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Democratic Inoculation in Slovakia and Serbia: Do Polities Learn from the Experience of Democratic Backsliding?

Does a polity learn from the past period of democratic backsliding? Democratic backsliding is often understood as a regional trend in Central Europe, but it is so far absent in Slovakia. This paper argues that it is because of democratic inoculation – experience with the hybrid regime in the 1990s that increased the persistence of Slovak democracy. Theory-building process tracing is equipped to trace the democratic inoculation through the mechanisms of the awareness of the threats to democracy and the creation of symbols. Quantitative text analysis is used to operationalize these processes. The empirical analysis offers strong evidence for the theory of democratic inoculation. To refine this theory, the Serbian case is analyzed as Serbia has also overcome a hybrid regime in the 1990s but backslides in the 2010s. It is argued that democratic inoculation failed there due to the lack of polarization and the stalled reforms in the post-Milošević era.

Key words: democratic backsliding, inoculation, process-tracing, Slovakia, Serbia

Introduction

The return of Robert Fico to the Slovak premiership in October 2023 has prompted widespread concern regarding the trajectory and survival of Slovak democracy (Bárády, 2023; Martinek – Techet, 2023; Muzikarova, 2023). Drawing parallels with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Fico aligns himself with populist ideology and an anti-liberal stance. Central to the discourse is the question of how persistent Slovak democracy is.

Since 2010, democratic backsliding has become a highly prominent topic in both journalistic discourse and comparative political science. This is partly a result of the developments in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where the liberal democratic consensus seems to have vanished very quickly after the optimistic 1990s and 2000s. The zeitgeist has changed so rapidly that authors speak nowadays about democratic backsliding as a regional trend applicable to CEE as a whole (Bustikova – Guasti 2017, p. 166; Krastev 2018; Mueller 2014, p. 15; critically Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2018, pp. 243–44).

The processes of democratic backsliding become better understood with increasing academic interest in this topic. Nevertheless, the literature is still heavily preoccupied with analyzing why countries backslide while neglecting the topic of democratic persistence, which is defined as the ability of democracy to prevent, cope with, and survive crises that can lead to the breakdown of democracy (Sisk 2017, p. 37). Therefore, it is an attribute preventing democratic backsliding and can explain the diverging democratic levels in the region. To understand democratic persistence in the context of democratic backsliding, we need to go beyond the universe of cases that backslide and include persisting democracies in the analysis. Slovakia, a country with no to little democratic backsliding between 1998 and 2023 and high levels of electoral and liberal democracies compared to its Visegrad Four neighbors (Coppedge et al. 2024), is chosen as the main case of this paper.

Since the electoral defeat of the hybrid regime of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar in 1998, Slovakia had seven different prime ministers in the office and none embarked on the consolidation of his or her rule through processes of democratic backsliding. Nevertheless, the electoral outcomes brought opportunities for such backsliding. For example, the 2012 parliamentary elections created a single-party government of the leftist party Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD) that controlled 55% of the seats in the parliament. Although Prime Minister Robert Fico (2006-2010, 2012-2018, and 2023-) used his powers to nobble police and judiciary to strengthen the economic interests of oligarchs close to him, he has not yet tried to undermine democracy as such (Anderson 2018). The backsliding paradigm assumes that all Central European states backslide, so Slovakia should as well. Then – why did it not?

Previous literature has repeatedly noted that Slovakia is an outlier in the quality of democracy and suggested that the theory of democratic inoculation can explain this outcome (Bakke – Sitter 2020, p. 12; Bustikova – Guasti 2017, p. 167). Democratic inoculation is a process that emerged in Slovakia as a result of historical legacy. Slovakia underwent a period of democratic backsliding and competitive authoritarianism in the 1990s under the regime of Vladimír Mečiar. This illiberal experience led to a learning process for the public, which strengthened democratic persistence and thus protected Slovakia from backsliding. Nevertheless, this theory was never fully developed or analyzed, rather it was speculation intended for further research. This paper aims to fill in this gap by answering the research question: What are the processes creating democratic inoculation in Slovakia?

To refine the theory of democratic inoculation, the second case chosen is Serbia. Although a similar case to Slovakia, it shows an outcome of democratic backsliding. Serbia shares with Slovakia a similar recent history – existing as a hybrid regime under President Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s and democratizing around 2000. Although less democratic than Mečiar's Slovakia, Serbia under Milošević is considered a hybrid regime by a number of authors (Levitsky – Way 2002, p. 52; Rupnik 2023, p. 15; Gilbert – Mohseni 2011, p. 294).

In addition, Slovak and Serbian hybrid regimes had numerous similar features (ethnonationalism, populism, anti-Western sentiment). Therefore, Serbia seems to be a very likely candidate for democratic inoculation. However, Serbia started to backslide after 2012 (Bieber 2018; Pavlović 2020). This is the second key puzzle of this paper. Serbia seems like a failed most-likely case – democratic inoculation theory would expect that the democratic inoculation would work and

strengthen its democratic persistence, but it did not. Therefore, the second research question of the paper is: Why was democratic inoculation ineffective in Serbia?

The case selection of Slovakia and Serbia is based on both cause and outcome. This is a standard case selection approach for the process-tracing method (Beach – Pedersen 2016, p. 849) – Slovakia is a typical case for the theory of democratic inoculation, as the theorized causal mechanism seems to be in place. Thus, it can be used for theory-building process-tracing as it is expected that the dependent variable, independent variable, and scope conditions are all present (Beach – Pedersen 2016, p. 852). Serbia is a deviant case as the cause is present, but the outcome is absent. A deeper analysis of this failed most-likely case can help us to identify omitted scope conditions for the democratic inoculation to refine this theory. Together with analysis of the expected case of Slovakia, this represents a powerful case study design (Rohlfing 2012, p. 114).

Literature Review

Bermeo (2016) identified several types of democratic backsliding – classic coup d'état, executive coup (self-coup of the freely elected chief executives), election-day vote fraud, promissory coups (military coup to “protect” democracy), executive aggrandizement, and manipulation of elections strategically. However, Bermeo (2016) and other authors (Lührmann – Lindberg 2019) acknowledge that some forms of democratic backsliding are very rare in the post-Cold War era. The first three mentioned forms of democratic backsliding were much more common in the Second Wave of Autocratization during the Cold War. Breakdowns in the current Third Wave of Autocratization are more often incremental – quick and dramatic breakdowns happen less often. Therefore, the paper analyzes democratic backsliding in the forms of executive aggrandizement and strategic manipulation of elections.

