"Everyday Democracy": an ethnographic methodology for the evaluation of (de-) democratisation

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Abstract

Comparative democracy indices such as Freedom House Nations in Transit underpin many scholars' perceptions of democratic progress and backsliding. However, these fail to account empirically for practices of deliberation, a central concern in contemporary democratic theory. They also fail to address the ideational nature of emergent global challenges to democracy. This paper addresses these domains of empirical neglect by presenting an "Everyday Democracy" approach to democracy evaluation, an ethnographic methodology rooted in an engagement with democratic theory. Data collected in Serbia and Bulgaria is contrasted, revealing a more vibrant and contested public sphere in Serbia, which is usually graded as less democratic. This finding highlights the need for a reassessment of some assumptions that underpin ongoing debates about democratisation, 'backsliding' and the evaluation of democracy generally.

Keywords: Democracy measurement; Ethnography; Serbia; Bulgaria; Backsliding; Democratic Consolidation

The mainstream political science consensus that democracy is 'backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) would be impossible without the existence of trusted comparative indices that measure democratic progress and regression. However, as I seek to demonstrate, even the most sophisticated forms of quantified democracy measurement fail to properly engage with arguably *the* central concern of modern political theory, the idea that democracy is located principally in the making and re-making of democratic citizens, through 'talking politics'[1]. Theoretical neglect leads to empirical neglect, undermining the reliability of democracy indices.

In this paper I advocate an 'Everyday Democracy'[2] methodology (ED), a comparative ethnographic approach informed by democratic theory. While the analytical toolkit of ED is formulated with reference to contemporary democratic theorists' concerns with citizen participation, deliberation and pluralism, it translates easily to political science debates concerning democratic consolidation. Indeed, most classic definitions of democratic consolidation contain a cultural or attitudinal dimension (Schedler 1998), even if the suggested

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[1] Theories of democracy stressing citizens' deliberative practices include those of Hannah Arendt (1958), Jurgen Habermas (1989 [1962]) and may be considered dominant in political theory today. As John Dryzek (2005:218) notes, 'for contemporary democratic theorists, democracy is largely a matter of deliberation'.

[2] The label 'Everyday Democracy' is derived from 'Everyday Nationhood' (Fox & Miller Idriss 2008), a distinct methodological agenda that traces the everyday practices through which the nation is enacted and embodied (or deflected and ignored).

methodologies for measuring this dimension – public opinion and values surveys – are, as I argue further on, not necessarily reliable gauges of the vibrancy of democracy as experienced and enacted by citizens. A focus on citizens' political discussions can provide a more nuanced, fine-grained and contextually-sensitive evaluation of the degree to which liberal democratic institutions are '[embedded] in some kind of shared culture' (Blokker 2009: 2) – which I formulate as the key criterion of 'consolidation'.

Using data on Serbia and Bulgaria collected through extensive ethnographic fieldwork in 2011-12, I illustrate the analytical benefits of the ED approach, both to those seeking to understand dynamics specific to CEE and to scholars of liberal democracy generally, seeking evaluative criteria that can address the challenge posed by the global ascendance of illiberalism (Plattner 2017).

From the regional perspective, the findings point to the need for a reassessment of some assumptions that underpin ongoing debates about democratisation, 'backsliding' and 'deconsolidation' in CEE based on a top-down focus on formal institutions backed up by quantified indices. First, the Serbia-Bulgaria comparison suggests that the usual ranking of these countries which identifies Bulgaria as closer to democratic consolidation, is the wrong way around. The Bulgaria findings suggest that the picture for this newer EU member is less one of elite-led post-Accession deconsolidation and more – at the 'everyday' political-cultural level – one of illusory or non-consolidation. Second, the dominant understanding of the Western Balkans as a sub-region that has yet to fully emerge from its post-war transition and thus faces all of the 'usual problems' of CEE democratisation *as well as* particular problems relating to nationalist excess and violence is in need of revision. This reading of 'legacies' has blinded most comparativists to some well-studied comparative advantages that Yugoslav successor states had relative to East-Central European states like Bulgaria. These include the deeper roots of progressive civil society (inclusive of anti-nationalist, feminist movements) that find an echo in the presence of liberal-cosmopolitan identities in my Serbian data.

Regarding the global applicability of the methodology, one key difference ED makes is that the application of evaluative criteria derived from modern deliberative theory (rather than legal-institutional checklists) means that democracy may be considered vulnerable even when institutions seem stable. Consider our two cases for example. Despite Bulgaria having recently met the democratic conditionalities of the EU, neither it nor Serbia ultimately come close to the consolidation of liberal democracy in the political-cultural sense simply because illiberal norms are markedly dominant over liberal norms in both societies. ED thus tells us little about the institutional forms that exist, but it tells us a great deal about the ideas that people hold dear. Cases such as Hungary since 2010 and even USA since 2016 caution that the latter may be a better predictor of the medium-term health of liberal democracy, not least because institutional assaults in both can be seen as mere symptoms of the ascendance of illiberal norms. Both the experience of contemporary politics and the weight of contemporary democratic theory combine to suggest that it is time put the form and discursive content of public deliberation at the centre of how we evaluate liberal democracy.

The paper is organised as follows. First, I consider some limitations of quantified measurements of democracy focusing on the influential Freedom House *Nations in Transit* database. I then build on existing theories of the public sphere to construct a theoretical framework for the evaluation of actual, everyday practices of democracy, which I term the

Everyday Democracy approach. This merits of this approach are illustrated through data presented from a comparison of public sphere discussions in Serbia and Bulgaria collected through ethnographic fieldwork in 2011-12[3]. Accordingly, the concluding discussion elaborates upon the findings to highlight analytical implications of the ED approach for ongoing debates about democratic 'backsliding', 'de-consolidation' and the evaluation of democracy generally.

I.   The Limits of Quantified Democracy Measurement

How Freedom House Nations in Transit Evaluates Democracy

In this section, I analyse the methodology of one quantified democracy index in order to make a more general point: despite the outward complexity of some measures, the underlying ethos remains that of a legal-institutional checklist. This approach is inadequate for addressing the essentially ideational ('illiberal') challenges currently faced by both new and long-standing democracies.

