**Consolidated technocratic and ethnic hollowness, but no backsliding: Reassessing Europeanisation in Estonia and Latvia.**

Licia Cianetti

Royal Holloway, University of London

This paper contributes to the growing debate on democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), by expanding on Béla Greskovits’ distinction between backsliding and hollowness, suggesting ways to broaden and specify the concept of hollowness, and discussing the relationship between hollowness and backsliding. Estonia and Latvia provide illustrations of two stable democracies, which nevertheless have consolidated tendencies for an elite-driven and ethnic-majority-driven democratic process hollowed out of its democratic contestation. This is what I call “technocratic” and “ethnic” *hollowness*. This double hollowness consolidated during EU accession, which created a favourable context for well-positioned ethnic majority elites to push forward ethnocentric and neoliberal agendas while restricting the space for debating them. However, far from a symptom of backsliding in the sense of a regression into authoritarianism, double hollowness is in fact central to these democracies’ stability. Such stability will have to be destabilised in order to improve their democratic quality.

**Keywords:** Europeanisation; EU accession; backsliding; hollowness; Estonia; Latvia.

**Introduction**

Concern over the state of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been increasingly voiced in recent years by both academics and policymakers (e.g. Plattner and Diamond 2007; Sedelmeier 2016). While recent developments in Hungary and Poland have made headlines, fears of wider post-accession regional backsliding have prompted a more general reassessment of the success of Europeanisation and democratisation in CEE. This article contributes to the growing debate on democratic backsliding by arguing for the importance of clearly distinguishing between dynamic processes of de-democratisation and static features of low-quality democracies – thus refining the useful distinction between “backsliding” and “hollowness” proposed by Béla Greskovits (2015). Following Greskovits, I argue that the term “backsliding” is useful only if used cautiously to indicate the emergence of worrying signs of democratic de-consolidation (in particular, the chipping away of democratic institutions by self-aggrandising executives). Instead, “hollowness” is a more useful concept to capture structural democratic failings that have to do not with the stability of institutions but with their low popular content. To use the kind of medical metaphor often employed in the backsliding debate, both democratic “illnesses” need addressing, but their diagnosis and prognosis are different.

This article uses the cases of Estonia and Latvia to enquire in more depth into the nature of “hollowness” (in particular, as it will be discussed below, its “supply-side” aspect), as a specific democratic deficit that cannot be subsumed under the “backsliding” banner. Three key points emerge from the analysis. First, in diverse societies “technocratic” hollowness is compounded by “ethnic-exclusionary” hollowness. The former is the tendency for an elite-driven approach to policymaking, which reduces the room for public debate and opposition, especially in the socio-economic sphere. This is in line with common understandings of hollowness, also in Western democracies. The latter is the tendency to restrict political inclusion along ethnic lines. Conceptualizing ethnic exclusion as a form of hollowness is helpful to highlight how it is not only a matter of minority rights (and thus a problem only for minorities), but actually has an effect on democracy as a whole, by narrowing the democratic debate and emptying it of oppositional minority voices.

Second, double hollowness is not the result of post-accession backsliding or imperfect Europeanisation, but has consolidated not least as a result of the contradictory incentives of EU accession in 2004. For what concerns technocratic hollowness, this finding is in line with critical assessments of EU accession. These have highlighted its top-down nature, which favoured the emergence and consolidation of technocratic approaches to policy-making (Greskovits 2007; Ost 2005; Krastev 2007; Mungiu-Pippidi 2007; Rupnik 2007). As for ethnic hollowness, the political and social marginalisation of ethnic minorities has most often been seen not as a facet of democratic settlement, but as a symptom of insufficient or half-hearted Europeanisation, that worsened when EU accession conditionalities came to an end (Kelley 2004). However, a deeper look at the direct and indirect effects of Europeanisation on Estonia and Latvia reveals that “ethnic hollowness” – like “technocratic hollowness” – was also helped rather than hindered by the pressures of EU accession.

Third, rather than threatening stability, Estonia and Latvia’s double hollowness is a constitutive element of it. Contrary to the expectation that ethnocultural divisions would make a democratising country particularly prone to instability and backsliding (e.g. Ekiert, Kubik, and Vachudova 2007, 14; Vachudova 2017), the Estonian and Latvian democracies have displayed remarkable stability. This shows a key difference between backsliding and (technocratic and ethnic) hollowness. Backsliding breeds instability and uncertainty: to guard democracy against backsliding its existing institutions must be protected and strengthened. On the contrary, hollowness is part of what sustains a stable (albeit low-quality democratic) status quo. This implies a trade-off: improving the democratic quality of hollow democracies will require the destabilising of existing arrangements in order to open up the space for de-hollowing (substantiating) democracy. While fear of instability has underlined much of the backsliding debate, from the perspective of hollowness stability can be the problem rather than the solution.

**Estonia and Latvia: Europeanising and democratising in ethnically divided societies**

Estonia and Latvia have remained marginal in the debate about democratic backsliding in CEE. In the seminal 2007 *Journal of Democracy* special issue on this topic, they are mentioned only once and the assessment was that they are generally doing well notwithstanding some transition “ups and downs” (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007, 8). After that, while worries about CEE democracy increased, Estonia and Latvia were rarely mentioned in the literature on backsliding and, when they were, it was usually to remark on their relative success (e.g. Sitter et al. 2016, 2). Both states have been, by most accounts, good Europeanisers: they are two of the only three former Soviet republics to complete a successful transition to democracy,[[1]](#endnote-1) they have accomplished some of the quickest and most decisive transitions to the market economy, and have generally complied with EU accession demands. Moreover, they are usually seen not displaying the anti-democratic backlash and the emergence of illiberal populist forces experienced by some other CEE countries. In this sense, they have given little reason to worry that their democratic institutions could be at risk.

