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**Deterioration of the Quality of Liberal Democracy
in the Central and Eastern European Countries. The
Case of Eleven European Union Members**

Keywords: CEE countries, the process of democratization, deterioration of liberal democracy

Słowa kluczowe: państwa Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej, proces demokratyzacji, pogorszenie liberalnej demokracji

Abstract

The article analyzes the quality of liberal democracy in 11 Central and Eastern European countries, the European Union members. The paper examines the most important fields of the process of democratization, enabling to trace the deterioration of liberal democracy like electorate's support for populist parties, neglecting the rule of the state of law, and the level of corruption. The methods of research are the analysis and synthesis of the material, comparative method, quantitative-qualitative method. Upon the analysis, the typology of three trends of the deterioration of democratization in CEE countries can be offered: massive deterioration, small decrease, stable democracy.

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Streszczenie**Pogorszenie jakości demokracji liberalnej w państwach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej. Przykład jedenastu członków Unii Europejskiej**

Artykuł analizuje jakość demokracji liberalnej w jedenastu państwach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej będących członkami Unii Europejskiej. W procesie badawczym uwzględniono pięć czynników obrazujących pogarszający się stan procesu demokratyzacji, w tym m.in. poparcie elektoratu dla populistycznych partii politycznych, przestrzeganie zasady państwa prawa, czy stan korupcji. W trakcie badań wykorzystano analizę i syntezę danych, podejście porównawcze oraz metodę ilościowo-jakościową. W wyniku analizy wyłaniają się trzy kategorie państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej ze względu na jakość i poziom demokracji liberalnej w kontekście jej pogarszającego się stanu: państwa o znacznym spadku jakości demokracji, państwa o małym spadku jakości demokracji, państwa o stabilnej demokracji.

I.

More than a decade ago, it seemed that liberal democracy was the most desirable regime, and till then, it was thought that the process of democratization² once opened would lead to full reception of liberalism and democracy³. Today it is evident that the way merging liberalism and democracy is not linear anymore⁴. One of the worldwide elements that led to this situation is globalization which accelerated the growth of economic standards of life but

² On the process of democratization see: A. Antoszewski, *Współczesne teorie demokracji*, Warsaw 2016.

³ S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Oklahoma 1991; A. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market. Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge 1991; J.J. Wiatr, *Europa pokomunistyczna. Przemiany państw i społeczeństw po 1989 roku*, Warsaw 2006.

⁴ A. Antoszewski, *Demokracja nieliberalna jako projekt polityczny*, [in:] *Zmierzch demokracji liberalnej*, eds. K.A. Wojtaszczyk, P. Stawarz, J. Wiśniewska-Grzelak, Warsaw 2018, pp. 52–53; R.S. Foa, Y. Mounk, *Sings of Deconsolidation*, "Journal of Democracy" 2017, No. 1 (28), p. 9.

without common human satisfaction. This factor, alongside others, destabilized the ground of liberal democracy⁵.

The subject to the analysis of the article is the worsening quality of liberal democracy focused on eleven countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which are the members of the European Union (EU): Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia. Two of the countries, Hungary and Poland, are examples of the most deteriorated liberal democracy⁶. But are they the only ones? Jacek Wojnicki focuses attention on the whole region of CEE as an area of antidemocratic tendencies⁷. In the article, the eleven CEE countries were chosen because they participated in the institution to sustain and develop democratic values and procedures. As the EU members, they should follow the liberal democratic path of the process of democratization. The following questions accompany this hypothesis: 1) what are the features of the deterioration of the democratization process in CEE; 2) what is the role of populist parties in democratization and its deterioration in CEE?

The analysis methods are the comparative method, quantitative-qualitative approach, analysis and synthesis of the materials, and case-based studies.

II.

Although the worsening conditions of liberal democracy have accelerated in the world for more than a decade, one of the first researchers who noticed the

⁵ J. Jaskiernia, *Władza sądownicza w warunkach kryzysu demokracji liberalnej*, [in:] *Zmierzch demokracji liberalnej*, eds. K.A. Wojtaszczyk, P. Stawarz, J. Wiśniewska-Grzelak, Warsaw 2018, pp. 222–223; J. Diec, *The Morphology of Right Populism*, “Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne” 2017, No. 4, p. 74.

⁶ Among the analyses of Polish deterioration of liberal democracy, see: J. Jaskiernia, *Authoritarian Tendencies in the Polish Political System*, [in:] *New Authoritarianism. Challenges to Democracy in the 21st century*, ed. J.J. Wiatr, Leverkusen 2019, pp. 152–168, or among the comparative analysis of Polish and Hungarian deterioration of liberal democracy, see: V. Glied, Ł. Zamęcki, *Article 7 Process and Democratic Backsliding of Hungary and Poland. Democracy and the Rule of Law*, “On-line Journal. Modelling the New Europe” 2020, vol. 34, pp. 57–85.