Various scholars use CEE as a source of paradigmatic examples of backsliding. It is suggested that the “*liberal-democratic project in these polities has been either stalled, diverted or reversed*” (Bustikova – Guasti 2017, p. 166). Ivan Krastev (2018, 51) describes emerging illiberal consensus across Eastern Europe. Apart from Hungary and Poland as the most pronounced examples, backsliding is said to happen also in the Czech Republic (Hanley – Vachudova 2018), Serbia, Slovakia, and Lithuania (Lindberg 2018).

The consolidation of democracy (CoD) literature repeatedly analyzes potentially positive long-term effects of events that are usually understood to be harming democracy. There are two key concepts, namely crises and reequilibrations.

Schedler (2001, p. 73) suggests that a crisis in democracies may lead to paradoxically positive outcomes, if “*democratic actors manage to weather the crisis successfully and establish a lasting precedent of democratic persistence*”. He stresses that such an outcome is infrequent, although it should not be ruled out. Schedler’s analysis of such outcomes is somewhat vague, but he stresses the role of precedents. If the crisis is resolved, it shows the anti-democratic actors that backsliding is costly and condemned to failure through projecting past experience into the future (Schedler 2001, p. 74). Schedler (2001, p. 74) gives an example of the 1981 coup in Spain, which failed after King Juan Carlos sided with the pro-democratic forces.

Bustikova – Guasti (2017, p. 167) argued that Slovak experience with democratic backsliding in the form of the Vladimír Mečiar’s regime in the 1990s inoculated Slovakia from the future illiberal turn. According to them, this is a result of negative economic consequences and the threat of being “left behind” in the integration processes with the West as a result of illiberalism (Bustikova – Guasti 2017, p. 167). Bakke – Sitter (2020, p. 12) also argue that Slovak politics is “inoculated” by the Mečiar experience because parties and voters respond quickly to punish potential backsliders. A similar view was pronounced by Slovak academic Szomolányi (1999, pp. 82–117), only a year after Mečiar’s downfall. Finally, Hungarian writer and academic Miklos Haraszi (Terenzani 2019) spoke about the “immunization of democracy” in the context of post-Mečiar Slovakia: *“the country gets over the first populist power grab and comes out of that crisis stronger, with its immune system ready for the next time.”* By “immune system” Haraszi effectively meant democratic persistence. Apart from these authors, no literature explicitly discusses democratic inoculation.

In this paper, democratic inoculation is defined as a gradual process of increasing public comprehension that democratic backsliding is a possible outcome of the regular democratic process and that such an outcome is generally not desirable. This process may emerge because of a preceding period of a hybrid regime.

Apart from the topics of democratic backsliding and the consolidation of democracy, it is essential to look at the case-specific literature of Slovakia and Serbia. The working hypothesis of this paper is that Slovakia underwent the process of democratic inoculation, but this inoculation did not work in Serbia. It is therefore essential to analyze why was this the case. As the process of democratic inoculation is causally linked with the period of the hybrid regime, it is expected that the mode of transition away from the hybrid regimes may have had a causal impact on the democratic inoculation. Based on the desk research, two connected key areas of difference between Slovak and Serbia transitions were identified: polarization and the level of reform.

The dominance of PM Mečiar, his political methods, and the question about the character of the regime itself were negatively perceived by the public and are theorized to have caused the democratic inoculation. Although an extended discussion on the autocratic moves that caused the inoculation is beyond the scope of this paper, describing two key events may suffice to illustrate. Firstly, in 1995 the state secret service SIS was likely misused to kidnap the president’s son in order to discredit the president that was in opposition to Mečiar. In 1996, Róbert Remiáš connected to the key witness of the kidnapping was murdered and Mečiar later amnestied the perpetrators (Haughton 2015, p. 280). Secondly, a politically uncomfortable referendum on NATO membership was effectively voided by the minister of interior in Mečiar’s government who openly disregarded the constitutional court (Haughton 2015, p. 302).

These and other issues led to polarization and the emergence of political cleavage, which Hloušek – Kopeček (2008) and Sekerák – Němec (2024, p. 142) call Mečiarist/anti-Mečiarist cleavage. In the 1990s, Mečiarism was characterized by preferring an illiberal hybrid regime that championed a “specific” Slovak way of economic transformation (slow reforms with building domestic oligarchy with ties to the incumbent) and misuse of the state institutions to harass and suppress the opposition. The anti-Mečiarist political spectrum consisted of a very heterogeneous group of anti-communists, right-centrist, and post-communist parties, held together primarily by

the rejection of Mečiar's politics (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008, p. 537; Sekerák – Němec 2024, pp. 143-144).

This cleavage was a highly polarizing factor in the late 1990s to the extent that “*any attempt to stand aloof from this principal conflict and reject the associated behavior patterns was a ticket to political obscurity*” (Učeň 2004, p. 46). Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) was victorious in the 1998 elections, but it was forced to stay in the opposition as it could not find coalition partners because of the high polarization. The ruling anti-Mečiarist coalition was very heterogeneous with numerous conflicts, but the fear of the HZDS coming back to power was its main “binding agent” enabling it to remain in power until the elections of 2002 (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008, p. 538).

The Mečiarist cleavage weakened somewhat by then, with the emergence of new parties pursuing a “third-way” between the Mečiarist and anti-Mečiarist camps (Učeň 2004). Additionally, Mečiar himself adopted a more pro-Western stance, moving away from its previous nationalist ally Slovak National Party (SNS). Still, even after the 2002 elections, the victorious HZDS was considered an unacceptable party by most parties and thus remained in the opposition (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008, p. 540; Sekerák – Němec 2024, pp. 145).

Mečiarist legacy created a strong polarization that helped the anti-Mečiar coalition to survive four years of a very heterogeneous government and then to remain in power for another four years. These eight years led to the EU and NATO accession, strengthened Slovak institutions, and consolidated Slovak democracy to an extent that the left-nationalist and illiberal coalition of Smer-SD, HZDS, and SNS between 2006 and 2010 did not reverse its democratic path. Mečiarist cleavage was certainly not the only one present in Slovak politics, but other cleavages to a significant extent overlapped with it (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008, p. 539).

