



DISILLUSIONMENT WITH LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

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Abstract:

The disillusionment with Europe and integration process is spreading through the continent. However, it appears to be stronger in countries of the Central Europe, specifically V4. Countries that have joined the democratic club at the end of 20th century show today higher potential to be governed by populist and nationalistic parties. The article addresses the issue of perception of democracy in V4 countries through the scope of analysis of scientific publications as well as opinion polls conducted by national or international agencies. It works with several definitions of democracy and liberal democracy as a theoretical background and confronts them with how these are perceived by the people in the selected V4 countries. The opinion polls show, that people in these countries value democracy as a concept, and value the freedom that it brings, however, their everyday life and political decision are often impacted by the social and economic conditions they are living in.

Keywords: Liberal Democracy, Central Europe, Visegrad Group, Populism, Nationalism

Título en Castellano: La desilusión con la democracia liberal en los países de Visegrado

Resumen:

La desilusión con Europa y el proceso de integración se está extendiendo por todo el continente. Sin embargo, parece ser más fuerte en los países de Europa Central, específicamente en el V4. Los países que se han unido al club democrático a finales del siglo XX muestran hoy en día un mayor potencial para ser gobernados por partidos populistas y nacionalistas. El artículo aborda la cuestión de la percepción de la democracia en los países V4 a través del alcance del análisis de las publicaciones científicas, así como de las encuestas de opinión realizadas por organismos nacionales o internacionales. Trabaja con varias definiciones de la democracia y la democracia liberal como antecedentes teóricos y las confronta con la forma en que éstas son percibidas por la población de los países V4 seleccionados. Los sondeos de opinión muestran que la gente de esos países valora la democracia como concepto y valora la libertad que conlleva; sin embargo, su vida cotidiana y sus decisiones políticas suelen verse afectadas por las condiciones sociales y económicas en las que viven.

Palabras Clave: Democracia liberal, Europa Central, Grupo de Visegrado, populismo, nacionalismo

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1. Introduction

In November 2019 the Europe celebrated 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall which has marked the process of transformation towards democracy for half of the continent. Central Europe, more specifically in this article the Visegrad Group countries, were among those where the process started. Over the last 30 years the region has undergone changes, economic and political transformations were underway, all four countries became part of NATO and more importantly the EU, societies have changed. At the same time, however, the countries have experienced turbulences in all areas of their development, economic reforms did not have only positive impact on the population, they have created significant economic differences among regions and different groups of people. In the political area, all countries have been experiencing attempts to undermine or change the character of liberal-democratic political system. In Slovakia this came relatively early on in the 1990s, Hungary and Poland have been transforming their liberal regimes in last 5-10 years, gradually. Only the Czech Republic is an exception, even though it was first of these countries were non-traditional political party won election and formed a government.

On the occasion of 30th anniversary, an opinion poll² was conducted in Central Europe. Besides of Visegrad countries the poll included Germany, Bulgaria and Romania. As the main observations of this poll suggest, there is an increasing distrust of the public in the government and the media, people are worried that democracy is under threat and nationalism and populist parties are on the rise. In this regard, the region reflects developments going on throughout Europe and the broader Transatlantic region.

According to the poll, between 47% to 61%³ of respondents in the region believe that democracy is under threat. The lowest number came from the Czech Republic while the highest belongs to Slovakia. Interestingly enough both countries have experienced a mass anti-government anti-corruption demonstration over the course of 2019. When asked about free and fair election, 52% of Hungarian respondents do not believe this is the case in their country. Also, the trust in the rule of law in respective countries is rather low. The most pessimistic are the Slovaks, as 70% of respondents believe that the rule of law is threatened in their country. Numbers for Poland and Hungary are also rather high with 61% and 59%⁴ respectively. Especially in Slovakia the high number reflects scandals that have been surfacing since the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová in February 2018. What comes as even bigger surprise, in Slovakia only 25% of people asked believe the economic transformation to free market economy was positive for the country. This is probably related to the high corruption and rather significant economic inequalities that are strongly perceived in the country. The next country with low score in positive impressions from free market economy is Hungary, with only 33% of respondents considering it positive.