Of the proliferation of democracy indices, Freedom House's regionally-specific database for CEE and Eurasia *Nations in Transit* (*NiT*) currently stands as most influential among scholars working on democracy in the region. *NiT* relies on expert testimony to provide fine-grained data that facilitates parsing the differences between states of the same basic regime-type in a way that statistically-oriented global databases like *Polity IV* and *Freedom in the World*, which round scores to whole numbers to provide clearer distinctions between regime-type, do not[4]. Even scholars focusing more on political-cultural rather than institutional dimensions of democracy frequently cite *NiT* democracy scores or the regime classifications that derive from them (Herman 2016, Dawson & Hanley 2016, Knott 2018 [this issue])[5].

NiT produces an annual 'Democracy Score' for each country by averaging the scores for seven categories: Electoral Processes, National Democratic Governance, Local Democratic Governance, Judicial Framework and Independence, Independent Media, Civil Society and Corruption. Each category is graded on a scale in which 7 denotes the 'lowest level of democratic progress' and 1 denotes the 'highest level of democratic progress'. Qualitative justifications for each category are written up by a country author – usually an academic or journalist from that country – and scores are moderated by FH's expert panel.

This grading methodology is, in essence, a describing-with-numbers approach. The scores gain their meaning in relation to other scores – firstly, of that same country in previous years, which suggests whether that country is democratising or backsliding, and secondly in relation to other

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[3] Some of this data was used in an earlier book-monograph that applied public sphere theory to advance arguments about the democratic cultures of these two countries (Dawson 2016). In this case however, the purpose is to model a replicable ED methodological approach for the benefit of comparativists engaged with measuring democracy generally.

[4] *Freedom in the World* gave identical scores to Serbia and Bulgaria in 2012 (2 for both Political Rights and Civil Liberties, hence 'Free') while *Polity IV* concurred with *NiT* (as we shall see), ranking Bulgaria higher at 9 and Serbia as 8 (both categorised as 'Democracy' where 10 is a 'Full Democracy').

[5] V-Dem, a newer database which also relies on expert-testimony, is slightly more closely informed by democratic theory in that one of the five indices it produces is a 'Deliberative Component Index' (of which 20% of the country score is calculated based on expert judgement of societal engagement ['Engaged Society']). However, I focus instead on *NIT*, first because it remains more widely used by scholars and second because (unlike *NiT*) V-Dem does not yet supply country-specific annual reports with qualitative justifications.

countries, which tells us if it is a 'leader' or 'laggard'. There are also, however, regime categorisations for absolute democracy score values: countries with an overall score of below 3 are designated 'Consolidated Democracies', between 3 and 4, 'Semi-Consolidated Democracies' and so forth all the way to 'Consolidated Autocracies' between 6 and 7. These categorisations, while arguably a reasonable first approximation of regime-type, are however, not transparently anchored in any specific theory of consolidation.

How Serbia and Bulgaria Compare According to Nations in Transit

I now turn to examine two case-study countries. Figure 1 below shows the Democracy Scores of both countries for the years 2003-12, chosen to reflect the period before and after Bulgaria's EU accession, up to and including the year of fieldwork (2011-12). Bulgaria was considered to be doing rather better than Serbia. The annual gradings show that Bulgaria democratised rapidly as the date of its EU Accession (2007) approached, closing in from 3.38 in 2003 to 2.86 in 2008 after which it has been backsliding. It briefly earned the designation of "consolidated democracy" on the eve of Accession as it dipped below 3 in 2006 before slipping to the status of "semi-consolidated democracy" by 2009, where it remained, standing at 3.14 by 2012. Serbia, by contrast, remained stably semi-consolidated through that decade, moving only slightly from 3.83 in 2004 (the first year for which Serbia is listed separately from Montenegro) to 3.64 in 2012.

FIGURE 1: Democracy scores 2003 -2012

[FIGURE 1 TO GO HERE]

Crucially, there was a gap of at least 0.5 between both countries throughout that period, with Bulgaria keeping pace with – and for a time catching up on - the group labelled as 'New EU Members' (occupying the range from 1.89 to 3.43 in 2012) and Serbia at home among those non-EU states grouped under the label 'The Balkans' (occupying the range from 3.61 to 5.18 in 2012)[6]. Overall, the gradings, and the relative gaps between clustered groups of countries, have remained remarkably stable over this period.

The trajectories mapped out by *NiT*'s annual gradings have been echoed by prevailing comparative political science narratives of democratisation (and backsliding) in CEE. Bulgaria and other 2004-7 accession states are generally considered to have benefited from a peaceful transition after which local political elites responded positively to the incentives of conditionality. It became common for scholars to write of Bulgaria's 'democratic consolidation' around the time of EU Accession and just beyond (Krastev 2007:55, Smilov 2010). Once it became clear in *NiT*'s scores that the institutional gains were being steadily eroded, the country was presented as deconsolidating. This was attributed to the corrupt actions of newly-disinhibited elites, albeit to some degree tempered by special post-accession conditionalities applied to Bulgarian and Romania (Spendzharova & Vachudova 2012, Ganev 2013).

For its part, the stagnation of Serbia's *NiT* democracy scores keeps it among its fellow low achievers in 'The Balkans' and is congruent with the narrative of a separate sub-region that is

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[6] As of the 2017 scores, showing Bulgaria at 3.29 and Serbia at 3.82, this gap is maintained.

implicitly held to struggle with all the usual pathologies of post-communist democratisation (populism, clientelism, corrupt elites) as well as particular problems of an uncompleted post-conflict transition, still mired in nationalist excess (Ekiert et al 2007: 28). A more subtle endorsement of *NiT*'s grading of Serbia is that the country is most often rejected as a suitably similar case for comparison among small n studies of democratisation in CEE, with some authors explicitly disqualifying the country based on its participation in recent wars (Elster, Offe & Preuss 1998, Stroschein 2012). Thus, most studies confirming Serbia's weak democratic trajectory either study the country alone (Edmunds 2009) or compare it with other Western Balkan cases (Ramet 2011).

