

**The crisis of democracy:
Conceptualization and empirical assessment
(with special consideration of Europe)**

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Introduction

According to a widespread perception, many democracies in Europe have entered into crisis. In Southern Europe, economic crises have had an impact on democracy, manifested in mass demonstrations, frequent government changes, and the rise of protest parties. In Eastern Europe, several post-communist countries, in particular those that were until recently considered to be most advanced in the process of democratic consolidation, are experiencing democratic backsliding in the direction of “illiberal democracy”. In Western and Northern Europe, the electoral success of right-wing populist parties is reaching new heights. Across Europe, the rise of populist and extremist forces entails a mounting polarization of society. Trust in democratic institutions is dwindling. Furthermore, common European values as well as the European integration project as such are increasingly called into question.

But can these developments be considered a crisis of democracy? Do they target the normative core of the democratic political regimes, in the sense that they are (potentially) substance-changing or life-threatening? Although the term is frequently used in everyday language, the concept of “crisis” remains poorly defined. Despite a lot of references to a “crisis of democracy” in public and academic discourse, the concept has different meanings for different researchers and is often confounded with either its causes or its consequences. This paper proposes a new concept of crisis of democracy that emphasizes the critical role of agency, in addition to the structural and institutional conditions that create a susceptibility to crisis. Crises of democracy are then defined by the presence of challengers (or change agents) that attempt to bring down – or fundamentally change the rules of the game of – a democratic regime. The paper specifies and operationalizes this concept and applies it to selected democracies in Europe. It is part of a larger endeavor that aims to develop a conceptual tool (and possibly, build a dataset) to be able to spot and compare crises of democracy in Europe, Latin America and beyond.

The first part of this paper conceptualizes the phenomenon of crisis of democracy. It attempts to carve out what a crisis of democracy is and what may be its causes and consequences, introduces criteria to distinguish different types of crises, and discusses whether crises of democracy can be considered critical junctures. The second part tackles the challenges of assessing crises empirically – that is, which data sources can we resort to in order to spot a crisis? The exploration of available data (at this stage still preliminary and partly drawing on secondary sources) sheds light on various facets of the crisis of democracy in Europe.

Conceptualizing “crisis of democracy”

What a crisis is...and is not

In everyday language, the term “crisis” is frequently used. Originating from Greek and signifying a turning point, a crucial situation calling for decisions, crisis was a fairly common term in medicine before it was introduced into the political realm, possibly in the 18th century (for a historical discussion of the crisis concept see Jänicke 1971; Starn 1971; Koselleck 2006). There are many forms of crises, from natural disasters to economic crises. Sometimes an economic crisis may lead to a political crisis. But political crises may also occur simply for political reasons.

The concept of political crisis is rather vague and diffuse. Over the last decades social scientists have done surprisingly little analysis of the determinants and consequences of political crisis phenomena. There are various reasons for the underdevelopment of crisis research, one being the diffuse quality of the concept itself. Obviously, crisis phenomena are often difficult to determine. Self-fulfilling prophecies and other perceptual effects seem to be particularly important in the case of crises. Moreover, the specification of time boundaries of the phenomenon under study causes trouble: when does a crisis begin, when does it end? How long may it last to still be considered a crisis rather than an enduring state of instability? Can we spot a crisis as it happens, or can we identify it *ex post facto* only? All those indeterminacies make it complicated to arrive at a clear-cut definition and operationalization.

Another challenge is that, depending on the context of its usage, the term is interpreted in different ways. Koselleck (2006) distinguishes two traditional usages: First, in a medical (and later on, political and military) context, “crisis” referred to a chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required. Second, in line with the theological promise of a future Last Day, “crisis” was defined as a unique and final point, after which the course of history will be changed forever. More recent coinages of the term still exhibit resemblances with the medical and theological usages (Koselleck 2006; Godefroy 2016). An understanding of crisis as a process, in line with the medical-political-military usage, considers it to be a chain of events that culminates in a decision-making situation in which action is required. At the same time, similar to the theological usage, crisis can be understood as ultimate decision (“Letztentscheidung”), a sudden radical upheaval that leads to profound changes. A third usage that could be called an “iterative period concept” of crisis (Godefroy 2016) considers crises to be recurring (potential) turning points in the course of time. Those different interpretations bifurcate in two fundamentally different ways of looking at crises: on the one hand, there is an interpretation of crises as a longer-lasting process or immanent transitional phase (that may or may not lead to a transition); on the other hand, crisis is understood as disruptive event, culmination or turning point.

A similar bifurcation can be found on the literature on the crisis of political systems, which distinguishes acute and latent crises (Merkel 2014, 2015a). According to the first notion, crises are sudden and acute disruptions in the regular workings of political systems (Dobry 2011). Typically, they are clearly discernible events that unfold over a limited time span and threaten the very existence of the democratic political institutional order. In turn, the notion of latent crisis implies that the crisis can drag on without a conceptually predicted conclusion. While formal institutions remain in place, democracy slowly changes its character, or hollows out from within. Empirical research for different regions of the world reflects those two notions of crisis. Crises in the Latin American context have mostly been conceptualized as acute crises, while the concept of latent crises has mainly been used for crisis diagnoses referring to the mature democracies of Europe and North America. As a result, debates on the topic of crisis of democracy have remained within the constraints of a specific regional context. There has been little dialogue between crisis diagnoses across specific regions, and no attempts to come to an overall understanding of the concept of the crisis of democracy.