The opinion poll in general suggests that the overall perception of state of democracy and quality of life is neutral or rather negative. Even though there are differences among Visegrad countries. These differences are likely caused by specific internal development in politics, economy and social affairs.

The original hypothesis of this article was that people in Visegrad countries are disillusioned with liberal democracy because they lack the knowledge and understanding of what liberal values mean and how democracy works. However, this seems to be a wrong assumption. Nevertheless, before we move to the explanatory phase of how and why people in

² Bui-Wrzosinska, Lan: "Stage of change – Attitudes in East and Central Europe 30 Years after the Fall of Berlin Wall", Open Society Foundation, 2019, at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/states-of-change-attitudes-in-central-and-eastern-europe-30-years-after-the-fall-of-the-berlin-wall>.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7



Visegrad countries see the democracy and liberal values the way they do, we need to address a theoretical issues and definitions related to democracy and all adjectives we use to specify it.

2. Theoretical background and definitions

In this article we are using two conceptual frameworks, one is simplified and used within the international relations liberal theory discourse, another is more complex elaborated by political scientists especially in the late 20th century. This second approach provides for more specified understandings of democracy and different types it has achieved over the course of its development as the most spread type of political regime. In addition, the theoretical definitions are used by institutes providing reports on the state of democracy around the world.

Starting with the simplified definition of liberal democracy, as the one that has inspired this article, we have to look at the discourse of liberal as well as realist scholars who are looking at what is democracy and how democracy behaves in international relations. When IR scholars of liberal theory talk about liberal democracy, they talk about two important features - the liberal, normative, or constitutional one and the institutional or democratic one. These arguments can be found in papers and books of John M. Owen and Micheal W. Doyle, but also in works of realist scholars as Fareed Zakaria and John J. Maersheimer.

More specifically, the liberal international relations scholars see the greatest value in democracy through the pacifying effect it has on foreign policy behaviour of states and on diminishing mistrust in international relations. John Owen defines liberal democracy as “state with visible liberal presence” reflected in guaranteed freedom of speech and regularly organized competitive election of those who have the power to declare war, “liberal ideals and institutions work in tandem”.⁵

Doyle looks at liberalism mainly through freedoms it guarantees, even when they are often conflicting. The most important principle is the freedom of individual. He talks specifically about “moral freedom – the right to be treated and the duty to treat others as ethical subjects not as objects or means.”⁶ He identifies three sets of rights that are part of the liberal ideals: the so-called negative freedoms, positive freedoms, and democratic participation and representation. The negative freedom includes freedom of consciousness, free speech and press, equality under law, right to possess or exchange property. Positive freedom is inherent in institutions that provide for the guarantees of rights and freedoms for all. Democratic participation is a key to secure all mentioned freedoms.

Moving to realist scholars, Zakaria defines liberal democracy as a political system that is characterized “not only by free and fair election, but by the rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of basic liberties”.⁷ These are freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and property, and they can be called constitutional liberalism. As Zakaria points out in 1995, in the West, liberal values and democracy are interconnected, but not in the other parts of the world, where a phenomenon of illiberal democracies was rising. These are states where competitive and multiparty elections are taking place, hence they are democracies. But they miss the constitutional element, some of liberal practices are not observed.

J. Mearsheimer does not recommend to use the term liberal democracy in general. As he understands it, democracy is “a form of government with a broad franchise in which citizens get to choose their leaders in periodic election, those leaders then write and implement the rules

⁵ Owen, John, M.: “How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace”, *International Security* vol. 19, n°. 2 (Fall, 1994) pp. 89.

⁶ Doyle, Michael W.: “Kant, Liberal legacies, and Foreign Affairs”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 12, n°. 3 (Summer 1983) pp. 205-235.

