
Reading Tocqueville in Postcommunist Democracies

Venelin I. Ganev

The collapse of Marxist dictatorships across Eastern Europe in 1989 set the stage for a process of democratization that has followed a pattern memorably described by Shakespeare's Jacques: «And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour we rot» [*As You Like It*, Act.2, sc.7, 27-28]. The “ripening” phase lasted until the former Soviet satellites' protracted entry in the European Union (EU) was completed in 2007, and during it postcommunist transformations were marked by acute socio-economic crises and also by steady democratic progress. The “rotting” phase began in several, if not all, East European countries almost immediately after that, and has been characterized by relative socio-economic stability (even the financial crisis of 2008-9, serious though it was, caused much less suffering than the massive dislocations of the 1990s) – and also by democratic regress. Can Alexis de Tocqueville's insights help us make sense of this peculiar pattern? The answer the article gives to this question is “yes.”

Keywords: *Democratization – Postcommunism – Tocqueville – Rotting – Ripening*

To be sure, interpretative accounts of postcommunist democratizations that rely exclusively on analytical clues provided by a thinker who passed away almost a century and a half before these democratizations gained momentum should be rightfully judged to be rather simplistic, perhaps even crudely contrived. Such explanations surely must refer to factors about which 19th century «classics» have little or nothing to say, e.g. patterns of party competition and electoral behavior in universal-suffrage democracies; the role of mainstream and social media in the framing and timing of political discussions; the consolidation of an array of distinctly

nationalist discourses; and – two topics about which I will have more to say below – the creation and evolution of the EU, and the rise of electorally successful populist leaders. Still, in my view plowing through Tocqueville’s oeuvre in search of explanatory insights is a worthwhile scholarly endeavor: it may help us recalibrate our thinking about the transformative processes that have been reshaping Eastern Europe over the last three decades, and expand exiting research agendas in non-trivial ways.

Engaging Tocqueville might, indeed, be a worthwhile scholarly endeavor – but how exactly one should go about it is far from clear. Cheryl B. Welsh summed up an almost unanimously upheld opinion when she asserted that «a consensus on what constitutes “Tocquevillian” analysis [...] remains elusive»¹. The fact of the matter is that there are «many Tocquevilles» – which is why the Frenchman’s restless efforts to reframe and redefine the intellectual conversations of his time made it «impossible to point to any passage from his works that would allegedly represent his definitive political outlook». Moreover, he is an author who «never discloses his opinion straightaway but rather turns it over in his mind, modifies it, and on occasion contradicts himself» and who seldom if ever «outlined openly or completely [...] his method of political analysis, his ethical assumptions, or any other such views»². Notably, Tocqueville’s name is not linked to a distinct analytical approach, a recognizable school of thought, or cohorts of inspired disciples. It is important to acknowledge, therefore, that engagements with Tocqueville almost by necessity take the form of what might be called the making of a *Tocquevillian bricolage*: their outcome is interpretative *tableaux* that amalgamate, in an unabashedly eclectic manner, a multiplicity of analytical themes, causal theses, cultural and psychological vignettes, and comparative propositions scattered over his texts³. In other words, such engagements will unavoidably be marked by a certain degree of arbitrariness in the choice of subject matters, quotes, and references. This fact, however, does not

¹ C.B. Welsh, *Tocqueville in the Twenty First Century*, in Id. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

² On the “many Tocquevilles” see R. Nisbet, *Many Tocquevilles*, in «The American Scholar», 46 (Winter 1977), n. 1, pp. 59-75; on the elusiveness of Tocqueville’s political outlook, see A. Craiutu, *Tocqueville’s Paradoxical Moderation*, in «The Review of Politics», 67 (Autumn 2005), n. 4, p. 603; on how Tocqueville expresses his opinions, see L. Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 1; on Tocqueville’s method and ethical assumptions, see R. Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 17.

³ The idea that the notion of *tableaux* is important for understanding Tocqueville’s work I borrow from L.E. Shiner, *The Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville’s Recollections*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988.

absolve admirers of Tocqueville from the responsibility to present arguments that are coherent, intelligible and empirically grounded – and to proffer justification for their choice of intellectual companionship.

I submit that there are two reasons why Tocqueville's acumen might provide the various ingredients of an argument plausibly explaining the «ripening» and «rotting» of postcommunist democracies. The first one is more general: he was psychologically and intellectually predisposed to view life as a series of reversals. Tocqueville was never seduced by the simplistic linearity and finality (cf. *la lutte finale*) embraced by even the most flexible of the flexible historical-materialist worshippers of Karl Marx – or by the avatars of modernization theory in the 20th century. Massive upheavals, frustrating setbacks, unexpected swirls and seemingly inexplicable twists and turns – these are the kinds of experiences he, his family and his generation had to go through⁴. The French sage, perhaps influenced by the argument defended in Montesquieu's treatise on the fall of the Romans, was well aware of the fact that in human affairs there is no such thing as steady progress because unescapably «there comes a moment when the forward movement is not only stopped but gives way to a most marked retrogression» – and that neither is there such a thing as a lasting success because «it is after some great success that the most dangerous threats of ruin usually emerge»⁵. He was convinced that liberty can never be secure – because «such democratic institutions as universal suffrage, popular education and the advancement of social equality were not automatic guarantees of freedom,» and also because a nation's «taste for freedom» may simply vanish⁶. Finally, Tocqueville knew that democracy (however defined⁷) is marred by imperfections and dangerous

⁴ Thorough accounts of Tocqueville's life can be found in A. Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989; H. Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007; and O. Zunz, *The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022.

⁵ On retrogressions, see A. de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1988, p. 37; on ruin following success, see A. de Tocqueville, *Recollections*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1992, p. 214. Cf. «Here, in a word, is the history of the Romans. By means of their maxims they conquered all peoples, but when they had succeeded in doing so, their republic could not endure». Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1965, p. 169.

⁶ On why democratic institutions might not be enduring guarantees of freedom, see J. Lukacs, *Introduction to: A. de Tocqueville, The European Revolution and Correspondence with Gobineau*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1959, p. 20; the claim that in the first half of the 19th century «many Frenchmen» experienced a «change of heart» which resulted in a loss of «the taste for freedom» Tocqueville defends in his *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, New York, Doubleday, 1983, pp. 167-168.

⁷ That Tocqueville used the term «democracy» in a variety of ways is a well-established fact; a very enlightening analysis of this problem can be found in Jaume, *The Aristocratic Sources* cit., part one (entitled *What Did Tocqueville Mean by «Democracy»?*)

potentialities: he «expressed serious concerns about the quality of democracy, especially the cultural and intellectual effects of unchecked and uneducated democracy», and never suppressed his fear that there might be «inherent tendency in democratic society to create, if nothing is done to prevent it, situations as dangerous to liberty as revolution is»⁸. In short, the general reason why those of us who study democracy's progress and regress in Eastern Europe might find Tocqueville a stimulating companion is because he understood that developments in the interrelated realms of politics, mores and culture are principally open-ended and essentially unpredictable – and that the psychological predispositions of democratic citizens fluctuate erratically.

But there is a more specific reason why students of postcommunist politics might want to reread Tocqueville: he could help us comprehend crucially important characteristics of the two junctures in the history of postcommunist democratization: 1989, its point of departure, and the entry into the EU, the beginning of democratic backsliding in several East European countries. It is to a defense of this argument that the rest of this article is devoted.

1. 1989: A Moment of Unsettled Mores

1989, the year when Marxist autocracy in Eastern Europe ended, is the point of departure of the multifaceted process Tocqueville memorably described as «the hard apprenticeship of liberty»⁹. That «points of departure» should be paid attention to is something Tocqueville reminded both his readers and also his colleagues in the French Chamber of Deputies¹⁰. What are the most important characteristics of 1989 as the historical juncture when the experiments with democratization commenced in the former Soviet satellites?