This level of success and stability was perhaps unexpected, as both countries have sizeable Russian-speaking minorities (about 29% of the population in Estonia and 34% in Latvia, according to the 2011 census) and their party politics has been to a large extent defined by the divisions between minorities and “titular nations” (Nakai 2014). While other CEE countries have significant minorities, the relative size of the minorities in Estonia and Latvia marked them off as states where the ethnic issue had a higher chance of destabilising democracy, due to the expected risk for inter-ethnic conflict and security threats from the minorities’ increasingly authoritarian “kin state” Russia (Hughes and Sasse 2003, 16). Nevertheless, ethnic divisions have not resulted in violent conflict and the chances of inter-ethnic violence remain very low.[[2]](#endnote-2) This stability and the absence of conflict are therefore remarkable.

However, looked at more closely, Estonia and Latvia display a combination of democratic stability, technocratic hollowness, and ethnic exclusion that does not sit well within either a backsliding or a triumphalist narrative of CEE democratisation. Their politics is strongly elite-driven, with low civic participation (Heidmets 2008, 59–61; Rozenvalds 2015, 224) and little open debate about socio-economic policies (Helemäe and Saar 2012; Masso et al. 2012). Some have argued that populism has made little inroads in Estonia and Latvia not due to the restraint of their political class but to the elitist nature of their politics (Jakobson et al. 2012). Moreover, ethnocentrism remains central to both countries’ politics, even after some of the harsher policies on citizenship and language use were softened in the years leading up to EU membership (Kelley 2004; Pettai and Kallas 2009). Public discourses that portray Russian-speakers as a potential fifth column are an ordinary feature of public debate and electoral campaigns, and minorities remain underrepresented in parliament, public administration, and (especially) government (Agarin 2010).

After independence, restrictive citizenship and language legislation were passed in keeping with dominant “restorationist” and “nationalising” discourses (Mole 2012). These maintained that the USSR had illegally occupied Estonia and Latvia and so Soviet-era settlers and their descendants had no legitimate claim to political rights, let alone shared ownership of the “restored” independent states. Thus, citizenship was granted only to the descendants of citizens of the interwar Estonian and Latvian republics, which left a large portion of Russian-speakers who were born in Latvia and Estonia or had spent most of their lives in these countries without citizenship.[[3]](#endnote-3) This left a legacy of “non-citizenship” that, although slowly decreasing over time, has affected the minorities’ social and political inclusion.[[4]](#endnote-4) Language is the major dividing line between ethnic majority and ethnic (linguistic) minority, and it is the object of extensive legislation regulating language use in, for example, public offices, schools, public and private employment, public and commercial communications, and the media. Through these laws and regulations, language (mother tongue and state language proficiency) became an additional filter that restricts minority access to public life and creates collective privileges for the so-called “titular nations” (Järve 2000, 7). For these reasons, Latvia and Estonia have in the past been referred to as ethnic democracies (Smooha and Järve 2005; Pettai and Hallik 2002), that is, “democrac[ies] that [contain] the non-democratic institutionalization of dominance of one group” (Smooha and Järve 2005, 21).

While Estonian and Latvian ethnic majority elites have remained broadly in control of the democratic process by occupying all the major positions of power, there are differences between the two countries that this broad sketch (and the “ethnic democracy” label) cannot capture. In particular, Russian-speakers’ political presence – in terms of both representation and grassroots mobilisation – has been higher in Latvia than in Estonia (cf. Cianetti and Nakai 2016, 8). Estonia’s Russian-speakers have a more weakly organised civil society, they have a proportionally lower representation in parliament, and the Russian-speakers’ vote is mostly collected by the mainstream Estonian Centre Party. Latvia’s Russian-speakers have shown more capacity for grassroots collective action, the moderate Russophone-led party Harmony gathers most of the Russian speakers’ vote, securing higher representation in parliament, and controlling the capital city Riga (whose mayor since 2009 is the Russian-speaker and leader of Harmony Nils Ušakovs). While they are not the focus of this article, these differences must be taken into account when assessing relative ethnic hollowness in the two democracies.

**No backsliding, but two faces of hollowness?**

Definitions of backsliding have often remained vague and case-specific. Unsurprisingly a lot of the discussion has been informed by the Hungarian and Polish governments’ moves to maximise their power, undermining democratic institutions, marginalising opponents, and attacking media freedom (e.g. Heller et al. 2017; Ost 2016). Used more loosely, “backsliding” has also been associated with the electoral gains (though not necessarily victory) of nationalist populist parties (Bútora 2007), and the consequent polarisation of the public debate (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007, 9). Popular disenchantment with democracy (Rupnik 2007), as evidenced by low turnout (Greskovits 2007) and mistrust towards politicians and parties (Krastev 2007, 57), is also often mentioned as part of CEE’s democratic malaise. The term backsliding has also been used in relation to Europeanisation, to mean the post-accession slowing down or reversal of EU-driven reforms (Sitter et al. 2016), often to do with governance rather than strictly-speaking democracy or liberalism (Levitz and Pop-Eleches 2010; Dimitrova 2010).

While the concern that democracy in CEE might be deteriorating is widespread, there have been few attempts at systematising (rather than merely enumerating) all these disparate “symptoms”. Most prominently, Béla Greskovits (2015) proposed a useful distinction between democratic backsliding and democratic hollowing, which is an important step towards putting some order in the CEE “democratic backsliding” frenzy. Backsliding, as noted above, is the more spectacular, headline-grabbing destabilisation of key democratic practices and institutions in an authoritarian and illiberal direction, as in Hungary and Poland. Hollowing is a slower, sometimes imperceptible emptying out of the popular component of democracy. According to Greskovits, in CEE we should talk of “hollowness” rather than “hollowing”, because CEE democracies were often already “born with a hollow core” (Greskovits 2015, 30; Bohle and Greskovits 2012).

