Gero Erdmann
Marianne Kneuer (Eds.)

Regression of Democracy?

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Foreword

This Special Issue is the first of its kind from the Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft/Journal of Comparative Governance. This German-language journal was founded in 2007 as the first German-speaking publication for Comparative Politics, which also includes English articles. As the idea was to build not only a platform for German-speaking scholars, the journal also regularly provides English online editions – such as the Supplement Volume of 2010 (see the archives of http://www.zfvp.de). This first Special Issue is exclusively and fully published in English. Special Issues allow us the opportunity to treat and address topics in a more comprehensive and in-depth way.

This first Special Issue addresses a topical theme – the decline of democracy – that has not been at the forefront of the academic and political agenda for two decades. The contributions to this Special Issue originate from a workshop with the title 'Demokratische Regression: Qualitätsverlust, Hybridisierung und Zusammenbruch von Demokratien/Democratic Regression: Loss of Quality, Hybridisation and the Breakdown of Democracy' organised by the Working Group 'Democracy Studies' of the German Political Science Association (DVPW), between 16 to 18 October 2008, at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg. Only those papers presented at the conference and submitted to the editors that triumphed in a first double-blind review process were included in this issue; in those cases where a paper received a contentious review, a third reviewer was then consulted. Among the reviewers were political scientists from Germany, other European countries as well as the United States.

We wish to take this opportunity to also extend an invitation to come forward to those scholars in Comparative Politics who are interested in assuming in future the editorship of such a Special Issue of Journal of Comparative Governance themselves. The next such Special Issues will be about 'The Use of Indices in Comparative Politics' and 'The (Dys-) Functionality of Corruption'.

Finally, we would like to thank the publishing house, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, especially its Reader, Frank Schindler. They were always open to the ideas of the editorial team, as well as to the idea of Special Issues, thus making possible what we present to you now.

The Editors

Introduction

Gero Erdmann and Marianne Kneuer

For a quarter of a century the transition from authoritarian rule figured very prominently on the Political Science research agenda. The reverse process – the transition *from* democracy – was largely ignored. This issue attempts to redress the balance, a choice for which there are a number of good reasons. It will address the regression of democracy – which might be a loss of democratic quality, a decline into a hybrid regime or a breakdown into an outright dictatorship.

Twenty years after the implosion of the Communist Bloc the euphoria in democratisation studies has come to an end. A more pessimistic or realistic view is spreading among scholars of democracy. This goes hand-in-hand with a significant expansion and differentiation in the research agenda of democratisation studies. While, since the 1980s, the transition towards democracy took the front seat, scholars began to concentrate on consolidation, its problems and its perils from the mid-1990s. This is due to the fact that, since then, democratisation has begun to display a mixed balance. It became evident that the linear and quite unproblematic evolution of democracies in Southern Europe did not become the role-model for everyone everywhere. The results of democratisation differed: while the neo-democracies in Central and Eastern Europe can be seen as largely consolidated and recipients of the democratic hallmark from the European Union in 2004, many other processes of democratisation, in other parts of the world – such as Africa, Asia and Latin America –, did not reach the same state of consolidation. Rather, they became stuck as unconsolidated or defective democracies, some 'regressed' into hybrid regimes and some even turned into autocracies. Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell (2007) calculated that less than a quarter of the changes from authoritarian regimes between 1972 and 2003 effectively resulted in democratic governance.

Although transitions did not slip from scholarly attention, the relevance of democratic consolidation – especially of the persistence and the deepening of democracy – became the new focus, along with the varying results of democratisation – including defective, unconsolidated democracies and hybrid regimes. The empirical variety in democratisation results gave way to the conceptual creation of the multitude of 'adjective democracies' (Collier and Levitsky 1997). The innovative approach of creating subtypes helped not only to capture the existing variety but also to diversify the concept of democracy. However, not all proposed subtypes were convincing, so that different concepts of subtypes came to coexist, sometimes creating more confusion than clarity.