⁷ Zakaria, Fareed: “The Rise of Illiberal Democracies”, *Foreign Affairs* (Novembre/December 1997) pp. 22.



that govern polity. Liberalism is all about individual rights. A liberal state privileges the rights of its citizens and protects them through its laws.”⁸ However, he does find commonalities in both definitions and reasons for why are they often bind together.

The IRT scholars provide us with rather general but normative as well as institutional definition of liberal democracy. We can conclude that a state is classified as a liberal democracy when it has guaranteed rights and freedoms for its citizens, and sorted relation between different branches of power with a system of checks and balances in place. At the same time, the liberal values and principles are part of everyday life of a society, where people are aware of what their rights and freedoms are vis-à-vis state and the other people.

When looking at liberal democracy, the main problem is that there is no single or generally accepted and used definition. The discussion whether the terms liberal and democracy should be connected remains contested. However, all definitions have in common the aspect of constitutional liberalism, a mechanism that guarantees that the rights and freedoms of individuals and groups are protected, that people cannot be oppressed by other people, or the state. All these are best achievable in democracy, where regular, free and multiparty elections are taking place. Hence the often-used term liberal democracy. However, in order to achieve the status of liberal democracy, a group of features needs be to present and clearly identified in a state. Therefore, over the course of political as well as theoretical developments, more types of democracy have been identified. The so called third wave of democratization, which Central Europe was an integral part of, emphasized the need to discuss these different types of democracy. In addition, the measures and features of how to consolidate a democratic regime in order to create a stable and functional state that can become a liberal democracy was elaborated.

In this article we will be looking in particular at two types of democracy, beside of the ideal type of liberal democracy. These two types are electoral democracy and delegative democracy.

2.1. Electoral democracy of Larry Diamond

In order to understand the difference between liberal and electoral democracy we will look at the definition provided by Larry Diamond at the end of 1990s and slightly adjusted by the author later.

Diamond introduces factors that distinguish liberal democracy from electoral democracy. The electoral democracy is “a constitutional system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular, competitive, multiparty election with universal suffrage.”⁹ In order to be considered a liberal democracy, the state must have few other elements. Firstly, no power domain is reserved for military or any other actor that is not accountable to the voters. Secondly, beside of the vertical accountability there is also horizontal one, so not only between ruled and rulers but also among people in power – basically the checks and balances system. Thirdly, “extensive provisions exist for political and civic pluralism, group and individual freedoms”¹⁰ allowing the exchange and competition of different values and opinions. Diamond defines 11 components of liberal democracy being the most important the constitutionalism as a precondition and guarantee for all the others to function. To summarize the components, liberal democracy includes as addition to the electoral element, the rule of law with independent and non-discriminatory judicial power, guaranteed freedoms of

⁸ Mearsheimer, John, J.: *The Great Delusion – liberal dreams and international relations*. New Haven - Yale University Press, p. 11.

⁹ Diamond, Larry: *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press 1999, p.10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.



speech, believe, publication, association, assembly. Additionally, protection of minorities either ethnic, cultural, or religious, or any other is strong in the state, together with evolved civil society that provides citizens with multiple options for participation outside of election processes. They are able to express their opinions and differences freely without any discrimination. Moreover, the military is under civilian control.¹¹

Based on these definitions, he presents four types of regimes which he later expands to six. The six are: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, ambiguous regime, competitive authoritarianism, electoral/uncompetitive authoritarianism, politically closed authoritarianism.

2.2. Delegative democracy of Guillermo O'Donnell

Another term which we consider to be useful for our analysis is the so called delegative democracy of Guillermo O'Donnell as a contrast to the mentioned liberal democracy and addition to the electoral democracy. As he claimed already in 1993, the delegative democracies are “neither consolidated nor institutionalized” so they basically represent a semi-type of democracy that can appear during what he calls “second transition”.¹² That means that country has managed to transform itself from authoritarian rule and adopt democratic principles, but only the second transitions shows if we talk about consolidated, institutionalized democracy. The second transition in this sense has to do with preserving the democratic principles of change in power. O'Donnell sees especially this moment as important, since there is no guarantee that this transition will succeed.