The significant polarization between the old regime and the reformers did not happen in Serbia after Slobodan Milošević. Oppositional parties lacked an alternative political program and many of them supported the aggressive foreign policy of Milošević back in the 1990s (Dolenec 2013, p. 168). After the downfall of Milošević in 2000, similarly to Slovakia, a very broad anti-Milošević coalition Democratic Opposition of Serbia (Demokratska opozicija Srbije, DOS) consisting of almost two dozen parties formed the government. Vojislav Koštunica, the chairman of the Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska stranka Srbije, DSS), became the president and Zoran Đinđić, the chairman of the Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka, DS), became the PM. The coalition was soon marred by disagreements and many of them were connected to Milošević's legacy. Đinđić and Koštunica disagreed about the preservation of the legal procedures of the past regimes, the necessity to fully reorganize the security apparatus, and the extradition of Milošević to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in Hague – ICTY (Dolenec 2013, p. 179; Kroeger – Partos 2001). Some authors argue that Koštunica and his DSS intended to preserve some elements of the Milošević regime (International Crisis Group 2001). In Slovakia, the situation was reversed – the idea of how to deal with the past regime was the most unifying factor in the post-Mečiar coalition.

Bochsler (2010, pp. 103–4) identified four dimensions of party conflicts in post-2000 Serbia – regime conflict, nationalist-authoritarian dimension, foreign policy dimension, and economic conflict. Only the first one is connected to Milošević's legacy. This partly explains why the post-

2000 government of the DOS coalition “*was marred by rivalries and disputes that hindered Serbia’s reform process*” (Dolenec 2013, p. 179). PM Đinđić was assassinated in 2003, which caused the dissolution of the DOS coalition. The assassination broke the resolve in Serbia for fast and far-reaching reforms and the new parliamentary elections took place in 2003. Koštunica’s DPS created a minority government without the DP, with the tacit support of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), still officially led by Milošević. This clearly shows that the division between pro-Milošević and anti-Milošević parties was already in 2003 only skin deep (Pešić 2007, as cited in Dolenec 2013, p. 182).

The modes of transition from hybrid regimes in Slovakia and Serbia differed significantly. In Slovakia, the post-1998 coalition amended the original constitution, strengthened checks and balances, and introduced a direct election of the president. The extensive adoption of the *Acquis Communautaire* strengthened the prospects of Slovak membership in the EU. Szomolányi (2004, p. 175) argues that the stabilization of democracy came primarily from the fact that the post-1998 government managed to stay in power for four years. This boosted the electoral prospects of Dzurinda’s Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), which managed to lead the government also after 2002.

Notably, Slovakia did not face the need to introduce as far-reaching reforms as Serbia, at least in the question of security services. In this area, the most important was the reform of the secret service SIS that was used by Mečiar’s government to kidnap the president’s son and harass the opposition and media. Only a few days after taking office, Dzurinda’s government replaced the director of the SIS. The new director reportedly replaced all senior employees of the institution (Tódová –Žemlová 2003).

The reforms in Serbia were much more limited. There seems to be a broad agreement of scholars (Bieber 2018; Pavlović 2020) that the reformist government failed to break with the past regime of Milošević, which facilitated the return of competitive authoritarianism in the 2010s. Dolenec (2013, p. 177) points out that the roots of this failure can be found in Milošević’s downfall – protesters co-opted the security services which enabled a peaceful transfer of power, but they compromised further democratic reforms (Subotić 2010). Choosing Koštunica as a president was considered a compromise choice that was agreed upon by both the democratic opposition and the old regime. Koštunica protected the elements of the old regimes in the security apparatus and obstructed Đinđić’s reforms (Dolenec 2013, p. 177). This led to the preservation of authoritarian enclaves in the security service and elsewhere.

The clearest articulation of the existence of the enclaves and their detrimental impact on democratic consolidation is the assassination of reformist PM Zoran Đinđić in 2003. Dolenec (2013, pp. 189–96) argues that the high number of public officials who were dismissed due to their connection with Đinđić’s assassination proves the high embeddedness of the old regime in the state apparatus. As argued before, the assassination stalled the reform process in Serbia (Dolenec 2013, p. 181).

The differences in the mode of transition from hybrid regimes in Slovakia and Serbia are significant. The political methods of Mečiar caused an extensive polarization on the political spectrum that stopped Mečiar from returning to power and held the incoherent democratic coalition together. This allowed them to adopt far-reaching reforms and stopped the possible emer-

gence of authoritarian enclaves. Serbian political landscape was divided much more than just by Milošević/anti-Milošević orientation. Numerous other issues created discord among the post-Milošević coalition that was unable to agree upon reforms. Unlike Mečiar, Milošević was removed only after co-optation of the part of the security forces. This stalled the reforms and made President Koštunica cooperative with the old regime. The lack of reforms and objectively much higher embeddedness of Milošević's old regime in the state caused the emergence of authoritarian enclaves. One of them – the security apparatus and its connection with the criminal underground led to the assassination of PM Đinđić and closed the window of opportunity for reforms.

Based on the literature review, we can hypothesize the three necessary conditions for the emergence of democratic inoculation. These are the existence of a recent period of the hybrid regime (Schedler, 2001 p. 73-74; Bustikova – Guasti 2017, p. 167), creating a clear break with the old regime through defeating it without its cooptation (Bieber 2018; Dolenc 2013, p. 179; Pavlović 2020), and continuing polarization across the political spectrum against the autocrat (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008, p. 539; Pešić 2007, as cited in Dolenc 2013, p. 182; Učeň 2004, p. 46). These consequently create a system of public comprehension, reactions, and perceptions that constitutes democratic inoculation (Bakke – Sitter 2020, p. 12; Szomolányi 1999, pp. 82–117).

Methodology

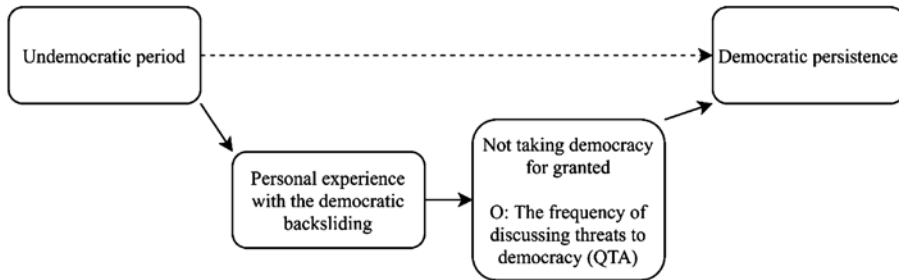
The hypothesized causal mechanism of democratic inoculation is that the experience with an undemocratic regime leads to learning among the public, which increases the democratic persistence of a polity.