⁸ On Tocqueville's apprehensions about «unchecked and uneducated democracy», see A. Craiutu, *Tocqueville and Eastern Europe*, in: C. D. Henderson (ed.), *Tocqueville's Voyages: The Evolution of His Ideas and Their Journey Beyond His Time*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2014, p. 416; on the «inherent tendency», see J.-C. Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 4.

⁹ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America/De la démocratie en Amérique: Bilingual Edition*, translated by J.T. Schleifer and edited by E. Nolla, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2010 (hereafter quoted as DA), vol. II, ch. 6, p. 393.

¹⁰ Cf. DA, vol. I, ch. 2, entitled “Of the Point of Departure and Its Importance for the Future of the Anglo-Americans.” At the beginning of his speech on prison reform – delivered on April 26, 1844 – Tocqueville said the following: «I beg the Chamber not to lose sight of our point of departure», A. de Tocqueville, *On Prison Reform*, in: S. Drescher (ed.), *Tocqueville and Beaumont on Social Reform*, New York, Harper and Row, 1968, p. 71.

Here is what, in my view, a Tocquevillian answer to this question might sound like: a moment of unsettled mores – followed by the rapid ascent of a particular *pensée mère*, the idea of «joining Europe». I will consider the former topic in this section and the latter in the next.

Even Tocqueville's most casual readers must be aware of the fact that for him *mores* is a centrally important analytical category. In the first volume of *Democracy in America* the young traveler who was also a relatively inexperienced civil servant unequivocally asserted that mores are more important than institutions: «I would say that physical causes contribute less than laws, and laws infinitely less than mores [...] The importance of mores is a common truth to which study and experience constantly lead. It seems to me that I find it placed in my mind like a central point; I see it at the end of all of my ideas»¹¹. And twenty years later, the celebrated author whose eventful career as a politician was over, forcefully reiterated the same belief in a frequently quoted letter to his friend Claude-François de Corcelle: «I accord institutions only a secondary influence on the destiny of men [...] I am quite convinced that political societies are not what their laws make them, but what sentiments, beliefs, ideas, habits of the heart, and the spirit of the men who form them prepare them in advance to be, as well as what nature and education made them»¹².

I readily submit that students of postcommunism who perceive Tocqueville exclusively as a mores-centered interpreter might easily conjure up an explanation of the progress and decline of assorted postcommunist democracies. Such an explanation is offered, for example, by Lucia Cianetti, James Dawson and Seán Hanley in a programmatic essay published in 2018. Their argument runs something like this. In the aftermath of 1989 ambitious liberal-democratic experiments were launched in Eastern Europe; but the principles and values that serve as the normative foundation of liberal democracy were alien to local cultural milieus; and that is why eventually the experiments ground to a halt, the deeply entrenched non-Western «habits of the heart» reasserted themselves, and societies reverted back to their pre-democratic ways. Or – to quote the authors' conclusion – Eastern Europe is a region where efforts to introduce «liberal democratic norms» are fated to be unsuccessful because such alien value standards «are easily eclipsed by illiberal

¹¹ DA, vol. II, ch. 9, p. 499.

¹² R. Boesche (ed.), *Alexis de Tocqueville: Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1985, p. 294.

norms»¹³. Using more Tocquevillian language, one might say that what transpired during the first decades of postcommunist transformations is a scenario which in *Democracy in America* was described as a failed «democratic revolution», or a set of surface changes confined to «the material aspect of society without happening in the laws, ideas, habits and mores, the change that would have been necessary to make this revolution useful»¹⁴.

I acknowledge that this is a plausible explanation which should not be cavalierly dismissed. Still, I think that, upon critical scrutiny, it must be rejected – based on one general consideration and three more specifically Tocquevillian reasons.

The general consideration is that such mores-focused accounts – whether they are based on Tocqueville’s insights or not – as a rule evoke an essentialized notion of culture as a set of behavioral predispositions impervious to change. When applied to East European contexts, such accounts smack of neo-orientalist stereotyping. For example, references to «the habits of the Balkan heart» more likely than not indicate that an author is seeking to fashion his particular account of the course of postcommunist transformations in such a way as to make it fit a preexisting narrative about backwardness and cultural inferiority – and then to reach the predetermined conclusion that «underneath all the apparent transitions, there exist pockets of social character in the Balkans that are unsuited to democracy as it is practiced in the West»¹⁵. The questionable assumption undergirding such narratives of “democratic failure foretold” is that only West European societies are civilizationally equipped to accomplish democratic progress but other societies are not, a view that is both empirically unwarranted and normatively unacceptable, and should be expunged from scholarly analyses.

But in addition to this general consideration, there are three specific reasons why Tocqueville should not be invoked by those who assert that democratic reforms in places like Eastern Europe will always be derailed by undemocratic mores.

First, Tocqueville was not a cultural determinist – as François Bourricaud persuasively argued, «it seems unlikely that he believed in the inalterability of cultural phenomena»¹⁶. That there exists a set of (anti-democratic and illiberal) mores that seamlessly and inexorably reproduces itself across generations and

¹³ L. Cianetti-J. Dawson-S. Hanley, *Rethinking “Democratic Backsliding” in Central and Eastern Europe – Looking Beyond Hungary and Poland*, in «East European Politics», 34 (Fall 2018), n. 3, p. 247.

¹⁴ DA, vol. I, Introduction, pp. 18-19.

¹⁵ S. Meštrović-S. Letuca-M. Goreta, *Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and the Fall of Communism*, College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 1993, p. 25.

¹⁶ F. Bourricaud, *Foreword* to J.-C. Lamberti, *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. xiii.

evolving historical contexts is a somewhat fatalistic proposition which Tocqueville would have repudiated. Even when, occasionally, he expressed the view that some things never change, he hastened to add that from this fact it does not follow that the richness of human experiences is reducible to one or a few overarching patterns. A good example would be the important speech he gave to the Annual meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1852: while he asserted that such a thing as «the very nature of man» does exist and that «his interests [...] faculties [...] needs and instincts [...] are as immortal as his race», he also reminded his august audience that «the objects» of these interests, faculties, needs and instincts «change according to the times»¹⁷. That is why his work is devoted to the study of both continuities *and* transformative developments.

Second, Tocqueville, this incisive analyst of modern society, was clearly averse to law-like generalizations. His argument about the primacy of mores should be interpreted against the background of the broader proposition that – to quote Saguiv A. Hadari – «Tocqueville’s “general laws” always remain cautiously limited in scope, and retain sufficient flexibility for subsequent contextual applications»¹⁸. Put differently, this argument should be treated not as a nomothetic formula but as hypothesis to which past experiences lend ample credibility – a testable hypothesis that might provide an analytical lodestar when we examine some contexts but which, when mechanically applied to others, might lead to interpretative distortions and cul-de-sacs.

Third, even Tocqueville’s most enthusiastic readers would probably agree that the neat compartmentalization underpinning his depiction of the failure of democratic reforms (i.e. the contention that change occurred in the «material aspect of society» but «the laws, ideas, habits and mores» remained essentially the same) is, lamentably, not the best example of his brilliant mind at work – as his own brother pointed out to him. «How can a revolution take place in the *material aspect* of society», Édouard Tocqueville asked, «without the ideas, laws, mores and habits seconding it? So, what then do you call the material aspect of society»¹⁹? To this conceptual question, others, more empirical, can be added: what is it that made the improvement of «material aspects» possible in the alleged absence of significant shift in mores? What exactly happens when democratic experiments clash with local

¹⁷ A. de Tocqueville, *Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852*, in B. Danoff-L.J. Herbert (eds.), *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2010, p. 18.

¹⁸ S.A. Hadari, *Theory in Practice: Tocqueville’s New Science of Politics*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1989, p. 6.

¹⁹ DA, vol. I, Introduction, p. 19, italics in the original.

mores? And through what mechanisms, exactly, do illiberal mores, having temporarily «conceded» political space to newly installed democratic institutions, subsequently reassert themselves?