Even if O'Donnell talks about delegative democracy in the sense of presidential political system, some of its features can be observed in parliamentary political systems, especially those backsliding. The main idea is that the winner of the election rules the country as he/she sees fit, his support does not come from a regular party but more from a movement. Decisions adopted once in power often do not correspond to the promises made in the course of election campaigns. This type of democracy is majoritarian, as a person wins the election with a significant majority, which was secured by different myths related to the candidate explaining why he/she is the most suitable for the position. In this sense, voters are seen as delegators, as they delegate the political power to the candidate, and when the election is over, the voters are expected to return to political passivity. The winner is, at the end, selected as the only one who can save the country, the nation from its problems, be it fragmentation, economic problems, migration, ect. Any opposition is ignored and often described as anti-national.

When we substitute the term person in O'Donnell's explanation with a party, or leader of the party, we can see few parallels in Visegrad countries. Hungary is a particularly fitting case where prime minister is represented along the lines of mentioned definition. In Poland similar pattern is observed related to the Law and Justice Party. In Slovakia, the former government represented itself as the only viable alternative for the nation. The behaviour of political elites does suggest that the voter is perceived as mere delegator of power, as the cases of accountability are rare. This counts not only vis-à-vis voters (vertical accountability) but also in terms of accountability in front of existing institutions (horizontal).

When looking at the accountability, what O'Donnell emphasizes is, especially in the new democracies (he uses Dalh's term Polyarchy), any accountable political system has to include three components: democratic, liberal and republican.¹³ Liberal component is based on

¹¹ Diamond, Larry: “Can the whole world become democratic? Democracy, development and international policies” *Center For the Study of Democracy* 2003, at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bv4b2w1>.

¹² O'Donnell, Guillermo: *Delegative Democracy?* Kellogg Institute, 1993 at https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old_files/documents/172_0.pdf.

¹³ O'Donnell, Guillermo: “Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies”, *Journal of Democracy* vol. 9, nº. 3, July 1998, p. 113.



the idea of existing rights which no one and nothing should violate. Republican component is based on the idea of selfless public service and subjugation to the law. The democratic component stems from the ability of everyone to participate in the decision making. All three combined “democracy’s concern with equality, liberalism’s commitment to freedom in society, republicanism’s view of obligations of rulers”¹⁴ are building blocks of constitutional state – the rule of law. Basically, if one of these components fails, the rule of law is threatened. In order to assure the accountability, state has to have institutions/agencies that are legally empowered to take action against those who violate law, even if they are members of governing elite. However, when we look at recent wave of “autocratization – decline of democratic regime attributes,” also in Visegrad countries, especially in Poland and Hungary, the independent judiciary was the first target of current governments.

2.3. Importance of democratic consolidation

Already in the middle of the nineties some signs have appeared that the democratization process is not going so straightforward. We have already mentioned the phenomenon of illiberal democracies, with Slovakia perceived as one.¹⁵ Diamond was looking at steps a state needs to make to prevent democratization from reversing. Among the most important were the need “to strengthen existing political institutions, improve functioning of democracy and generate active and positive commitments of support at the elite and mass level.”¹⁶ He believed that democracy needs to be considered by the elite and the public as “the only game in town”. This point is especially important in the context of recent development where more and more political leaders, but also citizens, look at the authoritarianism as an alternative to current system. Visegrad countries are not an exception in this trend.

Nevertheless, the most important feature of the consolidation is the need to arrive to “normative and behavioural consensus on the legitimacy of the constitutional system”. The norms of behaviour, procedures of conduct and expectations need to be internalized by the people, politicians and interest groups. In this regard a shift in political culture is necessary. It remains open for discussion if this process was achieved or completed in the Visegrad countries. If it was not, we can see it as one of the reasons for the democratic backsliding and the disillusionment with democracy among people.