The Limits of Legal-Institutional Evaluation

While *NiT*'s inclusion of categories such as 'Independent Media' and 'Civil Society' reveals an underlying concern with citizen participation in political life beyond the ballot box, the evaluations prioritize institutional form and legal accommodation over deliberative practices.

The underlying ethos is revealed in the qualitative justifications for the scores, such as this paragraph on Civil Society in Bulgaria for 2012:

> The civic sector in Bulgaria is well regulated, generally free to develop its activities, and well established as a partner both to the state and to the media. However, the ability of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to raise funds domestically remains limited, impeding the emergence of rich feedback links between NGOs and local communities. The absence of specific regulations for lobbying activities also creates a space for dubious practices and hinders the ability of civil actors to effectively express and pursue the interests of various segments of society. *Therefore, Bulgaria's civil society rating remains unchanged at 2.50* (Freedom House 2012b; emphasis in original).

The authors begin by applauding the regulation of the 'civic sector', which is 'generally free to develop its activities'. However, they then concede that a lack of funding means that the development of 'feedback loops between NGOs and local communities' is impeded. It can be deduced from this that civic participation in public life is, in fact, not very widespread beyond the employees of NGOs. If the reader requires more detail, a longer paragraph is provided later, where it is recorded that among 5302 registered NGO, "267 defined their basic activity as related to environmental issues, 191 as related to human rights, 137 as related to ethnic issues, and 77 as related to women and gender issues […] most of which appear to be active". This at least gives some indication of the range of interests and identities represented in the country's NGO sphere, some of which evidently identify their purpose in terms of a liberal discourse of social advocacy ('ethnic', 'gender') and human rights. However, as we are not actually told about the character of any specific activities or campaigns, the listing serves little purpose besides giving weight to the initial (legal) claim that the sector 'is generally free to develop its activities'.[7]

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[7] As of 2016, the online presentation format of the Country Reports changed to the extent that a greater emphasis was placed on justifications for changing scores, inevitably meaning that specific political events were given more prominence than stable legal frameworks. This is welcome, yet the overall ethos appears to be unchanged: to compare like-for-like, Bulgaria's first Civil Society paragraph for that year focused on the 'institutionalisation' of NGOs and a paragraph-long description of the NGO legal framework fills the third paragraph (Freedom House 2016).

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Although *NiT* scores are compiled on the basis of expert opinion, these opinions are evidently based upon concerns with institutional procedures and legal freedoms, rather than actual practice. While informative about the notional possibilities available to civic actors, this approach leaves many questions unanswered with respect to the actual contours of political practice. Does the fact that the NGO sector is 'free to develop its activities' mean that it actually uses this freedom to challenge existing bases of power in the country or to reinforce them? Or is the over-riding pattern, as Spendzharova & Vachudova (2012) find, that many NGOs are established by parliamentarians themselves to hoover up EU funds? Are the 77 'gender' groups spreading feminist ideas that challenge patriarchal norms or religious ideas that cement them? Even allowing for the accompanying qualitative commentaries, it is not at all clear that *NiT* allows its authors to make the judgements necessary to address these questions. Indeed, this approach could potentially lead to the recognition of democratic progress (even of 'democratic consolidation') on the basis of relatively superficial legal-institutional reforms - and the non-recognition of democracy where practices of deliberation and contestation abound.

II.   An "Everyday Democracy" Framework

Recognising (Lack of) Democracy in the Public Sphere

To some extent, the flaws of *NiT* can be mitigated simply by providing richer qualitative descriptions, sufficient to address substantive questions of actual practice (such as those raised above) and ultimately to supply more coherent judgements on the component parts of the democratic whole. However, the very notion of measuring democracy according to legal-institutional checklists itself harks back to the 'procedural minimum' definitions of democracy developed by Robert Dahl (1973) and his followers (notably Schmitter & Karl 1991). An engagement with democratic theory as it has developed in the intervening decades instead suggests that we really ought to be looking for 'democracy' through deliberative practices that do not map onto such checklists. Unlike institutionalist approaches, moreover, the analysis of deliberative practices can address ideational ('illiberal') challenges to democracy.

The burgeoning normative and empirical literature on the public sphere provides an analytical toolkit for the task of evaluating and comparing deliberative practices (and everyday practices in particular) through which democratic citizens – and hence publics – are constituted.

The concept of the 'public sphere' was popularized through the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989 [1962]). In rough terms, Habermas conceptualized the public sphere as the aggregation of numerous sites across society in which citizens gather to discuss the public matters of the day. These sites are neither 'private' social contexts such as the family home nor hierarchical, formal institutional settings such as workplaces (or most political parties) but a 'third setting' for conversation with three main characteristics: 'participation is optional, potentially open to all and potentially egalitarian' (Eliasoph 1998: 11). This 'third setting' is found in the manifold contexts in which people voluntarily spend time together: through sport and leisure activities, workplace canteens, civic associations, informal religious gatherings such as coffee mornings, in drinking establishments and so on.

The existence of a vibrant public sphere of discussion is vital for democracy for two key reasons. Firstly, access to public sphere debate is a condition for the transformation of atomized subjects into democratic citizens who understand and care about more than just their private lives. Secondly, it is only through participation in public sphere discussion that citizens

articulate their identities and interests together in ways that can lead to collective action (Arendt 1958), including (but not limited to) informed collective decision-making.

Everyday talk can only be understood as the deliberation of citizens when conversation is directed at a circle of concern wider than the individual lives of participants and their acquaintances. It is through the reflexive awareness of participants that other, similar conversations are taking place across the shared territory of concern that citizens come to understand themselves as belonging to a public (Habermas 1989). This reflexive awareness may be exhibited in simple ways. As Lisa Wedeen (2008) has argued, even discussing national newspaper reports that refer to events remote from the local context of the speaker contributes to the constitution of a public that is recognizably national in scope. This could apply to discussions of soap operas or football matches as much as to politics.