Following the distinction of different types of process tracing as defined by Beach – Pedersen (2013, pp. 16–18), this paper uses theory-building process-tracing. Because the literature does not contain a ready theory of democratic inoculation that can be applied, it is not possible to simply test a theory based on the case study (theory-testing process-tracing). Following Beach – Pedersen (2013, p. 16), this approach starts with empirical evidence, which is then built into a broader hypothesized theory. Importantly, such an approach aims to find a generalizable causal mechanism, which works in a broader population of cases. The case of Serbia was chosen because it represents a failed most-likely case, as the empirical outcome differs from theoretical expectations. Such case selection is useful to identify omitted scope conditions and through this refine the theory (Rohlfing 2012, 100). This case is also used as a benchmark for comparison of the results of the empirical part with Slovakia.

Process-tracing and operationalization

The following sub-sections outline three processes driving democratic inoculation and discuss the operationalization of individual steps. Each of the processes uses Coleman's (1990) model of causal inference, connecting the macro-level phenomena with a micro-level causal analysis.

The first process suggests that the personal experience with the democratic backsliding in a country leads the public to not take democracy for granted. The operationalization is based on the frequency of discussing threats to democracy in a given country. As a result, this increased

Figure 1. The first process creating democratic inoculation.

Source: Author's compilation

frequency leads to more democratic persistence as it is more likely that the public would identify early signs of democratic backsliding. This logic closely follows Gill (1998, p. 167): “an essential condition of making democracy secure is never to take it for granted”.

Quantitative text analysis (QTA) is used to quantify the number of occasions in which threats to the democracy of a given country were discussed in the newspapers. The reason for analyzing newspapers with this approach is that the quantitative method enables increased internal validity of measurements and improved replicability of results, compared to, for example, desk research. At the same time, it enables tracking political development in real-time and thus on a more granular basis than other sources being published annually (for example, democracy rankings).

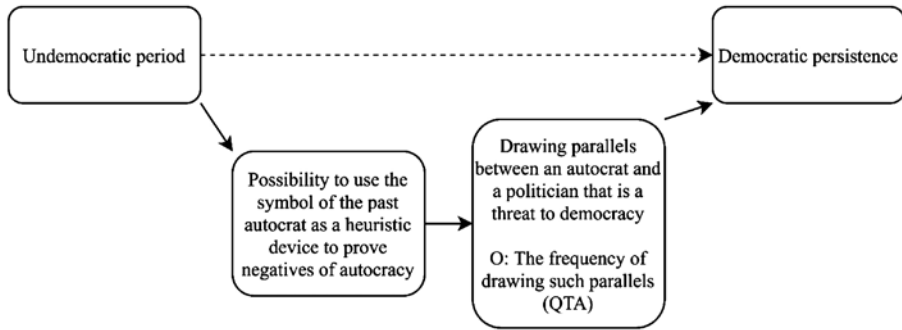
The corpus consists of the news articles of popular dailies in Slovakia and Serbia and is further explained below. It can be argued that using newspapers may be problematic as the outcome of democratic persistence is assumed to be driven by the public, not the journalistic elites. Nevertheless, the paper works with the assumption that the journalistic discourse partly reflects and partly forms public opinion. Therefore, using journalistic discourse is a suitable proxy to study public opinion. This is a standard assumption accepted by most of the previous scholarship studying sentiment analysis of political communication (for an overview, see Haselmayer – Jenny 2017).

It is expected that discussions of threats to democracy are more common in Slovak than in Serbian periodicals due to the presence of democratic inoculation. If this is the case, it proves that there is a higher level of vigilance among the Slovak public, leading to a higher persistence of democracy.

Hypothesis 1: The threats to domestic democracy were more often discussed in Slovakia than in Serbia.

The second process hypothesizes the creation of symbolism and parallels. For the voters, these represent a sort of heuristic device. Using the heuristic device of the past experience with a hybrid regime is a powerful tool to name-and-shame an emerging autocrat. Creating a cognitive connection between the past autocrat and emerging autocrat is a form of denouncement and a tool to effectively transmit a mental image of the negative implications that may come true, should the democracy backslide again through the actions of the emerging autocrat.

To operationalize the frequency of drawing such parallels, the QTA is used to find out how often the figures of Robert Fico and Aleksandar Vučić are compared to Vladimír Mečiar and

Figure 2. The second process creating democratic inoculation.

Source: Author's compilation

Slobodan Milošević, respectively. Using the data from the media may be problematic in this context. Drawing parallels between Vučić and Milošević is a stronger political statement and a direct critique of Vučić than discussing threats to democracy. Therefore, it is expected that expressing such views in the media is under the bigger influence of censorship and self-censorship. This is particularly true in Serbia, which currently ranks 93rd in the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders 2021). Because of this concern, only the period before May 2012 (the beginning of the backsliding) is covered in the corpus.

Fico had a much weaker connection with Mečiar than Vučić had with Milošević during the hybrid regime periods. Although Fico enabled Mečiar to re-enter the government in 2006 and largely copied his ruling techniques and approach to maintaining power, he was a vocal opponent of Mečiar in the 1990s and an MP of the anti-Mečiar coalition after 1998. Therefore, it can be argued that their connection during the 1993-1998 backsliding was non-existent. On the other hand, Vučić was a minister of information in Milošević's government during the period of the hybrid regime in the late 1990s. Empirically speaking, the connections from the backsliding periods between Vučić and Milošević are stronger than between Fico and Mečiar. Still, it is expected that because of the democratic inoculation, the parallels were drawn much more often between the second pair of politicians.

Hypothesis 2: The parallels were drawn more often between Fico and Mečiar than between Vučić and Milošević.

Corpus

The corpus used for the QTA consists of the newspaper articles scraped from three Slovak and three Serbian dailies. The most important criteria for choosing the newspapers are the political orientation of the newspapers, circulation, and archive availability. In terms of political orientation, the goal is to cover a broad ideological spectrum of newspapers to investigate whether some processes of democratic inoculation are more pronounced based on political orientation. Thus, in both countries, three different types of dailies are covered – one center-left, one center-right, and one tabloid. Although tabloids offer in general little politically relevant content, they were included as this newspaper type is clearly the most popular in both countries (MML – TGI 2008;

Rankovic n.d.). In terms of circulation, to cover relevant newspapers with a high impact, popular newspapers with high circulation are preferred.