The consolidation of democracy takes place in two dimensions -norms and behaviours- and on three levels: elite, interests’ groups and public. Diamond specifies actions on all these levels, and looking at them, they were severely underestimated in the Visegrad countries. When it comes to the level of elite, created not only by decision makers, but also leaders of different organizations, activists and opinion shapers, what is emphasized is that they are not only those with power but their role is to shape political culture and set norms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. The intermediate level¹⁷ as Diamond calls it, created by existing parties, organizations, movements that are responsible for strengthening existing institutions through values they represent, procedures they adhere to, tactics they use. The joint role on these two levels is not to undermine the existing institutions and constitutional order, obey the law, respect opposition. At the same time, the consolidation is severely disturbed if anti-systemic forces gain more than 10% of support. Anti-systemic in this case would be those advocating against democracy favoring any other type of regime. Looking at it from the perspective of development in Visegrad group the question that arises is whether the elites of these four societies have not failed in delivering this component. Another level important for

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁵ Zakaria, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ Diamond, Larry: *Developing Democracy*, *op.cit.*, p. 64.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.



consolidation is the level of public. Consolidation from this level is only achieved if more than 2/3 of populations believe that democracy is the best form of government, and they do not demand its transformation. However, this support needs to be consistent over continuous time frame. Again, from the perspective of the public, in Visegrad countries we do see decreasing support of democracy among people and rise of anti-systemic positions. These are especially observable when scrolling through the social media.

Summarizing the theoretical section, we have emphasized that the basic definition of democracy is related to the free, fair and multiparty election with general suffrage. Building on that are liberal and republican principles. The liberal one is represented by the liberal values that are internalized by the society and protected by the law. It is represented by guaranteed and respected rights and freedoms of individuals, but also of different groups and minorities. The republican principle incorporates the responsibility and accountability of those who are elected and become political elite.

What these selected definitions are missing is the incorporation of the level of economic development and the socio-economic situation of individuals, which also plays a significant part in how the ruling regime is perceived. The second part of the article suggests a strong connection between the perception of well-being on one hand and support of the democracy as well as liberal values on the other.

Concluding this section, we argue that these discussions about different existing types of democracy are completely foreign to the majority of the population of Visegrad countries. Taking into consideration the opinion polls, it is obvious that terms democracy and liberal democracy are used interchangeably. However, the content is left open to interpretation, regardless if people see it as system that allows the political elites to get not only power but economic benefits at the expense of general public or not. This is often the case of how democracy is perceived by ordinary people in Visegrad countries, even though this understanding is spreading all over the western society.

3. Evaluating of democracy and opinion polls

In addition to the existing definitions of liberal democracy, electoral democracy and delegative democracy, this article takes into consideration the internationally presented reports by institutions that are measuring and assessing the state of democracy in the world. As the Freedom House methodology is relatively well known, we have selected as source of quantitative data reports elaborated by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) at the University of Gotheborg. The reason is that the Institute applies a specific methodology to evaluate countries, primarily it focuses on experts' opinions from all around the world. Basically, it builds up the quantitative data on qualitative evaluations, and that is certainly an interesting perspective on how to evaluate countries.

Nevertheless, the results of V-Dem will be compared, in the case of the four Visegrad countries, with the results on state of democracy elaborated by the Freedom House which ranks countries on the scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is the highest score and represents a democratic country, 4 is the average and 7 is an un-democratic country.

Starting with categories the V-Dem uses in its reports, it divides democratic states into two categories – liberal and electoral (using Larry Diamonds terminology). The move from one to the other depends on change in some of the indexes that are observed.

Electoral democracy has 5 categories – suffrage (equality), clean election (free/fair, registration of voters, irregularities, intimidation, vote buying), elected officials, freedom of association (political parties – how many, are there any barriers, was any party/civil society organization banned, how easy/difficult it is to register) and freedom of expression in terms of



civil society and media (harassment, censorship, self-censorship, media bias, range, critical state) as well as deliberations and discussions (polarization, hate speech, range of consultations, respect for counterarguments, justifications, engagement of society).¹⁸ If change happens in one of these, the quality of democracy is worsening.

