a parallel with the well-established frameworks of democratic consolidation and embeddedness, then it cites examples for each defined type of consolidation. The incomplete list of examples demonstrate that the 1990s and the 2010s have provided fundamentally different opportunities for consolidation of power to the various countries of the region. While during the early transitional period, the reversal of democratic and economic reforms and regression into (Communist) authoritarian rule were the main challenges, nowadays, main consolidating actors are not post-communist parties but “illiberal” politicians who are trying to consolidate their power by altering the ways liberal democracy has been functioning in the region without reversing market reforms. These attempts have come in different forms and have enjoyed different levels of success, but have become more and more common. Throughout this paper, different types of consolidation are identified and assessed with regards to prevalence in the post-socialist Central European region, citing important examples from the period between 1989 and 2018.

## DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Consolidation has been a central concept of political science since the third wave of democratization began. The literature on consolidation focused on consolidation of democracy. According to this literature, “a consolidated democracy is one that is unlikely break down” (Schedler, 2001: 66); in other words, consolidation means that “democracy has become the only game in town” (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 5). This concept has become especially important for students of post-socialist Central and Eastern European democracies that have had issues with the implementation of the institutions of liberal democracy and the means of consolidation is treated as a solution to these issues.

As it has become such an important concept, various types of consolidation have been defined that differ from each other considerably. Schedler (1998) identifies five meanings of democratic consolidation that can be reduced to three main types. Negative consolidation is the prevention of the reemergence of an authoritarian regime or the erosion of democratic quality. This is the most basic type of consolidation, ensuring that whatever democratic progress the political system has achieved is preserved and the regime at the very least survives in its current state (which may very well be imperfect in the eyes of democratic theorists). Schedler (1998: 96) considers “eliminating, neutralizing or converting disloyal

players” as the “primary task” of negative consolidation. This type is consistent with the “unlikely to break down” definition.

Once a certain set of institutions is established and regression to an authoritarian regime or a lower quality subtype of democracy is ensured, neutral consolidation (i.e. the organization of democracy) can begin. Organizing democracy may include various processes that make the political system more enduring and readier for further improvement without actually changing its democratic subtype. It is a perpetual process in the sense that it can never end: no matter how advanced a democracy is, it always needs organizing to adapt to changing circumstances averting erosion and facilitating further advancement.

Finally, positive consolidation is about the improvement (“deepening” or “completing”) of democracy. Democracies can be qualified in countless ways (electoral, liberal, illiberal, delegative and advanced are just a few examples); getting from one subtype to another (according to democratic theory, a better and most importantly, more stable one) requires positive consolidation. This type of consolidation is more difficult to achieve than the negative one, and usually necessitates a longer period of time as it includes more than the building of formal institutions (even though that plays a significant part as well) and focuses more on the establishment of informal ones (e.g. democratic culture, effective civil society) essentially ensuring that the established formal institutions are not obsolete. Positive consolidation is a step of democratization that comes after the main formal institutions of the preceding authoritarian regime are replaced by basic democratic institutions.

Not only does consolidation have various different types, political scientists have introduced other concepts that have similar meanings. One such concept is embeddedness. According to Merkel (2004), embeddedness is crucial for consolidation; embedded democracies are less vulnerable and have a higher quality than unembedded ones. Embedding a democracy is similar to organizing it, it is mainly a variation of neutral consolidation, even though it might include elements of negative and positive consolidation as well. Internal embeddedness means that the various partial regimes of liberal democracy are interdependent, providing potentially conflicting sources of power. In internally embedded democracies, one partial regime cannot be broken down without harming others, preventing the emergence of a defective democracy or the breakdown of democratic institutions altogether. It is even more important that democracy is embedded externally, i.e. the economic conditions, the state of civil society and the international environment are all conducive to liberal democracy

## THE CONCEPT OF CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

Even though political scientists have mainly focused on democratic consolidation, consolidation of power is a similar phenomenon that also deserves interest. My definition of consolidation of power is simple and consequently broad and not specific: increasing and/or stabilizing long-term power of the actor in power. While it is a process that can take place in any environment, countries with unconsolidated democracies are especially prone to consolidation of power, since in these systems, institutions that check the wielders of power do not function properly yet, providing an opportunity for the powerful to increase their power. Therefore, post-socialist countries with young democracies are fitting to analyze from the perspective of this concept.