Once the reflexive awareness of shared community is achieved, it becomes possible to imagine the role of public sphere discussion in constructing civic power, which occurs at the everyday level when speakers discuss matters of public concern with reference to normative principles, or articulate identities in common, form solidarities[8]. It is therefore through the observation of everyday discursive acts including, especially, speech acts, that the public sphere may be encountered empirically, and its vibrancy gauged.

These definitions of the public sphere suggest why public opinion and values surveys will typically fail to adequately address the formation of democratic publics. As Michael Warner has argued, it is only through reference to discourse that the existence of publics may be postulated; hence being a member of a public is not analogous to being a member of a community or group on the basis of ascriptive criteria. So, while discourse may be observed either through reference to cultural artifacts ('shows', 'books') or ethnographically ('opinions produced'), it may not be observed by reference to 'objectivist' criteria such as census categories or voting patterns (Warner 2002:54).

From this it follows that neither the vibrancy nor the discursive content of the public sphere may be reliably gauged from survey methodologies, which are dependent upon the question choices of the researcher, and, in the case of cross-national surveys like the World Values Survey, devised remotely from the discursive contexts they appropriate (see Schaffer 2014). Furthermore, as Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller Idriss (2008) argue, surveys may thus be seen as a methodology that prompts respondents to inform researchers what they *can* do or what choice they would make *when prompted*. Yet if we wish to find out what people (and hence societies) *actually do* in the course of their everyday lives, we need to employ 'wait-and-see' techniques such as participant observation.

A Deliberation-Based Conception of Liberal Democratic Consolidation

While some political scientists working on new democracies considered attitudinal or political-cultural dimensions of democracy as part of their criteria for consolidation (overview in Schedler 1998), none came close to matching the pre-eminent focus on the deliberative practices that constitute public spheres (and thus political cultures) demanded by modern political theory.

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[8] Arendt (1958) uses the terms 'civic power' and 'solidarity' almost interchangeably.

So how can we recognise liberal democracy in the deliberative practices of citizens? Chantal Mouffe gives an eloquent definition of liberal democratic citizenship that provides an answer to this question.

> [Liberal democratic principles constitute] a 'grammar' of political conduct… [This] implies seeing citizenship not as a legal status but as a form of identification, a type of political identity: something to be constructed, not empirically given. Since there will always be competing interpretations of the democratic principles of equality and liberty there will therefore be competing interpretations of democratic citizenship. (Mouffe 1991: 75)

In this view, liberal democracy itself becomes recognizable through reference to the embodiment of liberal principles, specifically freedom and equality, in the practices (including the words) of agents.

How can we tell, from this bottom-up perspective, when liberal democratic institutions are 'likely to endure' (O'Donnell 1996), which is to say, become consolidated? I start by recognising with Paul Blokker (2009: 1-4) that the familiar institutional forms of liberal democracy are the historical realization of liberal ideas. From this it follows that liberal democratic institutions can only be expected to endure over time when they are staffed by officials and approached by citizens who both understand and identify with the principles enshrined in them – liberty (freedom), political equality, and their derivatives like the separation of powers, respect for pluralism and so on.

By this understanding, liberal democratic consolidation may be achieved when the institutions – or rather the principles underpinning them - are embedded in 'some kind of shared culture' (Blokker 2009:1). To be more specific, I will consider liberal democracy to be consolidated when a *prevailing mass of citizens* have attained the will and capacity to uphold these same liberal principles. By 'prevailing' I mean only that liberal-democratic norms ought to be dominant in the public sphere in comparison to competing normative standards. Such competing normative frameworks will usually involve some combination of illiberal ethnic exclusivist, socially conservative or pro-authoritarian discourses. When this condition is met, a given society may be considered 'consolidated' in the sense that any attempt to erode liberal democratic norms and the institutions that derive from them is liable to meet sustained mass public resistance. The endurance of liberal democracy in such contexts is never guaranteed but may be considered (to use O'Donnell's appropriately indeterminate term) likely.

Recognising Pluralism: Publics and Counterpublics

Following critics of Habermas's original conceptualization of a singular public sphere (Habermas 1989), I regard the existence of a plurality of discursively-constructed publics as a necessary condition of pluralistic and inclusive debate. In response to actual inequalities of access, 'oppositional counterpublics' have repeatedly constituted 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1992: 123). The absence of such counterpublics - as when a 'national consensus' holds with respect to collective identities and interests - usually masks the frustrations of a diverse society (Mouffe 1999). A national public sphere that is more open and permissive will therefore tend to be composed of recognisable publics and counterpublics.

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This point is particularly relevant in CEE, where national states were often treated as the property of titular ethnic majorities both by (most) late Communist regimes and (most) democratic governments of right and left that emerged after 1989 (Brubaker 1996). In this context, we find not only that minority voices struggle to find expression in the mainstream of public debate (see Cianetti 2018, this issue), but also that liberal challenges to ethnic-exclusivist visions of politics are recognisable as a distinct alternative to the (sometimes tacitly) illiberal mainstream (for Serbia, see Edmunds 2009). However, events such as Donald Trump's election in the USA and the result of the Brexit referendum in the UK (both in 2016) arguably demonstrate that analogous ethnic-majoritarian norms are also ascendant in long-standing democracies.

Methodology: Exploring Everyday Democracy

The findings presented in this paper result from the analysis of many hundreds of interactions gathered through over twelve months of participant observation and two-dozen group discussions divided equally between the cities of Niš, Serbia (population 255,000) and Plovdiv, Bulgaria (pop. 338,000) between January 2011 and May 2012[9]. By avoiding the wealth and information-access extremes of capital cities and depopulated rural areas, I settled on these large provincial cities as settings in which one might expect deliberative practices in the public sphere to be neither particularly advanced nor undeveloped. Since most existing studies and measures of democratization (including those of Freedom House) use the national state as the unit of analysis, it is necessary to frame such locally-rooted studies of the public sphere in national terms to bring my findings into dialogue with these approaches.