Adapting the term from Peter Mair’s (2006) “hollowing”, Greskovits’ “hollowness” is intended as the absence of a participatory debate in democratic decision-making, so that institutions are “hollow” from the point of view of participative democracy. In the scholarship on Western democracies, the source of hollowing has been identified in the “twin processes” of citizens’ withdrawal from political involvement and political elites’ increasing tendency to shield key political decisions from mass democratic participation in favour of “technical” (or “technocratic”) solutions (Mair 2006). According to Greskovits, CEE democracies were “born” hollow on both counts (Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Greskovits 2015, 30). For the purpose of conceptual clarity, however, it might be useful to distinguish between “demand-side” hollowness (where citizens are disengaged from politics) and a “supply-side” hollowness (where political elites restrict the scope for meaningful citizens participation and political debate).[[5]](#endnote-5) While recognising that the two are interrelated (Mair 2013, 44), this article’s focus is on institutions and elites and thus on the second, “supply-side” aspect of democratic hollowness.

Separating symptoms of backsliding from symptoms of hollowness allows us not only to be clearer about how we define the two terms but also to ask questions about the relationship between the two. However, Greskovits’ (2015) exploratory study of this question remains inconclusive: it suggests that a vibrant civil society might have facilitated backsliding in the Hungarian case (see also Greskovits 2017), while Latvia’s hollowness might have avoided some of Hungary’s excesses but did not prevent backsliding. Thus, in this account, backsliding is not explained by vibrancy of civil society (or by its contrary, hollowness) but rather by the ideology of the actors that manage to mobilise civil society (Greskovits 2015, 35).

This interpretation of the hollowness–backsliding nexus rests on Greskovits’ (2015) assessment of Latvia as both hollow *and* backsliding, which sets it apart from Estonia’s condition of being particularly hollow but not backsliding. Latvia’s high backsliding score (it is the second most severe case of backsliding in Greskovits’ ranking) seems to be driven mostly by two key developments. Firstly, the post-crisis electoral success of the far-right party National Alliance, which is compared to the emergence of Jobbik in Hungary (Greskovits 2015, 33–34). Secondly, the eruption of anti-austerity protests in 2009, as the number and intensity of such protests is included in the backsliding index (Greskovits 2015, 31).[[6]](#endnote-6) However, under closer scrutiny, this assessment becomes less convincing.[[7]](#endnote-7)

First of all, while Latvia’s party politics is rife with ethno-nationalist claims, this is not a new or even growing feature of Latvian politics. The far-right nationalist National Alliance did not emerge as a new party with a new exclusivist agenda. Rather, it is the latest iteration of several far-right parties and electoral alliances that have had fluctuating electoral success and campaigning strategies since Latvian independence, but have been consistently represented in parliament and have been key partners in almost all governing coalitions.[[8]](#endnote-8) Moreover, National Alliance does not have the monopoly on ethnocentrism, as this has been the electoral currency of moderate centre-right parties as well. While this normalisation of nationalism might be worrying in its own right, it is doubtful whether we should refer to it as backsliding. Backsliding implies a change for the worse, but as ethnonationalism has been a constant feature of Latvian politics since independence there is no high point from which Latvia would be sliding back.

In this sense, Estonia – which in Greskovits’ account is a non-backslider – is rather similar to Latvia. A governmental ethnonationalist party of the “titular” nation also exists (IRL, Union of Pro Patria and Res Publica), which has consistently gained sizeable representation in parliament and has been part of almost all governing coalitions. Ethnonationalist claims have also been often deployed by (ethnic majority) moderate parties in Estonia.[[9]](#endnote-9) The recent emergence of the right-wing Eurosceptic EKRE (Conservative People’s Party of Estonia) – which passed the 5% threshold for the first time in 2015, winning seven parliamentary seats – and the possibility of further reinvigoration of the far right in Latvia (Kott 2016) are perhaps signals that there is room for a harshening of ethnonationalist positions. However, these changes have so far not amounted to a significant shift in the countries’ party politics and – I would argue – should be understood in the context of deeply entrenched pre-existing ethnonationalism rather than as entirely new developments.

Anti-austerity protests also contributed to boosting Latvia’s backsliding score in Greskovits’ analysis. This could set Latvia apart from Estonia, where protests have been smaller and rarer. While the rationale for considering anti-austerity mobilisation as a driver of backsliding is not entirely clear, it seems to rest on the idea that popular dissatisfaction might breed instability. This, however, is hardly the case for Latvia, where protests were indeed sizeable, but they were quickly absorbed within the “normal” course of Latvia’s party politics (Pryce 2012), including its usual ethnic divisions (Lublin 2013). Moreover, higher (if not long-lasting) anti-austerity mobilisation in Latvia could be a function of civil society vibrancy – and thus a counter to hollowness – rather than an indicator of backsliding (cf. Ekiert and Kubik 2001).

A different picture emerges from this reassessment. First, although – as detailed in the next section – both countries are democratically hollow in the sense that their governments have tended to take a technocratic approach to policy-making, anti-austerity protests in Latvia might show a higher potential for bottom-up challenges to the hollow status quo compared to Estonia (see articles by Knott and Brett in this issue for other bottom-up challenges in the region). Secondly, ethnonationalism is not a new or emergent feature of these democracies that risks upsetting the status quo. Rather, it is a constituent part of the status quo. As such, it cannot be taken as proof of a dynamic process of backsliding, but is better conceptualised as an additional form of (supply-side) hollowness. That is, a static feature that shrinks the public realm further, by excluding or marginalising a substantial portion of society and by restricting the public debate on issues of identity and belonging. As technocratic hollowness empties democratic institutions of debates about *what* the state is for, ethnic hollowness empties them of debates about *whom* the state is for.