In order to present the different attempts of consolidation, I will create a typology for it. I will do this by drawing a parallel with the thorough conceptual framework of democratic consolidation outlined in the previous chapter. This is possible because the two phenomena are similar in many ways. Consolidation of both democracy and power are concerned with the long-term preservation and/or improvement of an existing object that is desirable for those that intend to preserve and/or improve it, making consolidation a “teleological concept” (Schedler, 1998: 95). It is imperative that in both cases, the object (i.e. democracy or power) needs to be established before consolidation begins in an incomplete form (i.e. an imperfect democracy or limited power). A powerless actor cannot start to consolidate its power even if it is attempting to increase its long-term power, and the democratic movement under an authoritarian regime cannot consolidate even though it is trying to bring about a more democratic system. Due to this similarity, I will expand on my initial definition with the help of the literature on democratic consolidation summarized earlier by creating a typology based on Schedler’s framework.

### NEGATIVE CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

The two short definitions of a consolidated democracy I quoted in the first paragraph look very similar at first glance, but under scrutiny, it becomes clear that they have subtly different meanings, and extremely different consequences. This is not apparent in the case of democratic consolidation: the goal is to make democratic regimes stable, thus eliminating alternative forms of government (“making it the only game in town”) is synonymous with making it “unlikely to break down”. They both seem to be good definitions of negative consolidation, and also describe some aspects of positive and neutral consolidation.

In the case of consolidation of power, these two definitions can describe entirely different processes. Making the power of a political actor “unlikely to break down” does not necessarily mean the elimination of alternative power wielders. On the other hand, if the goal of the actor that is consolidating is making itself the only one to access sources of power (“the only game in town”), then it is trying to eliminate all its potential rivals.

The first definition may be used to describe a process in a functioning liberal democracy, where the governing party is creating an environment where “its power is unlikely to break down” (i.e. it is unlikely that it loses an election), and does so without limiting the opportunities of its rivals. Even though this process is inconsistent with those definitions of democracy that emphasize the alternation of power (e.g. Golder, 2005), most scholars would consider this type of consolidation possible in a democratic regime. Sartori (1976) called parties that achieved this type of consolidation (i.e. the ones that won at least three consecutive competitive democratic elections) predominant parties.

In some way, every democratic government is attempting to achieve negative consolidation, at least by exercising good governance that is responsive to the will of the electorate, making reelection more likely. However, when democratic institutions are shaped in a way that they structurally favors those in power, then negative consolidation becomes more apparent. This kind of consolidation has been used on several occasions by different governing parties over the last twenty-five years, but it was a particularly crucial element when the new democratic regimes were established between 1988 and 1990. During this period, Communist parties in power were trying to maintain as much power as

they possibly could, and this was their main aim during the negotiations that shaped the institutions of the new democratic regimes. Preventing negative consolidation of the *ancien régime* was one of the goals of the democratic opposition.

A clear example of this was the case of Poland. As a compromise reached during the Round Table discussions, the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR) allowed for partially free elections to take place in 1989, with 65 percent of the seats in the legislature (Sejm) reserved for them and their allies. The agreement would allow for completely free elections to take place four years later, when some kind of liberalization would already have been achieved. The Communists were attempting to appear as the only competent actors capable of putting liberalization into effect, preserving their power even under democratic circumstances. However, their results at the elections were worse than expected, shrinking their legitimacy, and domestic, regional and international developments made this compromise seem outdated and obsolete. The allies of PZPR left the government, allowing for the agreement to be overwritten and new, completely free parliamentary elections to be held in 1991, resulting in a devastating loss for the Communists (Bernhard, 2000). Most attempts at negative consolidation in the region failed similarly; the domestic and international environment was not suitable for this kind of consolidation, at least not in the Visegrád countries (they had at least partial and temporary success in Romania and Bulgaria)

After the liberalization process had begun and some basic institutions of capitalism had been introduced, a new challenge of negative consolidation emerged: the winners of the early stages of liberalization (economic players that benefited from concentrated rents stemming from the supposedly temporary transition policies) attempted to stall advancement in the reform process, trying to preserve their economic positions in the partial reform equilibrium. This required exerting political influence (i.e. some form of state capture). The actors behind this consolidation were not entirely different from the Communists analyzed in the previous paragraph, as numerous members of the former Communist elite were able to transform their former (mainly political) power into economic power through their network and by capitalizing on the introduced policies of early liberalization. However, some new players (both domestic and foreign) were also able to seize the opportunity of partial reforms. This consolidation was at least partially successful throughout the region, however, the more democratized a country became, the less likely it was that these short-term winners held onto their vast amount of power, and many political parties explicitly tried to break down their consolidated power, or at least promised to do so in their campaigns (Hellman, 1998).