Based on these criteria, three media outlets from each country were chosen. In the case of Slovakia, the most popular center-left (Pravda) center-right (SME) dailies from the late 2000s were chosen (MML – TGI 2008; Školikay n.d.). The situation is more complicated with the tabloid, as the most popular tabloid *Nový čas* does not have an available archive for scrapping. Therefore, the second most popular tabloid *Plus 1 deň* was chosen instead. In the case of Serbia, the most popular center-left and center-right dailies, *Danas* and *Politika* were chosen, respectively.

The most popular Serbian newspaper from the late 2000s *Kurir* was chosen as the tabloid type (Surčulija – Pavlović – Padejski 2011, p. 19). The disadvantage is that the archive of *Kurir* covers only a few last months. A similar situation is in all other, less popular Serbian tabloids (*Blic*, *Alo!* or *Srpski telegraf*), therefore, exchanging *Kurir* for another tabloid is not helpful. The corpus uses the webpage *vesti.rs*, an automatic news aggregator of all newspaper articles from different media. The articles are without changes published on *Vesti* website (*Vesti.rs* 2020), including articles by *Kurir* since May 2008. The disadvantage of using this aggregator is the fact that *Vesti* publishes only the beginning of each article. Assuming that the average length of articles has not changed since the studied period and comparing the corpus with the current articles¹, approximately 60% of *Kurir*'s articles are published on *Vesti*. Although not an ideal outcome, even fragments of the articles can be used for the QTA. Additionally, there is little reason to believe that the parts of the articles available from *Vesti* are biased against the articles as a whole. Therefore, the fragments of articles in *Kurir* available on *Vesti* are used.

The choice of the articles chosen for analysis depends on the type of daily. In the case of non-tabloid center-right and center-left dailies, the corpus consists of all the articles from the opinion sections. The choice of the section is less straightforward in the case of tabloids as they do not contain opinion sections. Instead, the reporting sections are analyzed. Serbian *Kurir* (and *Vesti* website) has a political section, so all articles from this section are included. Slovak *Plus 1 deň* does not have a political section, only a much broader section called news. Therefore, it is necessary to sort out the articles and include in the corpus only the political ones. A keyword approach is used to select these articles. The articles containing stems from the names of the key politicians – chairpersons of all parties accessing the parliament between 2008 and 2012 were added, together with President Gašparovič and PM Radičová. As *Kurir* corpus contains also some foreign policy news, to balance *Plus 1 deň* in the same way, the stem of the word minister was added to the keywords, which expanded the selection also by some foreign news, but also by some political articles from Slovakia that did not discuss only the top party politics. Generally, this is not a perfect approach, but the results would not be significantly skewed even if some articles are not political, as the corpus contains more than six thousand (after filtering) articles from *Plus 1 deň*. As different sections are analyzed in the tabloids, the cross-media (tabloids with non-tabloids) comparison is problematic but does not endanger the main goal – cross-country comparison.

The time period for corpus was chosen to cover the period before the start of the democratic backsliding in Serbia (after the elections in May 2012) to ensure that the content of the articles is

¹ Based on a random selection of twenty articles from the period between February and April 2021.

not influenced by backsliding. The beginning of the corpus was chosen based on data availability constraints. For the center-left and center-right dailies, the 2009-2012 period is covered, as the archive of Pravda is not available for earlier years. The tabloid corpus covers articles between May 2008 and 2012, as the Kurir archive in Vesti starts this month. To eliminate the cofounder of different periods (due to external world events happening), the same periods in both countries for one type of newspaper are covered. The total number of articles in the corpus is 30,837. The overview is available in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the content of the corpus used in the QTA.

Newspapers		Article selection	No. of articles	Time period
Name	Type			
Pravda	Center-left	Opinions	3278	2009 – 04/2012
SME	Center-right	Opinions	9353	2009 – 04/2012
Plus 1 deň	Tabloid	Keywords	6310	05/2008 – 04/2012
Danas	Center-left	Opinions	5719	2009 – 04/2012
Politika	Center-right	Opinions	1174	2009 – 04/2012
Kurir	Tabloid	Politics	5003	05/2008 – 04/2012

Source: Author's compilation

Empirical part

Awareness of the threats to democracy

The first theorized process suggests that the period of the hybrid regime created a personal experience with democratic backsliding among the broad public. People realized that the existence of an undemocratic regime was a real possibility also after the fall of socialism in the late 1980s and thus they do not take democracy for granted. Remembering the negatives of undemocratic rule, they are cautious of possible democratic backsliding. Because of this higher vigilance, democratic persistence is increased. This is operationalized through the frequency of discussing threats to democracy in the newspapers. It is expected that the threats are discussed significantly more often in Slovakia than in Serbia because of the democratic inoculation.

For the operationalization of this process, the analysis started with choosing articles containing the stem form of the word democracy (*demokracia* in both languages). This stem allows to search for various forms of the word (nouns, adjectives, adverbs). After filtering out other articles, the articles containing the stem were hand-coded to identify articles discussing threats to democracy²

² Primarily, it was evaluated whether an article discusses a possibility that the democratic system in the country is or may be endangered or weakened.

regardless of who the author articulating these threats was. The three key coding criteria were geographical, temporal, and substantive. Geographical criterion meant that only articles discussing threats to democracy in a given country were considered. Regarding temporal scope, only articles discussing current threats to democracy were included. Finally, substantive criterion means that apart from threats to democracy, also threats to democratic consolidation were considered valid. This is because some Serbian authors (primarily in *Danas*) did not consider Serbia fully democratic, therefore, they discussed threats to the consolidation of democracy that was assumed to be happening in Serbia. Substantially, discussing threats to democratic consolidation is very similar to discussing threats to democracy, the only difference is in reflecting the fact that the author currently considers the regime as a defective democracy. Still, discussing threats to consolidation may boost democratic persistence as they warn of the possibility of democratic backsliding.

Due to practical considerations, the author exclusively performed the hand-coding for both analyses, which could affect the reliability of the coding. However, the automatic selection of articles based on keyword principles, and the fact that most articles clearly fell into one or another category, suggest that the coding reliability is sufficiently robust. The corpus with the coded articles is available upon request.