My sampling strategy aimed to access a maximal range of viewpoints within the chosen cities. Having been aided in my initial entry to the field by colleagues and students at the university departments that hosted me, I subsequently joined practically every non-academic voluntary association that would accept me as a member including a mountaineering club, a sports club, a cultural NGO and a careers office (Niš) as well as a language school, a dance class, an environmental NGO and a running club (Plovdiv). Of course, my fieldnotes were supplemented by innumerable interactions with landlords, neighbours, youth hostel staff and friends.

Following Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox & Grancea (2006) group discussions were sampled to achieve both informal communication and maximal diversity of the overall sample. The former aim dictated that discussions consisted of pre-existing groups of friends or colleagues convened in groups of four or five over food and drinks. I used snowball sampling to eventually convene twelve groups in each city from participants equally balanced by gender and organized into three non-overlapping age cohorts (18-25, 30-40 and over 55s). Each age cohort consisted of four groups that were distinct from each other in terms of social composition. All of the group discussions were conducted in Serbo-Croatian or Bulgarian as appropriate, as generally were fieldwork interactions, excepting those occasions when my interlocutors spoke English better than I spoke their native tongue.

III.   Serbia and Bulgaria Re-Contrasted

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[9] The main periods of fieldwork data collection were carried out between January and July 2011 in Niš and between July and December 2011 in Plovdiv. I returned to each city for a week in May 2012, the time of parliamentary elections in Serbia.

Analysing Serbia and Bulgaria from a bottom-up "everyday democracy" perspective yields some surprising and counter-intuitive findings.

The data is divided into two sections for each city: 'Participation', based on participant observation data of everyday life and 'Content and Scope of Democratic Debate', based on group discussion transcripts.

Participation: The Political Character of Everyday Life in Serbia

A significant contrast between the public spheres of these two countries is simply that public matters were discussed far more frequently during the six months of participant observation in Niš, Serbia than they were in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. In other words, the democratic public sphere was a much more pronounced feature of everyday life as encountered, unprompted through participant observation in Serbia than in Bulgaria.

Everyday life in the Serbian city was replete with numerous examples of situations through which citizens chose to, in Arendt's formulation, 'make their appearance in the world' through the medium of political discussion (Arendt 1958). At various times, this came in the form of serving and pensioned army officers angrily identifying each other as 'you democrats' and 'you nationalists' as they debated who lost the wars of the 1990s over the course of a countryside hike or in 30-something friends (male and female) sharing videos of nationalist Serbian Progressive Party supporters struggling with escalators in Belgrade. While the points I heard were not always fair or serious and voices were frequently raised, principled political participation was hard to miss in Niš. My fieldnotes are filled with so many informants' theories – both credible and wildly idiosyncratic - explaining Serbia's political trajectory that it is impossible to record them here. Finding political argumentation was less of a problem than finding refuge from it.

Participation: The Elusive Public Sphere in Bulgaria

In Plovdiv, Bulgaria, by contrast, the public sphere was such an elusive social object that it remained difficult, even after several months of close acquaintance to characterise the political convictions of those I encountered in the field. With the exception of a small number of my academic colleagues in the city - who tended to identify with the pro-European right - most of my informants remained better known to me as Manchester United fans, computer programmers or budding entrepreneurs, while evidently investing very little of themselves in political debates. This was in spite of the fact that the main fieldwork period in Plovdiv in the latter half of 2011 coincided with bitter and closely contested simultaneous national (presidential) and local election campaigns.

The pattern of the Plovdiv fieldwork usually served to bear out Nancy Fraser's contention that 'politics could be hidden in almost any topic' (Fraser 1987).

It is not easy to recount how politics is 'hidden', but one interaction from the fieldwork period should suffice to illustrate the contrast with the Serbian data. I had initiated a discussion of gender equality at a café with two women I knew in their early 30s (university educated, office workers). The first declared boldly that she was sure she had never been discriminated against because she was a woman. Probing further, I responded that I had read that women in the country were paid much less than men despite the higher educational attainment and foreign-language skills of young women. This reference to statistics moved the first woman to concede,

"You know so much about these things, but I have barely thought about them…" Seeking to bring the conversation back to the level of personal experience, I added that I knew of a few cases in which young women had taken jobs as waitresses in which the first two weeks' work were designated as 'training' and therefore unpaid, allowing the (usually male) owner-boss to find a reason to dismiss them once they started getting paid. Prompted by this example, both said they had had similar experiences.

The first woman had a particularly striking story to relate. Answering a female-specific job advertisement for a 'personal assistant', she had arrived at the interview venue to find it staffed by young women 'dressed for a nightclub'. An elderly man arrived to interview her identifying himself as 'Uncle [name withheld]'. He explained that the job was in the 'entertainment industry' and that he would show her a promotional video. As she had already started to guess, the precise industry was the making of pornographic films, one of which was now being shown to her, and the job available was for that of a pornographic actress. Shortly after she had refused the 'Uncle's' request for her to turn around for him, she made her excuses and left.

Having told the story with a sense of amusement at the absurdity of it rather than with any sense of anger, she returned to the question of the position of women in Bulgaria. She clarified that she did not regard the women working at the 'Uncle's' establishment as victims, joking about them having 'talents' she did not. I asked whether she felt it was wrong that she had been lured to a pornographic industry interview on false pretences and she conceded that that it was. As was sometimes the case when I felt moved to 'prompt' Bulgarian informants to consider the intersection of politics with their lives, the response revealed not any principled conservatism (or 'anti-feminism' in this case) but the curiosity of someone being exposed to new ideas: she certainly seemed less convinced that she had never been discriminated against than at the start of our conversation. However, the character of this interaction also tells us something important about the scarcity of the 'political' in Bulgarian public life: an intelligent and well-educated person had gone through a life in which quite egregious examples of gender discrimination abounded without making any connection between the personal and political. Her case was far from isolated.

The Content and Scope of Democratic Debate in Serbia and Bulgaria

If the research problem of participation (in the public sphere) is best studied through the 'wait-and-see' technique of participant observation, then the use of (gently) 'prompting' techniques like peer group discussions allows for consideration of the discursive content of the respective public spheres.