During what could be called a first wave of research on the crisis of democracy in the 1970s, scholars studying Latin America focused on democratic breakdown and the emergence of authoritarian regimes (O'Donnell 1973; Linz 1978). Adopting the understanding of an acute crisis of democratic systems, they viewed crisis as a preliminary stage preceding democratic collapse. At the same time, mature democracies of the OECD world were diagnosed as being in crisis due to the difficulties of the welfare state to fulfill the requirements addressed to it. In the face of declining economic growth and high inflation, the power of interest groups such as trade unions led to a growing disproportion between claims brought to the state and its ability to satisfy them. Consequentially, some analysts suggested to give relief to the overburdened state by downsizing the welfare state (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975; Olson 1985). Others, however, emphasized that this strategy threatened to aggravate the crisis of democracy even further, as the dismantling of the welfare state would endanger the society's legitimation basis by weakening the integrative power of established catch-all parties, which had until then been able to mitigate class conflict (Offe 1972; Habermas 1973, 1975).

More recently, crises of democracy in Latin America have still mainly been interpreted as acute crises. They are conceptualized as unsettling events challenging young and unconsolidated democracies (Boniface 2009; McCoy 2012; Heine and Weiffen 2015). By contrast, crisis theories analyzing established democracies maintained their focus on longer-term processes of change. A first strand of this research continues to study the phenomenon of overburdening, erosion or degeneration of representative democratic systems and their key actors (such as political parties). A second strand of discussion focuses on the growing contradictions and incompatibilities between democracy and capitalism in the context of accelerating globalization. A third approach seeks explanations for trends such as discontent and disaffection, decreasing participation and declining trust in institutions. Numerous new "democracies with adjectives" (or with prefixes) have emerged that describe specific defects of real existing democracies. Examples include "post-democracy" (Crouch 2004), "façade democracy" (Streeck 2013), or "simulative democracy" (Blühdorn 2013).

This paper argues that the fundamental distinction into acute and latent crises has made it difficult for researchers interested in the "crisis of democracy" to find common ground and to convert the catchword into an analytically useful concept. Especially the notion of latent crisis frequently confounds the crisis as such with its causes or consequences.

Instead of refraining from using the concept, the following paragraphs take up the challenge of defining an analytical concept of the crisis of democracy. A clearer definition of what a "crisis" is (and is not) delimits the phenomenon from its causes and effects, and differentiates the phenomenon by subdividing it into categories or types. Providing a single framework for

the analysis of crises of democracy in Europe, North America, Latin America and other world regions would enable researchers to engage in inter-regional comparisons and identify trends, forms and dynamics.

Crises of democracy and their causes and effects

Crises are processes “in which the structure of a system is called into question” (Offe 1972, 198). Accordingly, a crisis of democracy can be defined as a serious systemic disturbance of the democratic order which endangers its normative core. A democratic regime is facing a crisis when it is exposed to challenges of such a kind and degree that the persistence of the regime is threatened. The regime is facing a potential breakdown, or structural changes of a fundamental character (Svensson 1986). In other words, the object that is in crisis is the democratic regime as such. What is at stake in a crisis of democracy is the meaning of democracy, the functioning of democratic institutions and the persistence of the democratic institutional order. To qualify as crisis of democracy, the challenges to the democratic regime must be so severe that they are (potentially) substance-changing or life-threatening. Besides the focus on the democratic institutional order that is challenged, the role of actors that emerge as challengers is crucial.

Causes

In the literature on democratization, crises of democracy are mostly attributed to questions of institutional design, bad regime performance, or decreasing regime legitimacy. Regarding the question how a crisis of democracy comes about, a distinction needs to be made between challenges to democracy, causes of crisis, and the crisis as such (Merkel 2015a, b). Democracies today are facing manifold complex challenges:

- Socioeconomic inequality challenges the democratic principle of equality of participation and representation.
- A deregulated global economy and financial markets limit the ability of the democratic state to act, forcing democracy to become “market-conform”.
- Globalization, Europeanization and the concomitant trend of shifting decision-making processes to the level of inter- and supranational institutions challenge the sovereignty of democratic nation states.
- In response to the threat of terrorism, a tension between collective security and individual freedom rights has emerged.

In the face of these challenges, several questions arise: Who governs and in whose interests – i.e. is the government responsive principally to the electorate, or to particular organizations, the economic system, or international actors? Is the government still capable to identify the “common good” and to effectively translate it into politics? Or is it overloaded and cannot live up to expectations?

Challenges only turn into causes of a crisis of democracy when they are recognized and problematized as such by citizens and public opinion, and when they cannot be satisfactorily addressed by means of existing democratic processes and institutions. As long as institutions are able to adapt to changing circumstances, challenges can also be the motor of democratic reform. However, if the challenges cannot be dealt with productively, the democratic procedures and institutions may be damaged in their democratic substance. The consequences for democracy would be even more serious if the formal democratic institution ran empty and became less relevant for the production of politics. Democratic institutions would then become façades which can no longer affect the real environment, while important decisions

would migrate from the sphere of democratic politics to the world of corporations, markets and supra-national regimes.

