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POLITICAL CHANGES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GLOBAL REGRESSION OF DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: *The article describes political changes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that are members of the European Union against the background of the global condition of democracy. The frame of reference are selected results of the Economist Democracy Index 2020 report examining the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on political changes in the world, considering some conclusions from the previous publications of the ranking. The theoretical premises and methodology of the Democracy Index are presented, including the typology of political systems as a tool for classifying the countries covered by the study into one of the four types of the systems compared: full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime and authoritarian regime. The strengths and weaknesses of the Democracy Index have characterized as well as the symptoms of the global decline of democracy. Changes in the values of the Index indicators in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe between 2006 and 2020 are analysed. The summary shows the ambivalence of the directions of political changes in the region.*

Keywords: Global crisis of democracy, European Union countries, Political changes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Strengths and weaknesses of the Economist Democracy Index 2020.

Introductory remarks

The paper aim is to describe the political situation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe against the background of the global condition of democracy. The starting point and frame of reference in this regard are selected results of The Economist Democracy Index 2020 report, which examines the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on political changes in various countries and regions of the world. Some findings from earlier publications of this Index are also taken into account. It is prepared by The Economist Intelligence Unit, which belongs to the corporation that owns The Economist – the prestigious, liberal British weekly. Due to its long-term, recurrent and

multidimensional nature, the Democracy Index allows, among other things, present a ranking of states and a comparative analysis of the trends under consideration in a way that is conducive to the formulation or verification of various theses and opinions about the state of contemporary political systems.

The first part of the paper describes the theoretical premises and methodology of the Index of Democracies. The following fragments present the typology of political systems used in the Index as a tool for the global positioning of countries in 2020 and discuss its strengths and weaknesses. Then, emerging from the Index, the main manifestations of the global decline of democracy are presented. Against this background, political changes in individual countries of Central and Eastern Europe are described, with a different pace and scope towards “faulty democracies”. The paper closes with conclusions.

Democracy Index: theoretical background and methodology

The Democracy Index was first developed in 2006. Until 2010, it was published every two years, and then it began to appear annually. The latest, 13th edition of the survey covered 165 countries and two dependent territories, including Hong Kong. The authors correctly point out that there is no single, universally accepted definition of democracy. The concept of democracy has various meanings and connotations. The democratic system – like all political systems – has a multidimensional character, and, among other things, it is conditioned by election procedures, the quality of institutions, and the patterns of civic activity. In addition, each of these dimensions is gradual and is also specifically related to the historical and economic context, which makes it difficult to develop a universal definition of democracy and creates interpretation controversies. Similar problems also exist in terms of the criteria for distinguishing and measuring methods of other political systems (Crouch 2020; Inglehart, Norris 2019; Held 2006; Saward 2003; Dahl 1989; Sartori 1987). In such circumstances, the authors of the Index, as part of the conceptualization of research assumptions, presumed that democracy is a set of practices and principles that institutionalize the protection of freedom. In line with the theories prevailing in the political science and sociological literature on the subject, this collection includes five analytically distinguished categories of issues. They were operationalized by means of a questionnaire consisting of 60 questions on the key dimensions of the political system (their number regarding

the dimensions is indicated in parentheses). The questions include the electoral process and pluralism (12 questions), the functioning of the government (15), political participation (9), political culture (9), and civil liberties (17). Altogether, high indications in these dimensions constitute the sine qua non of all definitions of democracy, and their deficits are a manifestation of systemic limitations or qualitative differences, e.g., characteristic of authoritarian regimes¹.

The results of the Democracy Index allow to create a global ranking of states based on the weighted average value of responses to all the questions, each of which has two or three possible answers to choose from. The answers are coded as 0, 1, or (if there are three possible alternatives) also as 0.5. In several cases, giving a zero-point answer to one question results in an automatic receiving of 0 points in answer to another question. The points obtained are summed up in each category, multiplied by ten, and divided by the total number of questions. Modification of the results for a given category takes place in the case of no answer 1 in the following areas considered crucial for democracy: freedom and fairness of elections, voter safety, the influence of foreign powers on the government, and the ability of the state administration to enforce legal regulations. If the answers to the first three questions are 0 or 0.5, 1 or 0.5 points are subtracted from the result in the relevant category (“the election process and pluralism” or “the functioning of the government”).

If the answer to the fourth question is 0, 1 point is subtracted from the result of the category “the functioning of the government”. The vast majority of responses result from expert judgment. However, some are obtained in a different way, for example, on the basis of public opinion polls such as the World Values Survey, the Gallup Institute, Eurobarometer, or national surveys. In the case of countries for which such surveys are not available, the results of opinion polls from similar countries are used to obtain answers. In some matters, official data are also referenced, e.g., n voter turnout. The country average is calculated from the total number of points obtained in the five categories. This indicator, rounded to two decimal places, determines the final classification in the Democracy Index.

¹ The assumptions and methodology of the *Democracy Index 2020* are characterized by *Appendix*, pp. 54-68.