As such, this section will present some excerpts from group discussion transcripts to demonstrate the following key claim: that only in Serbia was there a distinct and sociologically-detectable counterpublic that identified strongly with universalist principles underpinning liberal democracy including ideas that actually challenged illiberal norms such as nationalism and social conservatism. In Niš, Serbia this 'liberal-cosmopolitan' counterpublic helped to structure the entire political landscape as one polarized between 'hard' liberal and hard nationalist poles such that it exerted some pull even on less politically-engaged citizens occupying a more fudged centre ground in which liberal and illiberal norms not only coexisted but competed. In Plovdiv, Bulgaria by contrast, I found that, in the absence of any clear philosophically-consistent challenge to either illiberal nationalism or social conservatisms, all

parts of the sociological spectrum were characterised by the cohabitation of liberal and illiberal norms, ultimately favouring the latter.

The most efficient way to demonstrate this key difference is to juxtapose just one group discussion excerpt from each city. This specific data presentation strategy is preferred to the more obvious strategy of quoting from a 'cross-section' of groups[10] because it is only through the presentation of extended interactions that the reader is able to discern the ways in which isolated statements cohere (or not) with over-arching normative commitments.

The first is chosen from what I characterise as a 'liberal-cosmopolitan' discussion from the Niš groups. Given that the entire public sphere in Plovdiv was characterised by the eclipse of liberal by illiberal ethics, I use an excerpt from the Plovdiv group discussion whose participants were most sociologically similar to those of the chosen Niš group. In both cases the featured discussions are those of gender-mixed, university-educated groups in which participants are (mostly) in their thirties. All informants' names have been changed.

Serbia: A Liberal-Cosmopolitan Counterpublic

The featured Niš discussion took place in March 2011, at a time when the opposition nationalist Serbian Progressive Party were trying to force early elections to unset the incumbent Democratic Party-led coalition. The four speakers – including Darko (male, late 20s, a bookseller) and Danica (female, late 20s, unemployed) who do not pass comment below – have all explicitly identified against nationalist and socially-conservative visions of politics that they associate with 'the 1990s' (the Milošević-era). All have for some time been discussing the numerous failures of the serving Democratic Party-led government that they feel has largely failed to advance liberal democracy in the country.

> Uroš (M, early 30s, English teacher): The problem here is that the institutions aren't independent of the ruling group. The institutions in this country are devastated. The army and the police...
>
> JD (author): The Ombudsman?
>
> Jelena (F, early 30s, freelance translator): The Ombudsman is the only institution functioning in this country! The Ombudsman, and Commissioner [for Information of Public Importance] Sabić, and Verica Barac who's head of the Anti-Corruption Council. This is an independent state body, and she's been warning the public for months and years about all the illegal things the tycoons have done, and yesterday there was this tycoon complaining about her, and [Democratic Party] Prime Minister Cvetković took his side saying: Right, let's see why she's bothering him...
>
> Uroš: What about that Marko Karadžić, the secretary to the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights ... how long was he there? He talked about such things in public two or three times and they finished with him.
>
> Jelena: No, he resigned himself, saying he could not work under such conditions. He said: I don't want to receive a salary, I'm here to do my job and that's human rights, but the Minister is sabotaging me... They made a mess of those elections for National

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[10] While apparently more 'representative', a cross-section approach requires just as much care and contextualisation on the part of the author to represent fairly as the more selective approach presented here.

(minority) Councils in Sandžak and now they are trying to organize new elections, and that was what enraged [Chief Mufti of Islamic Community in Serbia] Zukorlić and his people...

Uroš: And this is where we are supposed to see the strength of the state. Not in the current government and people in power, but in the institutions, in the mechanisms that govern a state towards a better future and shouldn't depend on who's in power... We don't have that. Here the police are always loyal to whoever is in power.

Overall, this is a discussion characterised by disappointment and cynicism. Though my question about the Ombudsman institution allows Jelena to express her support for public officials she sees as sincerely defending democracy and civil rights, she adds, grimly, that the corruption of politicians like prime minister Cvetković will undermine their ability to carry out their briefs. Uroš agrees, returning to his theme of the capture of institutions by the 'ruling group'.

Taken at face value, this discussion does not present a heartening picture. However, if we accept the claim that citizens can only uphold liberal democratic institutions when they both understand and identify with the principles enshrined in them, this transcript provides evidence that the large provincial city of Niš contains citizens (of very modest means) able to do this very well. Uroš' complaints about the lack of independence of the army and the police from the 'ruling group' reveals an understanding of – and support for - the liberal 'separation of powers' model of democracy. Jelena's defence of the Ombudsman institution reveals informed support for the work of public officials with mandates to regulate and sometimes to provide a check upon the actions of elected politicians – a characteristic anti-majoritarian feature of liberal democracy. Similarly, Jelena's unusually sympathetic interpretation of the grievances of 'Zukorlić and his people' reveals a rejection of the 'us' and 'them' language of illiberal nationalism.

While there is considerable anger in the exchanges, the fact that it is directed very specifically at corrupt politicians and powerful tycoons rather than at 'politics' in general or all targets at once reveals consistent support for the institutional checks and balances that powerful figures are seen as undermining. This is ultimately an exchange in which identifiable liberals are attacking the politicians who nominally represent their own side for failing to uphold the norms they hold dear.

Bulgaria: Conflation of Liberal and Illiberal Norms

The Plovdiv discussion was recorded in November 2011, at a time when the ruling right-wing GERB party had just triumphed in the presidential and local elections. This excerpt is taken from an early part of the conversation and is included because it reveals the categories of understanding speakers employ when specific political events are subsequently discussed.

Bozhidar (M, mid 30s, office worker): We are too tolerant and patient as a nation, we prefer waiting patiently, one day comes and another day passes by, but we just sit where we are and there is no progress.

JD (author): If people in Bulgaria were more like the Greeks then, if they were protesting, would the situation be better now?

Aneta (F, late 30s, Owner of cosmetics business): I do not know, only a few things bother me in Bulgaria.