In addition, there are groups of components that are observed – participatory, egalitarian, liberal, deliberative. Participatory component is intertwined with election – levels within the state where the election is taking place – from local through regional to national level. However, an important part of this component is also the freedom of civil society organizations, and their operation and activity. Egalitarian component looks at the guarantees in access, protection and distribution of possibilities, services and benefits – basically social elements. Liberal component is strongly connected to the rule of law, and judicial and legislative constraints on executive power. Deliberative component has a lot to do with deliberations, discussions and exchange of opinions that are inherent to freedom of expression.

The report evaluates a number of indexes that are quite encompassing. In general, the deterioration of democracy is caused by limiting the freedom of expression, freedom of media, freedom of civil society, and the rule of law. When looking at the media, issues such as censorship and self-censorship, media bias, range, critical discussion and freedom of discussion are taken into consideration. The report suggests that the state of the freedom of media plays a crucial role in the ability of people to decide when going to election. Concerning the freedom of expression, the report concludes that a toxic polarization is on the rise.¹⁹

In a recent period, the V-Dem report shows an increasing wave of autocratization as opposed to the democratization wave that the world experienced mainly in the late 20th century. “Autocratization is a substantial and significant worsening on the scale of liberal democracy... it is an umbrella term that covers both erosion in democratic countries (democratic backsliding), breakdown of democracy, as well as worsening of conditions in electoral authoritarian states.”²⁰ The Report of 2019 concludes that the autocratization is increasing. When looking at Visegrad countries, 3 out of 4 are not classified as liberal democracies. When comparing the state of democracy in 2008 with the state of democracy in 2018 only Slovakia managed to preserve the title of liberal democracy and Hungary being the worst according to the democratic index²¹ measured by this institution.

4. The case of Visegrad countries

Looking at the last 30 years in Central Europe, and specifically in Visegrad countries, the changes are really significant. Naturally, each change brings with itself certain expectations. When these are not met, frustration and dissatisfaction come.

In early nineties, Central Europe was considered to be a prime example of the so called third wave of democratization. However, after 30 years we have to conclude that it is not immune to the process of autocratization, that some call de-democratization.

When we look at the V-dem Liberal democracy index (LDI) that is set in the range from 0 to 1, we can get a picture of how is the state of democracy in the Visegrad countries seen from the outside. To clarify at the beginning, LDI consists of two components. First is the electoral democracy index based on the components of Dahl’s Polyarchy. The second component is the

¹⁸ *Democracy facing Global Challenges: V-Dem annual democracy report 2019*, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, p. 17-19, at https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/99/de/99dedd73-f8bc-484c-8b91-44ba601b6e6b/v-dem_democracy_report_2019.pdf.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²¹ The democratic index includes quality of electoral aspects, freedom of expression, media, quality of civil society, rule of law and existence of checks on the executive. V-Dem Institute, *op. cit.*, p. 10

liberal component index where rule of law, ensuring of civil liberties, and constraints on three branches of power are considered.²²

