

Standing Up to Goliath

Clara Volintiru

Cities in Central and Eastern Europe are becoming promoters of democratic values, even when central governments are acting otherwise.

The impact of the coronavirus on democracy has been mixed in Central and Eastern Europe, as elsewhere. While the pandemic has accentuated community-led solutions and the importance of responses tailored to local realities, central governments have assumed enhanced powers and used the opportunity to ignore democratic safeguards.

Despite those setbacks, local political actors are likely to continue to forge ahead in the process of building democratic resilience in this region. They are increasingly eager to challenge incumbent governments, as electoral wins in leading cities offer much more political capital than in the previous decades. Their stance is strengthened by local economic development and the growing involvement of civil society.

Cities mean more in terms of economic activity, population, budgetary resources, and international standing than they once did. With growing urbanization, this new political class is likely to expand its electoral base in the coming years and counter authoritarian tendencies that have sprouted across the region over the past decade.

A Break with the Past

Compared to Western Europe, the quality of governance was already relatively poor in the region. The growth of autocratic tendencies in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic was in line with manifested inclinations of incumbent governments. Beyond democratic backsliding, governmental improprieties in public procurement of medical supplies surfaced in various cases, such as in Slovenia, Hungary, and Romania. And now the coronavirus crisis has provided governments across Central and Eastern Europe with the perfect excuse to expand discretionary powers.

The notion of local political elites challenging trends such as these in central governments would have been unthinkable not so long ago. From clientelism to machine politics, political parties have showcased a top-down approach for mobilization and intra-party relations. Using a local office as a steppingstone to national politics has been done many times over the course of history—Teddy Roosevelt, Vladimir Putin, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Boris Johnson, just to name a few. That has been unusual in the context of both Central and Eastern Europe, however, where so much of local politics has been subservient to national leaders.

In this region, we recently saw Rafal Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw, barely falling short as an opposition candidate in the Polish presidential race. As a regional exception, Romanian politics did allow a couple of local leaders to rise up to national level, but there is a gravitational pull these days to local offices, as former Romanian Prime Minister Emil Boc returned to his position as mayor of Cluj, and former President Traian Basescu attempted to regain his seat as mayor of Bucharest in local elections earlier this week, facing another former prime minister, Calin Popescu-Tariceanu.

A new profile of local leaders emerges in the region. The recently elected mayor of Bucharest, Nicușor Dan, and the mayor of Bratislava, Matúš Vallo, have a strong track record in urban activism. There is also an increasing commitment to climate action not only on the part of the mayors of Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw, but also those of secondary cities such as adhering to the Covenant of Mayors and developing Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans for their cities as part of the EU's climate and energy policy framework. Finally, there is a growing international reach and ambition on the part of mayors in Central and Eastern European cities, having a more substantial international affairs agenda, and as such an increasing role for city directors of international affairs.

Such local elections can also be seen in the context of the ever-growing divide between rural and urban voting preferences in the region, as recent elections have signalled. The progressive opposition won all urban areas in the Polish parliamentary election, held one year ago, in line with the trend of the latest local elections in Hungary and Romania. For example, last autumn, Hungary's ruling Fidesz lost half of its major mayoral seats—most notably in Budapest, after facing a united opposition.

The increasing level of political dealignment between local and national leaders has become visible in recent years, especially in cases where national politics takes an illiberal turn. Nowadays, eight of 11 mayors of capital cities in Central and Eastern Europe are not aligned with the national ruling party or coalition, and six are political outsiders, coming from new political parties and civil society.

As external pressures from Brussels sometimes seem weak, internal pressures provide an alternative route for strengthening democratic resilience. Local political outsiders also have the support of civil society, which is itself more frequently transitioning from protest to political action across the region.

It's the Economy, Stupid!

The success story of the region's convergence with the West is illustrated by high GDP growth in these countries—a source of pride for successive governments across the region.

However, there are still persistent subnational disparities: between a third and a half of the regions of Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania have incomes of less than half the EU average. While European funding has contributed to local development, it has also placed a heavy burden on administrations that often lack both technical capacity and capital for co-financing requirements—a difficult balancing act that the new EU budget needs to take into account.

The political importance of cities in Central and Eastern Europe is linked to their economic standing. More than half of the national GDP in these countries comes from the capital city or other metropolitan areas. Following EU accession, capital cities in the region recorded outstanding economic growth, far above the EU

average, leading growth in their respective countries. Since the financial crisis, however, secondary cities have often surpassed the growth rates of the capital cities, making for a much more balanced distribution in the national economies. This has also meant more economic activity at the local level and higher power concentration in the hands of local governments.

Economic growth concentrated in cities has a two-fold impact: urban growth and political emancipation. Economic development attracts people, increases the diversity of the cities, and consolidates more progressive political preferences (normally associated with youth and diversity). For instance, age distribution figures show a higher rate of young, active populations in cities of Central and Eastern Europe than in other areas. Given a broad migration pattern in the region, growing cities attracted back workers that brought home with them fresh ideas for how local governments should serve them. Citizens became more engaged in their communities, creating online groups, ad-hoc associations to solve their problems. Complementing this, the economic wealth of the cities allowed local politicians to play a bigger game, with larger budgets and increased responsibilities.

Decentralization in various forms also took place across the region over the past decade. Greater responsibilities meant bigger budgets. Local governments managed more and more resources. Countries like Poland ended up leaving a substantial budgetary share with local governments in comparison to central expenditures. In contrast, countries like Hungary maintained centralized control over public budgets, as a means to control local political actors. Hungary's central government outspends local governments five times over, while in Poland, the ratio is roughly 1:1. A reaction on the part of central governments was bound to appear. In the name of fiscal competitiveness, an excuse that frequently serves more the central government than foreign investors, local entities in Hungary and Poland are being starved of their own budgetary resources and left at the discretion of the redistributive system controlled by the central government.

Jurisdictional battles also leave the advantage to the central government, as in the case of the recently instituted special economic zones in Hungary, which transfer decision-making powers from local to central government. The coronavirus crisis served as a perfect pretext to re-centralize budgets, taking money away from local governments despite their track record of managing the crisis better at the grassroots level.

New Ways Forward

Given political emancipation coupled with rapid economic growth and multiculturalism, cities in the eastern half of the EU can become vectors of stability and promoters of democratic values in the region.

Innovative solutions for consolidating their position come from mayors across the region: from transnational collaborative platforms between cities (improving direct access to EU funding), to developmental projects with neighboring regions (bridging urban-rural divides), or increasing participatory democracy (strengthening ties with civil society).

The pandemic has accelerated a series of changes for the region. There is a rearrangement of the relationship between national and local politics, between state-led growth and local economic activities, and between citizens and their communities.

These changes fall in line with broader trends across the transatlantic world and could potentially help strengthen European cohesion and resilience in the coming years.

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