In sum, the contention that what transpired in Eastern Europe should be construed as a verification of Tocqueville's argument that non-democratic cultures *always* effectively block democratic experiments, and that therefore such experiments produce only cosmetic changes while leaving «more important» things untouched should be deemed unacceptable. Tocqueville acknowledged that mores is not a static analytical category, that human affairs do not unfold in accordance with unchangeable patterns – and his account of what the «mixed outcomes» of democratic experiments might look like leaves much to be desired.

I therefore reject the view that Tocqueville might be a suitable guide to students of postcommunist because he allegedly helps us understand why, given the mores prevalent in the formerly communist countries in 1989, experiments with democracy were doomed to fail. I am convinced, however, that another Tocquevillian insight might shed light on one important aspect of 1989 as East European democracies' point of departure, namely that 1989 was a historical moment *when mores were unsettled*.

That there are historical junctures when «habits of the heart» cease to play a causally central role is a claim which Tocqueville repeatedly defended. For example, at one point in his career he claimed that revolutions might completely destroy mores-based behavioral patterns: «Every revolution has more or less the effect of leaving men to themselves and of opening before the mind of each one of them an empty and almost limitless space»²⁰. Obviously, there is a lot of hyperbole in this statement – perhaps because, as Stephen Holmes perceptively remarked, «Tocqueville believed [that] unless you exaggerate [...] no one will understand what you have to say»²¹. Be that as it may, in his later writings (and particularly *The Old Regime*) Tocqueville himself exposed the notion that revolutions create «limitless spaces» as a politically dangerous illusion. But when presented in a less audacious manner, the claim that there are times when cultural constants do not adequately explain permutations in the political domain makes a lot of sense: «in the life of peoples, a moment [might] occur when ancient customs are changed, mores destroyed, beliefs shaken, the prestige of memoirs has vanished, yet when the

²⁰ DA, vol. III, ch. 3, p. 708.

²¹ S. Holmes, *Tocqueville and Democracy*, in D. Copp-J. Hampton-J.E. Roemer (eds.), *The Idea of Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 23.

enlightenment has remained incomplete and political rights poorly guaranteed or missing. Then men no longer see the country except in a weak and doubtful light»²².

If and when such moments transpire, the heuristic value of mores-based interpretations will be doubtful: empirically, because other factors eclipse mores as a factor explaining important political phenomena – and also methodologically, because such interpretations posit as an analytically sturdy «independent variable» something that is very much in flux and therefore hard to define and operationalize in substantive terms.

In my view 1989 was precisely such a moment – a moment of unsettled mores. Almost overnight, political hierarchies were upended, cultural capital and prestige were redistributed, and politically enforced understandings of «right» and «wrong» were discredited – while at the same time the very notion of what constitutes «common sense» was shattered, familiar routines around which everyday life revolved were disrupted, and the parameters of political imaginaries were dramatically redrawn.

Of course, the argument that in 1989 mores were unsettled does not in any way imply that what emerged in the aftermath of the velvet revolutions was a *tabula rasa*. To the contrary, this argument is fully compatible with the understanding that some of the most important questions about early postcommunism – e.g. «who got what when and how» – can only be answered with reference to the multifaceted legacies of communism (and particularly the enduring dominance of networks composed of former high- and mid-ranking *nomenklatura* cadres)²³. Neither does the argument denote that mores instantly became completely irrelevant: it is not possible to answer the question why, when multi-party elections were held for the first time, unrepentant former communists won in Bulgaria and Romania but reformed communist parties lost in Czechoslovakia and Hungary without discussing the prevalent norms and cultural values in the respective countries²⁴. Still, I contend that

²² DA, vol. II, ch. 6, p. 386.

²³ On the importance of *nomenklatura* networks, see V.I. Ganev, *Notes on Networking in Postcommunist Societies*, «East European Constitutional Review», 9 (Winter-Spring 2000), n.1-2, pp. 101-110. The literature on Soviet-type regimes' legacies is enormous and needs not be summarized here. Arguably the best study of the subject published in the 1990s is S. Hanson, *The Leninist Legacy and Institutional Change*, in «Comparative Political Studies», 28 (July 1995), n .2, pp. 306-314. A notable recent publication is G. Pop-Eleches-J.A. Tucker, *Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017.

²⁴ On the historical and cultural factors that shaped the outcome of the first multiparty elections in postcommunist Eastern Europe, see V. Bunce, *The Political Economy of Postsocialism*, in «Slavic Review», 58 (Winter 1999), n. 4, pp. 756-793.

for those willing to analyze the course of postcommunist democratizations examining local mores is not the epistemologically most promising line of inquiry.

Thus one of the important aspects of 1989 is that it marked the beginning of democratic experiments amidst unsettled mores. What might an admirer of Tocqueville hypothesize about the possible outcomes of such experiments? Careful readers of the Frenchman's oeuvre can only reach one conclusion: he would have deemed such outcomes to be essentially unpredictable – and that what truly matters is the concrete forms in which fledgling democracies are organized in specific contexts.

If the context is favorable to the quick reassembling of the pieces of shattered illiberal mores, and if the habits-fashioned hearts, barely missing a beat, begin to pulsate with the same cultural rhythms that propelled them before the moment of political turmoil, then, indeed, the prospects of democracy would be dim. As the Tocquevillian scholar Joshua Mitchell reports in his fascinating book *Tocqueville in Arabia*, the regime change in Iraq did not significantly alter «the ideas about politics that came naturally into the heads of so many Iraqis during the Saddam Hussein period», and, most importantly, the idea that «either a single man rules over all – or chaos, anarchy, and disorder» prevail. Based on that, he concluded that the probability that democracy might progress in Iraq was minimal²⁵.

Another possible scenario, described by Tocqueville himself, is protracted political turmoil punctured by outbursts of mob violence. He was well aware of the fact that when populations unschooled in democracy are finally granted participatory rights, a very grave political crisis might ensue: «It cannot be doubted that the moment when political rights are granted to a people who have, until then, been deprived of them is a moment of crisis, a crisis often necessary, but always dangerous»²⁶. More specifically, the danger that arises is that politically empowered multitudes might abuse their newly acquired rights: «The common man, at the moment when he is granted political rights, finds himself in relation to these rights, in the same position as the child vis-à-vis all of nature. In this case, the celebrated phrase of Hobbes applies to him (*Homo puer robustus*) [...] The child inflicts death when he is unaware of the value of life; he takes property from others before knowing that someone can rob him of his»²⁷.

²⁵ J. Mitchell, *Tocqueville in Arabia: Dilemmas of a Democratic Age*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 183.

²⁶ DA, vol. II, ch. 4, p. 392.

²⁷ DA, vol. II, ch. 6, p. 392. On how the notion of *homo puer robustus* is deployed by Tocqueville see J. Jennings, *Travels with Tocqueville*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2023, p. 343.

In other words, if and when «democratization» amounts to nothing but a sudden rupture followed by chaos and pandemonium, violence might escalate and lead not to democratic progress but to a series of confiscations or brutal pillages. Under such conditions, tensions among social groups will be exacerbated and such important values as the peaceful resolution of conflict and respect for the rights of others will be negated.

