

Process Tracing as a Method of Historical Systematization: Modeling Power Centralization During the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, comparative-historical methods (CHM) have undergone a significant development, moving from largely descriptive historical narratives to rigorous tools for causal inference and theory testing in political science and adjacent disciplines.² One of the most prominent methodological innovations within this tradition is process tracing (PT), which enables scholars to investigate causal mechanisms operating within individual cases or across a small set of cases. Unlike variance-based approaches that require a high level of causal homogeneity and which rely on statistical correlations, PT is grounded in ontological determinism. It seeks to uncover the sequence of events and activities through which a cause leads to an outcome in a specific context.³ This study aims to demonstrate that PT and traditional historical approaches are not mutually exclusive, but can instead form a productive alliance. While historical research values context-sensitive narratives, process tracing offers formalized tools for identifying mechanisms, evaluating empirical evidence, and testing theoretical propositions. This alignment allows for the integration of analytic rigor into historical case analysis without sacrificing contextual richness.

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² See, e.g., David Collier, “Teaching Process Tracing: Exercises and Examples,” *Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011), 823–30; Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, *A Tale of Two Cultures: Qualitative and Quantitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); James Mahoney and Rachel Sweet Vanderpoel, “Set Diagrams and Qualitative Research,” *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 1 (2015), 65–100.

³ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines, Second Edition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

The article has two aims. First, it introduces process tracing to scholars in historical disciplines as a valid and fruitful method within the CHM tradition. Second, it presents a practical demonstration of PT in action: a comparative analysis of attempts to centralize executive power during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in three Central and East European (CEE) democracies – Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. This part serves primarily as an illustrative case of how PT can be employed to trace causal patterns across a small number of cases.

The pandemic that erupted at the turn of 2020 quickly evolved from a public health emergency into a multidimensional political crisis. The state of emergency, the demand for swift action, and the suspension of regular democratic oversight created opportunities for executive overreach. In Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic – three geographically and historically proximate states – political leaders sought to expand executive powers, however, with different outcomes. Nevertheless, while in Hungary and Poland the state of emergency spurred efforts to strengthen executive power, democracy in the Czech Republic demonstrated resilience when confronted with similar challenges.⁴ This article uses PT to explain why executive power was centralized more permanently in Hungary and Poland but not in the Czech Republic. It identifies key institutions that enabled or blocked these efforts – those resisting PM Babiš and those empowering Fidesz and PiS governments. Although the findings echo some previous studies,⁵ this article contributes by systematically reconstructing these dynamics through PT and by proposing specific configurations of factors as constituent elements of the causal mechanism.

2 Process Tracing as a Comparative-historical Method

The comparative-historical method reestablishes vital links between history and the social sciences, which were weakened by the rise of quantitative methods in the 1970s.⁶ As a framework for analyzing political and historical

⁴ Petra Guasti, “The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe: The Rise of Autocracy and Democratic Resilience,” *Democratic Theory* 7, no. 2 (2020), 47–60.

⁵ Cf., Jessika Eichler, Sumit Sonkar, “Challenging absolute executive powers in times of corona: Re-examining constitutional courts and the collective right to public contestation as instruments of institutional control,” *Review of Economics and Political Science* 6, no. 1 (2021), 3–23; Guasti, “The impact of the Covid-19,” 47–60; Petra Guasti and Lenka Buřtiková, “Pandemic power grab,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 4 (2022), 529–50.

⁶ Octavio Amorim Neto and Júlio César Cossio Rodriguez, “The new comparative-historical method and its contributions to political science and public administration,” *Revista de Administração Pública* 50 (2016), 1006.

processes across different countries, CHM emphasizes precise concept formation, logical coherence, and the identification of causal mechanisms and temporal sequences. Aligned with positivist traditions, it remains committed to causal explanation and generates contingent generalizations.⁷ Originating with thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Toqueville, and Max Weber, CHM matured in the twentieth century through scholars such as Barrington Moore, Theda Skocpol, and Charles Tilly. Their contributions focused on the delineation of specific historical processes such as democratization, revolution, and state formation, highlighting the conditions that shape historical outcomes. CHM thus offers a powerful lens for understanding complex political and historical phenomena through temporally and contextually grounded causal analysis.⁸

A central tenet of CHM is its robust interest in concept formation, a dimension thoroughly explored by Gary Goertz.⁹ Unlike quantitative methods that predominantly prioritize statistical correlations, CHM prioritizes the intricate development of causal mechanisms. One of the most distinctive features of CHM is its focus on understanding the causes of outcomes rather than the consequences of causes. Mahoney contrasts CHM with quantitative methods, such as multivariate regression analysis (MRA), noting that the latter is primarily concerned with measuring the effects of independent variables on dependent variables.¹⁰ “[W]hile the first [CHM – author’s note] is concerned with the causes of consequences, the second [MRA – author’s note] seeks above all to understand the consequences of causes,” summarized Neto and Cossio Rodriguez.¹¹ Process tracing, as a specific technique within CHM, exemplifies the method’s strengths. It allows researchers to systematically unpack the “box of causation” of causal mechanisms by identifying key events and sequences that link causes to outcomes.¹² This method is particularly suited to cases where understanding the interplay of historical and contextual factors is essential.

⁷ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 31–32.

⁸ Neto and Rodriguez, “The new comparative-historical method,” 1006.

⁹ See, e.g., Gary Goertz, *Social science concepts and measurement: New and completely revised edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ James Mahoney, “After KKV: the new methodology of qualitative research,” *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (2010), 120–47.

¹¹ Neto and Rodriguez, “The new comparative-historical method,” 1006.

¹² John Gerring, “The mechanistic worldview: Thinking inside the box,” *British journal of political science* 38, no. 1 (2008), 164.

By combining the rigor of conceptual development with an emphasis on historical specificity, PT provides a robust tool for analyzing complex political phenomena. The method can be likened to a detective investigation, where the researcher examines a series of direct and indirect pieces of evidence. With the cause and outcome identified, the researcher selects those elements that logically align with the observed framework, explaining how a given cause produces its outcome while controlling for confounding factors that are not part of the examined causality. The traces are then organized into a logical sequence linking the cause to the outcome, thereby constructing a causal mechanism.¹³ By means of PT, the researcher develops an empirical narrative, i.e., a sequence of case-specific events¹⁴ (see Figure 1). The search for a process that, in positive cases, leads to a known outcome aligns with ontological determinism: the assumption that every event results from preceding events based on the principle of causality. This approach involves demonstrating the existence of all components of the mechanism through empirical evidence. As a result, the method provides a robust approach to mitigating the problem of indeterminacy that often arises in case study research.¹⁵

¹³ Tulia Falleti and Julia Lynch claim that “[w]hereas variables are observable attributes of the units of analysis, [...] mechanisms are relational concepts. They reside above and outside the units in question, and they explain the link between inputs and outputs. Mechanisms describe the relationships or the actions among the units of analysis or in the cases of study. Mechanisms tell us how things happen: how actors relate, how individuals come to believe what they do or what they draw from past experiences, how policies and institutions endure or change, how outcomes that are inefficient become hard to reverse [...]” Tulia G. Falleti and Julia F. Lynch, “Context and causal mechanisms in political analysis,” *Comparative political studies* 42, no. 9 (2009), 1147.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Beach and Pedersen, *Process-tracing methods*; Jaromír Mazák, “Process tracing: zkoumání kauzality v případových studiích,” *Sociológia-Slovak Sociological Review* 49, no. 1 (2017), 55–80; Adrian Kay, Phillip Baker, “What Can Causal Process Tracing Offer to Policy Studies? A Review of the Literature,” *The Policy Studies Journal* 43, no. 1 (2015), 1–21.