Pravda and Danas

To test the hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference between the observed frequencies, Pearson's chi-squared test is used. This test compares the observed frequencies of a contingency table to assess whether the differences in frequencies can be assigned to a chance. In the case of *Pravda* and *Danas*, the difference between frequencies is statistically significant at a p value of .001 (table 2). The null hypothesis that there is no difference in the frequency distribution of these two newspapers can be therefore rejected with high confidence. At the same time, there seems to be a substantive significance as well. Although 1.9% of opinion articles in *Pravda* that discuss threats to democracy may not look like much, considering the fact that the opinion section discusses various topics, it is a fairly high number and suggests that this is a common discourse of speaking about Slovak democracy. This percentage is three times higher

Table 2. Contingency table and the chi-squared test of the number of articles discussing threats to democracy in *Pravda* and *Danas*.

	Pravda		Danas		Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%
Not discussing threats	3215	98.08	5682	99.36	8897	98.89
Discussing threats	63	1.92	37	0.64	100	1.11
All articles	3278	100	5719	100	8997	100
The chi-square statistic is 30.81. p value < .0001. Significant at p < .001.						

Source: Author's compilation

than in the case of Danas (0.6%). Notably, in Serbia, the discourse of threats to democracy was not common even straight before the May 2012 elections that started the democratic backsliding. These findings are in line with the first theorized process that the threats are discussed more often in inoculated Slovakia than in not inoculated Serbia (hypothesis 1).

SME and Politika

The frequency of discussing threats to democracy in the whole period is higher in SME than in Politika by approximately 0.4%. Nevertheless, according to Pearson’s chi-squared test, this difference is not statistically significant at the p value of .05 (table 3).

Table 3. Contingency table and the chi-squared test of the number of articles discussing threats to democracy in *SME* and *Politika*.

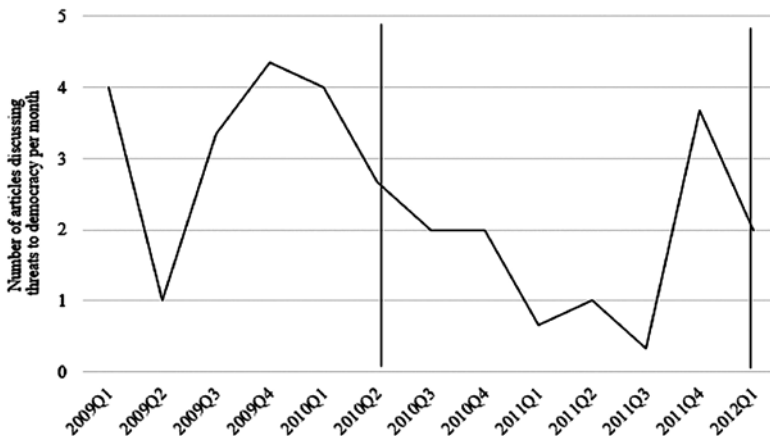
	SME		Politika		Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%
Not discussing threats	9260	99.01	1167	99.40	10427	99.05
Discussing threats	93	0.99	7	0.60	100	0.95
All articles	9353	100%	1174	100%	10527	100

The chi-square statistic is 1.76. p value = .19. Not significant at p < .05.

Source: Author’s compilation

However, there is a significant temporal variance in the frequency of discussing threats in SME (see image 3). These temporal differences are strongly correlated with the individual governments

Figure 3. The number of articles per month discussing threats to democracy in individual quarters. Vertical lines represent parliamentary elections.



Source: Author’s compilation

– there were more threats discussed in the period of the first Fico’s government before Q2 2010 than during center-right Iveta Radičová’s government between Q2 2010 and Q1 2012. One of the interpretations explaining such an outcome can be that this is a result of a media bias. SME did not discuss threats to democracy emerging during Radičová’s government as her government was ideologically closer to the newspapers than Fico’s government. Although this may be partly correct, SME extensively covered also threats to democracy in the latter period, particularly around November 2011, when the wiretapping scandal of the defense minister of Radičová’s government was leaked to the media. This is visible on the spiking line in Q4 2011 of image 3.

Taking into account this temporal dimension, it is possible to compare SME in the periods of Fico’s rule (Q1 2009 – Q2 2010 and Q1 2012) with Politika as a whole since there is little temporal difference between individual quarters in the case of Politika. Comparing the whole period of Politika to the Fico’s government periods of SME, the difference in the number of threats discussed is statistically significant at p value $< .05$ (see table 4). Regarding the substantive significance, the theory of democratic inoculation suggests that the frequency of discussing threats is so high in Slovakia that it boosts the democratic persistence of its democracy. At the same time, frequency in Serbia is expected to be substantively lower (hypothesis 1). The frequency in SME is twice higher than in Politika and the threats to Slovak democracy are in the studied period discussed on average more than three times a month. The opinions section includes also articles discussing irrelevant topics such as foreign policy and culture, in this context the share of more than 1% seems reasonably high and sufficient to speak about the substantive significance.

Table 4. Contingency table and the chi-squared test of the number of articles discussing threats to democracy in SME (January 2009 to June 2010 and March to April 2012) and Politika.

	SME		Politika		Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%
Not discussing threats	4698	98.72	1167	99.40	5865	98.85
Discussing threats	61	1.28	7	0.60	68	1.15
All articles	4759	100	1174	100	5933	100
The chi-square statistic is 3.91. p value = .048. Significant at $p < .05$.						

Source: Author’s compilation

Plus 1 deň and Kurir

As the full articles of Kurir are not available, the results were adjusted. During hand-coding Kurir, only seven articles discussing threats to democracy were found, but it is expected that some of the threats to democracy could have been discussed in the bottom parts of the articles that were not available and thus were not included in the corpus. A random sample of twenty recent Kurir articles (between February and April 2021) in the news section had an average word count of 372.1 words. It is assumed that the average length of the article has not changed since

the studied period. The average length of the articles in the sample is 229.45 words. It is extrapolated that the count of the threats to democracy in whole articles should be higher by a multiplier of 1.62 ($372.10 / 229.45$). The number of threats to democracy in Kurir after extrapolation is $7 * 1.62 = 11$ (rounded for the chi-square test).

Although the frequency of threats in the case of Plus 1 deň is higher, the difference compared to Kurir is not statistically significant at the conventional level of statistical significance and thus it is not possible to speak about the substantive significance (see table 5).

Table 5. Contingency table and the chi-squared test of the number of articles discussing threats to democracy in *Plus 1 deň* and *Kurir*.