⁷ J. Wojnicki, *Tendencje antydemokratyczne w regionie Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej. Zarys tematu*, [in:] *Pomiędzy demokracją a autorytaryzmem. Doświadczenia polityczno-ustrojowe państw współczesnych*, eds. J. Wojnicki, J. Zaleśny, Warsaw 2018, pp. 9–30.

regime's stagnation was Fareed Zakaria. In the 1990's, he pointed out that democracy could exist without liberalism and constitutionalism⁸. F. Zakaria called such regimes "half of the democratizing" – where corruption spreads and irresponsible, shortsighted authorities disregard public good, there is inequality of three independent branches of power with the dominance of the executive. Today, after twenty years of Fareed Zakaria's article, other concepts are describing similar situations. They are called, among others, illiberal constitutionalism⁹, deconsolidation of democracy¹⁰, de-democratization¹¹, backsliding of democracy¹², populist democracy¹³, new authoritarianism¹⁴.

The approaches conclude that backsliding from liberal constitutionalism refers to the power belonging to the populist party, which disregards liberal democracy. A. Antoszewski pays attention to the political party's surroundings, which are reshaped in illiberal democracy. He states that there is no pluralism recognition, no division on the right and the left, and a lack of marginalization of radical parties¹⁵. In such an environment, populist parties find enough followers to win the elections and then to rule. The populist parties in the governments directly influence state policies, and in young democracies, this process accelerates faster.

The deconsolidation of liberal democracy can be understood as a reverse trend of the consolidation of democracy. Populism is democratic

⁸ F. Zakaria, *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*, "Foreign Affairs" 1997, No. 6 (76), pp. 22–32.

⁹ T. Drinóczi, A. Bień-Kacała, *Illiberal Constitutionalism: The Case of Hungary and Poland*, "German Law Journal" 2019, No. 20, pp. 1140–1166.

¹⁰ M. Brusis, *Democracies Adrift: How the European Crises Affect East-Central Europe*, "Democratization" 2016, vol. 63, pp. 263–276.

¹¹ M. Bogaards, *De-democratization in Hungary: Diffusely Defective Democracy*, "Democratization" 2018, No. 8 (25), pp. 1481–1499.

¹² B. Geskovits, *The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe*, <http://politicalscience.ceu.edu/sites/politicalscience.ceu.hu/files/attachment/event/1113/greskovitshollowingandbackslidingofdemocracy-globalpolicy2015.pdf> (28.12.2020).

¹³ T.S. Pappas, *Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary*, "Government and Opposition. An International Journal of Comparative Politics" 2014, No. 1 (49), pp. 1–23.

¹⁴ J.J. Wiatr, *New and Old Authoritarianism in a Comparative Perspective*, [in:] *New Authoritarianism. Challenges to Democracy in the 21st century*, ed. J.J. Wiatr, Leverkusen 2019, pp. 169–181.

¹⁵ A. Antoszewski, *Demokracja nieoliberalna...*, pp. 56–57.

but not liberal¹⁶, and though it accepts democratic rules as free elections, it rejects liberal rules¹⁷. Populism is majoritarian because of the inclusion of the majority's will in making decisions, which brings hostility towards all of those who object to the will¹⁸. In illiberal democracy, there is a relativization of the Constitution. The executive power dominates and treats other branches of power as subordinated. The idea of the autonomy of the judiciary is questioned¹⁹ as well as the deliberative role of parliament. The Constitutional Court is loyal to the executive authorities, which diminishes the rule of law and develops clientelism and patrimonialism²⁰. There is a spread of corruption²¹. Although Matthijs Bogaards writes that in such a state which he describes as de-democratization, it is impossible to formulate clear conditions, speed, extent, and even end-point of the reverse trend of liberal democratization²², Roberto S. Foa and Yascha Mounk define such situation by the low level of social support for democracy as a system of governance, the strength of anti-system parties and movements in the party system, the low degree of acceptance for the rule of the democratic state²³.

It seems that five key elements play an essential role in describing the deterioration conditions of contemporary liberal democracies. Among the features, there is strong electoral support for populist parties, the break of the independence of the branches of power and the capturing of democratic institutions by the executive power, diminishing the autonomy of the judiciary and the Constitutional Court, the usage of public media to send populist propaganda, the development of corruption practices.

¹⁶ M. Marczevska-Rytko, *Teoretyczne aspekty współczesnego populizmu*, "Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe" 2011, No. 4, p. 30.

¹⁷ T.S. Pappas, op.cit., pp. 1–23.

