



# Editorial: Challenges to Local Democracy: Democratization Efforts and Democratic Backsliding at the Sub-national Level

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

### Challenges to Local Democracy: Democratization Efforts and Democratic Backsliding at the Sub-national Level

There are obvious challenges to building or maintaining subnational (local and regional) democratic governance structures in the context of national-level backsliding, hybridity or authoritarianism. However, there are also many challenges to local democracy in stable liberal democracies. The aim of this Research Topic was to contribute to knowledge about the relationship between local democracy and developments at the national and/or transnational level: is there scope for local democracy to mitigate or counteract forces that are overall detrimental for democratic development or may vertical rescaling and power-sharing re-arrangements be a driver for negative national developments?

Democracy is a prime example of an essentially contested concept (Collier et al., 2006). Nonetheless, scholars seem to have converged around approaches that go beyond electoral and procedural components and include issues such as participation and deliberation (Coppedge et al., 2019; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020). For *sub-national democracy (regional and local)* such an inclusive approach seems natural as sub-national democracy is more than a mere subdivision of state powers through decentralization or devolution. Its constituent elements are “system capacity”—i.e., autonomy (budgetary, administrative, policy) enabling local officials to respond to the community—and “citizen effectiveness”—i.e., the expression of the collective preferences of citizens through free and fair local elections and participatory processes (Dahl and Tufte, 1973).

An improved understanding of sub-national democracy therefore requires taking into account how well these constitutive elements function, but also the role of the multi-level governance structure in which the local polity is situated (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Since its inception the European Union (EU) has been actively promoting a multi-level governance system which has triggered the rescaling of the national state, by changing central-local relations. This has led to the marketization of the public domain with the “outsourcing” of public services to non-state actors and the “downloading” of delivery to local authorities (Andreotti and Mingione, 2016). In recent decades a general erosion of liberal democracy in Europe has been observed, as manifested in the hollowing out of democratic institutions in western European democracies (Greskovits, 2015) and democratic backsliding in recently democratized countries, such as some in Central and Eastern Europe. Bakke and Sitter (2020) p. 2 define “democratic backsliding” as a “process of deliberate, intended action designed to gradually undermine the fundamental formal and informal rules of the game with regard to political

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rights, free elections and the rule of law in an existing democracy, carried out by a democratically elected government". Their emphasis is on deliberate action, which is also emphasized by Bermeo (2016), p. 5 concept of a "state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy".

This Research Topic takes up a comprehensive approach to the destabilization of liberal democracy by analytically linking "hollowing out" to backsliding processes. This draws on Greskovits (2015), who argues that hollowing out can have an impact on the risk of democratic backsliding. We also join (Obydenkova and Paffenholz, 2021, p. 3) in arguing that, in general, the consequences of different types of political regimes for the sub-national level has not received enough attention.

The featured Research Topic articles study these processes from different perspectives, primarily in Hungary and Sweden. These countries are most different points of departure for analyzing de-democratization trends at the local level: Sweden consistently ranking among the countries with the highest degree of local autonomy and, high levels of social trust and rare occasions of corruption; Hungary at the same time has become "a poster child for the term 'democratic backsliding'" (Svensson) that also displays decreasing degrees of local autonomy especially in recent years (Ladner et al., 2015).

Johansson et al. argue that the rationalities of the political sphere have been replaced by rationalities of the market in governing the public sphere sparked by the EU's new regionalist agenda with its focus on economic growth, competitiveness, fiscal efficiency and entrepreneurial thinking (Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2014). Johansson et al.'s case study focuses on how a discursive and policy emphasis on economic growth in regional policy since Sweden's EU accession in 1995 has harmed efforts to (re)vitalize democracy through strengthened regional democratic bodies in Sweden, and instead has enhanced the process of de-politization and turned democratic institutions into administrative practices (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Mouffe, 2013).

Two further articles in this Research Topic find similar patterns. Baranyi et al. analyse the way technical and administrative features of online communication were formally established by local governments during the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary, yet behind the technical façade of two-way flow of communication and the distribution of intelligence (data), feedback channels from the bottom-up to the top were missing. This form of sheer technical governance lacks the essence of democratic governance. Similarly, Pálné's article calls attention to the way administrative procedures have taken over political institutions by hollowing out the county-level in Hungary through intensive centralization of public tasks and the abolishing of county-wide elections. Bridge-head positions of the central government were placed in each county instead of elected officials, which represented the controlling efforts of an increasingly authoritarian central government and the strong influence of civil servants in sub-national development (cf. Johansson et al.).

Social and territorial peripheralisation is a manifestation of de-democratizing trends in the economized state under neoliberal constraints. Mihály's case studies of two social and solidarity economy (SSE) initiatives in villages in Germany and Hungary represent genuine efforts to contribute to bottom-up democratic practices and counteract de-democratization. However, as Mihály also points out, SSE initiatives have weak capacities to influence domestic policy systems since these efforts are hampered by unaddressed structural inequalities. If systems of state structures are based on market rationalities, locally targeted projects can only provide temporary relief for communities, while injustices are reproduced at the systemic level (Keller and Virág, 2021).

Finally, Svensson shows how democratic governance in European regions that straddle national borders state illustrate how complex multi-level governance networks (Svensson) can become. What seems to be the strength of such networks—i.e., flexibility and reach-out beyond the political elite through civil society—can also represent their weakness. These networks often lack democratic legitimacy since their bodies are not directly elected and their civil society members may "lead different lives on each side of the border." The multi-scalar structure of these networks also makes them vulnerable to re-centralization trends and nationalist narratives initiated by authoritarian governments, further eroding the fragile legitimacy of cross-border bodies.

Taken together, the articles included in this collection illustrate challenges to democratization efforts in the context of different processes of hollowing out and backsliding, in both western and eastern parts of Europe. The articles demonstrate that some challenges are related to the fact that places are intrinsically multi-scalar (Horlings et al., 2018) and thus yield complex influence on citizen effectiveness and system capacity for autonomy at the local or regional level. While further research is needed, they also remind of the potential two-directional causal relationship between democracy that becomes devoid of meaningful political content and contestation, i.e., is hollowed out, and democracy that reverts toward authoritarian characteristics. All European democracies have been exposed to the erosion of democracy's popular content representing potential risks of backsliding. It is difficult to capture the tipping point of a de-democratization process, when the accumulation of destabilizing factors—low-key tactics, governance reforms, non-participation—actually lead to the downfall of democracy, hence all democracies may backslide at some point in time. While leading theorists have emphasized intentionality, unintended side-effects of reforms may also trigger further hollowing out processes and constitute a backsliding threat to democracy.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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