But Tocqueville also believed that a different scenario was possible: if amidst unsettled mores institutionalized opportunities for political participation emerge, the cause of democratic liberty may be advanced. Or, as Tocqueville put it, when the people realize that they are entitled to, and can in fact actively practice, democratic citizenship, they may consider the confusion and uncertainty that surround them not as an impetus to relapse into their old ways or to behave in a licentious manner, but as a chance to develop «an interest in the fate of their country and to ... participate in its government»²⁸. In order to illustrate his point, Tocqueville gives a very interesting example: recent immigrants to the United States. Despite the fact that they come from very different backgrounds and have internalized an array of mores, they almost instantly «get involved in the affairs of their town, their district, and the entire state»²⁹. This example is worth thinking about. From the point of view of the relationship between mores and institutions what Tocqueville depicts is clearly a situation marked by a disjuncture: what all immigrants to the US in the early 1800s shared, their diverse backgrounds notwithstanding, was that their mores were internalized in an environment less free and less egalitarian than America's, and in that sense they did not «fit» the institutionalized practices prevalent in the country of their arrival. This disjuncture, however, did not result in disruptions of democratic practices: what has been happening, and will continue to happen, the author of *Democracy in America* asserted, is that «each person [...] takes an active part in the government of society»³⁰. In other words, rather than individuals' mores undermining the democratic framework, the democratic framework reshaped individuals' mores – a fundamentally important transformative process which Claus Offe, in a perceptive analysis Tocqueville's book, called «democratic institutions generating democratic citizens»³¹.

²⁸ DA, vol. II, ch. 6, p. 387.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 381.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ C. Offe, *Political Disaffection as an Outcome of Institutional Practices? Some Post-Tocquevillian Speculations*, in: M. Torcal-J.R. Montero (eds.), *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies*, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 23-45.

In sum, what will happen when democratic reforms began to unfold in a milieu when mores have lost their grip on people's hearts and minds will depend on context-specific issues. In my view, one of the most important issues is whether opportunities for participation emerge – and whether a particular *pensée mère* arises that steers popular energies towards the principles and practices of democratic governance.

2. «Joining Europe» as a *Pensée Mère*

Construed as a historical juncture, 1989 is clearly a moment when millions of people across Eastern Europe got involved in politics. That East Europeans, just like the immigrants discussed by Tocqueville, eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to engage in political activism of various kinds is a point too obvious to be belabored: 1989 and its aftermath are the archetypical example of grassroots pro-democracy mobilization³². In addition to eliminating barriers to civic involvement, however, the events of 1989 produced another effect: not only was the implosion of Marxist autocracy a particular moment when mores were unsettled, but also a point in time when such a *pensée mère* rapidly materialized: the idea of joining Europe.

What is a *pensée mère*? As far as I can ascertain, in *Democracy in America* Tocqueville uses this term twice. In the Introduction he refers to a *pensée mère* that lends coherence and wholesomeness to his work. Addressing hypothetical malcontents prone to criticize his book, he confesses that «rien ne sera plus facile que de critiquer ce livre», but also points out that in *le livre* there is «une *pensée mère* qui enchaîne, pour ainsi dire, tout les parties»³³. Later on in the book – in a chapter entitled «Why Democratic Peoples Show a More Ardent and More Enduring Love for Equality than for Liberty» – the author refers to «ce fait donne presque toujours naissance à une *pensée mère*, ou à une passion principale quit finir ensuite par attirer à elle et par entrainer dans son courts tous les sentiments at toutes les idées»³⁴. In other words, *pensée mère* might mean either a leitmotif that runs through Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* – or a formative force that shapes the emotions, ideas, and practices of a political community. It is this latter meaning that is relevant to my analysis of postcommunist democratizations.

³² See V.I. Ganev, *The Revolutions of 1989*, in J. DeFronzio (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Modern Revolutions*, New York, ABC-CLIO Publishers, 2006, pp. 130-167.

³³ DA, vol. I, Introduction, p. 31, italics mine.

³⁴ DA, vol. III, ch. 1, p. 875, italics mine.

What does *pensée mère* mean in English? Translators disagree. Henry Reeve, Tocqueville's first English translator, rendered it as «dominant thought» – as did Gerald Bevan more than a century and a half later³⁵. Arthur Goldhammer has chosen both «dominant thought» and «pregnant idea»³⁶. George Lawrence has opted for “pregnant thought”³⁷. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop prefer «mother thought»³⁸. Daniel Bell refers very broadly to it as «axial principles»³⁹.

The translation I prefer is offered by James Schleifer: he believed that «generative thought» most adequately conveys Tocqueville's idea⁴⁰. I readily confess that there is an element of arbitrariness in my choice – I cannot back it up with an ironclad justification. The reason I find it epistemologically enriching is that it implies that the scope of possible outcomes that might be conceivably «generated» by «the thought» is much broader than is the case with the end of pregnancies, and thus obliges those who use it to explain what it is exactly that the thought engendered and how.

In what ways exactly do «generative thoughts» work, through what mechanisms do they alter political realities, and what happens when they dissipate (an issue I will revisit in a moment) – these are all questions which, unfortunately, Tocqueville does not discuss even in a rudimentary manner. But when applied to an early postcommunist context his argument compels us to look closely at as well-known fact: the overwhelming majority of East Europeans – dissidents, «ordinary folk» and reformed communists alike – embraced the idea of «joining Europe». I contend that across the region this idea became a *pensée mère*.

What precisely these newly empowered citizens of young democracies believed *Europe* to be is hard to pinpoint with a high degree of analytical precision. When Milan Kundera asked the same question in the 1980s – «What does Europe mean to a Hungarian, a Czech, a Pole?» – his answer was «not [...] a phenomenon of

³⁵ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by H. Reeve, New York, Vintage Books, 1945, p. 17, and A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*, translated by G. Bevan, London, Penguin, 2004, p. 17.

³⁶ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by A. Goldhammer, New York, Albert Knopf, 1994, vol. I, p. 16 and vol. II, p. 95.

³⁷ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by G. Lawrence, New York, Harper, 2006, p. 13.

³⁸ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by H. Mansfield and D. Winthrop, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 14 and p. 480.

³⁹ D. Bell, *Alexis de Tocqueville at the Crossroads of History*, in «Tocqueville Review/La Review Tocqueville», 20 (Spring 1999), n. 2, pp. 177-189.

⁴⁰ DA, vol. I, Introduction, p. 31, and vol. III, ch. 1, p. 875.

geography, but a spiritual notion synonymous with the *West*»⁴¹. But the embrace of Europe surely had its non-spiritual dimensions as well: what the word also denoted was a consumerist paradise – and also a paragon of freedom; a fair socio-economic system where workers are well paid and professionals enjoy middle-class affluence; a space of cultural vibrancy – and also the most important corner of the global soccer universe where the fans’ idols practiced their craft (during the Cold War communist authorities refused to host a Euro-Cup tournament or a Champions League final: too many Western tourists, too much threat to national security). In addition – as perceptive observers like Wojciech Sadurski have explained – a key reason why East Europeans rallied behind the cause of full membership in the EU was because «they did not trust and did not particularly like their own states»⁴². Obviously, then, *Europe* was a *pensée mère* which became the focal point of so many aspirations that it could have easily mutated into an *idée abstraite* – and, Tocqueville averred somewhat offhandedly, «there is nothing more unproductive for the human mind than an abstract idea»⁴³. But in the context of a dogged pursuit of an entry into the EU this idea mandated an array of practical actions. «Joining Europe» thus became the *telos* of postcommunist democratizations – a term, Andreas Schedler cogently explained, which might be utterly confusing when it implies «automatic progression» but analytically rather useful when it denotes «a normative goal or practical task»⁴⁴. Once underway, the pursuit of this *telos* affected every aspect of East European applicants’ domestic and foreign policy⁴⁵.

⁴¹ M. Kindera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, in: Id, *A Kidnaped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe*, New York, Harper Collins, 2023, p. 37, italics in the original. The essay was originally published in 1983.

⁴² W. Sadurski, *Accession's Democracy Dividend: The Impact of the EU Enlargement upon Democracy in the New Member States of Central and Eastern Europe*, «European Law Journal», 10 (July 2004), n. 4, p. 373.

⁴³ DA, Vol. IV, ch. 2, p. 1096. On Tocqueville’s critique of abstract thinking, see R. Boyd-C. Williams, *Intellectuals and Statesmanship? Tocqueville, Oakeshott, and the Distinction Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge*, in B. Danoff-J. Herbert (eds.), *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2011, pp. 117-136.