**Consolidating technocratic hollowness**

The double – technocratic and ethnic – hollowness discussed above is not a result of post-accession backsliding. Rather, it consolidated during Estonia and Latvia’s transition to democracy. CEE democratisation process took place in the context of Europeanisation and was influenced by both deliberate acts by European institutions and indirect lesson-drawing by the democratising countries (Beyers 2010; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Börzel and Risse 2012). The process of EU accession was driven by coalitions between EU institutions and CEE democratisers, which “lengthen[ed] the time horizons of postcommunist politicians, [expanded] the circle of interested reformers, and [deterred] opponents of reform” (Jacoby 2006, 625). EU integration supported CEE democracy- and institution-building (Sedelmeier 2008; Sedelmeier 2012a; Kelley 2004) and provided substance to CEE democratisers’ political agenda of “return to Europe”, giving it an explicit goal and a clear roadmap, as well as expertise and generous financial support.[[10]](#endnote-10) At the same time, conditionalities forced recalcitrant governments to follow through with democratic and good-governance reforms. However, the interaction between domestic and external actors was complex, as the pressures of EU integration were key in shaping the realm of possibilities for the emergent CEE democracies but domestic elites determined the ultimate outcomes (cf. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Sedelmeier 2012b; McCauley 2011; Spirova 2012).

While external pressures and constraints have certainly helped establish electoral democracies, some have argued that the top-down nature of the EU accession process and the fact that it was based on elite-level coalitions with no need for organised social constituencies also had the negative long-term effect of embedding technocratic practices in the nascent CEE democracies (e.g. Rupnik 2007; Bohle and Greskovits 2012). The need to stick by the EU integration roadmap depoliticised and technicised the democratic process. Thus, at the same time as democratic institutions were being built and consolidated, these were also emptied out of meaningful policy-based contestation (Bohle and Greskovits 2012, 86; Grzymała-Busse and Innes 2003). In this context, democratic elections became a “necessary evil” that should not change the policy course (Mungiu-Pippidi 2007, 15). Thus, the EU accession process helped the successful transition away from authoritarianism, but the top-down approach that characterised it also favoured a technocratic, elite-dominated, “hollow” (at least from a supply-side perspective) version of democracy.[[11]](#endnote-11) This was compounded by the fact that CEE countries democratised in the context of strong neoliberal flows of ideas, which favours technical governance over democratic debate (e.g. Bohle 2006; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). This affected the options and ideas that were immediately available to the democratising elites.[[12]](#endnote-12) While EU accession was not the only source of this neoliberal “inspiration”, it contributed to its persistence (Appel and Orenstein 2016, 319–20).

***Technocratic hollowness in Estonia and Latvia***

Estonia and Latvia present a strong version of the technocratic hollowness discussed above, as their domestic politics reinforced rather than offset EU accession incentives to de-politicise transition policies, especially in the socio-economic sphere. The effects of neoliberal inspiration were particularly pronounced in Estonia and Latvia, as their democratising elites displayed from the very beginning a strong preference for orthodox neoliberal economic policies (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). The effect of outside inspiration was noted by an Estonian scholar, who remarked that early democratising Estonian elites looked West for inspiration about how to redesign social provisions and what they found was the new fashion of new public management (Toots 2007). The EU was not the only source of such inspiration, but it was an important one. Most importantly, outside “inspiration” and incentives also justified reducing the room for debate on such policies. Indeed, in a period in which EU policymaking was increasingly displaying a preference for efficiency over debate (Cafruny and Ryner 2003; Bohle 2006), Estonian and Latvian democratising elites found little contradiction between democratisation and their small-government agenda that showed little patience for debate.

The “neoliberal Baltic capitalism model” – of which Estonia is the most accomplished version – is characterised by a strong belief in unbridled free market, minimal welfare provisions, low workers’ rights, weak unionisation, and non-redistributive taxation (Vihalemm et al. 2011, 24). Notwithstanding some rhetorical differences, there has been a general consensus on economic policies among governing elites.[[13]](#endnote-13) The Centre Party (a mainstream Estonian party which attracts the greatest share of Russophone votes) and the Estonian Social Democrats have moderately leftist agendas but have been in government only as part of ideologically broad coalitions that largely kept to the market economy consensus (Aylott 2013, 9–10). Being consistently excluded from government, Latvia’s Russophone party Harmony has had limited occasions to prove its social-democratic credentials.

As with other CEE countries, the process of EU accession provided incentives to depoliticise some key aspects of the politics of democratic transition – especially to do with transition to market capitalism, thus facilitating the consolidation of technocratic hollowness. This is evidenced by the European Commission accession documents, which monitored accession countries’ political conditions (democracy, rule of law, human rights, and minority protection), economic conditions (functioning of market economy, and economic integration within the Union), and institutional capacity to implement the *acquis communautaire*. The analysis of the Estonian and Latvian reports from 1998 to 2003 provides substance to the claim made with regard to other CEE countries that while “EU conditionality empower[ed] liberal reform coalitions”, it also empowered domestic Europeanising elites to pursue their political agendas without engaging in significant democratic debate (Börzel and Risse, 2012, p. 11).