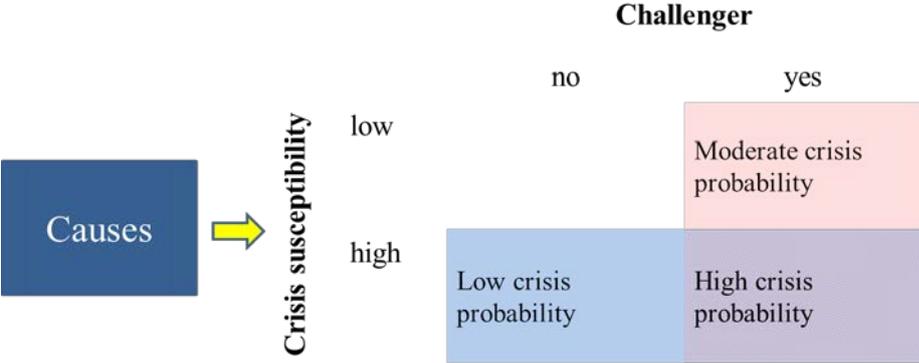
In sum, the main causes of crisis are 1) flaws in the institutional design that hinder the solution of pressing problems; 2) bad performance, that is, low capacity to find solutions considered satisfactory by the citizens to problems facing any political system and to newly appearing issues; and 3) dwindling regime legitimacy. Although a crisis of democracy has often been proclaimed in view of the existence of these factors, they are by themselves not identical to a crisis. Nor are they determinants (in the sense that situations with flaws in institutional design, bad performance and low legitimacy automatically enter into crisis); however, together they constitute what I call the susceptibility to crisis.

The susceptibility (Anfälligkeit) to crisis needs to be distinguished from the propensity (Neigung) to crisis. While susceptibility exists or increases in accordance with the challenges a democratic regime faces, propensity has to do with the characteristics of the regime itself. All democracies can be susceptible to crisis when they face challenges, but especially young and/or defective democracies (that are already “deficient” regarding stability and/or consolidation) have a higher crisis propensity due to those characteristics. Thus, crisis propensity needs to be controlled for when analyzing the causes of crisis.

An additional necessary element to bring about a crisis is agency. From an analytical perspective, the difference between causes of crisis/susceptibility to crisis and the actual occurrence of a crisis is marked by action theory. It depends on the actions of relevant actors whether situations of high crisis susceptibility actually become crises. This happens only if situations of crisis susceptibility produce actors that have resources and are able and willing to strategically challenge the existent system. These actors can be powerful movements, anti-system parties or the military.

Thus, whether challenges to democracy ultimately lead to a crisis is a result of the interaction of, on the one hand, structural and institutional conditions that create a susceptibility to crisis, and actors, on the other (see Figure 1). Crises of democracy are then defined by the presence of challengers (or change agents) that attempt to fundamentally change the rules of the game of a democratic regime, or replace it by a different type of regime. Even if a country suffers from high susceptibility to crisis, the probability of a crisis is low as long as there is no challenger. If the level of crisis susceptibility is low, but a challenger appears on the scene, the probability of crisis is moderate (and chances are rather high that the crisis can be overcome). However, the combination of high susceptibility to crisis and presence of a challenger entails a high probability for a crisis to occur.

Figure 1: Causes of crises



Source: Author’s elaboration

Effects

A crisis of democracy can lead to destabilization and deconsolidation. On the one hand, crises can be considered turning points that shake up the course of events over time and can thus initiate regime transitions. On the other hand, crises can be understood as processes that influence democratic development over time, leading to slow-motion incremental changes in the level of democracy.

When crises are unsettling events, or turning points, they are often interpreted as symptoms of political instability. One way of approaching the concept of political crisis would thus be to consider it the antonym of political stability—a concept which has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention in the 1970s and 1980s (Hurwitz 1971, 1972, 1973; Gurr 1974; Ake 1975; Dowding and Kimber 1983; Ersson and Lane 1983). Political stability can be defined as “the state in which a political object exists when it possesses the capacity to prevent contingencies from forcing its non-survival” (Dowding and Kimber 1983). Different approaches to political stability view it as the existence of a legitimate constitutional order, governmental longevity/endurance, the absence of structural change, and/or the absence of political violence (Hurwitz 1973; Margolis 2010). In the context of any political regime, a crisis targeting the political order as such may disrupt these components of stability and put the survival of the political regime in question.

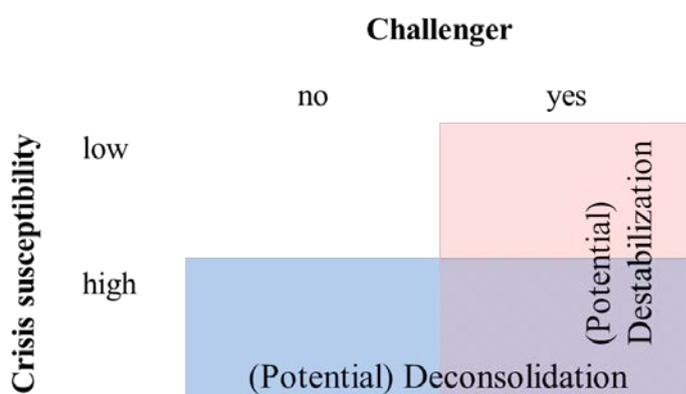
Political crises can, but do not necessarily always result in regime breakdown. Rather, crises are challenges that threaten the continuity of the identifying characteristics of the regime. When crises are processes that unfold over time, they can lead to smaller changes in those characteristics. Many states have not made a clear transition to either full democracy or full autocracy, but have remained incomplete/defective democracies or developed a hybrid regime exhibiting characteristics of both autocracy and democracy. Others have swung back and forth between more democratic and more authoritarian forms of rule. In the case of crises of democracy, deconsolidation is identical with diagnoses of democratic rollback, recession, and backsliding affecting those countries that have made transitions to democracy in the course of the third wave of democratization since 1974 (Diamond 2008, 2015; Bermeo 2016).¹

Destabilization and deconsolidation do not necessarily occur together (as depicted in Figure 2). Destabilization can be very short-term and need not necessarily change the regime, but can as well be overcome. Deconsolidation can be slow, without a clearly discernible turning point.