Mladen (M, early 40s, electronic engineer): The Serbs are the same way. There is no surprise they were bombed in the '90s and now they live a better life than us. As a nation they are more united. We are more individualist. I do not know whether this is good or not.

Vili (F, late 20s, sales engineer[11]): Everywhere it is the same. I think it more depends on what kind of person you are.

Aneta: What do you mean by saying it is the same everywhere?

Vili: I mean, in Europe you cannot go protesting in the street like that. In Europe things just do not work that way. It just depends on you, whether you are an individualist or not.

Aneta: Only the laws bother me in Bulgaria. I want my country to have strict law and order.

Mladen: No one abides by the laws here. The fact is that laws exist, but no one cares about them.

Aneta: In neighbourhoods like Stolipinovo [the site of Plovdiv's and Bulgaria's largest Roma ghetto] there are no laws. From my point of view, that annoys me very much.

Mladen: It annoys me too.

Aneta: It is unbelievable. When I was young and I had a baby, my husband and I were both university graduates. One day we went to a market in Plovdiv, I do not want to say its name now, and we saw that there were new flats built for the Gypsies. And we lived in lodgings and paid rent and I wondered how to make ends meet and we both had higher education. They get their electricity, water bills and everything paid because when the elections come along, they vote for who they have to and I vote for who I want to.

Mladen: Their bills for electricity and water are still being paid by the government.

Aneta: This is what happens to us – we are educated people and receive nothing. The youth of Bulgaria go abroad to study and remain to live abroad. This makes me angry, because I want my child to live here.

This exchange certainly bears the imprint of the Western-led liberal international order within which Bulgarian citizens (like Serbian citizens) are compelled to understand their place in the world. There are prominent references to the rule of law, the norm of individual autonomy and the exemplar of [Western] Europe. However, a closer reading reveals that such liberal norms are consistently blended with and ultimately eclipsed by illiberal ones.

Three of the four speakers (Bozhidar, Mladen and Aneta) explicitly describe the world as being composed of discrete nations with their own essential characteristics. Bozhidar begins the

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[11] 'Vili' identifies with both her Bulgarian citizenship and her Armenian ethnic background at various times in the recording.

discussion by invoking the popular Bulgarian auto-stereotype of 'tolerance/passivity' ("We are too tolerant… as a nation"), holding back the national interest in a competitive world (Rechel 2007). It is in this context that renders Mladen's comments about the 'more united' Serbs intelligible. Vili evidently hopes to challenge such generalisations by invoking the positive exemplar of 'Europe', but her description of Europe as a place where "you cannot go protesting on the street like that" invokes an authoritarian image. Indeed, Vili's interjection only really serves to cement the characteristically illiberal notion introduced by Bozhidar and Mladen that progress is achieved when everyone is compelled to pull in the same direction. Similarly, Aneta's evident concern for the law eventually segues into an attack on the Roma, whom she depicts as a deviant national 'other', using up resources that she would rather see go to more deserving Bulgarians. The language of liberal democracy is present, but the speakers ultimately provide no indication that they would or could uphold the specific principles it embodies in any way analogous to the Serbian group.

Indeed, when it came to discussing recent local political events, there was no cause to revise this assessment. Asked about the recent local elections, Vili and Mladen agreed – plausibly - that the elections were 'bought', but damned all politicians equally. While Vili's statements did not communicate any alternative vision of the good (beyond the implied less systematically corrupt version of the present), Mladen declared that he much preferred the system 'before November 10th 1989, never have voted and never will vote'. Aneta, despite her indignation at Roma selling their votes, cheerily declared that she voted for the ruling right-wing GERB party's candidate to 'get more money for Plovdiv!' When Mladen protested that GERB had been publicly withholding millions of euros compensation to Plovdiv for the disposal of the capital's garbage as part of their feud with the previous non-GERB led local administration, Aneta reiterated her rationale:

> "My choice was deliberate – economic. I thought about how we could have the money for the city in which I live. Plovdiv was facing the danger of becoming a huge dunghill for Sofia."

Aneta's embrace of clientelism was the minority position in this group, as it was in my sample overall. However, while the Serbian group were linked by a shared liberal-cosmopolitan identity that – despite cynicism about the real-life working of democracy - allowed them to hold politicians to account in a way that supported the liberal democratic system, none of the Bulgarian speakers in the equivalent discussion were able to draw on any analogous guiding principle – save perhaps vague hopes for national unity.

Illiberal mainstreams, contested and uncontested

In presenting these group discussion excerpts, I have aimed not to show 'typical' political talk in either location but to showcase the existence of what I characterise as a liberal-cosmopolitan 'counterpublic' in Niš, Serbia organised around discourses of constitutionalism, political equality, ethnic and social inclusion. These will be the normal registers of political discussion for a significant minority of Serbia's urban populations, amounting to perhaps half a million people nationally out of a population of over seven million. The availability of liberal-cosmopolitan ideas in the Serbian public sphere provides this sociologically significant minority with a conceptual language that allows them to hold elites to account in a way supportive of liberal democracy. Furthermore, the articulation of such distinct liberal ideas in everyday life promotes an awareness of challenges to illiberal nationalist and socially

conservative ideas even among less politically-engaged citizens who will never take the time to work out what the separation of powers is supposed to mean or what an 'Ombudsperson' is supposed to do. In other words, the effects of liberal-cosmopolitan values will not be limited to those who hold them.

In Plovdiv, Bulgaria (a more consolidated democracy according to *NiT*) by contrast, no shared popular discourse has emerged even among younger and more educated groups with which citizens can challenge the nationalist, socially-conservative orthodoxies in which mainstream political discourse (in both countries) is still grounded. The *de facto* hegemony of conservative ideas meant that philosophical conflict is avoided at the cost of the elimination of 'meaningful pluralism' (Mouffe 1999). Attempts to hold elites to account in the name of 'Europe' or 'democracy' generally fall flat because few can tie these labels to specific norms underpinning liberal democratic institutions. This seemed to be changing when mass protests filled the streets of central Sofia through much of 2013, the protesters attacking the oligarchic corruption of politics in explicitly pro-European terms. However, several aspects of the protests – from the preoccupation with attacking 'Communists' that segued into open attacks on the poor (Stoyanova 2016) to the failure to challenge the ethnically-exclusive assumptions underpinning mainstream Bulgarian politics (Dawson 2016: 188-9) – revealed the limits of Sofian civil society's embrace of liberalism. In the country at large, moreover, explicit liberal challenges to nationalist and socially conservative ideas remain rare and lacking in public support[12].