Typology of political systems

Based on the final results obtained in accordance with the above methodology, all the countries included in the Index are broken down into “full democracies”, “flawed democracies”, “hybrid regimes”, and “authoritarian regimes”. Such a classification, constituting a set of ideal types used to describe the state of democracy in the world based on indicators for their operationalization, distinguishes the most important features of the compared political systems. They are characterized as follows:

- **“Full democracies”** (countries with 8 to 10 points): countries where fundamental civil liberties and political freedoms are respected and strengthened by political culture standards conducive to the development of democracy. The functioning of the authorities is satisfactory, the media are pluralistically diverse and independent from the government, there are effective mechanisms to ensure the maintenance of political balance, the judiciary is independent, and its judgments are enforced. Problems with democracy in these countries are limited.
- **“Flawed democracies”** (6 to 7.9 points): countries where elections are conducted in a fair and accessible manner and where fundamental civil liberties are respected despite problems such as violations of media freedom. Such democracies, however, have their significant weaknesses, such as lowered governance standards (e.g., with regard to the system of checks and balances or violations of the rule of law), poorly developed political culture, or a low level of citizens’ participation in decisions of state authorities.
- **“Hybrid regimes”** (4 to 5.9 points): countries with significant irregularities often result in government elections not being both free and fair. In such countries, governments often pressure, political opposition, there is persecution and pressure on journalists, the judiciary is not independent, corruption is widespread, and civil society is weak and inactive. Political culture, the functioning of the government, and the level of participation in political life are at a lower level than in the case of flawed democracies.
- **“Authoritarian regimes”** (below 4 points): countries where political pluralism does not exist or is severely limited, violations of civil liberties are widespread, elections to the governing bodies – if they are held – are not free or fair, and the judiciary is not independent. They may have conventional democratic institutions, such as parliaments, but they are of little or no significance.

In such countries, the media is usually state-owned or controlled by government-related interest groups. Censorship is pervasive, and criticism of the government is stifled.

The typology presented is used to locate countries within the resulting systemic characteristics described in the period covered by the study.

Strengths and weaknesses of the Democracy Index

The Index's strength reinforces the presence in the international public debate of democracy against the background of changes taking place in countries with different political systems. The global reach of "The Economist" gives this weekly publication a high media impact, also stimulating political discussions and scientific reflection. In this aspect, the Democracy Index can be compared to other frequently discussed sources of system or problem comparative studies, such as the Freedom House (FH) reports on the state of democracy in the world, or the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) launched by the Transparency International (TI). The Economist has created a new variant of the multidimensional analysis of political systems, allowing for typologically distinguishing their types, as well as trend observations based on a number of complex indicators and expert views. It is a type of dynamic cross-sectional research planned to characterize and describe the same phenomenon over a long period (longitudinal studies). The continuity of data collected in the course of the Democracy Index is useful in studying changes at selected points in time. It provides an opportunity for cross-national comparisons and selected trends in various countries and regions worldwide.

However, compared to other cross-national comparative studies, the Index also has significant limitations and weaknesses. Some of them may also arouse significant ideological controversies, such as the institutional affiliation of the research company – The Economist Intelligence Unit. Due to close links with "The Economist", the company is associated with the views of the liberal circles gathered around the magazine (although for people with a similar approach to politics, this may be an advantage of the Democracy Index). This orientation, regardless of the use of social science methodology, is clearly reflected in the theoretical assumptions and methodology of the Index. It refers to Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy basing the state system on the characteristics of representative democracy and Ronald Inglehart's theory of modernization, according to which in advanced industrial societies, people begin to attach

increasing importance to the quality of life, individual autonomy, free expression, environmental protection and direct participation in making political decisions. In Dahl's concept, the distinguishing features of democracy include primarily the exercise of constitutional control over the government, free elections, equal political rights, the freedom to create independent organizations and associations, and unlimited access to information². A methodological manifestation of this orientation is the adoption of the largest number of questions in the study (17) regarding the protection of civil liberties, access to the Internet, independence of the judiciary, equality before the law, and individual rights and human rights.

The Democracy Index goes slightly beyond Dahl's concept by formulating questions also relating to participation and political culture. However, it does not go significantly beyond the liberal tradition of "electoral democracy" mainstream. It leaves out left-wing inspirations, for example, in the field of guarantees of social rights or participation in the workplace ("workers' democracy"), influential in the Nordic countries and the EU "core" countries, with Germany at the forefront. In turn, against the radical right, the Index upholds a positive assessment of religious tolerance and the separation of the church and the state. At the same time, its authors emphasize the fundamental difficulties in defining, selecting, comparing, and evaluating qualitatively different indicators. Many of them are strongly historically conditioned, which raises doubts whether using the same questions in different socio-cultural contexts leads to obtaining indicators of the same attitude.

Public opinion researchers have long recognized the deeply rooted cultural and regional differences among different countries regarding the perception of key issues such as power, freedom, justice, and corruption. Their occurrence causes fundamental difficulties in applying standards and measures to other societies developed in the Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition (Noelle-Neumann 2004, pp. 264-267). The Democracy Index can be classified as a descriptive study in which states are the subjects of analysis. Some of them, however, are very heterogeneous, and their internal administrative units could be an analytical equivalent of other countries (for instance, can a country the size and population of China be fully comparable to the small countries

² *Democracy Index 2020*, p. 55.

of the Western Balkans? Can an internally heterogeneous India, or Belgium, be treated as a coherent whole?)³.