¹⁵ Beach and Pedersen, *Process-tracing methods*; Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton university press, 2021), 205–209.

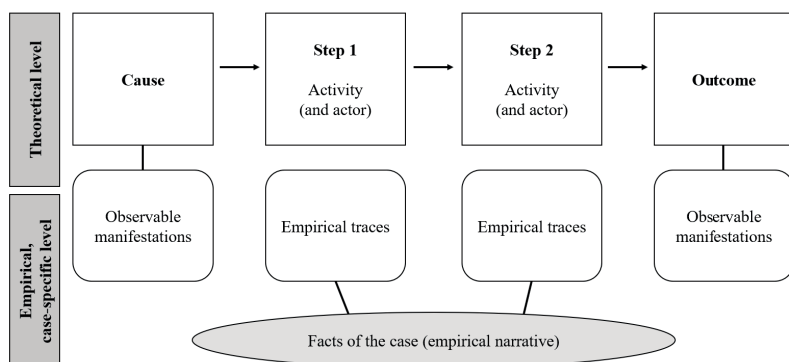


Figure 1 Conceptualization of causal mechanism in process-tracing (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, 272; Mazák, 2017, 60; adapted by the author).

3 Contrasting Process Tracing with Traditional Historical Approaches

Process tracing as well as the classical historical approach share a concern with temporality and contextual specificity, but they differ significantly in terms of their epistemological foundations, research aims, and methodological rigor. The latter typically emphasizes thick description, source criticism, and narrative reconstruction. It aims to understand past events in their own context, often resisting generalization or causal abstraction. Explanation is often implicit and integrative, rather than analytically dissected. Causal claims, if made, tend to be narrative in nature, emphasizing the uniqueness of a case and often avoiding formal theorization. In contrast, PT offers a structured approach to causal inference within the single-case studies as described above. It is not sufficient to demonstrate that event A preceded event B; one must demonstrate how A led to B via a logically coherent and empirically supported process.¹⁶

PT provides a framework for historians to move from plausible narrative to explicit causal explanation. It insists on (1) theorizing the causal mechanism (even inductively), (2) specifying the empirical traces each step should leave, and (3) testing whether such traces are present. Tannenwald's study on "the nuclear taboo" exemplifies this:¹⁷ she posits that normative constraints

¹⁶ Beach and Pedersen, *Process-tracing methods*; Mazák, "Process tracing," 55–80.

¹⁷ Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999), 433–68.

deterred US leaders from considering nuclear use, derives observable implications (e.g. references to moral norms during crises), and then traces evidence from elite deliberations to assess the theory. Her approach reflects the key steps of process tracing – formulating a mechanism, deriving testable implications, and empirically verifying each step. Brast develops, in contrast, a more detailed mechanistic account in his study of state-building in Sierra Leone.¹⁸ While focusing on a single case, he specifies the actors, institutional dynamics, and contextual triggers that activated each part of the causal process. Together, these examples show how PT can accommodate both exploratory and highly structured theorization, offering historians tools to “get inside the black box” of causation with varying degrees of analytical depth.

Both examples demonstrate that PT is a versatile method applicable to various research designs. First, in terms of case selection and research scope, it can be employed in within-case analysis (single-case studies, $N=1$), in small- N comparative designs, or in a combination of both.¹⁹ This design enables the testing of causal mechanisms across cases and the identification of recurring patterns. Selecting comparable cases is challenging, however, as even carefully matched cases may differ in terms of contextual factors that obscure causal relationships. The method’s reliance on qualitative data may also introduce an interpretive bias, and the limited number of cases constrains the potential for broader statistical inference, increasing the risk of spurious conclusions. Although small- N designs, based on matched or contrasting cases, are often praised, scholars emphasize that their contribution to causal inference “urgently needs to be supplemented by within-case analysis”²⁰ or combined with other methods such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA).²¹

Within-case PT, in turn, allows for detailed examination of causal pathways in a single case, producing rich insights into the operation of mechanisms. Its findings remain context-dependent, however, and are often limited in terms

¹⁸ Benjamin Brast, “The Regional Dimension of Statebuilding Interventions,” *International Peace-keeping* 22, no. 1 (2015), 81–99.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Kay and Baker, “What Can Causal Process Tracing Offer to Policy Studies?”, 5–6.

²⁰ David Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing,” *Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011), 824.

²¹ In recent years various scholars have successfully combined PT with the QCA method, compare, e.g., Priscilla Álamos-Concha et al., “Conservative solutions for progress: On solution types when combining QCA with in-depth process-tracing,” *Quality & Quantity* 56, no. 4 (2022), 1965–1997; Derek Beach, “Achieving methodological alignment when combining QCA and process tracing in practice,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 47, no. 1 (2018), 64–99; Carsten Q. Schneider, Ingo Rohlfing, “Combining QCA and process tracing in set-theoretic multi-method research,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 42, no. 4 (2013), 559–97.

of generalizability and external validity, making broader causal claims more difficult to substantiate.²² The combination of both approaches – a detailed and comparative examination of small-N closely related cases – strengthens both external and internal validity while enhancing the potential replicability of the analyzed causal mechanism.²³ The limitations of both approaches can also be partially mitigated by situating the findings within a broader theoretical framework.

Second, PT can be case-centric and theory-centric, with the latter further divided into theory-testing and theory-building.²⁴ Case-centric PT focuses on explaining outcomes within a single case, addressing the question of “What mechanistic explanation accounts for (the observed) outcome?” This approach is best suited to cases that are highly complex, multifactorial, and context-specific, making generalization challenging. Theory-testing design adopts a deductive approach, aiming to confirm whether a hypothesized causal mechanism is present, and functions as predicted. It is used in two situations: first, when existing theory provides deductions about a causal mechanism linking cause and outcome in a specific case, or second, when such deductions can be easily derived from existing theories. In contrast, the third PT variant – theory-building – takes an inductive approach, seeking to develop new theoretical insights by identifying causal mechanisms based on empirical evidence. This method is particularly applicable when correlations between variables exist, but the linking causal mechanism remains uncertain, or when an outcome is known, but its cause is unclear.