In addition, both destabilization and deconsolidation can happen without a crisis. As depicted by the blue area in the lower row of Figure 2, deconsolidation without crisis is possible if a country is affected by high crisis susceptibility over a longer time period but no challengers take advantage of this situation. Deconsolidation and destabilization may also be attributable to other factors. There are a number of indirect challenges to democracy – indirect in the sense that there is no actor that deliberately challenges the survival of the democratic institutional order. Rather, these are structural problems, such as high levels of criminal violence, contestations over the monopoly on the use of force, ongoing internal conflict, or transitions from civil war to peace occurring under a formally democratic regime that may potentially undermine the proper functioning of democratic institutions. In any case, these are longer-term processes that may or may not lead to deconsolidation or destabilization, but they are not considered crises of democracy proper.

¹ Democratic backsliding could be seen as a superordinate concept. Decline would then be a variant of backsliding denoting a process of loss of democratic quality, but still within the scope of a democratic regime; in turn, erosion is a variant of democratic backsliding that ends up crossing the threshold to a non-democratic regime.

Figure 2: Effects of crises



Source: Author’s elaboration

Variants of crises of democracy

Different variants of democratic crisis can be distinguished by questioning, first, how the object in crisis—the democratic regime—has been challenged and second, the denouement – or outcome – of the crisis. Regarding the first point, crises can be differentiated according to the origin of change, the strategies of change, and the timing.

The origin of change depends on who precipitates a democratic crisis. A basic distinction can be made between exogenous and endogenous threats to democratic regimes (Boniface 2009; Maeda 2010). Exogenous challenges emanate from outside the regime—that is, from unelected persons or institutions, generally those whose interests are challenged by the incumbent government’s policies. Exogenous agents of change in a democratic crises include traditional military force, armed non-state actors (such as guerrilla or rebel groups), and unarmed non-state actors. They can be further subdivided into (counter-)elites, on the one hand, and larger segments of the population, for example via civil society organizations or mass protest (Zimmermann 1983: 231). In that vein, González distinguishes between intra-elite crises that are elite-planned and elite-led and characterized by the absence of decisive mass participation, and crises with crucial participation by the population (González 2008). The primary agent of change in exogenous crises might be mass mobilization, a counter-elite (such as the military and its allies), or a combination of the two (Boniface 2009: 187). Typical crises of exogenous origin are military coups d’état and coup attempts or threats.

In turn, if the origin of change is endogenous, the threat to democracy is internal to the regime, meaning that it results from the undemocratic behavior of constitutionally elected officials (generally, in an attempt to subvert the democratic process). Endogenous actors are usually (counter-)elites, but they can be further subdivided into executive vs. other institutions (typically, the legislative or the judiciary). Examples include the misconduct of elected incumbents, when presidents wish to accumulate political power at the expense of democratic accountability and the rule of law. The most extreme form is the self-coup (*autogolpe*), where a democratically elected president sets out to transform his government into dictatorial rule by closing parliament and/or the constitutional court. Another example is conflicts between different branches of government.

The category of strategies of change tackles the question whether actors engage in norm-breaking or norm-bending. In the case of norm-breaking, the means that actors resort to, such as the use or credible threat of force against an elected government, are patently illegal. An aspect within the realm of illegal strategies is the use of violence. This is linked to the

question of how far actors are willing to escalate a crisis. Challenges to political systems might involve violent acts such as riots, assassinations, guerilla warfare, and deaths from political violence (Sanders 1981). Thus, crises can be scaled according to (1) the absence of political violence, (2) the threat to use political violence, (3) the use of political violence (Zimmermann 1983: 191-192).

In the case of norm-bending, actors pursue their goals via legal or quasi-legal strategies of change. The procedures channeling the crisis are either formally contained within the existing legal framework, but widely perceived as of a dubious character, or at the margins of what is allowed by existing laws. The use of legal or quasi-legal strategies creates ambiguity, as the nature of the crisis is subject to interpretation. Actions that may be formally in line with the constitution might nevertheless be considered illegitimate by some. The interpretation of the nature of crisis is usually highly contested and politicized.

Examples include dubious, but not outright illegal constitutional changes, stalemate resulting from power struggles and divisions within the government coalition or within the presidential party, and action by the congress or the judiciary to undermine the elected president. Another example is massive social mobilization and protest. Here, the ambiguity results from the fact that mass mobilization as such is not illegal, as it is protected by the freedom of assembly and the right to demonstrate. Social protest might even enhance the quality of democracy when it articulates demands from marginalized sectors of the population and opens new channels of political participation. However, there is a danger that violent protests calling for the resignation of the head of government functions as unconstitutional substitute for formal impeachment or recall proceedings. Figure 3 illustrates different variants of crises, mapping them according to origin and strategy of change.

Figure 3: Variants of crises

		Origin	
		<i>Endogenous</i>	<i>Exogenous</i>
Strategy	<i>Norm-breaking</i>	Repression Self-coup (<i>autogolpe</i>) Electoral fraud	Coup Coup attempt Coup threat Electoral violence
	<i>Norm-bending</i>	Electoral manipulation Inter-branch conflict Constitutional change	Mass protest Forced resignation

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Heine and Weiffen (2015)

The category of timing bears some resemblance to the distinction between acute and latent crises referred to at the beginning. A crisis can happen suddenly or incrementally, depending on whether challengers choose to act quickly or to pursue a strategy of stepwise changes. A

sudden crisis is a clearly discernible event or change that unfolds over a limited time span. It directly threatens the democratic order and may even mean its collapse. In turn, an incremental crisis is a gradual process that often leads to a step-wise reduction in democratic quality, converting a democracy into a defective democracy (Merkel et al. 2003; Merkel 2004), but usually not leading to an immediate collapse. Sudden and incremental crises can occur independently of each other, but can also be related to one another.