⁴⁴ On how the notion of *telos* may be productively – or unproductively – used, see A. Schedler, *What is Democratic Consolidation?* in «Journal of Democracy», 9 (April 1998), n. 2, p. 95.

⁴⁵ The best study of the impact of the multilayered interactions with Western countries and the EU on domestic politics in Eastern Europe is M.A. Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage and Integration After Communism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. See also K. Featherstone-C. Radaelli (eds.), *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003; A.L. Dimitrova (ed.), *Driven to Change: The European Union’s Enlargement Viewed from the East*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004; W. Jacoby, *The Enlargement of the European Union and NATO: Ordering from the Menu in Central Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004; F. Schimmelfennig-U. Sedelmeier (eds.), *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005; H. Grabbe, *The EU’s Transformative Power: Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*, New York, Palgrave, 2006.

Expanding the Tocquevillian *bricolage* I have been concocting in this paper – the amalgam of Tocquevillian themes that shed light on postcommunism as a specific context – I will argue that the significance of this *telos* lies in the fact that it set the parameters of the postcommunist apprenticeship of liberty because it shaped a widely shared understanding of what a «self-interest properly understood» is, and made it possible «to use democracy to moderate democracy».

«Apprenticeship of liberty» is one of the most memorable phrases Tocqueville produced – and also one of most tantalizingly ambiguous. What «apprentices» do is acquire a set of special skills in order to accomplish tangible objectives. Sometimes that happens in the absence of tutors – as is the case with the “fifteen million fingers learning how to play” referenced in AC/DC’s classic anthem «Let There Be Rock»⁴⁶. Usually, however, apprentices submit themselves to the tutelage of recognized masters who then lead them down well-trodden paths. Either way, to assert that each apprentice faces unique challenges would be ridiculous – those who want to become nurses, learn how to play Paul McCartney’s *Yesterday* or obtain a black belt in judo will basically have to go through the same intermediary steps irrespectively of whether they are being trained in Japan, Ghana, Spain or Argentina.

Needless to say, for the citizens and politicians who wanted to build democracy in Japan in the late 1940s, Ghana in the 1960s, Spain in the 1970s or Argentina in the 1980s the challenges were very different. To begin with, unlike other apprentices, aspiring democrats cannot rely on the guidance of certified masters: «experts» or well-wishers from «established democracies» might be quite knowledgeable about their own political systems but they have little or no idea about the political dilemmas and normative trade-offs in countries that have recently experienced military defeat and occupation (e.g. Japan), colonialism (e.g. Ghana), neo-fascist dictatorship (e.g. Spain) or *junta*-rule (e.g. Argentina) – or, as was the case in Eastern Europe, communist autocracy and the total collapse of state-owned economies. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that whereas aspiring despots wishing to engineer a successful coup or to establish a one-party regime, there are blueprints to be followed⁴⁷, for democracy-builders, there are none: no «boxes» to be «checked» no sequencing of steps to be pursued, no readily applicable rules of thumb. Finally, every effort to build a democracy is characterized by a distinct lack of clarity regarding the launched reforms’ final destination, and that is because if there is one

⁴⁶ AC/DC, *Let There Be Rock*, [song] on *Let There Be Rock*, Atlantic Records, 1977.

⁴⁷ Cf. C. Malaparte, *Coup D’Etat: Technique of a Revolution*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1932.

essential truth about democracy, it is that »democracy precludes closure regarding its own identity«⁴⁸.

What factors shaped the postcommunist apprenticeship of liberty? The answer to this question should begin with acknowledgement of the obvious: this apprenticeship was *not* guided by the EU or «the West» more generally. The fact of the matter is that until the late 1990s «the West» did not care *at all* about what had been happening in the former «second world». As Milada Anna Vachudova persuasively argued in her much-admired book, «the risk of democratic failure and economic collapse in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s was one that EU member governments seemed willing to take – as opposed to the risk of opening their markets to East European goods»⁴⁹. The *idea* of joining Europe as embraced by East Europeans was therefore much more important in the course of postcommunist democratizations than any actual involvement on the part of West Europeans.

In my view, among the most important political ramification of this ascent of the idea of joining Europe is that it molded East Europeans' understanding of what is in their «self-interest properly understood» and it steered the transformative process away from radicalized and institutionally devastating forms of democratic politics.

In his perceptive discussion of how the Tocquevillian term *l'intérêt bien entendu* should be translated in English Arthur Goldhammer defended the view that «self-interest properly understood» is better than «self-interest well understood» because whereas the latter presupposes that there is some objective interest «out there» that we need to comprehend, the former relies on judgements made in particular contexts: «what we take to be in our interest depends crucially on how we view the world and in particular on where we take time's horizon to be situated, and therefore it behooves us to understand our interest not merely well but properly»⁵⁰. It should be also mentioned that Tocqueville clearly links this form of individual behavior to the notion of moderation: it implies that those who embrace it seem medium- and long-term success rather than instant gratification and are predisposed to be partially accommodating to, rather to abuse and mistreat, the peers, partners and strangers with whom they interact⁵¹.

⁴⁸ The reference is to an unpublished manuscript by L. Whitehead, quoted by Schedler, *What is Democratic Consolidation?* cit., p. 104.

⁴⁹ Vachudova, *Europe Undivided* cit., p. 85.

⁵⁰ A. Goldhammer, *Translating Tocqueville: The Constraints of Classicism*, in *The Cambridge Companion* cit., pp. 146-147.

⁵¹ On the idea of moderation in 19th century French political thought, see A. Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012.

As we know, Tocqueville utilized the notion of *l'intérêt bien entendu* in order to dissect the social and, especially, economic behavior of the Americans he encountered in the 1830s⁵². It is hard to say whether he believed that it might be applicable to electoral politics: he never intimated that it might be «in the interest» of voters to cast their ballots for a particular party or a candidate running for office. In my view, however, in a postcommunist context the idea that it is in one's self-interest properly understood to join Europe clearly affected electoral outcomes. This idea generated a politically important sentiment which Tocqueville called «the salutary fear» that «makes [democratic citizens] vigilant and combative»⁵³. What he had in mind, of course, was the fear of tyranny – and certainly this type of fear played a role on a postcommunist context and accounts for the fact that by the mid-1990s across the region die-hard Marxist-Leninists had ceased to enjoy meaningful electoral support⁵⁴. The *pensée mère* of joining Europe, however, engendered another type of fear: the fear of being left behind in the process of the EU's eastward expansion. This fear, in turn, gave rise to a particular form of civic vigilance that informed the apprenticeship of liberty and propelled the process of cross-regional democratizations.

What results did the postcommunist apprenticeship produce? This is a difficult question, and reasonable analysts might disagree about the proper way to answer it. Understandably, there are skeptics who find the contention that successful democratization occurred in the region «very much open to debate»⁵⁵. In my view, however, this apprenticeship produced results that far exceeded initial expectations, and in order to substantiate this claim, I will refer to several pieces of empirical evidence that suggest that throughout the 1990s and early 2000s in Eastern Europe «democracy was used to moderate democracy».

The political dynamic Tocqueville somewhat enigmatically described as «using democracy to moderate democracy» is mentioned in an unpublished manuscript he wrote while working on *Democracy in America*⁵⁶. Admittedly, what this means exactly is hard to decipher. But one possible interpretation could be that the political reactions

⁵² On the economic dimension of Tocqueville's analyses, see R. Swedberg, *Tocqueville's Political Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁵³ DA, vol. IV, ch. 7, p. 1277.

⁵⁴ The last electoral victory of an unreformed ex-communist party in Eastern Europe was recorded in 1994 in Bulgaria; for more on this case, see V.I. Ganev, *Preying on the State: The Transformation of Bulgaria After 1989*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2007.

⁵⁵ Cianetti et al., *Rethinking* cit., p. 243.