In countries of great social contrasts, difficulties in assessing the equivalence of indicators for inhabitants of small villages and those of large cities may be much greater than in the case of comparisons between nations (Słomczyński 1995, p. 36). In research, country names frequently function as data set descriptors that ignore these issues. The Democracy Index confirms this phenomenon. It describes important phenomena and trends but does not undertake any deeper attempts to explain their premises, limiting the possibility of formulating theoretically significant conclusions. In this respect, the Index is closer to cross-sectional photographs of various phenomena than to cause and effect explanations of the state of democracy. It blurs the specificity of changes in individual countries (and regions of the world) due to the unification of national cases and depriving them of individual and collective contexts, e.g., cultural and religious. It creates the risk of excessive generalization of research results and simplified interpretations of the observed issues.

Some doubts are also raised by the indicators used in the Democracy Index taken from the World Values Survey. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (similarly to the consequences of the financial crisis of 2008-2010) in many countries may negatively verify Ronald Inglehart's thesis on the rise of post-materialistic values in modernizing societies, rooted in the belief about economic growth, improvement of living conditions and secularization⁴; especially that the Index does not contain information on the selection of experts from the countries where the research was carried out or on the introduction of a set of contextual indicators, which would increase the chance of an appropriate (e.g., "understanding") interpretation of questions well-rooted in local conditions of changes in social behaviour and institutional changes⁵. This situation also raises doubts about the adequacy of verbal equivalents, which affect the value of the final results. Thus, comparisons between nations are often questionable in such circumstances, as are rankings of countries,

³ Additionally, in some countries the credibility of public opinion polls is problematic, as exemplified by India during the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. *The Economist*, *The Modi blues*, June 19, 2021.

⁴ For example, with regard to the European Union countries, the increase in the influence of religion on voters is analysed by F. Foret, E. Mondo (2019).

⁵ People's way of thinking is culturally determined. However, researchers are also a mental product of their culture, which influences, inter alia, to formulate the issues and questions considered important. The standard solution used in the comparative research of different cultures is deceneration, i.e. the involvement of researchers from other cultures. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minko (2005) discuss the methods used in intercultural research more broadly. The institution of independent external experts sometimes provides the only viable method of obtaining the answers.

especially those belonging to significantly different cultures and political traditions, or those at different levels of economic development⁶.

As a result, the Democracy Index is mainly arbitrary, reflecting primarily the theoretical perspective and criteria for assessing political systems considered in the interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon liberal-democratic mainstream. The listing of its strengths and weaknesses does not, however, disqualify the significance of the results discussed. However, what it shows are the limitations and consequences of adopting a specific theoretical and methodological concept in the Index, which should be considered in its interpretation⁷. Its political importance is increased by the change of the president of the United States. The new administration of Joe Biden, which took power at the beginning of 2021, emphasizes (unlike the administration of the previous President, Donald Trump) support for democratic values, the rule of law, freedom of the media, and for minority rights, which is close to the theoretical assumptions and methodology of the Democracy Index.

Global regression of democracy

According to the 2020 Democracy Index, the average global result of the indicator (5.37) has dropped to the lowest level since its first publication. As many as 116 out of 167 countries (nearly 70%) recorded a decrease in the value of the Index compared to 2019. This result confirms the view of Samuel P. Huntington that the third wave of democratization initiated by the “carnation revolution” in Portugal in 1974, which culminated in the collapse of the communist system in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, can be stopped and even partially reversed. The abandonment of democracy in the world is not a new historical tendency. Its well-known manifestations were totalitarian regimes (led by Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany), authoritarian rule after World War I, the creation of “people’s democracy” states ruled by

⁶ Makowski (2008, pp. 34-66 and others) conducted a critical analysis of rankings and public opinion polls based on expert assessments and surveys. According to the author, their fundamental weakness is also the fact that they are based on functionalist theories while ignoring the perspectives of the conflict theory.

⁷ The awareness of the existence of ideological aspects enriches the theory and practice of the methodology of social sciences. Many research techniques have been devised to balance or control our human limitations, especially those we are unaware of. For more see Babbie (2001).

communist parties after 1945, as well as dictatorial systems emerging in many countries post-colonial Third World in the 1960s ⁸.

The financial crisis initiated in the United States in 2008, spread into the European Union and other regions of the world through capital connections, became a new catalyst for similar trends. The most recent deterioration of the state of democracy was brought about, primarily but not exclusively, by the introduction by governments of constraints related to counteracting the coronavirus pandemic. Among them were, among other things, an unprecedented restriction of civil rights and freedoms, the most substantial since World War II. In some countries, especially those under authoritarian and populist governance, the successive waves of Covid-19 have provided a pretext for capturing the state, increasing control over the society, and repressing dissidents and opposition groups. According to the findings of the 2020 Democracy Index, such a situation occurred to the greatest extent in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Middle East, and North Africa. The “Arab Spring” launched in 2010 was unsuccessful, and the countries of the region – except for Israel and Tunisia – are still included in the category of authoritarian regimes.