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Although some concepts became prevalent – such as 'delegative' (O'Donnell 1994), 'electoral' (Diamond 1999), 'illiberal' (Zakaria 1997), 'defective democracy' (Merkel 2004; Merkel et al. 2003) or 'hybrid regimes' (Karl 1995; Diamond 2002) –, there is still no overall consensus about definitions. This is also true when it comes to measuring the variations. As several scholars have pointed out (Müller and Pickel 2007; Munck 2009; Burnell and Youngs 2010), there is a kind of 'babble' regarding methods of measuring and classifications, and thus it is essential to be cautious when using, presenting and interpreting these data. For example, the *Bertelsmann Transformations Index* uses the categorisations of 'highly advanced', 'advanced', 'limited', 'very limited' and 'failed or blocked' for assessing the status of political and economic transformation[1]; *Nations in Transit* differentiates between 'consolidated' and 'semi-consolidated democracy', 'transitional government or hybrid regimes', 'semi-consolidated' and 'consolidated authoritarian regimes'.[2]

At the same time, there is an ongoing debate about how to evaluate the trends in democratisation. Three different types of interpretation can be identified: Firstly, there is a pessimistic faction that sees an overall rollback of democracy and a reverse wave (Diamond 2008; Puddington 2008; 2010). A second view confirms the pessimistic reading of democracy's international prospects, and, in finding nuances within the rollback interpretation, suggests not to see it as a crisis but as a challenge for democratisation (Burnell and Youngs 2010). Thirdly, there are also scholars who refute this claim about a re-autocratisation, or the negative prospects of democracy on the global scale. Thomas Carothers (2009: 1) calls for a 'stepping back from democratic pessimism' and states that 'although democracy is certainly troubled in many places, when viewed relative to where it was at the start of this decade, democracy has not lost ground in the world overall'. Similarly, Wolfgang Merkel (2010) argues that 'there is no hard empirical evidence' for a reverse wave of autocratisation – while acknowledging that the democratic optimism of the early 1990s was indeed caused by inappropriate theoretical concepts of an irresistible trend towards worldwide democracy. Therefore, the system competition between democracy and autocracy should be considered as 'frozen'.[3]

Simultaneously, comparative authoritarian studies experienced a renaissance. The increasing literature on dictatorships deals with the persistence and change in, as well as different types of, these regimes, and one of the major findings of this research agenda is how autocracies increasingly employ democratic institutions for their non-democratic survival (for example, Brownlee 2007; Hadenius and Teorell 2007; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Schedler 2006; Köllner 2008). This research program, however, does not provide conceptual assistance to the issue of the regression of democracy. The two research fields – on the one side defective and unconsolidated democracies and on the other authoritarian regimes, authoritarian rollback and the possible 'reverse wave' (Huntington) coupled with the re-emergence of authoritarian great powers – remain largely isolated from each other.

1 http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/en/bti/ranking/status-index/

2 http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/nit/2010/NIT-2010-Methodology.pdf

3 See also Croissant and Thiery (2009: 70).

While transitology dealt with the transition from authoritarian rule, the reverse process – the transition *from* democratic rule – remained almost completely outside of scholarly consideration. One reason for why the reverse process was not addressed might have been that the reverse transitions simply did not happen or only during the last couple of years when the 'retreat of freedom' was discovered. Another reason could be that transitology by nature has as a starting point the emergence of democracy and its further development and thus looks at cases which can be subsumed as young or neo-democracies. Examining the loss of democratic quality or the breakdown of democracies is, then, a different research program. Hence, the starting point is, rather, a more comprehensive process of regression which possibly ends with the emergence of an authoritarian regime. Research has to deal with explanations for such processes in both young as well as established democracies. In fact, during the third wave of democratisation there were not only democratic transitions, which failed, but also a number of young and not-so-young democracies that regressed after a democratic period – not only into defective democracies and hybrid regimes, but even into authoritarian regimes.[4]