Another criterion to take into account when assessing a crisis is its outcome. Obviously, a military coup is more severe than mere civil-military tensions or allegations of a coup, and a self-coup (*autogolpe*) violates the democratic rules of the game more profoundly than attempts to change the constitution to allow for another reelection of the president. Unlike origins, strategies of change, and timing, the outcome can be assessed *ex post* only, by taking into consideration the course and the consequences of the crisis. Outcomes can be scaled in the following manner: (1) no impact of crisis on government and regime, (2) changes in government, (3) changes in regime, (4) regime breakdown. The first variant implies that the democratic regime weathers the storm unscathed. In the face of a crisis, political regimes might well be able to avoid a forced change of identifying characteristics (Svensson 1986). Changes in government, for example changes in the chief executive or cabinet composition, can have wide repercussion, but do not go along with a change in regime characteristics either. In turn, changes in the regime consist of the transgression or change of norms and affect key institutional components such as the party system or civil-military relations. This may result in a transformation of the political regime. Regime breakdown occurs if all the characteristics of the political regime are forcefully changed (Sanders 1981; Svensson 1986).

Crises of democracy as critical junctures?

A conceptualization of crisis as the interaction of susceptibility to crisis with agency imagines them as recurrent (potential) turning points: Whenever a country is in a situation of high crisis susceptibility, actors may seize the opportunity and attempt to unsettle the political order. This raises the question of whether crises can be understood as critical junctures.

In historical institutionalism a critical juncture is commonly referred to as a moment of setting the course in which an institutional path is abandoned in favor of another. Generally, after a specific institutional arrangement is put in place, mechanisms of path dependency ensure that it becomes increasingly difficult to leave the chosen path and switch to an alternative arrangement, even though it might have been equally viable at the outset (Mahoney 2000, 2002). Critical junctures are defined as moments of fluidity. They are relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest. They are often characterized with terms such as "turning point", "unsettled times", or also "crisis" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Thus, the basic features of critical junctures coincide with my above reflections on political crises. Political science analyses of both critical junctures and political crises focus on decisions by influential actors—political leaders, policymakers, bureaucrats, judges, military leaders—and examine how, during a phase of institutional fluidity and vulnerability, they steer outcomes toward a new equilibrium.

However, one cannot easily conclude that all crises of democracy constitute critical junctures. The first contestation concerns severity. When is the crisis susceptibility high enough that one can speak of a critical juncture? And do crises and critical junctures necessarily imply substantive change? According to some authors, a definition of critical junctures necessarily entails that it leaves a durable legacy. Yet, others emphasize that the outcome of a critical juncture may also be institutional continuity, or "re-equilibration". Both in the literature on

political crises and on critical junctures, there is contestation on whether the occurrence of substantive change, should be a definitional feature of the phenomenon. Collier and Collier (1991) consider critical junctures to be “a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies.” According to Mahoney (2000, 2002), critical junctures are expected to render an outcome that cannot be easily broken or reversed because of enduring institutions and structures or because of self-reinforcing path-dependent processes. In turn, Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) state that change is not a necessary element of a critical juncture: “If change was possible and plausible, considered, and ultimately rejected in a situation of high uncertainty, then there is no reason to discard these cases as ‘non-critical’ junctures.” In a similar vein, in the literature on political crises, some authors argue that substantial change in policies or the political order are a definitional component of the crisis concept: “Systematic crisis and structural change suggest something more than a shuffling of personalities, as when one cabinet falls and is succeeded by another. They imply a fundamental change in regime that alters the institutional power balance among the contenders.” (Flanagan 1973: 48; also see Zimmermann 1979: 69). Others consider this an unnecessary limitation of the concept and suggest to say that a crisis has been survived if the political system is able to eliminate the challenges to its continued persistence (Barry 1977; Svensson 1986).

The second contestation concerns timing. Critical junctures are similar to sudden crises in terms of their time horizon, as their duration is brief. This raises the question of a threshold in terms of timing: How long can a crisis drag on to still be considered a critical juncture? One possible solution would be to suppose that there is a critical juncture as long as the situation is undecided and in flux. As soon as it turns out that the actors clearly steer the institutions in a certain direction and they also have the resources to proceed and achieve the desired results, there is no longer a critical juncture, even though we might still speak of an incremental crisis leading to deconsolidation.

Empirical assessment of “crises of democracy”

The contested nature of the concept of crisis has so far made it more complicated to arrive at a clear-cut operationalization, which would be the prerequisite for the identification of a sufficient number of comparable cases for cross-national studies. Empirical analyses so far are characterized by the same bifurcation as theoretical debates, looking at either acute or latent crises. They usually have a regional focus: Studies working with the concept of acute crises focus mainly on Latin America, whereas studies that understand crises as latent crises look at Europe and North America. This bifurcation also suggests the use of different data sources. According to my considerations above, particularly the data used to assess latent crises does not measure “the crisis” per se, but the susceptibility to crises or the effects of crises.

In the following, I will take stock of the different approaches to measuring democratic crises and present examples of how to grasp the crisis of European democracies. However, the ultimate goal must be to overcome the bifurcation of acute vs. latent crises and come to a uniform measurement approach that is applicable cross-regionally.

Approaches to measure crisis of democracy

In the Latin American context, empirical research on democratic crises has mainly attempted to assess acute democratic crises via (qualitative or quantitative) event data. Several scholars studying international and regional responses to democratic crisis have put together lists of instances where democratic regimes in the region were challenged (McCoy 2006; Boniface 2007; Heine and Weiffen 2015). The most elaborate qualitative dataset of democratic crises in Latin America was compiled by McCoy (2006, 2012), who singles out five distinct domestic sources of democratic crises: traditional military force, incumbent elected leaders, conflict between different branches of government, armed non-state actors, and unarmed non-state actors.