The deterioration of democratic standards also affects (although to different extents) many countries located in Europe as well as those in the EU, Asia, South America, and North America. Due to the goals and governing style of President Donald Trump, in 2020 the United States was classified as a “flawed democracy”. Among the reasons for this categorization, the Index indicated extremely low trust in institutions, high dysfunctionality of state authorities’ actions in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic and its radical politicization, increasing polarization, political conflicts, and decreasing social cohesion. Examples of such tendencies were mass protests against police violence after George Floyd’s death, racial injustice, and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. On the other hand, the right-wing circles questioned the foundations of the American system, attacked the freedom of expression, the independence of the judiciary, and even questioned the results of the presidential election. The spectacular culmination of such political tendencies was January 6, 2021, attack by Donald Trump’s supporters on the Capitol in Washington to prevent the Electoral College from voting and the legal taking power by Joe Biden. According to the latest Democracy Index, 11 states in the world have changed their place in the typology of political

⁸ Regarding the premises of a possible departure from democracy and transition to various forms of authoritarianism, S.P. Huntington (1991, chapter 6).

systems: seven of them negatively and four positively. Three Asian countries have moved from the category of “flawed democracies” to “full democracies” (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). In the Balkans, Albania has shifted from a group of “hybrid regimes” to “flawed democracies”. In turn, in the EU, France, and Portugal, due to their governments’ methods of fighting the pandemic and restrictions on civil rights, lost the status of “full democracies”, which they had in 2019 and were classified as “flawed democracies”. El Salvador and Hong Kong have been moved to “hybrid regimes.” According to the Democracy Index, slightly less than half of the world’s population lives in “full” or “flawed” democracies. The analysis of states according to the systemic classification leads to the following summary of the most important results of the ranking:

- The “full democracies” (23) include all the Nordic countries, most of Western Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries, as well as Taiwan, Japan and South Korea in Asia, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Chile in Latin America and Mauritius in Africa (inhabitants of this group of countries together constitute only 8.4% of the world’s population).

- The category of “flawed democracies” (52) this time included certain countries considered in 2019 as “full democracies” – France, the United States, and Portugal, as well as a large group of countries previously included in this group, such as Italy, Israel, Belgium, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Thailand, and Singapore, including all the EU countries of Central and Eastern Europe (41% of the global population live in this group of countries, relatively the largest part of the world population).

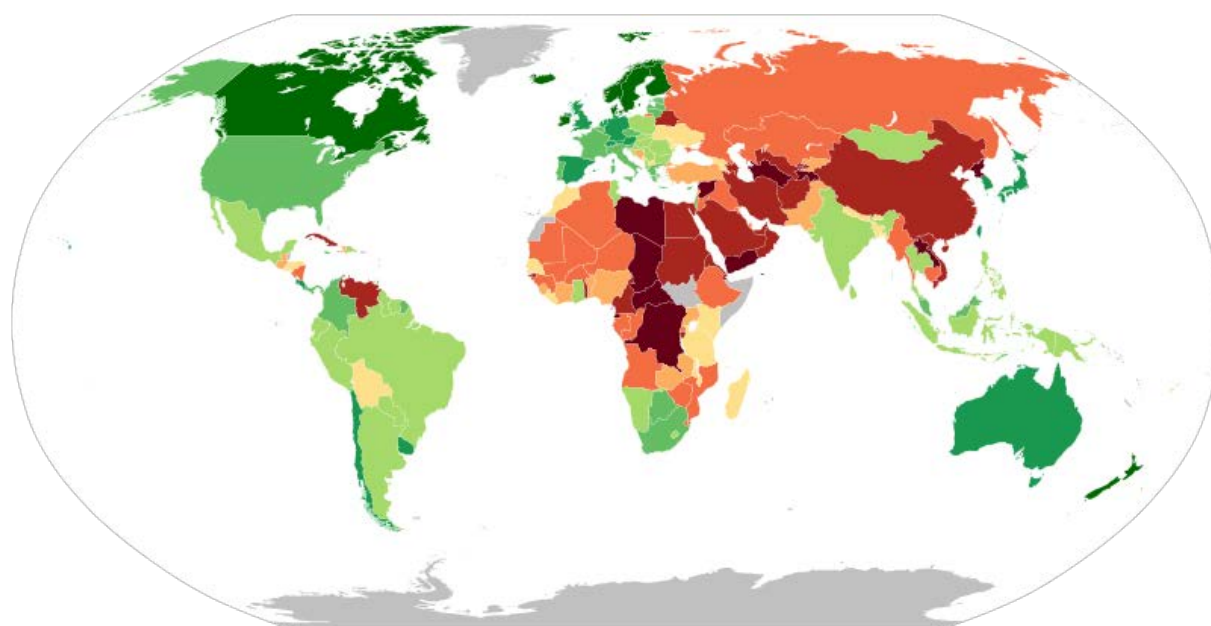
- The ‘hybrid regimes’ (35) include, among others, Bangladesh, Ukraine, Hong Kong, Tanzania, Kenya, Turkey, Pakistan, and Nigeria (15% of the world’s population).

- The category of “authoritarian regimes” (57) includes Kuwait, Algeria, Angola, Iraq, Nicaragua, Mozambique, Russia, Qatar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Egypt, Afghanistan, Cuba, Venezuela, the United Arab Emirates, Belarus, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq (35.6% of the world’s population in total).