²² Kay and Baker, “What Can Causal Process Tracing Offer to Policy Studies?,” 5–6.

²³ A prominent example of historical-political research, with high external validity supported by empirical evidence is Tannenwald’s study, “The Nuclear Taboo,” 433–68. By increasing the potential for generalization, however, her findings were necessarily presented in a minimalist form of causal mechanism: cause → factor (step) → outcome.

²⁴ Kay and Baker, “What Can Causal Process Tracing Offer to Policy Studies?,” 6. The categorization may vary in the literature; for example, Beach and Pedersen identify four variants of PT: theory-testing, theory-building, theoretical revision, and explaining outcome. For further details, see Beach and Pedersen, *Process-tracing methods*. Similar classifications are offered by George and Bennett in *Case Studies and Theory* and Peter A. Hall in “Systematic Process Analysis: When and How to Use It,” *European Management Review* 3, no. 1 (2006), 24–31.

4 Empirical Application of Process Tracing: Executive Power Centralization

A basic application of PT will be demonstrated through a recent political science case study examining the actions of three CEE governments at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopts a small-N comparative design with a focus on within-case analysis. The selected cases share a number of similarities, including the sudden emergence of an unprecedented crisis, the political composition of the ruling elites, and a common historical and political context (to be elaborated below). Despite attempts at more permanent centralization of power occurring in all three cases during a similar, short time frame, the outcomes differed significantly: while the efforts succeeded in Hungary and Poland, they failed in the Czech Republic.

This divergence raises a research question well-suited for a PT approach: Why were attempts at more permanent centralization of executive power during the COVID-19 pandemic successful in Hungary and Poland, but not in the Czech Republic? The article adheres to a classical theory-testing PT design. It will first introduce a theoretically grounded explanation derived from existing research. Subsequently, it will formulate a causal claim, identify its relevant counterfactual, and delineate the corresponding empirical traces. It will also compile a non-exhaustive list of confounding factors shared across the cases that are not part of the causal mechanism. The existence and operation of the hypothesized causal mechanism will then be tested through within-case analysis.

5 Theory and Data

Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic share a number of structural similarities: their geographical location in Central and East Europe, a post-communist trajectory of political development, and membership in key international organizations such as the EU, NATO, OSCE, etc.; together, they also form the Visegrad Group. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these countries exhibited further contextual similarities, which will be elaborated below. One key factor, however, distinguishes these cases – a difference repeatedly highlighted in the research of many scholars:²⁵ the degree of consolida-

²⁵ Licia Cianetti and James Dawson and Seán Hanley, “Rethinking ‘democratic backsliding’ in Central and Eastern Europe—looking beyond Hungary and Poland,” *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018), 243–56; Guasti, “The impact of the Covid-19,” 47–60; Guasti and Bušítková,

tion of democratic institutions. This article argues that the varying levels of democratic consolidation significantly contributed to the multifinality of the causal mechanism²⁶ and helped explain the divergent outcomes. In short, the quality of democracy in a given country largely determines whether efforts at executive power centralization during the pandemic result in more enduring institutional changes or fail to take hold.

The three above-mentioned countries exhibit varying levels of democratic consolidation.²⁷ This was not always the case, however, following their transition from communist regimes. By 2010, a prevailing academic consensus held that most CEE countries – including these three – had successfully consolidated their democratic systems. This perspective was largely based “on measurements drawn from institutionally-focused indices (such as Freedom House) and the equally institutionally focused EU accession criteria.”²⁸ Since the 2010s, some CEE countries have undergone “democratic backsliding.”²⁹ This term describes a process in which democratic governance deteriorates in a state that was previously considered to have successfully consolidated its democratic institutions. Illiberal politicians ascend to power through democratic means but, in rejecting the liberal model of governance, pursue a more authoritarian approach to ruling. Since the 2010s, the quality of democracy in CEE countries has deteriorated to varying degrees, leading to partial democratic deconsolidation, particularly in Hungary and Poland.

Orbán’s ruling party, Fidesz, leveraged its constitutional majority to pass a new constitution and restructure the electoral system, gradually re-centralizing political power and undermining the independence of key democratic institutions, including the judiciary, the prosecutor’s office, the constitutional court, and both private and public media. By filling these institutions with party loyalists, Fidesz severely restricted opposition and civil society

“Pandemic power grab,” 529–50; Ben Stanley, “Backsliding away? The quality of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15, no. 4 (2019), 343–53.

²⁶ Process tracing disaggregates historical processes, making it particularly sensitive to the potential for multiple alternative pathways leading to the same outcome (equifinality) and for the same causal mechanisms, under varying conditions, to produce different outcomes (multifinality). Kay and Baker, “What Can Causal Process Tracing Offer to Policy Studies?,” 7.

²⁷ Stanley, “Backsliding away,” 343–53.

²⁸ Cianetti and Dawson and Hanley, “Rethinking ‘democratic backsliding,’” 247.

²⁹ See e.g., Nancy Bermeo, “On democratic backsliding,” *Journal of democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016), 5–19; Cianetti and Dawson and Hanley, “Rethinking ‘democratic backsliding,’” 243–56; or Milada Anna Vachudova, “Ethnopolitism and democratic backsliding in Central Europe,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020), 318–40.

activities, although it continues to enjoy substantial public support.³⁰ Similarly, Kaczyński's PiS, despite lacking a constitutional majority, systematically weakened democratic oversight by politicizing the judiciary (especially the constitutional court), public media, and civil service, while centralizing state control over civil society organizations.³¹ In contrast, the Czech Republic has not experienced comparable democratic backsliding. While the *Varieties of Democracy Project* dataset indicates a decline in democratic quality in the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic³² – partly due to the influence of illiberal actors such as PM Andrej Babiš and President Miloš Zeman – no significant deconsolidation occurred. Institutional safeguards – including the Senate, the independent constitutional court, and the media sector – underwent no fundamental transformation and continued to perform their functions during the pandemic.³³

The long-term erosion of liberal democracy has likely served as a significant intervening variable influencing the nature of the outcome. It remains difficult to determine the precise degree and level of democratic deconsolidation required for successful attempts to undermine accountability mechanisms³⁴ and more permanently centralize executive power. It is possible to

³⁰ Aron Buzogány and Mihai Varga, “The ideational foundations of the illiberal backlash in Central and Eastern Europe: The case of Hungary,” *Review of international political economy* 25, no. 6 (2018), 820–21; Guasti and Bušíková, “Pandemic power grab,” 537; Kim Lane Scheppele, “Autocratic legalism,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018), 549–53.