⁵⁶ DA, vol. IV, ch. 7, p. 1279; even more enigmatically, he added «this is the sole path to salvation opened to us».

of a citizenry motivated by a particular non-transient understanding of a self-interest properly understood might drastically limit the opportunities available to violent political entrepreneurs and tame the dangerous potentialities inherent in the process of democratic governance.

To be sure, there are limits on how much vigilant citizens motivated by their self-interest properly understood can accomplish – which is why some problems endemic to postcommunist politics were never fixed (corruption is the best example). Still, it seems to me wrong to dismiss off-handedly the contention that as the 1990s progressed and the process of «joining Europe» gained momentum East European democracies became more moderate in the Tocquevillian sense of the word. The fact of the matter is that during this period no former Soviet satellite in the region (except Albania) experienced the serial violent upheavals which convulsed France during Tocqueville’s political career (which lasted from the late 1830s until 1851).⁵⁷ Moreover, among the most important aspects of post-1989 democratic governance in Eastern Europe is that as the 1990s progressed, East European voters invariably got rid of politicians who, even if initially popular, endangered their countries’ chances of successfully completing the accession process. Bulgarian Prime Minister Zhan Vidonov’s open disdain for everything «capitalist» and «Western» and his enthusiasm for «the Chinese model» were among the major reasons why his (ex-communist) party decisively lost the 1997 general elections; Slovakian Prime Minister Vladimir Mečiar’s anti-European shenanigans resulted in the massive electoral defeat that ended his party’s political dominance in 1998; and Viktor Orbán’s statement that «there is life outside of the EU» was clearly one of the factors that motivated Hungarian voters to repudiate him in 2002⁵⁸.

In addition, during the same period voters’ preference for joining Europe clearly motivated elected officials to find solutions to potentially system-destroying institutional conflicts. Unsurprisingly, the hastily written and adopted constitutions of the early 1990s were marred by serious problems which led to various forms of immoderate elite political behavior (power grabs, self-interested interpretation of

⁵⁷ Albania is a unique case where a pro-European consensus did not emerge until the early 2000s. The best source of information about the violent clashes that dominated Albanian politics in the early postcommunist era are the *Albania* section of the “constitutional reports” featured in each issue of «East European Constitutional Review» in the 1990s.

⁵⁸ On Videnov and Bulgaria, see V.I. Ganev, *Bulgaria’s Symphony of Hope*, in «Journal of Democracy», 8 (October 1997), n. 4, pp. 125-139; on Mečiar and Slovakia, see G. Pridham, *The European Union’s Conditionality and Domestic Politics in Slovakia*, in «Europe/Asia Studies», 54 (Spring 2002), n. 2, pp. 203-227; on the ramifications of Orbán’s statement, see Zsófia Szilágyi, *Hungary*, in «East European Constitutional Review», 9 (Fall 2000), n. 4, pp. 82-85.

vaguely defined constitutional prerogatives, efforts to evade various checks and balances) – the clashes between Presidents and Prime Ministers in Slovakia, between parliaments and governments in Romania, and between various courts in Czech Republic would be good examples⁵⁹. By the turn of the last century, most of these problems were fixed by democratically elected or appointed officials, sometimes through constitutional amendments, and sometimes through adherence of what was recognized as binding precedents. As a result, reckless political disruptors found fewer and fewer opportunities to stage their democracy-undermining spectacles.

Finally, what also transpired during this period is that the initially palpable threat of majority tyranny was diffused. The term «majority tyranny» remains somewhat under-defined in Tocqueville's *oeuvre*, but it is clear that this tyranny might take a variety of forms. In postcommunist Eastern Europe its potentially most destructive and repressive form was undeniably the tyranny of ethnic majorities over ethnic minorities. In the early 1990s, the time of post-Yugoslavian ethnic cleansings, the danger that tribal hatreds might erupt violently was real. It is worth remembering that no less an academic luminary than John Mearsheimer stated in 1990 that it is very likely that Romania and Hungary might go to war over Transylvania⁶⁰. Surprisingly or not, such a war never materialized. Given the objectives of this paper, however, much more relevant is the fact that once joining the EU became the top priority of national political agendas, the relationship between ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities across the region steadily improved. Since the mid-1990s, parties representing the Hungarian minority have participated in numerous Romanian governments and ethnic Hungarians have occupied positions of power (the fact that Klaus Iohannis, an ethnic German Catholic who hails from the above-mentioned contested region, was elected president of overwhelmingly Orthodox Romania twice, in 2014 and 2019, should also be mentioned in this context). The same tendency towards mutual accommodation is readily observable in the other two countries in the region where ethnic passions were routinely enflamed in the early and mid-1990s, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Ethnic Hungarians (in the former country) and ethnic Turks (in the latter) have been fully integrated in the democratic process, and are able to practice unintimidated their cultural and political rights.

⁵⁹ On Slovakia, see P. Höllander, *The New Slovak Constitution: A Critique*, in «East European Constitutional Review», 1 (Fall 1992), n. 4, pp. 16-17; on Romania, see S. Bach-S. Benda, *Parliamentary Rules and Judicial Review in Romania*, in «East European Constitutional Review», 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 49-53; on Czechia, see *Constitutional Reports: Czech Republic*, in «East European Constitutional Review», 6 (Spring/Summer 1997), n. 2-3, p. 11.

⁶⁰ J. Mearsheimer, *Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War*, in «The Atlantic Monthly», August 1990, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/politics/foreign/mearsh.htm>.

Surely, to assert that the former communist countries are a paragon of ethnic equity would be Pollyannaish – and the situation of the region’s most neglected minority, the Roma, remains dire. But that the situation at the time of EU’s expansion was much better than in the immediate aftermath of 1989 cannot be gainsaid in good faith. It is precisely the fact that as democratization in Eastern Europe deepened the threat of majority tyranny subsided that proves that Tocqueville was right – Édouard, that it, not Alexis. Developments such as the re-founding of Hungarian-language schools and universities in Romania or the regular inclusion of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria’s faction in the European Parliament certainly would not have materialized if the democratic process was confined only to an ill-defined «material sphere»: such developments became possible because this process precipitated democratizing shifts in mores, laws and ideas.

It is now time to sum up. The Tocquevillian bricolage laid out in this paper coheres around the following interrelated propositions. Construed as a point of departure of postcommunist democratizations, 1989 was a moment of unsettled mores. The general directionality of the transformative developments that ensued was shaped by the rise of a particular generative thought, the idea of joining Europe – and what this thought generated was a context-specific understanding of self-interest properly understood and an electoral nexus linking voters and politicians characterized by the former’s preference for pro-European politics and the latter’s incentive to moderate democratic practices and fix troublesome institutional problems. Thus the postcommunist apprenticeship of liberty produced voting patterns and institutionalized practices that stabilized and moderated the framework of democratic governance. Put simply, this apprenticeship worked as intended: by the mid-2000s East European democracies had ripened.

3. The Post-Accession Rotting of East European Democracies: Populists as Tocquevillian “Steersmen”

Once the accession process was over, in several East European countries successful democratizations were reversed. As is well known, populist leaders scored numerous and spectacular electoral victories (most notably in Poland and Hungary⁶¹, but also

⁶¹ On Hungary, see especially B. Magyar-J. Vásárhelyi (eds.), *Twenty Five Studies of a Post-Communist State*, New York, Central European University Press, 2017; G.A. Tóth (ed.), *Constitution for a Disunited Nation: On Hungary’s 2011 Fundamental Law*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2012 ; J.M. Kovács-B. Trencsenyi (eds.), *Brave New Hungary: Mapping the «System of National*

in Slovenia and Bulgaria) and proceeded to put in motion a process usually described as democratic *backsliding* – a term defined as «to go back to doing something bad when you have been doing something good»⁶².