If negative consolidation means that the consolidating actor completely eliminates all of its rivals, excluding even the possibility of them increasing their power (as the “only game in town” definition would suggest), then consolidation is necessarily an authoritarian tool that cannot be successful in a democracy. Generally, when the term ‘consolidation of power’ is used in scholarly papers, it is used in this sense. Most often, these papers study how political actors who seized power through democratic, semi-democratic means or a coup made their system less democratic and hence more authoritarian, ensuring that they remain in power, and the Nazis in particular are a popular example of this type of consolidation (e.g. Epstein, 1962). This type is not only consistent with the “only game in town” definition, it is also true that (as Linz and Stepan suggested in their definition) its “primary task” is “eliminating, neutralizing or converting disloyal players”, making it clearly different from the type I described earlier. Hence, two subtypes of negative consolidation of power exist. This subtype

of negative consolidation also requires positive consolidation (not only preservation, but also the extension and deepening of power), therefore its examples are discussed in the next section.

### POSITIVE CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

Both subtypes of negative consolidation overlap with positive consolidation but only the latter, undemocratic one presupposes it. As positive democratic consolidation “deepens” or “completes” democracy, positive consolidation of power deepens the power of the consolidating actor. When positive consolidation of power takes place, not only is it ensured that the actor that wields power will not relinquish it, but it increases its power, getting hold of new sources of power that have not been under its control beforehand. Positive consolidation is inherent to the second subtype of negative consolidation: those who ensure that they remain in power by creating a more authoritarian regime increase the power that they were given under the system that made them the ruling actor (again, the Nazis are a clear example). On the other hand, negative consolidation in a democracy does not necessarily mean positive consolidation. It might only consist of preserving the power of the position that the consolidating actor already has and ensuring that it does not relinquish that position (making it a purely negative consolidation).

Positive consolidation was an issue in post-socialist countries after the initial policies of liberalization had been introduced. As mentioned earlier, these policies created some winners (who were trying to consolidate their newly gained economic positions) and large masses of losers. Theoretical models have suggested that the losers would not appreciate the prospect of long-term gains (especially if they see the consolidation by short-term winners), and would oppose further reform, creating an opportunity for some politicians to ride this wave of anti-capitalist sentiment and reverse both economic and democratic advancement, creating an opportunity to consolidate their power with (initial) popular support (Przeworski, 1991). While in most countries of the region, this process did not take place, as even parties that were elected due to the resentment of transitional costs proved to be reformers themselves (e.g. the Socialist Party in Hungary in 1994), in other countries this prediction proved not to be true.

For example, in Belarus, a country where even though the Communist party was able to retain most of its power, partial capitalist reforms were introduced similarly to other Central and Eastern European countries, by 1992, most of the population suffered from the effects of the reforms, as most basic goods were strictly rationed and the standard of living was rapidly decreasing. In addition to the bad experience associated with liberalization and partial democratization, the Belarusian electorate was already reluctant to change its way of life even before the short-term losses of the transitional period occurred, as shown by the overwhelming majority voting for the retainment of the Soviet Union in 1991 (82,7%, considerably more than even in Russia). This created an opportunity for a politician to win an election by promising to return to the old (authoritarian) ways, and Alexander Lukashenko did so in 1994, winning the presidential election in a landslide. Lukashenko strengthened the ties between Belarus and Russia, brought back many symbols from the Communist era, empowered the Office of the President in a way that the system of checks and balances could not work properly, and reversed or stalled most of the economic reforms

in the coming years. He did not lose legitimacy in the process as the most important policies (mainly reversals) were approved by two referenda in 1995 and 1996. Through his policies, he moved Belarus from a mostly democratic country into becoming an authoritarian one, positively consolidating his power, which has remained virtually unchallenged during the last twenty years (Ioffe, 2014). This proves that in post-Soviet countries where the nostalgia of Communist times was strong and the short-term costs of transition proved to be high, democratic tradition was close to nonexistent and the West was not needed for the maintenance of a functioning economy due to the presence of the large Russian economy, Przeworski's prediction was right and positive consolidation of power could be executed successfully. This was not the case in Central Europe however, where the tradition of democracy and resentment of the authoritarian (Communist) era were stronger.

### NEUTRAL CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

As for neutral consolidation (i.e. "organizing democracy"), 'organizing power' is just as important in achieving consolidated power as negative or positive consolidation is. When the consolidating actor organizes its power, neither does it make it less likely to lose, nor does it increase the power it possesses, but it adapts to the changing circumstances. No power structure can remain unaltered for a long period of time: it is either adapted or it gets broken down. Therefore, neutral consolidation of power is crucial for consolidating actors, regardless of the regime type it is acting in (democratic or authoritarian).