This special issue will address the problems of the regression of democracy and the aim is to close the gap between research on democracy and democratisation on the one side and the emergence of authoritarian regimes on the other. The topic of the regression of democracy raises one basic question: should the investigation be confined to young democracies or should old and/or established democracies be included in the research agenda? As regards the first part of the question, there is nothing new about the insight that transitions are open-ended and that other outcomes than fully fledged democracies are possible. This has been pointed out from the beginning of this research topic – although sometimes the non-democratic results might have been forgotten during the democratisation euphoria. 'Transitions are delimited […] by the installation of some form of democracy, the return to some form of authoritarian rule or the emergence of a revolutionary alternative' (Schmitter and O'Donnell 1986: 6). It is quite safe to assume that there is a consensus among those scholars theorising and analysing transitions and democratic consolidations that either not fully consolidated or fragile democracies are the most vulnerable and prone to erosion. The spectrum of regression might encompass transitions into the so-called 'grey zone' between stable democracies and stable autocracies (namely, defective democracies, hybrid regimes, competitive autocracies), hence a decline not only into a subtype of democracy, but also into new authoritarian regimes.

The second part of the question addresses the issue of 'democratic survival' that takes us back to the contentious debate about the meaning of democratic consolidation (Schedler 1998). It is the question about the stage or level of democratic development that secures a democracy against authoritarian regression; in other words, which is the state of a democracy that leads us to believe or claim that the democratic rules are institutionalized in such a way that the regime is immune against authoritarian threats and that it will continue to persist in the future as a democracy? Since the issue of this state of 'irreversibility' of democracy, as it is sometimes called, is unresolved, a better under-

4 For a detailed overview of the cases of decline and the literature, see Erdmann in this volume.

standing of the democratic survival issue requires us to also include older, well-established democracies into the research agenda. Closely interlinked with this problem is the question and need for research about the quality or level of democracy, for two reasons. First, a particular quality or lack of quality might be the cause for endangering democratic rule that is not inherent in young democracies; second, changes in the quality of democracy[5] – for better and worse – can even be observed for some of the very old democracies of industrialized societies. An increase in research on the differences among, and ongoing changes within, established democracies is reflective of this issue.

The regression of democracy fans out into different phenomena: the loss of quality, which means a silent regression; the backslide into hybrid regimes (hybridisation); the breakdown of democracy. Essentially, there are two routes to decline: the 'rapid death', which insinuates a sudden breakdown of a democratic regime by such means as civil war, coup d'etat etc., thereby relapsing into authoritarian rule, and the 'slow death', displaying an incremental decay through 'the gradual erosion of freedoms, guarantees and processes that are vital to democracy' (O'Donnell 1995: 27; 1988). When Guillermo O'Donnell exposed these main routes to the perishing of democracy he also sketched the tasks for research on that field. One desideratum – more refined typologies – has been intensively elaborated, although there is still a way to go. The other tasks – like describing the risks and their evolution, as well as thinking about the necessary efforts at the domestic and international levels to reverse such trends of democratic erosion – remain to be fulfilled. Andreas Schedler emphasised that the description of democratic evolution or decay and their assessment are very much perspective dependent (Schedler 1998: 94f). That means that it is extremely important to make clear what the viewpoint and the direction of the view is. On the basis of Schedler's four-fold classification – authoritarianism, electoral democracy, liberal democracy and advanced democracy – he shows two scenarios: preventing democratic breakdown from a liberal or electoral democracy and democratic erosion from a liberal to an electoral democracy. Obviously, he assumed that advanced democracies would not experience democratic erosion.