According to the results of the Index, in 2020, only 38 countries inhabited by 22.6% of the world’s population improved in total, and in 13 the state of democracy was stagnant. The most favorable change was recorded in Taiwan, where the course of the presidential and parliamentary

elections in high turnout and significant mobilization of the young generation confirmed that democracy is well-rooted in society and that state institutions are highly trusted by the public. Mass protests in Hong Kong also had a significant impact on this result. They were caused by the announcement by the authorities of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) of draft legislation violating the civil liberties and status of this Special Autonomous Region, which, according to the agreement with the United Kingdom, was to be in force until 2047. These events consolidated Taiwan’s society, threatened by increasing political pressure from the PRC. The visualization reflecting the systemic differences in the world, following the adopted typology, is presented in the Chart below.

Chart 1. Democracy Index 2020, global map by regime type



<i>Full democracies</i>	<i>Flawed democracies</i>	<i>Hybrid regimes</i>	<i>Authoritarian regimes</i>	<i>No data</i>
9.01–10.0	7.01–8.00	5.01–6.00	3.01–4.00	
8.01–9.00	6.01–7.00	4.01–5.00	2.01- 3.00	
			0–2.00	

Source: Democracy Index 2020, p. 4

African states find themselves at the opposite extreme of political change. In Mali, the military seized power in August 2019, and part of the country is under the control of Islamic fundamentalists. Togo and Burkina Faso are in a similar position, where jihadists have incited

armed uprisings against the state authorities, which resulted in these three countries being classified as “authoritarian regimes”.

“Flawed Democracies” in Central and Eastern Europe

The Democracy Index lists a total of 28 countries considered as Eastern Europe. Other geographic regions highlighted in the report are Asia and Austral Asia, Latin America, North America, the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Western Europe. Such a categorization of the broadly understood Eastern Europe brings together countries that are very diverse in many respects: from the countries of Central Asia, through the Caucasian countries, the Russian Federation, the Baltic republics, the countries of Central Europe, to the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. The region’s heterogeneity is also reflected in the classification of the region’s countries into three different types of political systems in line with the Index typology - “flawed democracies” (13), “hybrid regimes” (8), and “authoritarian regimes” (7). However, the direction of changes in the political situation in the region is vividly evidenced by the fact that, since 2014, none of the countries in the region has been included in the category of “full democracies”. In order to reduce some of the weaknesses of the Index methodology characterized earlier (e.g., resulting from the difficulty of comparing very different countries), this part of the analysis was limited to 11 countries of Central and Eastern Europe.⁹

Their systemic common denominator is their EU membership, which creates the general institutional framework of a democratic political system and strengthens the processes of macroeconomic convergence to the level of economic development of more developed countries. According to the 2020 Democracy Index score, the following states have been analyzed: Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Croatia, and Romania. All of these countries are categorized as “flawed democracies”. The results are partially inferior to Latin America, where Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Chile have been labelled “full democracies.”¹⁰ These countries can be interpreted as a further confirmation of the backsliding

⁹ The researchers of economic changes, who distinguish this group of countries in regional comparisons, behave in a similar way, see Rapacki (2019).

¹⁰ At the same time, it is worth noting a greater typological diversity of political systems than in 11 countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which is illustrated by the fact that the three Latin American and Caribbean countries, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba, are included in the 2020 Democracy Index as “authoritarian regimes”.

thesis – the erosion of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe – and of regressing in this respect in relation to the previously achieved positions. Due to the direction of political changes, higher standards are still expected of these countries, which are articulated both by a significant part of their citizens and by other democratic countries, including EU member states and EU institutions (Sadurski 2019).

Such tendencies update the views emphasizing, since the 1990s, the heterogeneity and contradictions in the development of the countries of the region, which undermined the expectations of a one-way transformation of the political system – from the authoritarian system to the democratic one. The results of the 2020 Democracy Index, therefore indicate the need to develop more precise characteristics of democratic systems, as well as to develop research on specific forms of “non-democracy”, such as “illiberal democracy”, “clientelist democracy”, “authoritarian democracy” etc. (Balik, Holzer 2007). The diversified development of political systems in Central and Eastern Europe confirms that classifying them into one category of “flawed democracies” does not fully reflect the complexity of their systemic changes. Estonia, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia are relatively closest to the criteria of “full democracies”. Latvia and Lithuania place themselves directly behind them. Other countries in the region are separated by a greater distance from the leaders in this ranking. Slovakia, Poland, and Bulgaria are in the middle, while Hungary, Croatia, and Romania occupy the lowest positions.

The coronavirus pandemic has, to varying degrees, amplified the long-standing trends and problems of this region of Europe. The most important of them include the relatively low quality of institutions, including the functioning of the government, the increase in the popularity of strong leaders, weaknesses in participation and political culture, lower support for democracy, and disappointment with the inferior position in the EU of those countries which are mainly capitalized by populist, right-wing and nationalist parties (Krastev, Holmes 2019). Previously, some countries in the region had departed from the rule of law and negated liberal values that weakened the foundations of democracy. Hungary, and later Poland¹¹, were mentioned as the most significant examples of states pursuing such a policy through the dismantling of democratic institutions, including the system of checks and balances, legislative and administrative changes limiting civil

¹¹ *Democracy Index 2019*, pp. 30-31. Regarding the impact of the political ideas of V. Orban’s government on the concept of PiS exercising power in Poland see Dąbrowska, Buzgany, Varga (2019); Chapman (2017).