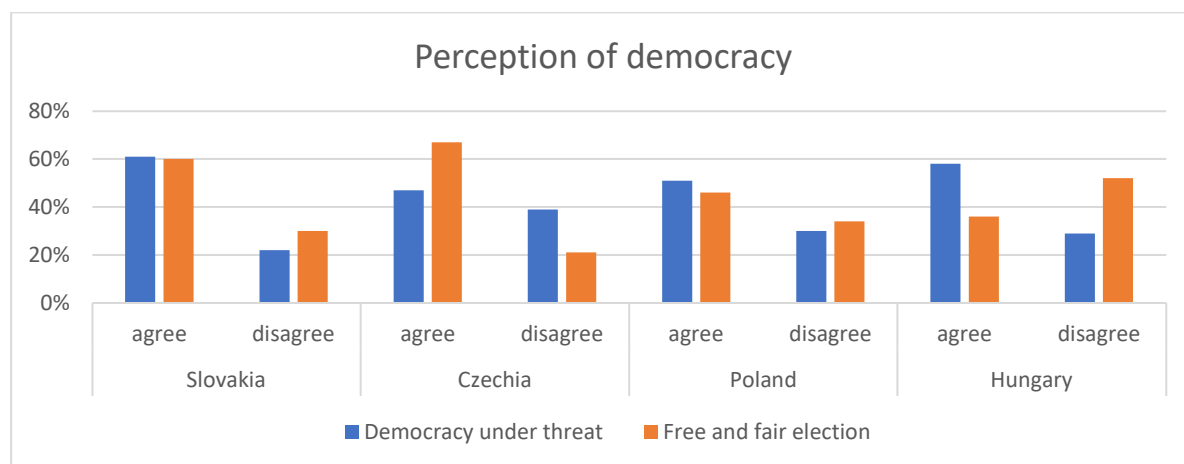
When looking at evaluation of democracies, the graph provided by in the V-Dem on pages 11-12,²³ is divided into the 4 sectors, with the sector between 0,0 – 0,25 represents closed autocracy, 0,25-0,5 representing electoral autocracy, countries in the sector of 0,5-0,75 are electoral democracies and the last sector 0,75-1 are liberal democracies. The Visegrad countries are today dispersed in three sectors. Slovakia and Czech Republic are rated the highest, Slovakia just below the 0,75 margin, Czech Republic very little lower; however, Czech Republic is marked as country that experiences autocratization, Poland and Hungary are placed along the 0,5 margin, both are experiencing autocratization, with Poland being still in sector 0,5-0,75 (but closer to 0,5), and Hungary moved to the 0,25-0,5 sector (but still closer to the 0,5 border). That would mean that while three Visegrad countries remain evaluated as electoral democracies, even if on different position within the sector, Hungary is considered an electoral autocracy.

Clearly, the democracy is experiencing severe setbacks in the region. However, in order to find an answer to the issue of disillusionment of people with liberal democracy, we need to look at the opinions of the public as well as the most important events in the development of these countries within the last 30 years.

When we look at the results of an opinion poll conducted at the occasion of 30th anniversary of the Fall of Berlin wall, from around 50 to 60% percent of Visegrad group citizens have the feeling that democracy is under a threat, with the highest 61% in Slovakia and lowest 47% in Czech Republic. In Hungary, 52% of people asked do not believe that the election is free and fair, which is the highest number in all four countries. When it comes to economy and free marked, only 25% of people in Slovakia consider it to be good for society, while 28% thinks it is bad. The rest of the population remains somewhere in the area of neither, nor. In Hungary, which is placed just slightly above Slovakia, 33% consider free market a good thing and 22% a bad thing. Another category shows that there is rather high mistrust towards the information provided by the government, with 71% of Slovaks not trusting governmental sources, and 60-63% in other three countries.

More detailed results are provided in Figures 1 to 3 below, created by the author based on the data from already quoted poll of Bui-Wrozinska.

Figure. 1



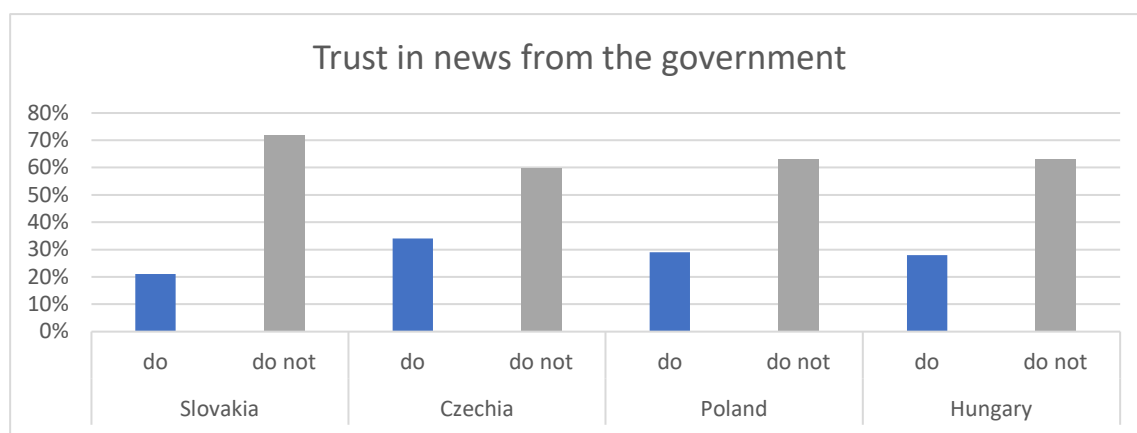
²² For further details see the V-Dem report at https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/99/de/99dedd73-f8bc-484c-8b91-44ba601b6e6b/v-dem_democracy_report_2019.pdf.