	Plus 1 deň		Kurir		Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%
Not discussing threats	6310	99.72	4996	99.78	11306	99.74
Discussing threats	18	0.28	11 ⁱ	0.22	29	0.26
All articles	6328	100	5007 ⁱ	100	11335	100
The chi-square statistic is 0.46. <i>p</i> value = .50. Not significant at $p < .05$.						
ⁱ The numbers are adjusted (see explanation in the text above).						

Source: Author's compilation

The number of threats discussed in the tabloids was significantly lower compared to the previous two kinds of newspapers and is likely caused by the type of articles analyzed. As tabloids do not contain opinions sections, only news about politics was included in the corpus. These contain mostly reporting and not evaluations of the events. Whereas in previous types of newspapers, the statement about threats to democracy came from the article authors, in tabloids these statements came in majority directly from the politicians, who were cited in the articles. Also, the type of tabloid journalism (short articles based primarily on sensational news) stops these newspapers from offering deeper reflective takes on the events (Johansson 2007b), in which threats to democracy are more likely to be discussed. Nevertheless, this has important ramifications, particularly because tabloids are the most popular newspaper type in both countries. The theorized process may be present only among some strata of the population of Slovakia – better educated and richer social groups that read more complex newspapers (Johansson 2007a, pp. 28–29).

Symbolism and parallels

The second process hypothesizes that democratic inoculation enables the usage of the hybrid regime as a heuristic device to prove the negatives of autocracy. It is expected that the undemocratic politicians in the inoculated cases are more often compared to an autocrat of the hybrid regime. In the case of Slovakia, such a politician is expected to be Robert Fico. He did not start democratic backsliding in Slovakia, but his frequent attacks on the free media and numerous

corruption scandals made him look like the main “dark knight” of Slovak democracy (Anderson 2018). In the case of Serbia, SNS is the main party creating democratic backsliding after 2012, therefore, its chairman after 2012 Aleksandar Vučić was chosen.

To operationalize this process, all articles in the corpus were searched for ones that contain both names in the root form (in Slovakia *meciar* and *fic*, in Serbia *milosevic* and *vucic*). At the same time, these roots had to be within fifteen words from each other (the first root, not more than thirteen words, and the second root). As the root forms were used, also nouns, adjectives, and adverbs containing them were taken into account. Articles containing both roots were hand-coded, looking for parallels drawn between the two individuals. The substantive criterion for coding was that the statement directly showed parallels between two politicians that were both explicitly mentioned.

To test the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference between the observed frequencies, Fisher’s Exact Test is used. Unlike in the first process, Fisher’s Exact Test is used because it is better equipped to test hypotheses with a low number of observations in individual categories (Agresti 2007, pp. 45–46). Nevertheless, the principle is similar to the chi-square test used earlier as the tests compare the expected and observed frequencies of a contingency table.

The null hypothesis that there are no differences in the frequencies of discussing parallels between Slovak and Serbian newspapers can be rejected for both center-left and center-right pairs of newspapers. The *p* value in the center-left newspapers is lower than .001 and in the case of center-right newspapers lower than .05 (tables 6 and 7).

The situation is different for tabloid newspapers, where no article mentioning parallels was found in any of the two newspapers. There is no reason to conduct a statistical test in such a situation as there are no frequencies whatsoever.

Apart from the statistical significance, it is important to assess the substantive significance of the results in the pairs of center-left and center-right newspapers. The theorized process suggests that the frequency of discussing parallels is so significant in Slovakia that it strengthens democratic persistence and that the frequency is significantly higher in Slovak newspapers than in Serbian newspapers (hypothesis 2). This seems to be the case. Although the overall percenta-

Table 6. Contingency table and Fisher’s exact test of the number of articles discussing parallels in *Pravda* and *Danas*.

	Pravda		Danas		Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%
Articles w/out parallel	3265	99.60	5718	99.98	8983	99.84
Article with parallels	13	0.40	1	0.02	14	0.16
All articles	3278	100	5719	100	8997	100
The Fisher exact test statistic is 0. The result is significant at $p < .001$.						

Source: Author’s compilation

Table 7. Contingency table and Fisher's exact test of the number of articles discussing parallels in *SME* and *Politika*.

	SME		Politika		Total	
	count	%	count	%	count	%
Articles w/out parallel	9310	99.54	1174	100.00	10484	99.59
Article with parallels	43	0.46	0	0.00	43	0.41
All articles	9353	100	1174	100	10527	100
The Fisher exact test statistic is 0.012. The result is significant at $p < .05$.						

Source: Author's compilation

ges are lower than in the case of threats to democracy, this is expected, taking into account the fact that a highly specific discourse is studied as it compares two specific politicians with each other. As the opinion articles discuss a plethora of different topics and events, the fact that the parallels between Fico and Mečiar appear in almost 0.5% of all the opinion articles in both *SME* and *Pravda* is quite persuasive.

Analysis

Table 8 below gives an overview of theorized processes and whether the empirical research supported, contradicted (in the case of the statistically significant reverse effect), or did not provide support (no statistically significant result) to the theorized causal processes.

Table 8. The summary of evidence found divided by method and causal processes.

Theorized causal processes	QTA methods		
	Center-left	Center-right	Tabloids
Threats to democracy	Support	Partial support	No support
Parallels and symbolism	Support	Support	No support

Source: Author's compilation

The first process suggested that the experience with the undemocratic period leads the public in democratically inoculated countries to not take democracy for granted. Following Gill's argument (1998, p. 167) that "*an essential condition of making democracy secure is never to take it for granted*", this strengthens democratic persistence. The QTA was used to identify the newspaper articles discussing threats to local democracy. In agreement with the theory, it was found that the Slovak newspapers discuss threats significantly more often. In the case of center-left newspapers, the difference in frequencies was statistically significant at a very low level of the p value (.001). The outcome in center-right newspapers was less straightforward as the chi-square test

did not show statistical significance. However, if considering only the periods of the government of PM Fico, the difference is statistically significant at the .05 level of the p value.

The comparison of tabloids did not show a statistically significant difference between the frequencies. However, the differences in the other two pairs of newspapers are statistically and substantively significant, suggesting that “threats to democracy” is a fairly common discursive strategy to speak about Slovak democracy. Strikingly, unconsolidated Serbian minimalist democracy that started to democratically backslide soon after the studied period was not considered as under threat very often. This gives sufficient evidence to support hypothesis 1 and the first causal process.