³¹ Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's constitutional breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Kim Lane Scheppele, “Autocratic legalism,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (2018), 553.

³² Michael Coppedge et al., “V-Dem dataset v11. 1,” *Varieties of Democracy Project* (2021).

³³ Petra Guasti, “Populism in power and democracy: Democratic decay and resilience in the Czech Republic (2013–2020),” *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 4 (2020), 473–84; Seán Hanley and Milada Anna Vachudova, “Understanding the illiberal turn: democratic backsliding in the Czech Republic,” in Licia Cianetti, James Dawson, Seán Hanley, eds., *Rethinking 'Democratic Backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019), 34–54; or Hubert Smekal, Jaroslav Benák, and Ladislav Vyhnanek, “Through selective activism towards greater resilience: the Czech Constitutional Court's interventions into high politics in the age of populism,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 26, no. 7 (2022), 1230–1251.

³⁴ The primary function of accountability is to constrain political power through justification requirements and the threat of sanctions. The literature traditionally distinguishes between three axes: vertical (e.g., voters vs. representatives), horizontal (between executive, legislature, and judiciary), and diagonal (e.g., media or civil society vs. government). Anna Lührmann and Kyle L. Marquardt and Valeriya Mechkova, “Constraining governments: New indices of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 3 (2020), 811–20; Guillermo A. O'Donnell quoted in Staffan I. Lindberg, “Mapping accountability: core concept and subtypes,” *International review of administrative sciences* 79, no. 2 (2013), 213. As

narrow down, however, the list of democratic institutions whose functionality or dysfunction may have critically contributed to the success or failure of such efforts. This opens the potential for applying an alternative research method, such as QCA, which could identify with high precision the institution, or their combination, capable of preventing such attempts. Both the preliminary literature review and the within-case analyses presented below suggest, however, that the combined functionality of two specific institutions may serve as a strong safeguard against abuse of power: an effective constitutional court and independent media. Both institutions play a prominent role across all three cases under study.

If one takes into account the context of the existential pandemic crisis as a powerful catalyst for executive power expansion (as will be elaborated below), the following causal claim can be formulated: Unlike Hungary and Poland, the Czech Republic possesses functioning democratic safeguards – most notably an independent media and an effective constitutional court – that are capable of preventing the government from pursuing more permanent centralization of executive power, even during periods of existential crisis.

Preliminary research suggests that neither an independent media nor a functioning constitutional court alone constitute sufficient safeguards for preserving democratic checks and balances. Another critical variable appears to be the government's capacity to implement reforms aimed at expanding executive authority. A sufficiently strong government may be able to reshape the judiciary and media landscape in such a way that further expansion of executive power encounters little institutional resistance. At present, however, this factor is not evident from the outlined cases; the article will therefore test the validity of the causal claim as it stands, supported by the following counterfactual: Had the Czech Republic lacked independent media and an effective constitutional court – key democratic safeguards – it is likely that the government would have been able to achieve a more lasting centralization of executive power during the COVID-19 crisis, similar to the outcomes observed in Hungary and Poland.

The aim of the illustrative case study is to identify, through within-case analysis of attempted power centralization, the causes of governmental success or failure. To this end, empirical evidence will be systematically traced using a detective-like approach across a variety of sources. This approach – known

shown below, the governments of Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic managed to restrict all three forms of accountability during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

as data triangulation³⁵ – is widely employed in qualitative research to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon and enhance the credibility and validity of findings. It involves the use of different types of sources (e.g., documents, media reports, expert analysis) to ensure that the conclusions are not based on a single line of evidence. In this case study, data are derived from multiple sources of evidence, namely, peer-reviewed scholarly literature based on both primary and secondary sources, media outputs, analytical reports, etc. This strategy enhances trustworthiness by enabling convergence and contextual richness and by reducing the risk of bias.

Theory-testing PT requires a highly detailed investigation of cases, as each step in the causal mechanism has to be supported by multiple sources of evidence. Ideally, it also involves formulating and testing several hypotheses, as well as considering alternative explanations, all of which would necessitate a more robust theoretical framework. Due to space constraints, this example builds on existing research and its conclusions. Methodologically, however, it synthesizes and systematizes these findings according to the logic of PT while introducing additional evidence, thereby extending and reinforcing previous claims.

6 Confounding Factors

Before proceeding with the within-case analysis, there is a need to identify factors that may lead to spurious associations and explicitly exclude them from the causal mechanism. These so-called *confounding factors* or *confounders*³⁶ are third variables that influence both independent and dependent variables in a study, potentially producing a misleading correlation between them. Confounding represents one of the primary threats to the internal validity of qualitative research, as it can obscure the true causal relationship by introducing hidden influences into the analytical framework. The aim of this article is not to provide an exhaustive list of such factors. This illustrative case study instead focuses on a limited set of variables that are similar or identical across all three cases and that, if improperly or incompletely interpreted, could lead to erroneous conclusions.

³⁵ Nancy Carter et al., “The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Research,” *Oncology Nursing Forum* 41, No. 5 (2014), 545–47; Nancy L. Leech and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, “An array of qualitative data analysis tools: A call for data analysis triangulation,” *School psychology quarterly* 22, No. 4 (2007), 557–84.

³⁶ Kantahyanee W. Murray and Anne Duggan, “Understanding Confounding in Research,” *Pediatrics in Review* 31, no. 3 (2010), 124–26.

First, what do we know? At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic were governed by political parties that existing scholarship classifies as populist with authoritarian tendencies (authoritarian populists, AP).³⁷ Shortly after the emergence of the state of crisis, these governments initiated attempts to more permanently centralize executive power. Two potential confounding factors are immediately apparent: the presence of an existential crisis and the rule of authoritarian populists. This article explores both in detail through an illustrative case study, without aiming to identify or analyze additional potential confounders.

History provides numerous examples of crises that have triggered the centralization of power and the emergence of authoritarian rule.³⁸ Extraordinary crises prompt calls for extraordinary measures and open windows of opportunity for power expansion. The global COVID-19 pandemic clearly represented such a moment. As Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała³⁹ note, “[u]nlike the ‘usual’ pandemics and natural catastrophes, any fight against COVID-19 demands unusually fast, controlled, coordinated, and not only epidemic expertise-driven governmental actions in the entire territory of a state.” The pandemic constituted a genuine existential crisis, threatening the core dimensions of life: physical survival, economic stability, social cohesion, and individual purpose. Its simultaneous impact on all these domains forced societies to confront their vulnerability, values, and adaptive capacity⁴⁰.