This special issue goes beyond these scenarios. The empirical examinations are not limited to breakdown and erosion cases, but also include cases of the loss of democratic quality in advanced democracies. The contributions embrace conceptual considerations (Erdmann, Lauth, Burnell), as well as empirical analyses of the regression of democracy (Braml/Lauth, Kneuer, Basedau/Stroh, Frankenberger/Graf, Stefes/Sehring, and Skaaning). The focus is on gathering approaches that might open up fresh perspectives on how to capture conceptually and analytically this phenomenon that disquiets the democratisation community. The empirical cases cover the loss of democratic quality in old democracies such as the United States, in young democracies of Central Europe – considered to be consolidated – and of two liberal democracies in Africa – Benin and Mali. Also included are cases of hybridisation, such as Georgia and Venezuela, as well as the erosion of hybrid into authoritarian regimes, such as Russia. Further to these, a complete

5 See Beetham (1994); Altmann and Pérez-Liñan (2001); Beetham et al. (2002); Beetham (2004); O'Donnell et al. (2004); Diamond and Morlino (2005); Lauth (2004); Bühlmann et al. (2008).

survey of the instances of political breakdown and survival during the interwar period in twentieth-century Europe is also undertaken.

Since there is hardly any substantive research to date on the authoritarian reversals for the third wave of democratisation, in the first contribution *Gero Erdmann* sets out to sketch the research challenges faced in addressing the decline of democracy. His stock-taking of decline cases – which include changes in the democratic quality and changes from liberal democracy to hybrid and authoritarian regimes – provides basic data for the period from 1974 to 2008. The survey illustrates that most of the cases of decline refer to the change in and from young democracies that were established during the third wave. The predominant pattern of change is the loss of democratic quality and hybridisation. Not very surprisingly, middle-income countries seem to be the most vulnerable to the loss of democratic quality and hybridisation. The data analysis also confirms the institutionalist argument that the longer a democracy endures the more likely it will survive – although there are substantial exceptions. This points to crucial research areas, namely, to the analysis of the *gradual erosion* of democracy and the transition to a hybrid regime, while the phenomenon of the 'rapid death' of democracy seems to be a past pattern. After highlighting the richness of the 'eclectical approach' of transitology, the article concludes with a number of critical issues for the future research agenda. Among them is the volatility of middle-income countries, which points to the need for refined comparative research strategies that, to name a few only, might focus not only on the *process* of decline in reaction to and combination with economic crisis, but also, for example, on structural conditions such as the degree of social inequality and heterogeneity, as well as historical sequencing.

One crucial issue for the research on the regression of democracy, as conceived here, is the conceptual challenge of the quality of democracy. Any analysis of changes in quality and of the regressions of democracy obviously requires clear-cut criteria. *Hans-Joachim Lauth's* essay takes up the fundamental challenge and joins in with the ongoing debate about how to define and measure different qualities of democracy. After having suggested five 'pragmatic' rules for conceptualising the quality of democracy, he characterises democracy as a 'boundary concept' encompassing three dimensions: namely, freedom, equality and control; the three dimensions are competing and, simultaneously, complementary. Building on the tensions between these dimensions, he argues that 'complete responsiveness', although being a core criteria in many conceptualisations of democracy (for example, Dahl, Diamond and Morlino), should not be used for assessing and measuring the quality of democracy. This is not to eliminate responsiveness from the basic definition, but full responsiveness cannot exist for a number of methodological and empirical reasons, which are related to the tensions between the different dimensions of democracy. His analysis underlines that the definition and measurement of democratic quality is a daunting work-in-progress, and that we have still not reached consensus about the abstract content of the concept – not to mention the institutional domain and its indicators for empirical measurement. As just one example, it would be misleading to equate an increase of dissatisfaction with a quality regression of democracy without further qualification or contextualisation.