rights and judicial independence, and taking control of public (as well as of private) media. In this area, compared to the 2019 Index, the state of democracy deteriorated in most countries in the region – with the partial exception of Slovenia, Poland, and Bulgaria in terms of political participation. In recent years, this state of affairs has been particularly affected by the consequences of introducing radical measures against the coronavirus pandemic, such as a lockdown, social distances, and restriction of civil rights, e.g., in the form of a ban on public gatherings, limiting the movement of people national and internationally and introducing a curfew in several countries. The extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic create structural grounds for abuse of power in line with the proverb that “opportunity makes a thief” and “the fish spoils from the head”. Documentation of the use of the coronavirus pandemic for such purposes in EU countries is provided, inter alia, by reports from non-governmental organizations. They highlight the significant deterioration of the situation (in many Member States) in the judiciary, corruption, freedom of expression, and access to public information, separation of powers, the rule of law and the defense of human rights¹². Before the coronavirus pandemic (mainly in the context of the rule of law), this issue became the subject of the positions of the EU bodies along with the announcements of an action plan in this area¹³. The extraordinary measures taken by governments during a pandemic crisis are also used to increase political influence uncontrollably and obtain undue economic benefits. In many countries, the pandemic has become a pretext to change the rules and scheduling of elections (presidential, parliamentary, and local) to obtain unwarranted political benefits¹⁴ such as concentration of the executive power, media partyisation, limiting the transparency of law-making and social consultations, abusing the ban on assemblies and movement, and political control over the judiciary.

In addition, large packages stimulating the economy create opportunities for abuse, for trading in influence, for nepotism, unfair favouritism of certain regions, social groups, or economic

¹² Civil Liberties Union for Europe. *UE 2020: Demanding on Democracy. Country & Trend Reports on democratic Records by Civil Liberties Organizations Across the European Union*. https://dq4n3btxmr8c9.cloudfront.net/files/AuYJXv/Report_Liberties_EU2020.pdf (access date 21 June 2021).

¹³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0343&from=EN>, (access date 21 June 2021).

¹⁴ The presidential elections in Poland in 2020 were a symptomatic example of exceeding the competences and abuse of power in the area of legal interpretations, the course and manner of organizing the elections, the lack of transparency and the costs of changing the election date. See: The Supreme Chamber of Control. *Actions of selected entities in connection with the preparation of the general elections for the President of the Republic of Poland ordered on 10 May 2020 with the use of postal voting*. Warsaw. April 23, 2021.

entities, especially those related to the ruling politicians or constituting their electoral support¹⁵. Such situations are fostered by a decline in the quality of governance resulting from the fast pace of events and the implementation of regulatory changes, which, due to the circumstances of the pandemic, are not subject to civic debate. Circumstances of this kind occur with particular force in those states which are burdened with the post-authoritarian path of development dependencies, have relatively recently started to create democratic institutions, are characterized by significant political passivity of citizens, and the weakness of civil society just building its economic prosperity (Marczewska-Rytko et al. 2018). In this context, for Central and Eastern Europe, some conclusions emerging from the review of all Democracy Index scores (see Table 2) are of interest.

Firstly, in the entire period under consideration, the leading countries achieving the relatively highest scores stand out. This group consists of the Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia, followed by Latvia and Lithuania. None of these countries fell below 7 points, but only the Czech Republic (the only country in the region) met the “full democracies” criteria in 2006-2013. This circumstance is often explained in terms of the long duration and entrenched democratic experiences correlated with the high level of economic development in Czechoslovakia before World War II when the country was creating the region’s only democratic system (Rothschild 1998).

Table 2. Democracy Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2006-2020

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2008	2006
Estonia	7,90	7,90	7,97	7,79	7,85	7,85	7,74	7,61	7,61	7,61	7,68	7,68	7,74
Czech Republic	7,69	7,69	7,69	7,62	7,82	7,94	7,94	8,06	8,19	8,19	8,19	8,19	8,17
Slovenia	7,54	7,50	7,50	7,50	7,51	7,57	7,57	7,88	7,88	7,76	7,69	7,96	7,96
Latvia	7,24	7,49	7,38	7,25	7,31	7,37	7,48	7,05	7,05	7,05	7,05	7,23	7,37
Lithuania	7,13	7,50	7,50	7,41	7,47	7,54	7,54	7,54	7,24	7,24	7,24	7,36	7,43
Slovakia	6,97	7,17	7,10	7,16	7,29	7,29	7,35	7,35	7,35	7,35	7,35	7,31	7,40
Poland	6,85	6,62	6,67	6,67	6,68	7,09	7,47	7,12	7,12	7,12	7,05	7,30	7,30
Bulgaria	6,71	7,03	7,03	7,03	7,01	7,14	6,73	6,83	6,72	6,78	6,84	7,02	7,10
Hungary	6,56	6,63	6,63	6,64	6,72	6,84	6,90	6,96	6,96	6,04	6,21	7,44	7,53
Croatia	6,50	6,57	6,57	6,63	6,75	6,93	6,93	6,93	6,93	6,73	6,81	7,04	7,04

¹⁵ OECD. *Public Integrity for and Effective COVID-19. Response and Recovery*. 19 April 2020. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/public-integrity-for-an-effective-covid-19-response-and-recovery-a5c35d8c/>, (access date 22 June 2021).