First of all, while EU conditionalities included both political and economic elements, the latter were clearly prioritised (Hughes 2005; Bohle 2010, 8). For both Estonia and Latvia the accession reports mention several non-economic aspects of democratic transition – for example, rule of law and respect for minority rights – and funds were made available through the Phare programme for non-economic projects aimed at inter-ethnic inclusion. However, most of the focus was on economic performance and the establishment of a market economy. As accession reports were widely used as a measure of democratisation progress, they contributed to blurring the distinction between “more democracy” and “more free market” (cf. Ost 2005, 2016). Thus, local elites could present small-government economic policies as the necessary recipe to achieve modernisation, prosperity, and – in a conflation typical of the transition period – democracy. In this context, positive results in economic freedom rankings (compiled, among others, by Heritage Foundation, Free Market Foundation, and Cato Institute) were presented in the public discourse as a measure of democratic success (especially in Estonia) or the proof that more neo-liberal reform should be done (especially in Latvia).[[14]](#endnote-14)

* Secondly, the reports were strongly focused on pushing through specific policy outputs. In particular, economic policies to establish a successful market economy were required, with a strong focus on macroeconomic stability, “especially through the effective control of public finances” (European Commission 1999, 26), “containing government expenditures” (European Commission 2000a, 31), and implementing “structural reforms” – especially privatisation, including of public utilities (European Commission 1998, 17). The need to guarantee adequate salaries and social protection, reduce poverty and inequality, and guarantee adequate healthcare provision in line with the European Social Charter were also suggested (European Commission 2000a, 18; 2002a, 77; 2002b, 86), if much less prominently.[[15]](#endnote-15) Whatever the content of the required (or suggested) policies, this output-driven approach incentivised the idea that democracy is built by passing a set of “optimal policies” with little scope for debate.
* Thirdly, the reports advocate for political consensus, especially on economic policies, not least because “[m]acroeconomic stability and consensus about economic policy enhance the performance of a market economy” (European Commission 1998, 17; 1999, 24). So Estonia was repeatedly praised for its “economic consensus” across party lines (European Commission 2000a, 24; 2001, 28), at the same time as one of Latvia’s “main weaknesses” was identified in the “lack of political consensus regarding the reform process” (European Commission 2000b, 15) especially on privatisation (European Commission 2000b, 28). The reports repeatedly praised the consistency of economic policies despite changes of government (e.g. European Commission 2002a, 20, 38). The need for a smooth and rapid reform process and the insistence on consensus created an environment in which depoliticisation and technicisation were favoured over lengthy inter-party debate.
* Thus, the transition guidelines supported the impression that there was a “democratising elite” that had the trust of the EU and should not be prevented from “doing their job”. Estonian and Latvian democratising elites could therefore justify their small-government policy choices as required by the higher aim of re-building and modernising their countries, joining the EU (and later the Eurozone), and “becoming Western”. These higher aims meant that their policies should be shielded from opposition and debate: dissent and opposition were impediments to transition rather than part and parcel of democratic politics. An illustration of this was provided by former Estonian prime minister Mart Laar, who claimed in an interview that “in the coming years the reforms will continue to give good results, because they are not dependent upon who is in power” (Arias-King and Laar 2002, 496). Similarly, the Latvian-American economist George Viksnins, who was a key advisor during Latvia’s transition to market economy, claimed that, while there had to be a dialogue with the public about new policies, “the reform has to continue despite changes in government” (quoted in Sommers and Bērziņš 2011, 121).

Estonian and Latvian governments presented their unwavering commitment to the free market not only as proof of their commitment to democracy and Europeanisation but also as a source of national pride. So, for example, Trivimi Velliste – Estonian Foreign Minister between 1992 and 1994 – reportedly boasted that “Estonia is the only country in the world whose economic policies have been even tougher than the IMF has demanded” (quoted in Lieven 1993, xvii). In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, Latvian governments took similar pride in their commitment to textbook austerity and in the Latvian people’s alleged readiness for self-sacrifice in the name of the higher good of the country (Åslund and Dombrovskis 2011, 121). This pushed economic grievances even further to the margins of the political debate, making it difficult for them to be mobilised also beyond the transition period. This tradition of free market national pride resulted in little solidarity with the “losers” of these policies when they voiced discontent. As an example of this, in December 2008, in the first months of post-crisis austerity measures, then Latvian president Zatlers suggested that in times of crisis people should not whine.[[16]](#endnote-16) Thus, although the Estonian and Latvian governments’ embrace of the free market went beyond EU demands, the EU accession reports’ insistence on balancing the budget, privatisation and political consensus provided support to their policy agenda and contributed to delegitimising any opposition to it. This stifled the debate on key policies in the very period in which the democratic foundations of these countries were being laid.

**Consolidating ethnic hollowness**

While trends towards technocratic hollowness have been noted across CEE (e.g. Ost 2005), in Estonia and Latvia they were compounded by a particularly strong ethnic dimension. There, technocratic hollowness consolidated together with what could be called “ethnic hollowness”: a tendency to limit the democratic space as the remit of the ethnic majority, marginalising and delegitimising minority voices. Hollowing and hollowness are generally discussed in terms that highlight the separation between an elite that controls decision-making and a civil society whose participation in decision-making is severely reduced either by disenchantment or by lack of channels through which to affect decisions (e.g. Crouch 2004; Mair 2013). This underplays the fact that hollowing/hollowness can affect different sections of society differently. To put it simply, a democracy can be more or less hollow with respect to civic participation in general, while at the same time being *particularly hollow* with regard to minority voices. The advantage of conceptualising ethnic political exclusion in terms of hollowness is that it shifts the focus from the minority who suffers exclusion to the quality of democratic institutions, which suffers as a result of being emptied out of minority voices.

Ethnic hollowness consolidated as a stable element of Estonian and Latvian democracy at the same time as Europeanisation pressures – at least on the face of it – were pushing in a more inclusive direction. Indeed, although the EU lacks a specific minority *acquis*, it developed a minority rights protection and non-discrimination agenda during the CEE accession round, not least due to fears that ethnonationalism might destabilise the nascent democracies and breed ethnic conflict (Sasse 2005). As part of accession conditionalities, CEE democracies were pressured to improve their minority protection legislation and their minority policies were subjected to scrutiny. In contrast with market reforms, EU and (ethnic majority) democratising elites’ agendas did not align on ethnic issues.