¹⁸ M.F. Plattner, *Populism, Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*, "Journal of Democracy" 2010, No. 1 (21), p. 88.

¹⁹ J. Jaskiernia, *Władza sądownicza...*, p. 224.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 225–227.

²¹ T. Drinóczy, A. Bień-Kacała, op.cit., pp. 1140–1166.

²² M. Bogaards, op.cit., pp. 1481–1499.

²³ R.S. Foa, Y. Mounk, *The Democratic Disconnect*, "Journal of Democracy" 2016, No. 3 (27), p. 15.

III.

The research methodology refers, among others, to W. Beywl's approach, which argues that evaluation of democracy and the process of democratization in itself may follow from different aspects of democracy²⁴. As he concludes, the quantitative analysis should be followed by another approach. The comparative method seems the most suitable in comparing 11 countries and five elements of deteriorated liberal democracy. As there are some of the features to reach, the best way to compare them is M. Coppedge and D. Kuehn's approach. They present the methodological possibility of comparing some elements from different perspectives²⁵.

The countries chosen to analyze are the former socialist states that today belong to the EU. Five elements to measure are the ones that were enumerated upon the theoretical analysis of deteriorated liberal democracy: electoral support for populist parties²⁶, level of democratic independence of the branches of power, the position of the independent judiciary (including the Constitutional Court), the extent of existence of free media and corruption in the state. The elements were chosen to reflect both behavioral aspects of

²⁴ W. Beywl, *The Role of Evaluation in Democracy: Can it be Strengthened by Evaluation Standards? A European Perspective*, "Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation" 2006, No. 6, pp. 10–29.

²⁵ M. Coppedge, D. Kuehn, *Introduction: absorbing the four methodological disruptions in democratization research?*, "Democratization" 2019, No. 1 (26), pp. 1–20.

²⁶ The populist parties were chosen to the analysis upon the research of the regional studies: D.N. Čakar, *The Rise of New Challenger Parties in Croatia: Party System Stability Endangered?*, <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/42326> (28.12.2020); T. Boros, B. Bötös, *Populism report. Special edition: Slovenia*, Brussels 2018, https://progressivepost.eu/wp-content/uploads/populism_report_slovenia.pdf (8.01.2021); L. Raycheva, D. Peicheva, *Populism in Bulgaria Between Politicization of Media and Mediatization of Politics*, "Mediatization Studies" 2017, No. 1, pp. 69–81; D. Alexandru, *Populism in Romania: between Numbers and Strong Reactions*, <http://trulies-europe.de/?p=887> (30.12.2020); S. Braghrioli, V. Petsinis, *Between party-systems and identity-politics: the populist and radical right in Estonia and Latvia*, "European Politics and Society" 2019, No. 4 (20), pp. 431–449; G. Alekonis, R. Matkevičienė, *Populism in Lithuania: Defining the Research Tradition*, "Baltic Journal of Law and Politics" 2016, No. 1 (9), pp. 26–48; V. Naxera, V. Glied, O. Filipeć, M. Kaczorowska, *To protect national sovereignty from the EU?" The 2019 EP elections and populist parties in V4 countries*, "Revisita UNISCI/UNISCI Journal" 2020, No. 54, pp. 71–106; V. Glied, *The Populist Phenomena and the Reasons for their Success in Hungary*, "Politics in Central Europe" 2020, No. 16 (15), pp. 23–45.

democratization (support for populist parties, corruption) and institutional ones (three remaining features). The support for populist parties refers to the number of votes (in percent) gained during and before the last elections to the national parliaments. The evaluation of democratic independence of branches, free judiciary, and media was taken from the internal indicators of democracy scores of Freedom House: Nations in Transit. The element connected with corruption is the Corruption Perception Index presented by Transparency International.

The values of five elements are presented on a scale from 0 to 100%. The latter is the maximum score for liberal democracy and 0% for deteriorated ones, apart from the level of support for populist parties. Here the higher value is, the electorate is more dissatisfied with the liberal democracy.

IV.

Table 1. The deterioration of liberal democracy in 11 Central and Eastern European countries (members of EU) from the comparative perspective of 5 elements (values in %)

Country	Support for populist parties in parliamentary elections		Democratic independence of branches		Free judiciary		Free media		Corruption	
	last	before last	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015
Czechia	40.2	25.5	66.7	70.9	83.3	80.7	66.7	70.9	56	51
Slovakia	46.1	47.3	62.5	66.7	66.7	66.7	66.7	66.7	50	51
Poland	45.5	46.4	50	75	50	75	66.7	75	58	61
Hungary	68.3	70.7	37.5	54.2	62.5	70.9	37.5	54.2	44	51
Bulgaria	45.8	54.6	54.2	54.2	58.4	58.4	41.6	50	43	41
Romania	50.1	54.5	50	54.2	54.2	54.2	45.9	45.9	44	n.a.
Croatia	57.5	55.5	54.2	58.4	41.7	41.7	45.9	50	47	51
Slovenia	39.1	26.7	79.2	83.3	83.3	83.3	75	79.2	60	60