Romania	6,40	6,49	6,38	6,44	6,62	6,68	6,68	6,54	6,54	6,54	6,60	7,06	7,06
Average*	8,29	8,35	8,35	8,38	8,40	8,42	8,41	8,41	8,44	8,40	8,45	8,61	8,60

* The concept of the average refers to the index of “full democracies” and is a measure of the distance of 11 Central and Eastern European countries to this category of political systems in subsequent editions of the Index. Source: own study based on Democracy Index 2020, pp. 21-22.

Secondly, there is a downward trend in the Central and Eastern European Democracy Index score. The exception is Estonia which since 2015 has been close to meeting the criteria of “full democracies” (i.e., exceeding 8 points of the Index as the threshold for obtaining such categorization in the typology of political systems). In the latest edition of the Index, only five countries in the region exceed the level of 7 points – Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Other countries do not achieve this result. Romania, Croatia, and Hungary recorded similar indicators only in 2006 and 2008. In most countries of the region, initially relatively high indicators of the Democracy Index can be treated as a consequence of changes in the style of governance and accession reforms, the so-called EU effect. (Jasiecki 2008). It is worth noting, however, that in the entire analyzed period, the average of the indicators achieved globally by the countries of “full democracies” has also gradually decreased.

Thirdly, over time in Central and Eastern Europe, the group of countries falling below their previous results has grown – Hungary since 2013 and Poland, Croatia, and Romania since 2016. Slovakia and Bulgaria joined this group in 2020. In Hungary and Poland, such indicators reflect the general trend of systemic transformation towards “illiberal democracy”, as defined by Viktor Orban.

The Democracy Index rating system enables the analysis of political systems in five dimensions: the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of the government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. Such a list helps to identify. Such a comparison helps identify indicators lowering the quality of democracy in CEE compared to other EU countries. A comparison of these dimensions in the countries of the region shows that the relatively highest indications of the Index are found in the electoral process and pluralism and – to a much lesser extent – in the sphere of civil liberties. On both of these issues, Hungary, and partly also Croatia, have the lowest scores. On the other hand, the functioning of the government, participation, and political culture in the region are significantly below the EU average. The lowest indicators are shown in the area of political culture, with a significant difference between the

leading countries in this group of states (the Czech Republic, Estonia), and those from the bottom of the ranking – Romania, Croatia, and Bulgaria (Table 3)¹⁶.

Table 3. Eastern Europe, Democracy Index 2020

	Overall score	Global Rank	Regional Rank	Electoral process and pluralism	Functioning of government	Political participation	Political culture	Civil liberties
Estonia	7.84	27	1	9.58	7.86	6.67	6.88	8.24
Czech Republic	7.67	31	2	9.58	6.07	6.67	7.50	8.53
Slovenia	7.54	35	3	9.58	6.48	7.22	6.25	8.24
Latvia	7,24	38	4	9.58	6.07	6.67	5.63	8.24
Lithuania	7.13	42	5	9.58	6.07	5.56	5.63	8.82
Slovakia	6.97	47	6	9.58	6.43	5.56	5.63	7.65
Poland	6.85	50	7	9.17	5.71	6.67	5.63	7.06
Bulgaria	6.71	52	8	9.17	5.71	7.22	4.38	7.06
Hungary	6.56	55	9	8.33	6.43	5.00	6.25	6.76
Croatia	6.50	59	10	9.17	6.07	6.11	4.38	6.76
Romania	6.40	62	11	9.17	5.36	6.67	3.75	7.06

Source: Democracy Index 2020, p. 33.

The above results lead to the conclusion that among the analyzed five aspects of the 2020 Democracy Index, its weakest distinguishing features in Central and Eastern Europe are the “soft dimensions” of the public sphere, such as political culture and political participation. These are the findings that not only indicate the areas of the most significant deficit of democracy in this region but also show that social attitudes and behaviours are rather poorly rooted in creating the conditions for the stable development of such a political system.

¹⁶ An anecdotal, but telling, example of the difference in political culture in the region are the two examples concerning the Czech Republic and Poland. A manager who lives in the Czech Republic told me about the deliberations of the parliament in Prague, during which the previously reported absence of several MPs from the ruling coalition caused the opposition parties to withdraw the same number of MPs so as not to take advantage of their numerical advantage during the vote. I have not encountered similarly consensual behaviour in the Polish parliament. In turn, Polish workers working in the Czech Republic recounted with surprise that the workers of the plant where they were employed went on strike and then, after the end of the strike, worked off the lost day's wages on the following Saturday. In Poland I have not come across any information about similar situations.

Summary

The 2020 Democracy Index is a global ranking of political systems. It introduces a typological distinction between “full democracies”, “flawed democracies”, “hybrid regimes”, and “authoritarian regimes”. The compared states are analysed taking into account five key dimensions of the political system: the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of the government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. The index reflects the theoretical perspective and the criteria for political system analysis prevailing in the Anglo-Saxon liberal-democratic mainstream (as in Dahl’s concept of polyarchy and Inglehart’s theory of modernization). Its latest edition confirmed the global regression of democracy, which was strengthened by the introduction of unprecedented restrictions against the coronavirus pandemic. According to the Index, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been included in the category of “flawed democracies” since 2014 (in the last few years, Estonia is the only country close to “full democracy”, and previously only the Czech Republic met the criteria for such a political system).