In many cases, this kind of consolidation would have been beneficial to democratic consolidation and the implementation of economic reforms. Adaptation to changing circumstances by reformers could have ensured that they remain in power while completing both democratization and liberalization. In most countries, this was not successful, as governing parties usually lost trust early in the reform process and were not able to consolidate their power neutrally (Győrffy, 2009).

Recently, however, some political actors in the region have seemingly been successful at neutral consolidation. The prominent example is Hungary, where the ruling coalition, Fidesz-KDNP, has been in power since 2010. Its actions have included (successful) attempts at both negative (e.g. electoral reform favoring the party) and positive consolidation (e.g. restricting the powers of the Constitutional Court), but most importantly, it has been particularly effective at neutral consolidation. It has adapted to a volatile domestic and international environment, reorganizing institutions with a new Constitution in 2012, and amending it whenever prompted by new developments. Similarly, the reorganized media also helped it tremendously by vilifying potentially dangerous opponents before they became viable alternatives. It has also been effective at adapting its message and the main topic on the agenda so that it has the edge on the salient issue even if it has unpopular positions on other ones. For example, the subject of migration had been introduced by them into Hungarian discourse before it became the dominant issue in European politics, gaining credibility early on, practically eliminating any other topic from political discussion. None of these acts have prevented electoral defeat, nor have they directly increased Fidesz-KDNP's influence on policy-making, but they significantly contributed to its consolidation of power, making neutral consolidation effective. Apparently, neutral consolidation was not feasible during the

transition years, but recently, the conditions necessary for it have emerged in the region, as shown by similar processes taking place in Slovakia and Poland.

#### EMBEDDED POWER

It is interesting to consider how power can be 'embedded'. I consider embedding power a significant element of consolidation. Just as Merkel describes it for democracy, power can be embedded both internally and externally. Making the various aspects in the power structure interdependent (i.e. internal embedment) makes the preservation of power much easier to accomplish, as the structure becomes less vulnerable, since there is no single point where it could be 'attacked': in order for one aspect of power to be seized by other actors, a whole structure of power systems needs to be broken down, and that is more difficult than taking over the systems one by one. For example, this kind of embeddedness was crucial for the Nazi regime, where the various institutions within the power structure were strongly interdependent, making it virtually impossible for anyone inside or outside the system to challenge the ultimate wielder of power, the Führer (this is described in detail by Arendt [1951]). In that sense, embedded power is the opposite of embedded democracy, embedding power is the reverse of embedding democracy (although the two might also take place simultaneously).

Embedding power internally is a prerequisite of effective positive consolidation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that it is most prevalent in countries where positive consolidation is present. Governing parties in states like Russia and Belarus have employed this strategy effectively. It is also a central feature of Fidesz-KDNP's consolidation. The main institutions that can check the power of the government (in addition to the parliament in which the party has a majority) have been filled with officials that are loyal to Fidesz-KDNP, and in many cases, are former members of the party. Examples include new members of the Constitutional Court, the President, the Central Bank and the State Audit Office. The fact that this process is feasible in Visegrád countries shows how the regional environment has changed, allowing for at least partial consolidation of power to take place, supported by internally embedding power.

External embeddedness is equally important for the consolidation of power. When the socio-economic context, civil society and the international environment all favor the existing power structure, consolidation is clearly easier than when they do not. If there are potentially powerful groups that have serious social or economic issues caused by the power structure, its maintenance (and hence, its consolidation) becomes costlier.

This was a serious issue when market reforms were introduced: as the transition produced large masses of losers in the electorate, those in power needed to appease at least some of those masses to avoid losing popular support and have a chance at reelection. Therefore, packaging and easing (and in extreme cases, such as Belarus, reversing) reforms or compensation of losers were introduced by virtually every government. Compensation was particularly prominent in the most developed countries (i.e. the Visegrád countries), as the production of the economy allowed for larger absolute social expenditures than in other countries of the region (Roland, 2000). However, compensation was in most cases insufficient to embed power socio-economically, and governments consequently alternated quickly. The only example is the Klaus government in the Czech Republic, which was able to reduce unemployment to a comparatively low and therefore acceptable level, making reelection feasible (Ham, Svejnar and Terrell, 1998).

The lack of embeddedness in the international environment poses similar issues: if the relevant international players oppose those who possess power, they have one more enemy to fight during consolidation, and their internal rivals might become more dangerous to the power structure due to the financial, military or symbolic assistance provided by international players. On the other hand, if the consolidating actor is embedded in the international system, it might receive assistance for consolidation against its internal rivals.