One of the major shortcomings in the early transitology research was the neglect of the international factors, whose relevance became acknowledged only at a later stage – although they have even now still not yet been fully integrated into a theory of democratisation. *Peter Burnell's* contribution opens up the issue right from the beginning of the research on the regression of democracy, and helps us to avoid repeating the same mistake with the question: 'Is the international environment becoming less benign for democratisation?' He reminds us that the 'international dimension' is not only an external politics factor and also is much more than internal democracy promotion and assistance. It further includes such components as diffusion, contagion, control, conditionality and consent (Whitehead), or snowballing effects (Huntington), which partly have a very indirect impact on domestic political processes, which might be either the transition from or to democracy. Based on the research experience of the international dimension of democratisation, he illuminates the methodological challenges that lie ahead for those assessing how more or less benign the international environment has become for democracy or dictatorships. His major point is that we need to modernise the framework of analysis for the external dimension, in order to establish whether there is such a trend or not; his own tentative answer to the question is a qualified yes. The subsequent problem, however, is: if the international environment has become less benign, does that mean it has also become more favourable for the international diffusion of anti-democratic values and the promotion of dictatorships? There is obviously no easy answer; simply to equate the international effects of the two different regime types seems to be questionable, as pointed out by Burnell. An answer requires thoroughly designed comparative studies, ones that include both types of regimes.

The first empirical case study of the decline of democracy in this special issue takes up the challenge of analysing the regression of democratic quality in an established – in fact the oldest – democracy, the United States of America. To assess the quality of the US' democracy, *Josef Braml* and *Hans-Joachim Lauth* apply the latter's 'democracy matrix', which builds on a three-dimensional concept of democracy – including political freedom, political equality and political and legal control (horizontal accountability). They argue that the US under George W. Bush has become a 'deficient democracy' since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror. They see the democratic regression as a paradoxical result of the US' attempt to promote democracy even by military means, while sacrificing civil liberties at home. In effect, the power of the Executive was expanded whereas the rule of law, the effective control of the Executive by the Legislative and the Supreme Court deteriorated. However, they conclude with an optimistic view. First, the democratic regression under Bush was not a singular one, but historically a more frequent phenomenon caused by external threats – a regression from which US democracy usually recovered because of its inherent liberal tradition. Second, the election of Barack Obama and his commitment to the liberal ideals of the US constitution might be an indication that the decline of democratic quality will only be a temporary phenomenon.

The 'centrality of institutionalised party competition' (Lipset 2000) for a flourishing and consolidated democracy is common wisdom among scholars of democracy. However, there is little empirical research about the degree to which party systems affect the

quality of democracy. The general assumption is that a highly fragmented, highly polarised and lowly institutionalised party system will have a negative impact on the democratic regime and might contribute its breakdown. Two contributions, those of *Marianne Kneuer* analysing the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and *Matthias Basedau* together with *Alexander Stroh* examining party systems in West Africa, address this issue and come up with different conclusions, which challenge some assumptions in the conventional wisdom about the role of party systems.

On the basis of the concept of party system institutionalisation – but introducing new indicators – Marianne Kneuer reveals, first, that most of the party systems of the eight young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe cannot be regarded as institutionalised. In a second step, she examines the effect of the unstable party systems on the quality of democracy by looking at three dimensions of democracy: the freedom and control dimension, the procedural dimension and the output dimension. Herein she discovers that the weak party systems had little influence in the first post-autocratic decade, but much in the second, especially in the freedom and control and the procedural dimensions. Government effectiveness, in contrast, seems less affected by instable party systems as deficits are compensated for by an executive concentration. Taking into account the four-level model of consolidation, Kneuer's analysis shows that while the Central and Eastern European countries dispose of stable and functioning institutions (constitutional consolidation), consolidation is not accomplished on the representative level, especially as regards the parties and party systems. Such non-simultaneous consolidation processes can interfere with the further deepening of democracy or the enhancement of its quality. An open question for further research is whether the weak intermediary actors and low citizen participation – correlated with a low degree of input agency and input capacity – could in the long run cause a debilitation of the input legitimacy.