The period of the coronavirus pandemic significantly accelerated the erosion of democracy in this region of Europe. Following the example of Hungary, some states – especially Poland – are departing from the liberal principles of the rule of law, separation of powers, freedom of the media, and the limitation of civil rights, including women’s rights and the rights of minorities. The phenomena and tendencies known before, such as the low quality of institutions and the functioning of the government, the great influence of authoritarian and populist leaders, disappointment with the direction of systemic changes, weak participation, and, low quality of political culture, have intensified in the entire region. The results of the 2020 Democracy Index also confirm the need to develop more precise characteristics of democratic systems and to develop research on new forms of “illiberal democracy”, “personalist types of non-democratic regimes”, etc. Samuel P. Huntington (1991) in the context of the revolution of 1989-1990, asked whether they were anti-communist democratic movements or anti-Soviet nationalist movements? In the latter case, he saw the possibility of a return of authoritarian nationalist regimes in some countries of the region. The occurrence of such a scenario is characterized by the Freedom House Report, Nations in Transit 2020, which carries the symptomatic subtitle *Dropping the Democratic Façade*. The recommendations of this report attest to the seriousness of the situation. “Given the EU’s lack

of success to date in addressing autocratization in Hungary and Poland, member states should adopt a simple and uniformly applicable method for making EU funding conditional on respect for democratic values.” (Freedom House 2020, p. 18).

The 2020 Democracy Index rating system allows comparisons of different dimensions of the political system. In Central and Eastern Europe, they show that the relatively highest indications of the Index are in the electoral process and pluralism, and – to a much lesser extent – in the sphere of civil liberties. On the other hand, the functioning of the government, participation, and political culture in the region are clearly below the EU average. However, contrary to expectations that the pandemic period will “freeze” activities in the public sphere, in some countries of the region, there has been an increase in political participation. High political polarization and escalation of the “cultural war” in Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Croatia, and Bulgaria also dissent from corruption, found expression in the form of participation in mass protests and social demonstrations.

In Poland, for instance, among the manifestations of mobilization of various social circles against the government's policy one may point to protests of farmers, restaurateurs, hoteliers, organizers of recreation and cultural events (theatre performances, concerts, exhibitions, etc.), as well as of protests by nurses and paramedics. The most significant expression of such tendencies became the protests of the All-Poland Women's Strike after the Constitutional Court ruling on 22 October 2020, which radically increased the criminalization of abortion. These protests assumed a mass character on a scale for many years not known in Poland. During one week, approximately a million people in over 400 localities protested against the Court's decision (Hausner 2020, p. 72). In turn, demonstrations by thousands of people were held in Slovenia against the actions of Prime Minister Janez Jansa's government limiting the independence of the media. Like the governments of Hungary and Poland, the Slovenian government exploits the public media taken over by the authorities, creates new right-wing media, and tries to force self-censorship of journalists critical of the government¹⁷.

¹⁷https://www.euronews.com/2021/06/04/is-freedom-of-the-press-at-threat-in-slovenia?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=political_newsletter&_open=eyJndWlkLjoiNzkzZGNhODlmZmRmYmY4MDhkZGM0Y2E0NjJjZjg5YzUifQ%3D%3D (access date 21 June 2021). J. Jansa was the only prime minister of an EU member state to congratulate Donald Trump on his victory in the presidential campaign won by Joe Biden. P. Jendraszczyk. *Europe is waiting calmly for the results from the US. Apart from Slovenia*. “Rzeczpospolita”, 5 November 2020.

In the countries of the region, increasing political participation is a manifestation of the emergence of new forms of civic activism. They promote changes that democratize the exercise of power by popularizing the use of online voting platforms and introducing new rules of accountability for politicians. Criticism of the authorities' actions in counteracting the coronavirus pandemic and other factors causing an increase in political participation erode the legitimacy of governments. They also reinforce the need for new political solutions that take more account of social subjectivity. They are also a manifestation of the transnational struggle for the distribution of goods and value systems going beyond the borders of the nation-state in the EU. The result of this clash is not a foregone conclusion. The increase in civic activism in the world in recent years has often turned out to be a temporary and poorly institutionalized phenomenon. Social movements rarely achieve their goals, which can lead to apathy and political demobilization. It is also difficult to say how politically significant the generational and cultural change will be in the aging European societies. For the first time in history, demographics show a declining share of the younger generation in the population of many countries, making them less likely to be a target group for political parties. Especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which is distinguished by labour migration that transfers a significant population of active and entrepreneurial citizens to the more developed EU countries. Even if we recognize that new forms of participation are becoming the avant-garde and a "laboratory of change", it remains an open question to translate their postulates into the activities of the leading actors of politics, among whom, like in Poland, the circles of the "older generation" dominate.

However, the strength of the other pole of social change is clearly growing. Accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, digitization, and robotization, along with the shift in the capitalism model forced by the low-carbon transformation, is starting (or will soon start) favouring a new generation of political leaders. It is more likely that they will be recruited from social and cultural environments that are carriers of values and competences more functional in the face of new civilization challenges than politicians from the earlier period of post-communist transformation (leaders of the former democratic opposition, officials, and youth activists of the "old regime" etc.) The dynamics of the influences of these competitive tendencies already determine the shape of the future, and political participation is its significant herald.

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