³⁷ This classification draws upon the classic definition of populism as a set of ideas positing that society is strictly divided into two homogeneous groups: a “pure people” in opposition to “corrupt elites,” see, e.g., Bojan Bugarič, “The Rise of Nationalist-Authoritarian Populism and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe,” in *Constitutionalism Under Stress: Essays in Honour of Wojciech Sadurski*, ed. Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczynska-Grabias (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 21–37; Anna Grzymala-Busse et al., “How Populists Rule: The Consequences for Democratic Governance,” *Polity* 51, no. 4 (2019): 707–17; or Cas Mudde, “Populism in Europe: an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism (The Government and Opposition/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2019),” *Government and Opposition* 56, no. 4 (2021), 577–97.

³⁸ For instance, the rise of Adolf Hitler in 1933 followed a crisis-driven path: the Reichstag fire enabled the NSDAP-led government to suspend civil liberties and eliminate opposition, culminating in the Enabling Act and the consolidation of authoritarian power. Giovanni Capocchia, “Defending democracy: Reactions to political extremism in inter-war Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research* 39, no. 4 (2001), 431–60.

³⁹ Tímea Drinóczi, Agnieszka Bień-Kacała, “COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland: extraordinary situation and illiberal constitutionalism,” *The Theory and Practice of Legislation* 8, no. 1–2 (2020), 172.

⁴⁰ Andrew M. Bland, “Existential Givens in the COVID-19 Crisis,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 60 (2020), 710–24; D. V. Van Tongeren and Sara A. Showalter Van Tongeren, “Finding

Governments pursued a certain degree of power centralization as part of their crisis management strategies, strengthening the executive branch at the expense of other branches of government⁴¹. As Guasti and Bušítková argue, “[p]andemics strengthen governments, weaken parliaments and test the judiciary [...] liberal democracy remains resilient during a pandemic only when mechanisms of [...] accountability can avert efforts to erode democratic institutions.”⁴² As a rule, state decision-making bodies shift into a mode of highly centralized crisis governance, in which elements of accountability can easily disappear. The near-simultaneous emergence of power-centralizing efforts in three CEE countries during the pandemic might suggest, at first glance, that the occurrence of an extraordinary crisis is a necessary precondition for such efforts to arise and succeed. In this case, however, the importance of the temporal sequence becomes evident, especially in countries already undergoing liberal democratic erosion.

In process tracing, timing and ordering are essential to avoid conflating correlation with causation. In this case, one might ask: “Did the democratic decay occur during the pandemic or due to the pandemic?”⁴³ Guasti and Bušítková argue that many efforts to undermine formal institutions and accountability linkages took place during the pandemic, not due to it.⁴⁴ The erosion of pluralism can largely be attributed to illiberal inertia already underway before 2020; the pandemic itself is not the cause of authoritarian tendencies but rather amplified pre-existing distortions of liberal democracy. In other words, it acts more as an accelerant than as an original source of democratic decline, thereby complicating the distinction between causality and coincidence⁴⁵. As such, the existential crisis qualifies as a confounder by meeting the following criteria:

Meaning Amidst COVID-19: An Existential Positive Psychology Model of Suffering,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021), 1–10.

⁴¹ A number of scholars have written about the pandemic as an opportunity for the centralization and expansion of government power, see, e.g., Şener Aktürk and Ildir Lika, “Varieties of resilience and side effects of disobedience: cross-national patterns of survival during the coronavirus pandemic,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 69, no. 1 (2022), 1–13; Lenka Bušítková and Pavol Baboš, “Best in Covid: Populists in the time of pandemic,” *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 4 (2020), 496–508; or Nikolay Marinov and Maria Popova, “Will the real conspiracy please stand up: Sources of post-communist democratic failure,” *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022), 222–36.

⁴² Guasti and Bušítková, “Pandemic power grab,” 529.

⁴³ Guasti and Bušítková, “Pandemic power grab,” 530.

⁴⁴ Guasti and Bušítková, “Pandemic power grab,” 529–50.

⁴⁵ Guasti, “The impact of the Covid-19,” 57.

1. It necessitates extraordinary measures, including executive power centralization, as a means of more effective governance.
2. It is positively associated with the success of such power-centralizing efforts.
3. It is not an intermediate step in the causal mechanism between the attempt to centralize power and the success or failure of that attempt.

Another potential source of erroneous inference lies in the presence of authoritarian populists in government. Hungary's ruling party, Fidesz, led by PM Viktor Orbán; Poland's Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), under the de facto leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński; and the Czech Republic's dominant governing party at the time, ANO, led by PM Andrej Babiš, are all commonly classified as populist with authoritarian tendencies. These parties are frequently associated with the widely studied phenomenon of liberal democratic erosion.⁴⁶ Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała argue that, particularly in Poland and Hungary, a gradual implementation of an illiberal interpretation of the Rule of Law – termed “illiberal legality” – can be observed.⁴⁷ According to them, “both states opportunistically apply their constitutions and selectively invoke favorable constitutional provisions.”⁴⁸ Similar authoritarian tendencies, albeit to a lesser extent, can also be identified in the populist governing style of PM Babiš.

Fidesz, PiS, and ANO and their leaders, although authoritarian, did not seize power by force but gradually through democratic means, making “this version of authoritarianism different from all previous examples of authoritarian regimes.”⁴⁹ Their electoral success is closely tied to their populist appeal. While modern populism emerged globally in the 1980s and 1990s, in Central and Eastern Europe it gained momentum more recently, particularly in the past two decades. Populism theorist Cas Mudde emphasizes the role of

⁴⁶ Pavel Barša and Zora Hesová and Ondřej Slačálek, *Central European culture wars: beyond postcommunism and populism* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, 2021); Bugarič, “The Rise of Nationalist-Authoritarian Populism,” 21–37; Cianetti and Dawson and Hanley, *Rethinking 'Democratic Backsliding'*; or Guasti and Buštková, “Pandemic power grab,” 529–50.

⁴⁷ Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała, eds., *Rule of law, common values, and illiberal constitutionalism: Poland and Hungary within the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁴⁸ Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, “COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland,” 171. It is also possible to mention the classic definition of illiberal democracy formulated by Fareed Zakaria as “[d]emocratically elected regimes, often ones that have been re-elected or reaffirmed through referenda are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.” Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 76, no. 6 (1997), 22.