In this respect, at least, the investigation of the West African party systems reveals similar results, as far as the apparently clear-cut relationship between the type of party system and democracy is concerned. In their analysis Matthias Basedau and Alexander Stroh add to the usual indicators (fragmentation, institutionalisation and ideological polarisation) a new indicator – namely, behavioural polarisation. On the basis of four cases, they reject the conventional hypothesis that moderate fragmentation, high institutionalisation and low polarisation are supportive of a high level of democracy. The reason is very simple: most of the indicators show no, and a few even a negative, impact. This might lead to the conclusion that the classical party-system characteristics do not matter at all for democracy – a suggestion, however, that the authors reject. Instead, they argue that the relevance of the party system might not be as strong as the functionalist wisdom maintains and that other causal mechanisms might be at work. At the very least, high fragmentation and low institutionalisation seem to be no major cause for high democratic volatility. Nevertheless, the authors concede that further research is required, especially to test their findings with a larger sample than the small-n comparison. Apart from the latter provision, which also applies to Kneuer's results, the results of both studies point to some shortcomings in the functionalist understanding of the relationship between the political party system and the quality of democracy, which seems to be more complex than conventionally envisaged. The introduction of new

indicators obviously helps us to understand better the correlation between party system institutionalisation and quality problems. Interestingly, both behavioural polarisation (Basedau/Stroh) as well as the indicators Kneuer used (for example, fractional migration) point to the same problem: namely, elite behaviour.

The cases of Russia and Venezuela have been of central interest and focus in recent years, both being important players not only in their regions but also beyond, and both also experiencing a regression of democratic status: Russia degraded from a hybrid regime to an autocracy and Venezuela from a liberal democracy to a hybrid regime. The closing of the political systems has been achieved by the political leaders through the centralisation of power, the restructuring of federalism, the devaluation of political parties and the rise of informal institutions in the form of neo-patrimonial or clientelistic structures. *Rolf Frankenberger* and *Patricia Graf* focus on elections, assuming that they are a crucial means by which to gradually steer and even to smooth transition to autocracy, as they are the 'Archimedian Point' for changing political systems. Applying a functionalist–structuralist approach the authors identify several functions of elections such as legitimisation, structuring, integration and so on. The interesting finding is that, in both cases, functions of competitive, semi- and non-competitive elections coexist, although to a different degree. It is this mixture of different electoral functions that enables a smooth – even hidden – process of de-democratisation. In both cases, elections are neither a democratic technique nor do they constitute a democratic threshold against authoritarian developments. Thus, Frankenberger and Graf consider elections in both countries as a means to implement and/or stabilise authoritarian rule.

Christoph Stefes and *Jennifer Sehring* also analyse two cases that drew international attention: Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. Their coloured revolutions symbolised the hope for democratisation to sweep away semi-authoritarian regimes. Both cases show, however, that the new democratically elected leaders use similar techniques to their authoritarian predecessors, by which the democratic progress has been halted and reversed. Based on Steven M. Fish's work (2001), the authors find three explanations for this development: the moving from presidentialism to super-presidentialism, the weakly organised and fragmented opposition and the adverse impact of authoritarian states in the neighbourhood. In a way very similar to the Russian case, the main trait of the democratic decline is the centralisation of executive power – namely to the head of the state – through constitutional changes, repression of the opposition and the stifling of civil society. Stefes and Sehring identify, as a further important variable, the international dimension and the role of foreign actors. The authors argue that Western support was diminishing, while Russia was pulling the strings in the neighbourhood. Testing the international dimension, the authors conclude that both countries display low international linkages, which consequently means that the leverage of external actors is likewise low. As a result, the ability of foreign actors to deter authoritarian setbacks is also low.

While most of the contributions concentrate on cases of the third wave of democratisation, *Svend-Erik Skaaning's* analysis takes us back to the cases of the interwar period in Europe. These constitute an interesting sample as they were initially based on democratic euphoria, yet in the end more than half had collapsed into autocratic and totalitarian regimes. His study includes all 29 European countries in the period and uses a con-