Can Tocqueville help us understand this turn of events? I submit that this is a challenging question. One could invoke, of course, Tocqueville's well-known doubts about the prospects of democratic governance – for example, a passage in the draft of a letter that might have never been sent, namely that the most dangerous tendency of democracy is «the steady lowering of the level of society with no conceivable limit»⁶³. But how informative are such general statements for understanding the post-accession context in Eastern Europe? Moreover, it is obvious that the specific scenarios discussed by Tocqueville in his memoirs did not materialize in the EU's newest members. For example, in a prophetic speech he delivered in the French parliament in January 1848 he declared that «we are at this moment sleeping on a volcano» – and, indeed, what followed in the ensuing months can only be characterized as a series of seismic political upheavals⁶⁴. In one of his poems Tocqueville's younger contemporary Charles Baudelaire mentions «a demon» who «thrusts» before his eyes «all the bloody instruments of Destruction» – and it should be acknowledged that the author of *The Recollections* witnessed how political demons created an explosive milieu where such «instruments» were routinely used⁶⁵. But no one in their right mind would have characterized early 21st century Eastern Europe as a «volcano» – and the changes that began to occur there were not accompanied by any violent clashes pitting mobilized social constituencies against each other. Existing institutional frameworks were overhauled in the absence of any «destructive» campaigns: electorally victorious populist leaders displayed a remarkable respect for legalism and always acted in accordance with constitutional norms, including when they proceeded to amend such norms⁶⁶.

Cooperation», Lanham, Lexington Books, 2019. On Poland, see J. Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018; W. Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, and K. Wigura-J. Kuisz (eds.), *The End of the Liberal Mind: Poland's New Politics*, Warsaw: Kultura Liberalna Foundation, 2020.

⁶² The definition can be found here: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/backslide>.

⁶³ Jardin, *Tocqueville* cit., p. 273. See also footnotes 7 and 9, above.

⁶⁴ A. de Tocqueville, *Recollections*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1987, p. 11.

⁶⁵ Ch. Baudelaire, *Destruction*, in: *Les fleurs du Mal/The Flowers of Evil*, Digirids Publishing, 2015, p. 316; the French original is «l'appareil sanglant de la Destruction», p. 315.

⁶⁶ For more on East European's respect for legalism, see K.L. Scheppele, *Autocratic Legalism*, in «The University of Chicago Law Review», 82 (March 2018), n. 2, pp. 545-584.

What Tocqueville had to say about Louis Napoléon's political triumph is also inapplicable to post-accession Eastern Europe. In the aftermath of the 1852 plebiscite that validated his claim to the title of emperor, Tocqueville asserted that what the plebiscite's results showed is that «the love of independence» might «be followed by a dread of, and perhaps a distaste of, free institutions»⁶⁷. The situation in post-accession Eastern Europe is very different. Even voters who consistently voted for illiberal politicians did not abandon their «love of independence» in order to submit themselves to unelected usurpers willing to suspend the democratic process: what such voters have been doing is cast their ballots for aspiring prime-ministers articulating competing visions of what a democratic order should look like without ever broaching the issue of replacing democracy with a different regime type.

Should we then conclude that Tocqueville is not the kind of thinker whose insights shed analytical light on the post-accession rotting of East European democracies? Not necessarily. In my view, a Tocquevillian analysis of post-accession developments in Eastern Europe should revolve around the following observation he made in the draft of the never-finished second volume of *The Old Regime*: «Very much confusion is caused by the employment given to these words: *democracy, democratic institutions, democratic government*. Unless they are clearly defined and unless there is agreement about their definition, we shall live un an inextricable confusion of ideas, to the great advantage of demagogues and despots. They will say that a country governed by an absolute ruler is a *democracy* because he governs by such laws and maintains such institutions as are favorable to the great mass of people»⁶⁸. The end of the accession process turned out to be a critical juncture that marked the exhaustion of the transformative thought of joining Europe – and in its aftermath populist demagogues exploited the «lack of agreement about the definition of democracy and democratic government» in order to assert themselves as effective «steersmen».

The concept of critical junctures is rapidly gaining popularity among political analysis and social scientists – but a detailed examination of its methodological underpinnings and heuristic potential is beyond the scope of this paper⁶⁹. Given the analytical intent informing my Tocquevillian bricolage, its most important

⁶⁷ Tocqueville, *Recollections* cit., p. 110.

⁶⁸ Tocqueville, *The European Revolution* cit., p. 102, italics in the original.

⁶⁹ An excellent collection of essays devoted to the notion of critical junctures is D. Collier-G. Munck (eds.), *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies: Insights and Methods in Comparative Social Science*, Lanham, Rowman&Littlefield, 2022.

facet is that in certain historical moments «permissive conditions» emerge that create a «possibility space» within which «the causal power of agency» is heightened. In other words, critical junctures are moments when the constraints on elite action are loosened and subsequent developments cannot be traced back to relatively permanent structural variables or massive shifts in cultural values or normative commitments. Such developments are instead propelled by the behavior of political elites who have gained access to power⁷⁰. Among the most important features of critical junctures, therefore, is that they bring into a sharper relief the significance of elite agency – and create opportunities for novel types of political action. Both features were readily observable in post-accession Eastern Europe. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the transition from the pre-accession to the post-accession eras in Eastern Europe did *not* produce a massive shift in voters' preferences: «ordinary» East Europeans remained committed to democracy, European unity and political freedom, which is why the proper way to think about democratic backsliding is as an example of «democracy eroding from above»⁷¹.

While the parameters of public opinion remained static, those who could «act from above» were considerably emboldened: as the generative thought of joining Europe lost its immediate relevance, the «possibility space» within which they could operate expanded. It bears emphasizing that this idea was *not* abandoned – as apparently it was in Turkey in the course of Erdogan's long rule⁷². But clearly it lost its generative potential – once Europe was joined, the need for defining the next *telos* arose, and very quickly issues that appeared to be «settled» within the EU-centered thought-generated framework (e.g. what is in one's self interest properly understood and what the electoral nexus linking voters and democratic leaders should be) were now up for grabs. In several East European countries, it was populist leaders who outperformed their mainstream rivals in the competition to articulate this new *telos* – and thus emerged, to refer to Wilhelm Hennis' brilliant

⁷⁰ On permissive conditions, possibility spaces and the causal power of agency, see H.D. Soifer, *The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures*, in «Comparative Political Studies», 45 (December 2012), n. 12, pp. 1573-1574.

⁷¹ The best survey and analysis of these studies can be found in L. Bartels, *Democracy Erodes from Above: Citizens and the Challenge of Populism in Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023.

⁷² On Turkey, see D. Bechev, *Turkey Under Erdogan: How A Country Turned from Democracy and the West*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2022.

analysis of Tocqueville's ideas about political leadership, as effective «steersmen»⁷³.

Unfortunately, we will never know what Tocqueville might have said about populism – a phenomenon that conceivably might be linked to some of his observations about the nature of democratic politics, but is also related to developments he was not familiar with, e.g. the rise of political parties, universal-suffrage democracies and various modes of mass- or individualized communication. I would conjecture that Tocqueville would not be surprised by the fact that it was populist leaders that benefited from the potentialities inherent in the expanded possibility space that opened up in Eastern Europe after the completion of the accession process. He hoped that with the expansion of possibility spaces democracy-builders might prove to be more effective – but was well aware of the fact that democracy-disrupters might also enjoy certain advantages. Why is it that when the generative thought of joining Europe somehow «expired», populists prevailed?

To begin with, they have their own *pensée mère* – namely, that the proper way to think about politics is as an ongoing confrontation between «us», the virtuous people, and «them», corrupt elites⁷⁴. As we already saw, during the accession process the matrix of incentives and constraints was such that political elites had to moderate their actions and collaborate on a common project. In the post-accession era, these same elites were free to pursue more confrontational and polarizing policies – and the populist mantra that the people have been betrayed by immoral elites is an example of such a policy.