⁴⁹ Bugarič, “The Rise of Nationalist-Authoritarian Populism,” 23.

crises as catalysts for populist mobilization. In recent years, the economic crisis (notably the euro crisis) and the migration crisis have acted as such triggers.⁵⁰ Populists gain support by offering seemingly simple solutions to complex crises, solutions that, they argue, the “traditional elites” are unwilling or unable to provide. They advocate plebiscitary forms of democracy and reject elite-driven politics.⁵¹ The boundary between populism and authoritarianism becomes dangerously blurred when the will of the majority is placed above the protection of minorities and when constitutional norms are bent to serve this logic, ultimately dismantling the fragile machinery of liberal democracy.⁵²

The presence of AP politicians in executive power may lead to the mistaken conclusion that only such actors attempt to centralize authority. How can they, however, be reliably identified? It is not only authoritarian populists who seek to centralize power, nor are they the only ones to exploit crises for political gain. According to the Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs (IPOL) of the European Parliament, most EU Member States – including established democracies – adopted emergency regimes and invoked “emergency powers” in response to the pandemic.⁵³ This led to executive strengthening, a weakening of parliamentary and judicial oversight, and consequently a disruption of checks and balances. The report, in line with other scholars, notes that Hungary and Poland experienced a significant shift toward authoritarianism. This reflects the institutional inability to prevent such moves, rather than an inherent tendency of a specific category of politicians to exploit crises. This definitional ambiguity is further complicated by scholarly findings suggesting that AP governments were not demonstrably more incompetent in managing the pandemic than non-populist governments.⁵⁴

The specific association between AP governments and efforts to expand executive power can therefore be excluded from the causal mechanism, based on the following reasoning:

⁵⁰ Mudde, “Populism in Europe,” 577–97; Bugarič, “The Rise of Nationalist-Authoritarian Populism,” 22.

⁵¹ Mudde, “Populism in Europe,” 578–80.

⁵² See, e.g., Petra Guasti and Zdenka Mansfeldová, eds., *Democracy Under Stress. Changing Perspectives on Democracy, Governance and Their Measurement* (Prague: Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, 2018); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How democracies die* (Portland: Broadway Books, 2018); or David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London: Profile Books, 2018).

⁵³ IPOL, *The Impact of Covid-19 Measures on Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights in the EU. Briefing for the LIBE committee* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2020), 1–10.

⁵⁴ Mudde, “Populism in Europe,” 577–97.

1. The presence of AP actors in government increases the likelihood of initiating reforms aimed at centralizing executive power.
2. Authoritarianism is positively associated with the success of such reforms.
3. AP is not an intermediate step in the causal mechanism between the attempt to permanently centralize executive power and the success or failure of that attempt.

7 Tracing of the Causal Mechanism

After considering alternative explanations and controlling the confounding factors, the analysis proceeds to the tracing of empirical evidence and the construction of the causal mechanism. At this stage, the collection, selection, and accurate interpretation of data play a critical role. While the limited scope of this article does not allow for a comprehensive analysis, it provides an illustrative completion of the causal mechanism tracing to demonstrate the application of the method. The focus is placed primarily on interpreting the evidence related to the attempts by the three CEE governments to more permanently centralize power under the guise of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As noted above, the pandemic functions as more of an accelerant than as the trigger of democratic backsliding, complicating the distinction between causality and coincidence. Is it then even possible to distinguish between pandemic-driven and pandemic-unrelated developments? This article addresses the question through a within-case analysis of legislative changes explicitly framed by governments as responses to the pandemic. It works therein with degrees of probability which, despite the underlying ontological determinism, are an integral part of PT. When research extends beyond a single case and engages in small-N cross-case analysis (as in this study), probabilistic causal claims become relevant, particularly when interpreting average causal effects. In such designs, the epistemology of PT adopts Bayesian logic, which recognizes that certainty in causal inference is never absolute; instead our confidence in a given causal claim depends on the strength and coherence of the empirical evidence available.⁵⁵

Considering Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, in all three cases, attempts to more permanently centralize executive power were very likely prompted by the opportunity created by the pandemic, which was subsequently reinforced by the initial success of emergency power expansion for the purposes of crisis management. At this stage, divergent institutional responses

⁵⁵ Beach and Pedersen, *Process-tracing methods*.

to varying degrees of authoritarian tendencies began to surface. The intensity of these tendencies correlated with the extent of prior democratic erosion; Hungary, which had experienced the most significant democratic backsliding by the onset of the pandemic, exhibited the strongest shift.⁵⁶

On 11 March 2020, the Orbán government declared a state of emergency, granting itself the power to rule by decree. Its measures included increased control over journalists, thereby restricting media plurality and introducing a form of censorship. Although the state of emergency is supposed to last only 15 days before requiring parliamentary renewal, the government had already indicated that these measures may be in force indefinitely. In addition, public gatherings were restricted, and universities transitioned to remote learning.⁵⁷ Similar steps were taken in Poland, where the government approved a special law (referred to as *specustawa*) on 1 March 2020. This legislation allowed the government to implement administrative, budgetary, and epidemiological measures without the need to declare a state of emergency.⁵⁸ Legal experts criticized the law for its vague provisions and lack of adequate checks and balances, arguing that it effectively circumvented constitutional safeguards.⁵⁹ As in Hungary, the Polish government subsequently introduced lockdown-style measures, including school closures, bans on mass gatherings, and restrictions on public assemblies.⁶⁰ Due to the dismantling of judicial independence in both cases, the reforms passed with little to no scrutiny from the constitutional courts.

In the Czech Republic, a state of emergency was declared on 12 March 2020, under the authority of a constitutional law, enabling the government to impose extraordinary measures such as restrictions on freedom of movement,

⁵⁶ Stanley, "Backsliding away," 343–53.

⁵⁷ Nepszava-MTI, "Gulyás: az operatív törzs veszélyhelyzet elrendelését javasolja a kormánynak," *Népszava* (11 March 2020); Richárd Tóth, "Koronavírus: kihirdette a veszélyhelyzetet a kormány," *HVG.hu* (11 March 2020).

⁵⁸ Sejm, *Ustawa z dnia 2 marca 2020 r. o szczególnych rozwiązaniach związanych z zapobieganiem, przeciwdziałaniem i zwalczaniem COVID-19, innych chorób zakaźnych oraz wywołanych nimi sytuacji kryzysowych* (2020), 1–13.

⁵⁹ Jerzy Zajadło, "Demokracja deliberatywna w pułapce – Trzy grzechy ustawy dotyczącej koronawirusa," *konstytucyjny.pl* (4 March 2020). Former judge of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, Ewa Łętowska, also criticized the law, arguing that it effectively establishes a new 180-day state of emergency that circumvents constitutional rules for declaring such measures. Mariusz Jałoszewski, "Koronawirus w Polsce ograniczy na zawsze nasze prawa? Analiza OKO.press: ustawa PiS to prawny populizm," *OKO.press* (February 5, 2020).