To summarise, the dominant discourses in both societies were ones in which liberal norms coexisted uneasily with, and were generally subtly overpowered by, illiberal norms. In the sense that liberal-democratic norms are emphatically not privileged by a prevailing mass of citizens, neither Serbia nor Bulgaria come close to being 'consolidated liberal democracies' at the time of the study. Comparatively however, the Serbian public sphere was found to be more vibrant, more contested and more liberal than that of its Bulgarian counterpart.

IV.   How "Everyday Democracy" Challenges Backsliding Debates

In this paper, I have argued for an Everyday Democracy approach: an evaluative ethnographic methodology informed by some key concerns of modern democratic theorists: deliberation, participation, pluralism. At the end of this section, I explore the implications of ED for evaluating democracy in the global context. Before that however, I use the specific findings of the comparison between Bulgaria and Serbia to illustrate how this approach can challenge assumptions underpinning debates concerning 'backsliding' and 'deconsolidation' in CEE.

First, my findings strongly suggest that the ranking of these countries in quantified databases is the wrong way round. In particular, Bulgaria's democratic progress was systematically overestimated over the decade prior to the fieldwork. *NiT*'s scores recorded that Bulgaria democratised rapidly up to the point of EU accession, meeting the criteria to be categorised as a 'consolidated democracy' by *NiT* from 2006-8, since when it has been steadily deteriorating.

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[12] The Bulgarian response to the (mostly Syrian) refugee influx since 2015 provides a more recent illustration of illiberal dominance even in pro-European circles (BBC 2016), while Serbian responses have been more mixed, inclusive of both public hostility and widespread acts of solidarity, including a great many Belgraders who opened their homes to refugees ("Roundtable on the refugee crisis in Europe", University College London, 15 September 2015).

However, my ED data on Bulgaria's restricted and generally anaemic public sphere tells a different story. If liberal democratic consolidation requires its norms to prevail at the everyday level of public discussion, then it follows that Bulgaria never even approached consolidation. At the everyday level, liberalism even among those most likely to embrace it –younger, more educated, more urban - is not so much a discourse in retreat but one that has yet to gain widespread adherents. Thus, the relative success of states in meeting formal institutional criteria is a poor guide to understanding whether liberal democracy has consolidated in the political-cultural sense. This provides yet more weight behind the repeated calls to place cultural perspectives on democratisation and political transformation at the centre of our analytical practice (Agh 1991, Ekiert, Kubik & Vachudova 2007:13, Kubik 2017).

Going further, the general picture of 'non-consolidation' for Bulgaria begs the question of whether the institutional erosion we are witnessing in CEE can really be called 'backsliding' or 'deconsolidation'. Both imply prior success in democratisation for which there is scant evidence at the everyday level.

Could this insight apply to other CEE states besides Bulgaria? If so, the "success" of the whole project of democratisation across Central and Eastern Europe may be called into question. The apparently rapid democratisation that propelled states into the EU may have been little more than the superficial adoption of liberal institutions that did very little to alter the fundamentally illiberal parameters of debate (Dawson & Hanley 2016). Arguably the mismatch between institutional progress and everyday political culture may be most pronounced not in democratic 'laggards' like Bulgaria (or Romania) but in erstwhile democratic pace-setters such as the Visegrad states, most obviously in Hungary. While the Fidesz project to dismantle Hungary's liberal-democratic institutions only really began in earnest after the party regained power in 2010, it has been shown that the illiberal conquest of civil society was already well underway (Herman 2016, Greskovits 2017) at the time when *NiT* was recording historic-high democracy scores between 2003-5.

Second, by dint of its ethnographic methodology, ED allows researchers to follow the data in ways that can usefully challenge the kind of received wisdom that is generally cemented by institutionally-focussed databases. For example, the almost exclusive focus in the regional literature on the relative disadvantages in democratisation endured by post-conflict Western Balkan states within the wider CEE region (Ekiert et al, 2007: 14) is given empirical heft by institutional measures including *NiT* which confirm the 'laggard' status of the sub-region. Yet, as the appearance of the Serbian liberal-cosmopolitan counterpublic in the ED data demonstrates, this powerful narrative has blinded us to the fact that the post-Yugoslav space also has many comparative advantages in relation to the rest of the CEE region. In this vein, it is hardly a secret that late-socialist Yugoslavia had a much more vibrant civil society than did many Soviet-aligned countries that have gained early entry to the EU. Nor is it a secret that this civil society fed emergent feminist and anti-nationalist movements in the successor republics including Serbia (Dević 1997, Fridman 2011, Bilić 2012), the like of which was not found further East (including especially Bulgaria, notable for the poverty of its civil society [Pederson & Johannsen 2011]). Further, it points to a probable causal factor explaining this variation – regime legacies – that makes perfect sense in retrospect.

Counterpublics such as the Serbian liberal-cosmopolitans are likely to play a vital role in any future attempts either to defend existing democratic institutions in CEE or to push towards

long-haul democratic consolidation in a political-cultural sense. This provides an additional – and positive - rationale for studies taking an ED perspective on other CEE countries and indeed democracies generally.

Most ambitiously, European or global-level comparative research conducted on ED or analogous discourse-sensitive methodological principles could serve the very useful function of alerting scholars to just how few states there are where liberal democracy is consolidated in the political-cultural sense. Almost certainly, all CEE countries – and some democracies in the developed West – would be downgraded and re-categorised if democracy were gauged in terms of the practices and content of deliberation, rather than mainly in terms of institutional processes. The liberal democratic universe would most likely shrink to a rump: a realistic and challenging image appropriate to this age of the illiberal populist revolt.

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