As part of the wider debate on EU and other external actors’ influence on democratisation, there is an ongoing debate on whether pressures of European institutions (EU, OSCE and Council of Europe) to improve minority rights in CEE were successful (Kelley 2004; Galbreath and McEvoy 2012; Hughes and Sasse 2003; Schulze 2010). Nevertheless, the EU has been generally seen as a moderating force on ethnonational issues, although domestic electoral incentives to adopt nationalist positions can cancel out such leverage (Vachudova 2017). However, the cases of Estonia and Latvia show that ethnic hollowness could consolidate not in spite of but partly because of the pressures of EU accession.

***Ethnic hollowness in Estonia and Latvia***

Accession conditionalities were successful in pushing Estonian and Latvian governing elites to address some concerns with their minority policies, for example softening language proficiency requirements for employment, simplifying the naturalisation process, and establishing minority integration programmes and dedicated integration agencies (Kelley 2004). However, it has also been noted that (ethnic majority) domestic elites acquiesced to changes to minority policies only to the extent that these did not threaten their position of power – thus the EU accession de facto strengthened majority elites’ position by giving them full control of the minority policy agenda (Agarin and Regelmann 2012). Thus, compared to technocratic hollowness, EU accession’s incentives for ethnic hollowness were more indirect – they rested not on its explicit demands (which were for minority inclusion) but with implicit messages that provided justifications for majority elites’ exclusionary agendas.

First of all, the perception of a double standard in minority protection requirements and monitoring (more stringent for CEE and laxer for Western Europe) weakened the credibility of EU minority policy requirements (Jutila 2009). Ample examples of exclusionary practices in Western Europe and contradictory concepts of minority rights could be brought forward by local majority elites to justify restrictive policies.[[17]](#endnote-17) Thus, while minority exclusion was officially condemned throughout the EU accession process, the ambiguity of the message coming from the EU member states – summarised as “do as I say not as I do” (Galbreath and McEvoy 2012, 55) – implicitly validated domestic elites’ lukewarm embrace of minority rights protection.

More directly, the same coalition-building with EU elites that strengthened the hand of Estonia and Latvia’s local Europeanisers as technocratic economic reformers, also had the effect of reinforcing ethnic hierarchies as these were the same ethnic majority elites that had successfully pushed forward an ethnocentric restorationist agenda upon independence(Pettai 2007, 17–20; Agarin and Regelmann 2012). As their role as key partners for liberal market reforms was established, majority elites were in a strong position to marginalise minority voices from their democracy-building and modernisation project.

The presence of large communities of Russian-speakers was presented by majority elites as a potential hindrance to a successful transition to democracy and market economy (Norkus 2007, 27). This attitude was not restricted to openly nationalist forces, who regularly presented Russian-speakers as a menace to the survival of the “titular nation”. Even the liberal elites – who were also nation-minded but rejected the nationalists’ harshest rhetoric – were ambiguous about the role of Russian-speakers in the democratisation process. There was the worry that, if included as citizens early on in the process of democracy and state building, Russian-speakers might have slowed down Europeanisation and democratisation. This was based on the idea that Russian-speakers were “more Soviet-minded” than their ethnic Estonian and Latvian compatriots (Kirch and Kirch 1995, 52), and that they “lack experience with a liberal and legal society” and thus find it more difficult to adapt to the new social and political realities of their countries (Kirch and Kirch 1995, 55). This characterisation of Russian-speakers was in contrast with representations of the “titular nations” as proudly resilient under neo-liberal reform. For example, Marju Lauristin and Mati Heidmets – two prominent policy specialists on Estonian minority integration and by no means nationalists – argued that the “truly complicated task” of democratising Estonia

was even more complicated, due to the fact that the Estonian and Russian communities were not at the same stage of modern development […] Estonians and Russians occupied quite different positions in the scale of modernisation […] The post-war immigrants in Estonia represented Soviet-type collectivism, including obedience to the party elite, denial of market relations, and paternalism and collectivism in work-place relations. Based on such an historical background, attitudes of Estonians towards the Western world, and people’s readiness to accept the capitalist social, political and economic models, have clearly been more positive than those of Russians living in Estonia. (Lauristin and Heidmets 2002, 21)

Seen from this perspective, minority exclusion from the process of democracy building (especially through initial mass disenfranchisement via non-citizenship) appears as perhaps not entirely fair but as having the benefit of ensuring that opposition to transition was minimised during the delicate period of the early 1990s and then of EU accession. Thus, while ethnic exclusion was by no means required by EU accession, it was nevertheless expedient to ensuring the political consensus on reform promoted by EU officials.

The reduction of the debate on socio-economic policies to a choice between a democratic free market future and a repressive socialist past (Lagerspetz 2001, 415) also came with strong ethnic overtones. The bases for this were that in both countries Russian-speakers tended to have a more left-leaning outlook (Daatland and Svege 2000; Bottolfs 2000). This meant that democratising elites could conflate leftist stances on welfare provisions with the ethnic minorities and the Soviet past. Consequently, it was easier to dismiss critics of government socio-economic policies as “Russian revanchists or ignorant populists, regardless of the nature or quality of the critiques” (Sommers and Bērziņš 2011, 121).

Ethnocentric and neoliberal agendas reinforced each other in several ways. Firstly, the survival of the nation was presented as the ultimate goal to which even social welfare could be sacrificed. Consequently, resilience in the face of the harsh economic policies of the transition (and, post-2008, of austerity) became a matter of national pride. This is what Bohle (2010) called “nationalist social contract” and Kattel and Raudla (2013) “nationalist neoliberalism”. Self-reliance, personal responsibility, individualism, competition, and free market could be presented as a matter of Estonian and Latvian national (ethnic) identity. Thus, Russian-speakers’ (on average) more left-leaning tendencies were another reason to keep them (and, in Latvia, their parties) at the margins of democratic power.