⁶⁰ Ewa Palińska, "Premier odwołał wszystkie imprezy masowe w Polsce," *trojmiasto.pl* (10 March 2020); Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, "Zawieszenie zajęć dydaktyczno-wychowawczych w przedszkolach, szkołach i placówkach oświatowych," *gov.pl* (11 March 2020).

public assemblies, and business activities.⁶¹ Additionally, a state of legislative emergency was declared, allowing for the expedited passage of laws in response to the pandemic. During this period, key legislative changes were approved, including budget adjustments and laws related to health insurance and social support. Some of these measures were later challenged, however, before the Constitutional Court.⁶² While the actions of the Hungarian and Polish governments faced criticism for their long-term weakening of democratic oversight and the rule of law, the Czech government was primarily scrutinized for specific legislative measures adopted under expedited procedures. Overall, these initial attempts at power centralization encountered little resistance, largely because governments remained within or on the edge of constitutional boundaries.⁶³

7.1 Hungary

There is a broad consensus among scholars that Hungary is a textbook example of an autocratic expansion of executive power during crisis management.⁶⁴ On 30 March 2020, the Hungarian National Assembly passed the first Authorization Act (came into force the following day), authorizing “emergency legislation” through government decrees. Due to its unconstitutional nature, Antal and other scholars explicitly refer to it as an Enabling Act, arguing that it “indefinitely suspended Parliament and allowed [V. Orbán] to rule by decree until the law is revoked.”⁶⁵ They also warned of the unpredictable long-term consequences and precedents the Act set, even if withdrawn, as the government promised upon its passage in late May 2020.

The Authorization Act is unconstitutional on at least three grounds. First, it imposed an indefinite state of emergency, disregarding the constitutional

⁶¹ Adam Fiala, “Nouzový stav. Vláda zakázala akce s více než 30 lidmi, omezí se provoz restaurací po osmé večer,” *ČT24* (12 March 2020).

⁶² ČTK, “Odklad nájmu a opatření k pendlerům bude řešit Ústavní soud, senátoři podali stížnost,” *Aktuálně.cz* (7 May 2020); PS PČR, “Sněmovní tisk 788 VI.n.z. o úpravách v oblasti evidence tržeb,” *psp.cz* (23 March 2020).

⁶³ See, e.g. Nikola Zwrťková, “Vláda může stav nouze zneužít. To je velká výzva pro opozici, varuje právník,” *Seznam Zprávy* (27 March 2020).

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Attila Antal et al., *Triumph of Orbán's Illiberal Democracy? The Law and Politics of 2020 Coronavirus Enabling Act in Hungary* (Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 2020); Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, “COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland,” 171–92; Eichler and Sonkar, “Challenging absolute executive powers in times of corona, 3–23; or Guasti, “The impact of the Covid-19,” 47–60.

⁶⁵ Antal, *Triumph of Orbán's Illiberal Democracy*, II.

requirement that government decrees expire after 15 days unless renewed. Second, it retroactively legalized decrees issued without a proper constitutional basis. Third, it authorized the adoption of future decrees, thereby eliminating meaningful parliamentary oversight.⁶⁶ The government thus acquired a crucial tool to suppress civil society and political opposition, without facing meaningful resistance from the Constitutional Court as the ultimate arbiter of constitutionality (at the time, independent media in Hungary were already severely restricted and had only minimal reach).⁶⁷ The Constitutional Court did not formally annul any of the government's emergency legal measures on constitutional grounds. Its review remained limited to procedural issues and interpretative guidelines. In general, the Court deferred to the executive's judgment regarding the necessity of the measures and explicitly refrained from assessing their proportionality or substantive content.⁶⁸

Between 30 March and 18 June 2020, during the initial state of danger, the Hungarian government issued over 150 decrees, many of which violated human rights and the rule of law. Although the Authorization Act and its related decrees were revoked when the state of danger ended, the government passed the Transitional Act on 16 June 2020. This legislation incorporated several controversial measures from the Authorization Act into ordinary law, effectively enabling the government to rule by decree indefinitely, without even minimal constitutional safeguards.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, "COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland," 180.

⁶⁷ For example, the Authorization Act introduces the broadly defined offense of spreading false information or distorted facts during the "state of danger." This "[c]riminalisation has arguably been used as a strategy both to silence criticism of the government and to frustrate media efforts to hold it accountable," Eichler and Sonkar, "Challenging absolute executive powers in times of corona," 8.

⁶⁸ Zoltán Szente and Fruzsina Gárdos-Orosz, "Using Emergency Powers in Hungary: Against the Pandemic and/or Democracy?," in *Pandemocracy in Europe: Power, Parliaments and People in Times of COVID-19*, ed. Matthias C Kettmann and Konrad Lachmayer (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2022), 155–60.

⁶⁹ Antal, *Triumph of Orbán's Illiberal Democracy*, 27, 34; International Commission of Jurists, *A Facade of Legality: COVID-19 and the Exploitation of Emergency Powers in Hungary* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 2022), 8.

7.2 Poland

Poland does not provide as clear-cut an example of the erosion of accountability as Hungary; it did not occur through a single legislative act but rather through a series of steps. Guasti and Bušítková, for instance, classify the controversial presidential elections held on June 28 and 12 July 2020, as part of this broader pattern.⁷⁰ Despite the 1997 Constitution, PiS first declared a special type of state of emergency – the “state of epidemic threat” – which did not require postponing the presidential election. Subsequently, PiS pushed through changes to electoral rules by switching to postal voting, thereby disregarding a 2011 Constitutional Tribunal ruling that deemed altering election laws less than six months before an election unconstitutional.⁷¹ Another significant breach of accountability was the proposal by Deputy PM Jarosław Gowin (Agreement party, *Porozumienie*) to extend the mandate of incumbent PiS President Andrzej Duda by two years. Although this proposal was ultimately rejected by the opposition, it remained under discussion for an extended period.⁷²

The Polish Constitutional Court effectively refrained from assessing the constitutionality of the government’s COVID-19 measures. It did not examine the substantive proportionality or necessity of the restrictions in relation to fundamental rights.⁷³ While critical voices appeared in the media, they failed to mobilize the weakened opposition or civil society into meaningful protest. The incumbent president and PiS-backed candidate, Andrzej Duda, won the July 2020 election. Many observers argue that PiS deliberately engineered conditions to secure its candidate’s victory, as having a loyal president was crucial for the ruling party.⁷⁴ Beyond signing laws passed by the Sejm, the Polish president holds expanded powers during a state of emergency, including the ability to issue regulations with the force of statute if the Sejm is unable to convene. An opposition-aligned president could have posed a significant obstacle to advancing controversial government policies.

⁷⁰ Guasti and Bušítková, “Pandemic power grab,” 529–50.

⁷¹ Guasti, “The impact of the Covid-19,” 54; IPOL, *The Impact of Covid-19 Measures*, 5.

⁷² Łukasz Szumowski, “Szumowski o przedłużeniu kadencji prezydenta: bardzo dobra propozycja,” *Onet Wiadomości* (15 April 2020).

⁷³ Jakub Jaraczewski, “The New Normal? – Emergency Measures in Response to the Second COVID-19 Wave in Poland,” *verfassungsblog.de* (27 October 2020).

⁷⁴ Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała, “COVID-19 in Hungary and Poland,” 177.