Country	Support for populist parties in parliamentary elections		Democratic independence of branches		Free judiciary		Free media		Corruption	
	last	before last	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015
Estonia	32.9	40.9	83.3	79.2	91.7	91.7	87.5	91.7	74	70
Latvia	23.1	16.6	83.3	83.3	83.3	87.5	79.2	79.2	56	56
Lithuania	14.8	18.9	70.9	79.2	83.3	83.3	79.2	79.2	60	59

Own calculations based on: Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit> (20.01.2021); Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/en> (20.01.2021); Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, <https://pkw.gov.pl> (20.01.2021); Český statistický úřad, <https://www.volby.cz> (20.01.2021); Nemzeti Választási Iroda, <https://www.valasztas.hu> (20.01.2021); Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, <https://volby.statistics.sk> (20.01.2021); Central Election Commission of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.cik.bg/en> (20.01.2021); Državno izborno povjerenstvo Republike Hrvatske, <https://www.izbori.hr/site> (20.01.2021); Valimised, <https://www.valimised.ee/en> (20.01.2021); The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, https://rezultatai.vrk.lt/index_en.html (20.01.2021); Centrālā vēlēšanu komisija, <https://sv2018.cvk.lv/pub> (20.01.2021); România Biroul Electoral Central, <https://parlamentare2020.bec.ro/rezultate> and <https://parlamentare2016.bec.ro/rezultate> (20.01.2021).

The populist parties have been present in the state governments after the last or before the last parliamentary elections in all CEE countries except Lithuania. Some of them are the only or dominant government's members: Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria (all cases: after the two last elections). Some are the major coalitional partner: the Czech Republic (after the last election), Slovakia (after the before last elections), Estonia (after the last election), Romania (after the before the last election), Croatia (after the two elections), Slovenia (upon the reconstruction of the cabinet after the last election). Furthermore, some parties serve as minor coalitional partners in the cabinets: the Czech Republic (before the last election), Slovakia (the last election), Latvia (after both elections), Romania (after the last election).

The influence of the populist parties on the democratization process may differ depending on the length of time the presence of populist parties in the governments and the dominance of government politics. In analyzed countries, one can encounter three different situations: 1) populist parties control

the process of democratization after the two last elections: Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria; 2) populist parties influence the process of democratization partially as major coalitional members of the cabinets: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, Romania; 3) populist parties as the minor coalitional partner may deteriorate in smaller degree the process of democratization: Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia; 4) no populist parties in the governments: Lithuania.

In the first group of countries (Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria), the level of four features (democratic independence of branches, free judiciary, free media, and corruption) equals about 50%, which places them on much-disturbed democracies. The second group's countries differ as the Czech Republic and Slovakia are better evaluated than Croatia and Romania. Slovakia's marks equal about 60% (except corruption index, which is 50%). The marks given to the Czech Republic are better with a good appreciation for the judiciary system (about 80%). The two remaining countries (Romania and Croatia) should be instead placed in the first group where populist politics dominates in the internal public sphere. Their evaluation of the features is about 40% to 50%. The third group receives high marks of about 80%, and Estonia's analyzed features are even more than 90%. The corruption index is on the level of about 60% and much better in Estonia: more than 70%. The last example was Lithuania which generally receives similar marks as the third group of countries.

Upon the analysis, we can present the three types of CEE countries referring to the level of deterioration of liberal democracy. Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania face massive deterioration. The Czech Republic and Slovakia encounter smaller signs of decrease and stagnation of the process of democratization. The quality of the process of democratization in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia seem stable and good.

V.

Referring to the hypothesis from the beginning of the article, the eleven CEE countries, EU members, remained democratic throughout the second decade of the XXIst century. However, their relation to liberal democracy differed. The quality of the deterioration process of liberal democracy reflects

the extent of electoral support and then the influence of the populist party on internal politics.

The analysis reveals that Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia faced massive deterioration of liberal democracy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia noticed a small decrease while Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovenia seemed to be stable democracies. The mentioned distinction originates from the extent of influence of populist parties on internal politics and the perception of liberal democracy. The populist parties of the CEE countries with massive deterioration govern independently or as a major coalitional partner. In the CEE countries with a small decrease of liberal democracy, the populist parties are one of the cabinets' multi-coalitional partners. In the CEE countries with stable liberal democracy, the populist parties are minor partners in the cabinets or are absent.

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