Secondly, ethnic divisions make ethnic majority elites’ position in power more stable and divert attention from socio-economic grievances. In Estonia, “concerned about the Russian threat, Estonians mostly vote for right-wing parties, giving them a free hand to implement radical economic policies with very harsh short-term welfare consequences” (Vihalemm et al. 2011, 29). In Latvia, although the Russian-speakers’ party Harmony has been the largest party in the country since 2011, its exclusion from governing coalitions keeps the nationalist and neoliberal parties consistently in power. Harmony’s attempts to appeal to austerity’s losers with a social-democratic message were met by calls for national solidarity and nationalist retrenching,[[18]](#endnote-18) and were not helped by the war in Ukraine (Ikstens 2015). Thus, in both countries ethnic majority elites can present challenges to their economic policies as “socialist and, thus, backward” (Lauristin and Vihalemm 2009, 20). Ethnic divisions can be stressed to discourage the formation of transversal, cross-ethnic solidarities based on socio-economic status (Cianetti 2015).

Moreover, especially in Estonia, where Russian-speakers have been at a higher socio-economic disadvantage after the transition (Leping and Toomet 2008; Lindemann and Saar 2012), there is also a tendency for majority elites to both individualise and ethnicise social exclusion. Socio-economic exclusion is typically explained as a result of individuals’ inability to adapt to the realities of the European market society, backwardness, expecting too much from the state, and lack of entrepreneurial spirit – all characteristics associated with Estonia’s Russian-speakers. This rhetoric further delegitimises socio-economic grievances, marginalising people – both “titulars” and Russian-speakers – who find themselves in a weaker socio-economic position (Helemäe and Saar 2012).

***Minority rights without minority voices***

As shown above, EU accession facilitated, rather than counterbalanced, the exclusivist tendencies of domestic majority elites. Perhapscounterintuitively, this was true even when European institutions intervened directly, using strong prodding and conditionalities, to push for minority-friendly policies – such as simplifying the naturalisation procedure, softening state language requirements for employment, and dropping language requirements for elected officials. The EU monitored Estonia and Latvia’s majority–minority relations closely during the accession period, provided Phare funding for integration programmes, and supported OSCE and Council of Europe in their hands-on work to shape Estonia and Latvia’s minority policies. OSCE officials helped to draft policies and the EU supported them with the carrot-and-stick of conditionalities.

However, EU pressures to liberalise minority policies were once again strongly output-driven, following the general approach that the problem of minority exclusion could be “fixed” by forcing governments to pass (or change) certain pieces of legislation.This focus on output – perhaps paradoxically – had a perverse effect on the inclusiveness of the democratic debate. The negotiations between European institutions and local (ethnic majority) governments replaced majority–minority debate. Minorities remained for the most part passive observers of negotiations made on their behalf; policy objects rather than policy makers. Majority elites remained in control of the process, negotiating with external partners and deciding when and how much to budge (Agarin and Regelmann 2012). So, for example, the head of the Estonian Language Inspectorate described policymaking on language policies as a negotiation between the (ethnic majority) government and EU and OSCE officials, assigning no role to minority voices in his account (Tomusk 2009, 23–33).

In fact, external intervention provided a justification for majority elites to exclude minorities from policymaking and reduced the legitimate space for minority grievances to enter the debate. An example of this is the Latvian parliamentary committee’s debate over the 1999 Language Law, which set all the key principles on language use in Latvia’s public and private spheres. When Russophone MPs complained that the government’s draft promoted assimilation rather than integration and unduly restricted Russian language use, the governing parties dismissed their critiques on the bases that OSCE officials had been involved in the drafting procedure so opposition MPs had no grounds to complain.[[19]](#endnote-19) Russophone MPs’ request that governmental regulations on how to implement language requirements for employment be discussed in parliament was rejected on the same grounds.[[20]](#endnote-20) Thus, if a policy was deemed satisfactory in the accession monitoring or an issue had not been raised by European officials, that was automatically out of the debate, whatever the reactions and opinions of local minorities.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Therefore, even in the cases in which external intervention resulted in more lenient policies, negotiations de facto reduced the need for ethnic majority elites to engage in a debate with minority representatives. This is not to say that Europeanisation pressures caused minority exclusion. However, by proposing a technocratic, problem-solving approach to tackling minority problems, they paradoxically ended up supporting it, ultimately helping to consolidate ethnic hollowness as a key feature of the Estonian and Latvian democracies.

**Conclusions**

This article builds on Greskovits’ (2015) distinction between “backsliding” and “hollowness” to separate dynamic processes of de-democratisation (for which the concept of backsliding can be useful) from static features of low-quality democracies, which include (but are not necessarily limited to) hollowness. “Hollowness” is a useful concept to subsume the different ways in which democratic institutions can be “empty” of a popular component, but – I argue – it needs to be further developed and nuanced. First of all, demand-side hollowness (that has to do with low citizen participation) should be distinguished from supply-side hollowness (that has to do with the top-down shrinking of the space for participation and debate). The focus of this article has been on the latter.

Drawing from the Estonian and Latvian cases, three key points can be made with regard to supply-side hollowness. First, while hollowness has been most often discussed (both in CEE and in the West) in its “technocratic” aspects, the cases of Estonia and Latvia show that in diverse societies it can be compounded by “ethnic hollowness”, in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Conceptually, ethnic hollowness takes us a step further than ethnic exclusion as it moves the focus from what such exclusion does to minorities to what it does to democratic institutions, emptying them out of key dissenting voices. Smooha’s (2009) model of ethnic democracy similarly points to the systemic effects of exclusion. However, differently from ethnic hollowness, it does not allow for gradation (while a democracy can be more or less ethnically hollow, it either is or is not an ethnic democracy) and limits comparability to a few democratic-outlier cases. Ethnic hollowness allows for envisaging broader comparisons, as it is most prominent in countries with large ethnic minorities like Estonia and Latvia but elements of it are present to a smaller or larger extent across all democracies, where minority voices are more likely to be absent from the democratic debate (Haddad 2002; Hochschild and Mollenkopf 2009).