7.3 Czech Republic

An effort to significantly concentrate executive power in the hands of the government and prime minister also emerged in the Czech Republic. Unlike in Hungary and Poland, however, this attempt was identified and halted at the preparatory stage, emphasizing the important role of independent media in democracy. In March 2020, investigative journalists Lukáš Valášek, Ondřej Kundra, and Jaroslav Spurný revealed the existence of a legislative proposal that suggested granting the government and prime minister full authority to govern independently during times of crisis.⁷⁵

Under this plan, if Parliament were unable to function, crisis decision-making would be transferred to the government, and in the event of cabinet dysfunction, the prime minister alone would assume full decision-making powers. Then-PM Babiš sought to introduce this proposal through his party colleague, Minister of Defense Lubomír Metnar, during a government meeting. The revelation sparked a strong backlash, however, from both the opposition in Parliament and civil society, ultimately forcing Babiš to withdraw the proposal.⁷⁶ No similar attempt was undertaken by the Czech government during the same period as in Hungary and Poland. Alongside the Constitutional Court, which reviewed individual pandemic-related measures, independent media functioned as a strong safeguard of democracy. Together, they helped mobilize the opposition to exert sufficient pressure on the government.

7.4 Causal Mechanism

While all three cases, with a high degree of probability, support the proposed causal claim, within-case analysis reveals an additional critical factor that must be incorporated into the causal mechanism: the strength of the governing majority. This factor closely correlates with the government's ability to implement reforms that both limit judicial independence and significantly weaken public oversight. At the onset of the pandemic, Hungary's Fidesz held a two-thirds majority, enabling constitutional amendments without opposition. Poland's PiS had a strong – though not constitutional – majority in the lower house but faced opposition control in the Senate, which likely

⁷⁵ Lukáš Valášek and Ondřej Kundra and Jaroslav Spurný, “Babiš věděl, že se změna pravomocí parlamentu chystá. Metnarovi zadal předložit návrh,” *Aktuálně.cz* (31 March 2020); Petr Jadrný, “Metnar navrhoval při ohrožení země posílit roli vlády. Bylo to nešťastné, otočil po kritice,” *iRozhlas.cz* (31 March 2020).

⁷⁶ Kristýna Guryčová, “Silnější premiér i klička pro střet zájmů. 5 novinek, které se vláda snažila prosadit ve stínu koronaviru,” *iRozhlas.cz* (15 May 2020).

contributed to the fragmented nature of the government’s attempts to implement power-centralizing reforms. In contrast, PM Babiš led a minority coalition government dependent on external support, making any attempt at lasting power centralization politically risky.⁷⁷

Considering the sufficiency of the governing majority for major reforms, the effectiveness of the constitutional court, and the independence of the media, the resulting causal mechanism might be outlined as follows:

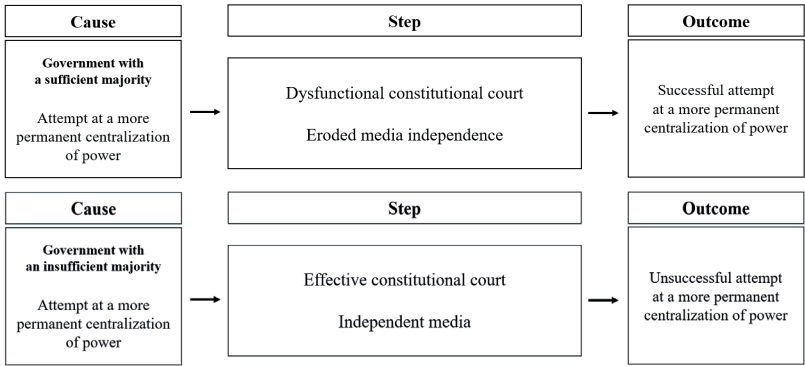


Figure 2 The causal mechanism of government’s attempts at more permanent power centralization during the COVID-19 pandemic.

8 Conclusion

Process tracing demonstrates a unique compatibility with the objectives of historical scholarship by offering a systematic and transparent approach to uncovering causality in complex historical-political processes. Unlike traditional narrative-based methods that may implicitly suggest causation, PT demands explicit theorization, specification of empirical indicators, and rigorous within-case analysis of causal mechanisms. This alignment reinforces, rather than undermines, the contextual richness prized by historians, while simultaneously introducing a methodological rigor characteristic of contemporary political science.

⁷⁷ Vladimír Bartovič, “Czechia: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House* (2020); Guasti, “The impact of the Covid-19,” 47–60; Anna Wójcik and Miłosz Wiatrowski, “Poland: Nations in Transit 2020 Country Report,” *Freedom House* (2020).

The empirical application presented in this article illustrates the value of PT in reconstructing and empirically testing a causal mechanism that explains divergent outcomes in executive power centralization efforts during the COVID-19 crisis in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. The method made it possible to move beyond post-hoc generalizations and instead dissect the specific institutional constellations and temporal sequences that conditioned success or failure. In doing so, PT enabled the identification of key democratic safeguards – particularly independent media and effective constitutional courts – as active components in the causal process rather than mere contextual background. The majority of the government also proved to be a necessary component of the causal mechanism.

The approach also underscored the importance of systematic data triangulation and the logic of ontological determinism: if an outcome occurred, it did so for specific and identifiable reasons. This strengthens the internal validity of causal claims while offering a replicable framework for comparative-historical inquiry. Limitations, however, still persist. While PT was essential in clarifying the causal path, its scope for generalization remains constrained. To advance research in this area, studies should integrate complementary methods such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis. In the article case study, this would allow for the identification of robust institutional configurations that systematically inhibit an authoritarian drift under crisis conditions. Such multi-method strategies hold the potential to bridge the gap between rich empirical narratives and generalizable institutional theory, thereby enhancing both the explanatory and normative ambitions of comparative political analysis.

Abstract

This article explores the methodological potential of process tracing (PT) within comparative-historical analysis, emphasizing its compatibility with historically grounded research. PT allows for systematic reconstruction of causal mechanisms by identifying temporally ordered, theory-driven sequences that link causes to outcomes within specific cases. Rather than replacing narrative approaches, PT complements them by enhancing analytical transparency and causal inference. The study demonstrates the practical application of PT through a comparative analysis of executive power centralization efforts during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Despite similar contextual triggers, the outcomes diverged significantly. Hungary and Poland witnessed substantial executive

aggrandizement, while the Czech Republic did not. The article applies a theory-testing PT design to reconstruct the causal process behind this divergence, identifying key institutional safeguards – most notably independent media and constitutional courts – together with the factor of a government majority as active elements in the causal chain. The findings highlight PT's value in isolating causal dynamics in complex historical contexts.

Keywords: Process tracing; Causal mechanisms; Comparative-historical analysis; Democratic backsliding; Executive power; COVID-19 pandemic; Institutional safeguards; Central and Eastern Europe

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