Certain variants of democratic crises that occur in the Latin American context have been studied extensively, most notably the phenomenon of failed presidencies and coups d'état. Given the centrality of the executive in Latin American political systems, a lot of attention has been devoted to the perils of presidentialism, the causes and consequences of executive instability, and failed presidencies, or presidential breakdowns, that are rather frequent phenomena even after democratization (see Valenzuela 2004; Hochstetler 2006; Pérez-Liñán 2007; Hochstetler and Edwards 2009; Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010).

Several global quantitative datasets offer interesting insights for the study of crises of democracy in Latin America, and could also be drawn upon for an assessment of crises in other world regions. Data assessing the quality of elections serves to identify instances of electoral fraud. For example, the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) Dataset captures whether there were allegations by Western election monitors of significant vote fraud (nelda47).² Two quantitative datasets code coups, coup attempts, coup plots, and/or alleged coup plots, as well as other types of forced leadership changes (Powell and Thyne 2011; Marshall and Marshall 2013). Datasets on internal conflict such as the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) State Failure Problem Set provide annual data on cases of ethnic war, revolutionary war, and adverse regime change and may thus also help to spot coups, coup attempts, and self-coups. Violent protest is captured by the Banks Cross-National Time-Series (CNTS) Data Archive.³ The data differentiates between different types of instances of domestic conflict, such as major government crises, general strikes, anti-government demonstrations, riots, purges, assassinations, and guerilla warfare.

In contrast, scholars interested in Europe and North America have explored ways to tackle latent crises. Merkel (2014, 2015a) suggests three different strategies – objective assessments, subjective assessments, as well as in-depth partial analysis – to which I suggest to add a fourth strategy, the assessment of changes in policy-making and the political culture:

- Subjective dimension – What do the people think? The subjective assessment is based on population surveys and explores what these opinion polls tell us about the people's opinion on a possible crisis of “their” respective democracy.
- Objective dimension – What do scholars think? Objective assessments draw on objective or expert-based democracy indices such as Freedom House, Polity IV, the Democracy Barometer and the new Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) index and their findings with respect to the changes in quality of democracy during the last decades or years.
- Political dimension – What does everyday politics tell us about the state of democracy? This strategy looks at observable changes in policy-making and the

² See <http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda/>

³ See www.databanksinternational.com/

political culture, such as the decline of catch-all parties and the emergence of/ increase in vote share for populist/radical right parties. Recent developments like that are often not (yet) adequately captured by available survey data and democracy indices.

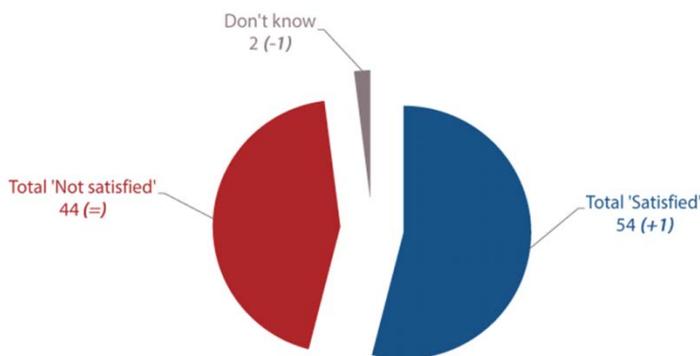
- Analytical dimension – Do democracies fulfil their democratic functions? This strategy undertakes an in-depth analysis of crucial spheres of democracy in individual countries and assesses them in relation to a theoretically defined model. This requires using as point of reference a pre-determined concept of democracy, its essential components and partial regimes, such as Merkel’s concept of embedded democracy (Merkel 2004, 2014).

Are European democracies in crisis?

Following the four strategies of analysis of latent crises outlined above, this section compiles illustrative evidence on whether there is a crisis of democracy in Europe. Regarding the subjective dimension, population surveys such as the Eurobarometer reveal that a significant fraction of the population is not satisfied with the way democracy works in their country (Figure 4). The percentages vary enormously across countries, however, as Figure 5 shows. At the top are Denmark, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, where nearly 90 percent of the population is satisfied with democracy. At the lower end of the scale are mainly Eastern and Southeast European countries, with less than a third of the population satisfied with democracy in Slovenia, Croatia and Greece.

Figure 4: Overall satisfaction with democracy in Europe

On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in (OUR COUNTRY)? (%)



Source: Eurobarometer Survey, March 2017

Figure 5: Satisfaction with democracy in individual European countries

Total 'Satisfied' (%)



(Evolution November 2016 / March 2017)