From a Tocquevillian point of view, there are at least three important reasons why the populist *pensée mère* might be particularly resonant in certain contexts: it appears to «the ideas, passions and feelings that bring together men»; it allows political entrepreneurs running electoral campaigns to redefine and control «the collective sentiment of well-being»; and it makes it possible to infuse in democratic politics «a sense of the exalted».

As we already saw, Tocqueville duly noted the role of self-interest properly understood in democratic politics. According to Hennis, however, the Frenchman

⁷³ W. Hennis, *Tocqueville's "New Political Science,"* in Id., *Politics as Practical Science*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 137, where the term "steersmen" is frequently used.

⁷⁴ C. Mudde-C.R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

also believed that «enduring relationships can only be built upon the ideas, passions, feelings that bind together men and women, even if in hatred. Where men are only bound together through self-interest and not through ideology, then it seems that human opinions form only a sort of intellectual dust which swirls in every direction, unable to settle or to find stability»⁷⁵. As Jan-Werner Müller cogently remarked, the populist rhetoric is always rooted in a type of «moralistic imagination». It thus enchants national politics as an arena where the forces of good clash with the forces of evil⁷⁶. The post-accession political landscape was therefore reshaped by rabble-rousers who defined the new *telos* of politics as democracy's protection against enemies, including malicious conspirators and deceitful manipulators speaking on behalf of science⁷⁷. Apparently many East Europeans who previously believed that it is in their self-interest properly understood to join Europe now found this *telos* worth pursuing.

The significance of the notion of “control over the sentiment of well-being” for Tocquevillian analysis is discussed by Dalmacio Negro in an insightful essay where he examines a well-known scenario: politicians who define well-being in materialistic terms may deliver the goods coveted by citizens – and then subvert freedom⁷⁸. For reasons explored above, during the accession period this sentiment was linked to the idea of full membership in the EU and therefore generated a momentum favoring further democratizations. Once full membership became a reality, the question of how the nation's well-being will be reconceptualized came to the fore of East European politics. Populist leaders had an answer to this question: what is necessary, they vociferously argued, is to reestablish the nation's sovereignty and to make sure that «the will of the people» is instantly turned into concrete policies⁷⁹. Naturally, some East European populists also resort to the tactics examined by Negro: they provide welfare benefits to large swaths of the population in order to boost their electoral chances⁸⁰. For the most part, however, they steered the issue of collective well-being towards sentiments such as national

⁷⁵ Hennis, *New Political Science* cit., p. 145.

⁷⁶ J.-W. Müller, *What is Populism?* Philadelphia, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

⁷⁷ C. Belloio, *An Inquiry Into Populism's Relation to Science*, in «Politics», 42 (August 2022), n. 3, pp. 1-15.

⁷⁸ D. Negro, *Virtue and Politics in Tocqueville*, in: E. Nolla (ed.), *Liberty, Equality, Democracy*, New York, New York University Press, 1992, p. 66.

⁷⁹ On how the interrelated notions of «popular sovereignty» and «the will of the people» are featured in populist rhetoric, see Müller, *What is Populism* cit. and W. Sadurski, *A Pandemic of Populists*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

⁸⁰ For an informative analysis of the Polish case, see P. Sadura-S. Sierakowski, *Political Cynicism: The Case of Poland*, Warsaw, Krytyka Polityczna, 2019.

pride and the feeling of “disenfranchisement” which political majorities feel when they cannot get what they want. Thus the question of the nation’s sovereignty was framed as an urgently needed emancipation of electoral majorities – and it is in the name of the emancipation that East European populists launched a sustained assault on the liberal anti-majoritarian components of East European constitutionalism that were fortified during the accession process: independent judiciaries, checks and balances, protection of individual and minority rights⁸¹.

Finally, in a post-accession context the mainstream politicians who effectively led their nations to full EU membership simply lost the capacity to excite voters – whereas populists proved quite adept at it. Hennis summarizes what Tocqueville thought about effective political «steering» in the following way: «what is important is the sense that man has for the exalted is preserved, that the withering of all feeling for the eminent is prevented»⁸². And, indeed, Tocqueville repeatedly underscored that democracy can only flourish if inspired citizens get mobilized in pursuit of shared ideas – which is why he lamented the fact that «we still have not discovered a social formula, nor any political ruse, which can turn a nation of small-minded and flabby citizens into one that is full of energy»⁸³. It is a safe bet that such a formula will never be discovered. But as one *pensée mère* gets supplanted by another certain political entrepreneurs are in a better position to generate political energies than others. We should not overlook the fact that the completion of the accession process was, in a sense, the «end of a journey» – and mainstream, pro-European politicians found it hard to explain what comes next in ways that «exalt» and sustain «feelings for the eminent». Their post-accession vision largely conjured up individuals taking advantage of the new opportunities provided by the free movement of people, ideas and capital in a unified Europe. Populists, in contrast, articulated a collectivist vision which featured «ordinary people» as defenders of moral values, treasured national identities and the unity of the virtuous. Temporarily, at least, some segments of East European electorates found this vision compelling.

In sum, the completion of the accession process marked the supersession of the *pensée mère* of joining Europe – and empowered political elites who could articulate a generative thought of their own. Such elites offered their own interpretation of contested concepts such as democracy, majority rule and the will of the people – and then proceeded to abandon the democratic practices established during the

⁸¹ Sadurski, *Poland’s Constitutional Breakdown* cit.

⁸² *Ivi*, p. 151.

⁸³ Quoted by Hennis, *New Political Science* cit., p. 151.

accession period and to engage in anti-liberal forms of politics. Tocqueville never explained what might happen when a generative thought exhausts its generative potential – but he knew that the preferences of democratic citizens fluctuate between what self-interest dictates and what the passions demand, that visions of a nation's collective well-being might be exploited by demagogues, and that, at times, democracy-generated energies might endanger democracy itself. That is why his insights remain valuable to analysts who try to comprehend why the entry into the EU marked the moment when some East European democracies began to rot.

4. A Short Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended the view that a Tocquevillian bricolage might help us come to grips with the zig-zagging pattern of democratization in postcommunist Eastern Europe. More specifically, I have offered a multi-faceted description of 1989 as a turning point in East European history, a contextualized explanation of the ensuing apprenticeship of liberty as it unfolded during the period when the former Soviet satellites were trying to «join Europe» and analysis of the entry into the EU as a critical juncture that empowered populist politicians.

Surely, many friends of liberal democracy will find the narrative I present disconcerting: democratic rot prevailed where democratic ripening occurred before. Should we therefore sink into the dark depths of democratic pessimism? I think Tocqueville would have advised against it. In his prison notebooks Carl Schmitt called Tocqueville «the greatest historian of the nineteenth century» and described him as «one of the vanquished: all forms of defeat converged on him, and not accidentally or only unluckily, but rather fatefully and existentially»⁸⁴. And, indeed, Tocqueville had every reason to despair as he watched the dark clouds of the future approach France, Europe and the world. And yet, towards the end of *Democracy in America*, having discussed the general idea that democracies who over-value equality are destined to abandon freedom, he makes the following statement: «If I had had this belief, I would not have written the work that you have just read; I would have limited myself to bemoaning in secret the destiny of my fellow men»⁸⁵. Those prone to bemoan the destiny of their fellow human beings will find it easy to construe recent developments in Eastern Europe and

⁸⁴ C. Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017, p. 26, 29.

⁸⁵ DA, vol. IV, ch. 7, p. 1277.

elsewhere as a validation of their general stance. Democratic backsliding did take place – East European countries did «go back to doing something bad» when they had been «doing something good» before. But Tocqueville’s overall view of politics as an open-ended spectacle, as well as the East European example of the 1990s and early 2000s, suggest that an equally compelling stance might also be warranted: even political communities that sometimes rally behind populist leaders who champion bad causes might start doing good things once again.