The second process suggested that the past existence of a hybrid regime enables using the parallels as a heuristic device to transmit the meaning of the negatives of undemocratic rule. This process was operationalized through the frequency of drawing parallels between the past autocrat and the current politician, perceived to be a danger to democracy. This is a more specific discursive tactic than the discussion of threats as it requires a direct comparison of two specific politicians. Nevertheless, the results of the comparison of center-left and center-right newspapers provided strong evidence for this causal process as the parallels were discussed more often in Slovakia, whereas they were not discussed at all in Serbia. In addition, partial discourse analysis was given to illustrate how the parallels between the current politician and the past autocrat were used to mobilize the public, which brought down Fico’s government. It can be therefore concluded that strong evidence was found for both hypothesis 2 and the second causal process.

Nevertheless, there were no parallels whatsoever in any of the two tabloid newspapers. This is an outcome similar to the first process – whereas other newspapers supported the theorized process, this was not the case among tabloids. Here it is important to consider the influence of these outcomes on the argument presented in the paper. The first interpretation may be that the studied tabloids are less political than the more serious newspapers, due to simplifying important political issues and using emotional appeals (Johansson 2007b; Örnebring and Jönsson 2004). Because of this, they offer few value judgments or deeper analyses. It is therefore no surprise that no evidence of the theorized process was found in tabloids, particularly regarding hypotheses 1 and 2. Still, people reading tabloids may understand the negatives of the previous hybrid regime and the parallels between the past and present through different channels – political socialization in schools or different media channels. Therefore, the lack of such discussions in tabloids may not make a difference in terms of democratic inoculation.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to identify and analyze the causal processes that create democratic inoculation in Slovakia and compare them with the case of Serbia as a failed most likely case of the theory of democratic inoculation to find omitted scope conditions of democratic inoculation.

The empirical analysis strongly supported the existence of theorized processes and the influence of democratic inoculation in Slovakia. The first research question of this paper is: *What are the processes creating democratic inoculation in Slovakia?* It was argued that these processes

are a higher awareness of the threats to democracy and the parallel drawing between the past autocrat and the current, potentially autocratic politician.

The second research question is why the democratic inoculation did not happen or was not successful in the case of Serbia. Even with an experience of a highly repressive hybrid regime, Serbian democracy backslided and ejected the politicians of the past hybrid regime to the leading political roles, which is in stark contradiction with the expectation of the democratic inoculation theory. Two key reasons connected with the mode of transition from the hybrid regime were identified.

Firstly, the lack of political polarization was noticeable in the Serbian case. Only three years after the downfall of Milošević, his party SPS supported the government of Koštunica, who was originally one of the leaders of 2000 anti-Milošević protests (Pešić 2007, as cited in Dolenc 2013, p. 182). This lack of polarization against Milošević made it difficult for the democratic opposition to hold together and reform the country. This was very different in Slovakia, where high party polarization on pro-Mečiar and anti-Mečiar party cleavage helped a very heterogeneous reformist government to hold together between 1998 and 2002 (Szomolányi 2004, p. 175).

Secondly, to overthrow Milošević in 2000, the Serbian democratic opposition co-opted the security apparatus, which consequently slowed down reforms and created autocratic enclaves (Dolenc 2013, p. 177). Therefore, the break with the hybrid regime was not as clear as in the case of Slovakia – the corrupt security apparatus stayed largely untouched, the new government did not have a consensus on whether to make a clear break with the period of Milošević, and the organized crime structures remained powerful (Dolenc 2013, p. 179). Autocratic enclaves aimed to stall the reforms to stop the ICTY extradition and assassinated reformist PM Zoran Đinđić in 2003, which stopped further reforms. Due to the compromised transition from the hybrid rule and flaws of post-transition democracy, the break between the hybrid regime and the new democratic government was insufficient to create an effective democratic inoculation.

The combination of the lack of polarization and the stalled reforms is an answer to the second research question of the paper: *Why was democratic inoculation ineffective in Serbia?* At the same time, this can be generalized as a scope condition of the theory of democratic inoculation. For the democratic inoculation to function, there must be a clear break between the hybrid regime and the consequent democratic regime. thesis

The theory of democratic inoculation offers significant analytical strength in the case of Slovakia, but its usefulness is questionable if it is not generalizable and cannot provide similar analytical strength in other cases. As it was argued, in Serbia, democratic inoculation theory does not work. The scope of the paper did not allow to extend the case selection and to discuss another positive case to test whether the processes work as theorized also elsewhere. The case of Peru after the downfall of Alberto Fujimori in 2000 may be suitable for further research using Most Different Systems Design and equipping theory-testing process tracing. An additional avenue for further research is the topic of whether increased sensitivity of the public cannot be under some circumstances detrimental to democratic persistence. This could have been the case in the 2012 elections when Fico's Smer-SD gained a majority of the seats in the parliament. This political triumph was at least partly due to the massive public protests against the corruption of the center-right parties (Gorilla scandal). Massive protests could have been a result of increased

public sensitivity due to democratic inoculation. Paradoxically, the center-right parties were less dangerous to the Slovak democracy than Smer-SD that the protests helped to bring to power.³

The results of the paper have significant ramifications for recent, current, and eventual instances of democratic backsliding. Firstly, the electoral defeat of the Law and Justice party in Poland enables the winning coalition to reverse the democratic backsliding in Poland. Moreover, Poland can democratically inoculate and establish “a lasting precedent of democratic persistence” (Schedler 2001, p. 73). This paper argues that three conditions are needed for the inoculation – experience with the recent hybrid regime, creating a clear break with the previous regime, and continuing polarization against the past autocrat. The first condition was already met, but the second one will be more difficult to achieve due to the lack of the constitutional majority of a new government (as was the case after Mečiar’s defeat in 1998) and opposing president Andrzej Duda.

Secondly, the same argument applies to future Hungary, which is currently a paradigmatic example of democratic backsliding and less democratic than the Slovak hybrid regime in the 1990s. Hungary remains electorally competitive – although not offering a level playing field, the democratic opposition may arguably still win in free, although not fair elections. If this is the case, the lessons learned from the case of Slovakia and Serbia can help us to understand two distinct paths that post-Orbán Hungary may take.

Lastly, the prior encounter with Vladimír Mečiar may enhance Slovakia’s persistence against potential democratic backsliding. The hope remains that relying on this persistence will prove unnecessary.

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³ I thank the reviewer for suggesting this argument.

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