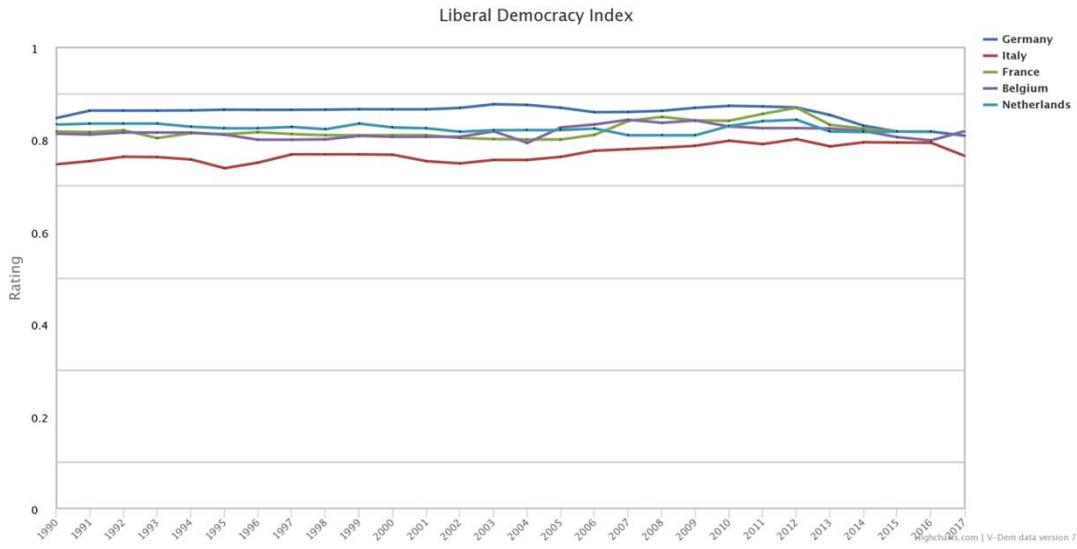
Source: Eurobarometer Survey, March 2017

Regarding the objective dimension, I draw on the latest version of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset to assess the trajectory of democracy in selected European countries. V-Dem is a multidimensional dataset that reflects the complexity of the concept of democracy as a system of rule that goes beyond the simple conduction of elections. V-Dem distinguishes between different principles of democracy, such as electoral, liberal, participatory and egalitarian, and measures these principles.⁴ The Liberal Democracy Index includes the state of electoral democracy, equality before the law and individual freedom, legislative constraints on the executive, and judicial constraints on the executive. Figure 6 displays the state of liberal democracy in the founding countries of the European Community since 1990. Despite minor ups and downs, the level has remained more or less stable over time. In comparison, Figure 7 shows the state of liberal democracy in selected East European accession countries that became members of the European Union (EU) in 2004. This measurement indicates that liberal democracy is in decline in some of those countries, most visibly in Hungary and Poland.

Regarding the political dimension, Figure 8 maps the vote share for populist/radical right parties in Europe, while Figure 9 shows the surge of populist/right wing parties' share of seats in the European Parliament over time.

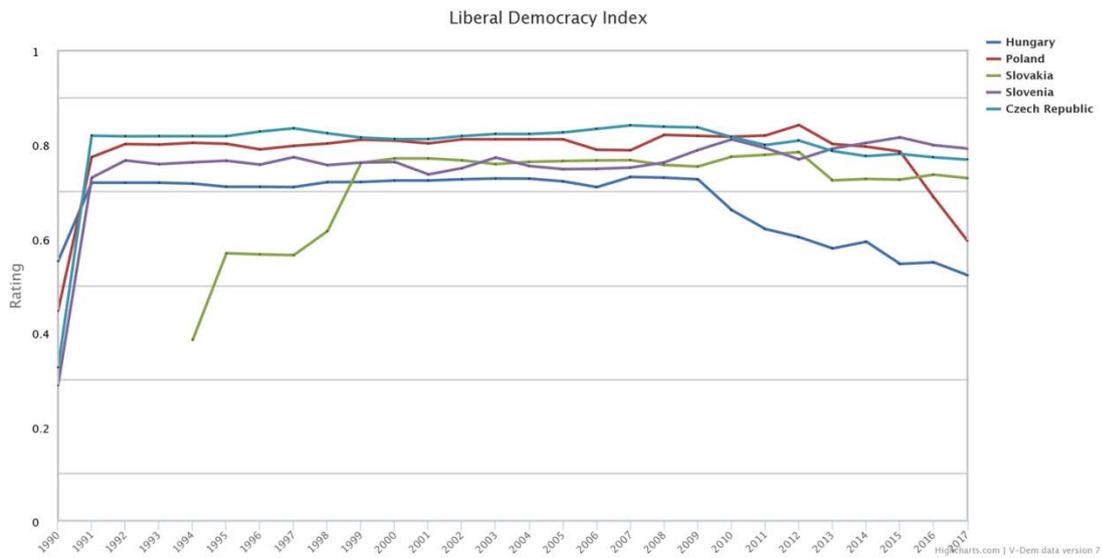
⁴ See <https://www.v-dem.net/en/about/>

Figure 6: Liberal Democracy Index of EC founding countries (1990-2017)



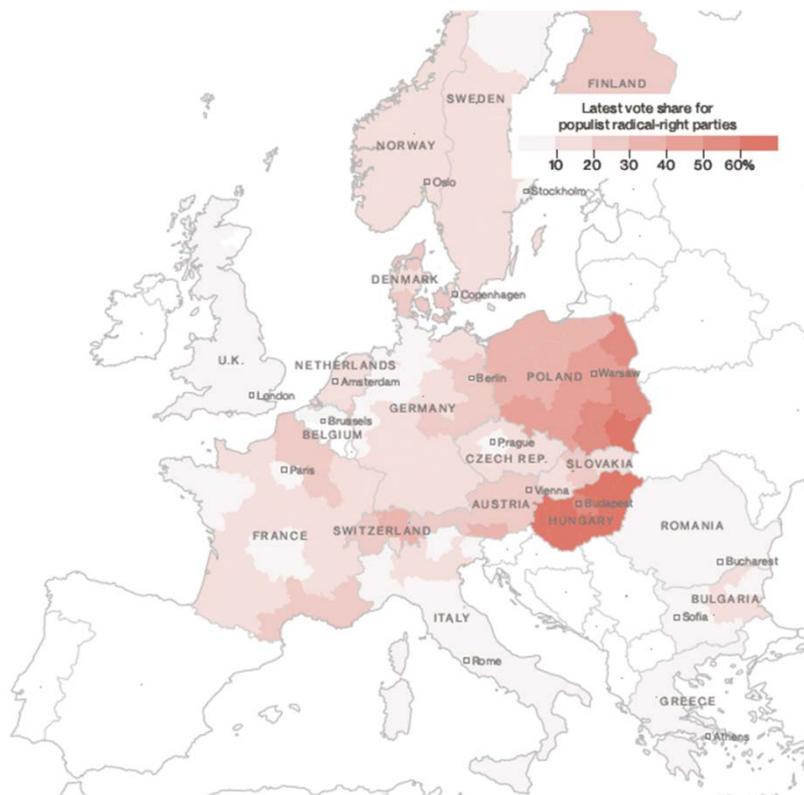
Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/>