Second, ethnic and technocratic hollowness are not the result of post-accession backsliding. On the contrary, in Estonia and Latvia they consolidated in line with EU accession’s implicit and explicit incentives. In particular, the explicit incentive to speed up transition and deliver specific policy outputs carried the implicit incentive to limit debate. This empowered the democratising (ethnic majority) elites to limit the role of civil society and opposition, restrict the room for debating policies, and marginalise minority voices. These exclusionary effects remained true even when European officials were pushing for minority-friendly policies.

Third, as they have consolidated as a static (though not necessarily immutable) feature of Estonian and Latvian democracies, technocratic and ethnic hollowness cannot be taken as symptoms of impending backsliding. Indeed, rather than indicators of instability, technocratic and ethnic hollowness are key components of stable (albeit low-quality)[[22]](#endnote-22) democratic systems. This has implications for how we treat the different democratic “syndromes” of backsliding and hollowness, in CEE but also in more advanced democracies. Stabilising and strengthening existing democratic institutions can be a way of preventing backsliding. With hollowness, it is the very stability of institutions that perpetuate a low-democratic status quo. Some destabilisation would be required in order to change that.

To conclude, the findings from Estonia and Latvia seem to mirror Greskovits’ (2017) conclusion on the relationship between backsliding and hollowness in Hungary. As in Hungary the vibrancy of civil society (lack of hollowness) supported backsliding, in Estonia and Latvia, by preserving the status quo, hollowness safeguards stability and hinders Hungarian-style backsliding. However, this does not make hollowness desirable. First of all, in the longer-term hollowness might reduce popular stakes in democratic institutions and open up room for anti-democratic reactions – thus, its relationship with backsliding might be more complex than simply impeding it. Moreover, even if that was not the case, there is a trade-off between preserving the kind of low-democratic stability that hollowness can support and improving democratic quality. The latter goal cannot easily be dismissed.

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1. **Notes**

   All the major democracy indexes give them consistently high marks; see for example Freedom House (where they are classed as “free”) and V-Dem (where they are in line with EU average on all main indicators). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See for example the assessment of the Minorities at Risk Project (http://www.mar.umd.edu/). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It is estimated that about 80% of Estonia’s Russian-speakers and 60% of Latvia’s were left without citizenship upon independence (Mole 2012, 88; Smith, Galbreath, and Swain 2010, 119). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In 2014, 22% of Estonia’s Russian-speakers and almost 40% of Latvia’s were non-citizens. This corresponds to 6.6% of the Estonian total population and 12.7% of Latvia’s. A further 24% of Estonia’s Russian-speakers (7% of population) and 6% of Latvia’s (2% of population) are citizens of a third country, mostly Russia (Figures retrieved from Estonian Statistical Database [www.stat.ee] and Latvian Central Statistics Database [www.csb.gov.lv]). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Two separate terms for supply-side and demand-side hollowness might in fact be in order. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Freedom of the press also worsened – mostly due to ownership concentration, legal limits on language use, and cases of attacks against anti-corruption journalists. However Latvia’s media remain free (https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a different critique see Hanley (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Only in 2010 the nationalists were briefly out of government. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a comparison between the far right in Estonia and Latvia see Bennich-Björkman and Johansson (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ther (2016) talks about a Marshall Plan for post-communist Europe. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For a summary of early critiques of the conflicting logics between Europeanisation and democratisation, see Ekiert (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This is the other side of the coin of what Jacoby (2006) called “inspiration” and others called “lesson drawing” (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. On “consensual politics” in Estonia see Lagerspetz and Vogt (1998, 75–78). On how deindustrialisation and financialisation became the undisputable economic policy in post-independence Latvia, see Sommers and Bērziņš (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For example: “Eesti — Ida-Euroopa esimene” [Estonia is the first in Eastern-Europe], *Äripäev* 17 February 2005 (http://arileht.delfi.ee/archive/eesti-ida-euroopa-esimene?id=9792836); “Latvija ekonomiskās brīvības reitingā pakāpusies uz 36. vietu” [Latvia’s economic freedom rating climbed to 36th place], *LETA* 2 February 2016 (http://www.delfi.lv/bizness/biznesa\_vide/latvija-ekonomiskas-brivibas-reitinga-pakapusies-uz-36-vietu.d?id=47014381). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Compared to the pressures for privatising and liberalising, these appeared in the reports less often and more as advisable rather than necessary reforms. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Delfi, 29 December 2008 (http://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/versions/odnorelsovyj-put.d?id=22760833). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For example, local policymakers often mention Germany’s strict naturalisation policy and its treatment of Turkish settled migrants as proof of the fact that their own governments’ minority policies are in line with (or even exceed) European norms (Smith 2003). This was also the case during my own interviews with Estonian and Latvian policymakers in 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For instance, in September 2013 National Alliance appealed to the “Latvian parties” to unite against Harmony’s electoral advance (Latvian Centre for Human Rights [LCHR], Integration Monitor, 13 Sept. 2013 [http://cilvektiesibas.org.lv/en/monitoring/]). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. LCHR, Integration Monitor, 10 February and 19 March 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. LCHR, Integration Monitor, 27 June 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. This stands in contrast with majority elites’ pride in “overfulfilling” external requirements of market liberalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. That is, if we define democracy beyond its minimalist electoral form. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)