This issue has been crucial for this region not only over the last twenty-five years, but also beforehand. Central Europe is mostly comprised of small nations that need to have good relations with at least one great power in order to have a productive economy and survive in the international arena. Before 1989, this great power was the Soviet Union, but after its collapse, it was not able to play this role for this region anymore (even though some countries, like Belarus and Moldova, could rely mainly on Russia even after the transition), and it was also unpopular, making a democratic and responsive government (especially one that was committed to reforms) unable to have strong ties to it. Consequently, governments needed to establish and maintain good relations with the West. Hence, parties that rejected Western orientation were in most cases unelectable. Parties whose allegiance was questionable needed to prove that they were in fact friendly to the West and the liberalization policies favored by it to become credible (Tavits-Letki, 2009). Virtually all governments of Central Europe embedded their power internationally (to various degrees), otherwise they would have been ousted almost immediately. This embeddedness was in most cases mutually exclusive with other versions of consolidation and embeddedness. For instance, the economic reform policies promoted by the West made it difficult to embed power socio-economically. However, after a country had joined the European Union, it could move away at least partially from Western orientation, and it will be interesting to see whether this embeddedness will be a prerequisite in the region in the future.

Dealing with civil society is a more complicated issue as it might be achieved in a number of different ways. The consolidating actor can make its goal easier to achieve by weakening civil society if it is hostile to it, it can alternatively convince or convert its main actors by compromising with it (granting at least some of its wishes), or by making it part of the structure itself ensuring that it does not pose a serious threat even though it is not weak (or weaker than it previously was) *per se*. The last way is embeddedness, but the first two can be important elements of consolidation as well as they remove the obstacles civil society can pose to consolidation.

Civil society is diverse and it is therefore not easy to analyze the embeddedness of power in it. One particular instance stands out though. In Poland, civil society is dominated by the Catholic Church, which is seen as one of the major players causing the fall of Communism. Catholicism has been an integral part of Polish national identity, and it used this role to exert political influence after 1989. Due to the enormous popularity and credibility the Church has in the country, any political actor trying to consolidate its power needs to at least partially appease it. Concessions made to the Church on social and educational issues such as abortion and education were a necessary way to embed power in civil society. While right-wing parties were willing to make those concessions, left-wing parties were not or not to the degree conservatives were, making them unelectable and creating a party system dominated by moderate and radical right-wingers (Mach, 2000). The sitting Polish government, which is trying to consolidate its power akin to what the Orbán government has been doing in



Hungary, is crucially embedded in civil society through the support received by the Church due to adopting many of its positions on social issues.

## CONCLUSION

This paper presented the various ways consolidation of power was attempted in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. After presenting the different types of consolidation, it demonstrated how each type was present in the region. It is clear that the regional environment has changed considerably over the last twenty-five years, as both the actors and the means of consolidation are different now than they were during the 1990s. Due to the requirement of being embedded in the international system by having a Western orientation, socio-economic embeddedness and consequent effective consolidation of power was not feasible in most countries of the region during the 1990s. On the other hand, after the accession to the European Union, an opportunity for embedment and subsequent consolidation has emerged even in the most developed countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike what Kornai (2015) has suggested, consolidation of power is not a 'U-turn' anymore, as it was feared during the early 1990s and as happened in Belarus, since it does not mean a return to the policies pursued during the Communist era. On the contrary, consolidating actors are usually outspoken anti-communists who have gained credibility by opposing Socialist policies, but are determined to alter the liberal democratic regime installed in the early nineties, blaming the system of checks and balances for failing to catch up to the West, creating a new, rather than returning to an old system of government. In the process, not only are some of the institutions of liberal democracy discredited, but also the West that is seen as a major cause of this failure. Since most governments implemented reforms promoted by the West, adopting most policies suggested by it, it is only natural that the initiators of the unsuccessful policies are considered responsible. Apparently, the most important factor in this region is international embeddedness, without it, no attempt at consolidation of power is feasible, while if it is secure (as it is the case with the countries that have membership in the EU and NATO), consolidation becomes possible. It is also noteworthy that democratic consolidation, which had been expected to be almost complete in at least the Visegrád countries by the time they had joined the European Union, is seemingly not enough to diminish the efficiency of attempts at power consolidation. This is either a sign that democratic consolidation does not have a significant effect on preventing power consolidation, or it means that while these countries seemed to be consolidated in the 2000s, the political culture of these countries has still not shed its authoritarian past, and consolidation is not complete.

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