Figure 7: Liberal Democracy Index of selected 2004 EU accession countries (1990-2017)



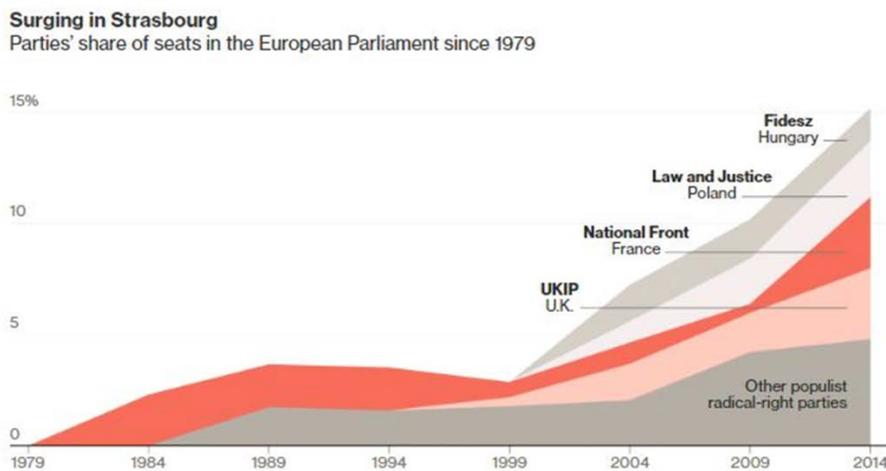
Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/>

Figure 8: Vote share for populist/radical right parties (as of Dec. 2017)



Source: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>

Figure 9: Presence of populist/radical right parties in the European Parliament



Source: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>

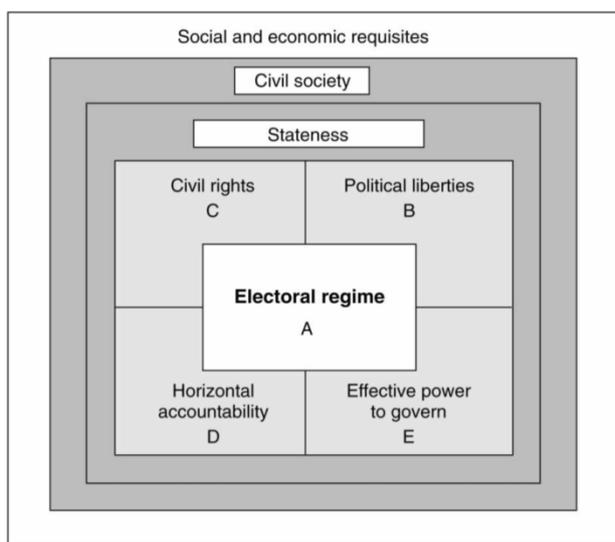
Regarding the analytical dimension, departing from the exploration of the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index and the finding that liberal democracy in Hungary and Poland is in decline, it is interesting to study in more detail which changes of democracy have taken place in those two countries, using Merkel's concept of embedded democracy as point of reference (see Figure 10).

In Hungary, the government of Prime Minister Victor Orbán’s coalition Fidesz, in office since 2010, has undertaken numerous steps toward a concentration of power in the executive, affecting the electoral regime and the partial regimes of political rights, civil liberties, and the effective power to govern. Regarding the electoral regime, the Orbán government has modified electoral laws in order to ensure a parliamentary majority. It has curtailed political rights by tightening the control of public media and putting restrictions on independent media. Regarding civil liberties, there have been attacks on private property and political interference in economic activities, usually in favor of Fidesz supporters and disadvantaging its opponents; harassment of civil society organizations; and attempts to reduce pluralism and “foreign influence” in arts, sciences and education (the attempts to shut down Central European University being the most prominent example). As for the effective power to govern, checks and balances have been undermined. Due to the modification of electoral laws, the executive and the legislative are both controlled by Orbán. Oversight organizations were staffed with loyal people, and there has been an increasing centralization of the civil service. Additionally, there have been numerous attacks on the rule of law, such as attempts to subjugate the judiciary, meddling in the staffing of the Constitutional Court, the adoption of new Constitution and numerous “cardinal laws”. Also, the equality before the law was put in question.

In Poland, the government of the Law and Justice (PiS) party has since 2015 moved in a similar direction. Its main initial focus was the partial regime of horizontal accountability via the dismantling of checks and balances. Particularly, the government made several attempts to undermine the independence of the judiciary by appointing new members and modifying the rules for the Constitutional Tribunal and by forcing judges to retire. It has also tried to centralize the civil service and, as regards political liberties, to tighten the control of public media.

Of course, the assessments presented here are selective and of merely illustrative character, and it would take a more detailed analysis to determine whether and in which countries of Europe a crisis of democracy actually exists.

Figure 10: The concept of embedded democracy



Source: Merkel (2004)

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