²³ For more details see the report.

Figure. 2

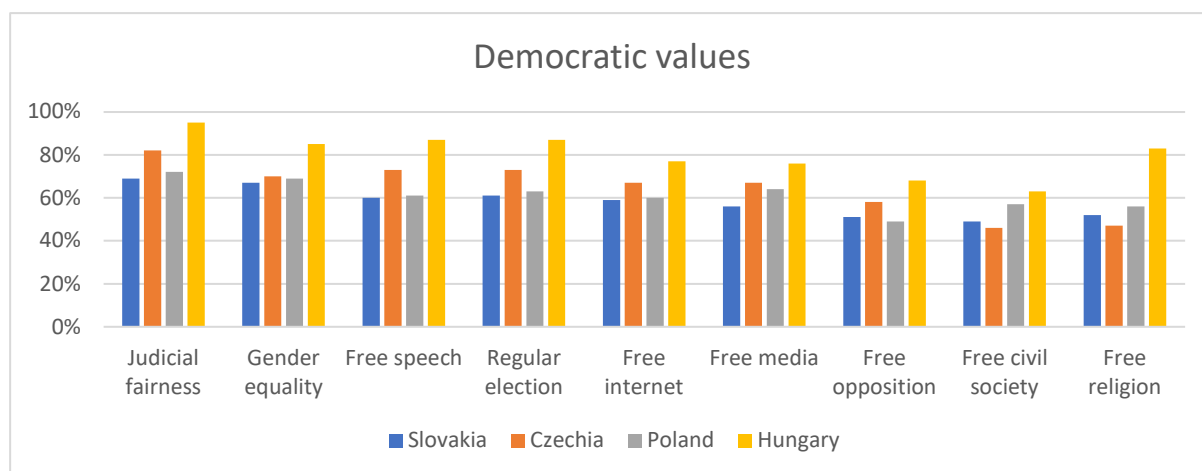


Figure. 3



The opinion poll conducted by Pew Research²⁴ asked people in Europe, what they value the most in democracy. The results of Visegrad countries suggest that the liberal components of democracy are very important. Figure 4 shows that from over 60% to over 90% of Hungarians consider all categories relevant. An interesting factor is that this country is no longer considered a democracy.

Figure. 4



²⁴ Table made from Pew Research Center, *2019 Report*, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/democratic-values/>.



4.1. Slovakia

Looking at political developments in Slovakia, if we take democracy in its minimalistic definition, the first fair, free multiparty election with general suffrage took place already in 1990 when Czechoslovakia still existed. Since becoming independent, the political arena was not stable, there were regular changes in government, with the longest period of about 2,5 years of one of them, however all these changes took place through the election processes.

The government that was formed after the 1994 election was the first that had managed to govern the country for the full term of four years. However, when looking at the behaviour of this government, it was nor republican, neither liberal. It was more authoritarian, as it blocked any possibility for opposition to participate on power within the National Council. Moreover, it has used police and intelligence officers to threaten the opposition. All over the country, mafia groups were active. Economic privatization was booming with state companies sold for low prices to the people who had close links to the government. The Slovak public and academia call this period meciarism (named after that time prime minister Vladimir Meciar).

The problem that probably started the disillusion of people with democracy was that none of the politicians was persecuted. Most of them left active politics significantly richer, some remained in public life. Privatizers also were left untouched. The accountability was not achieved.

When the new government was formed after 1998 election, their primary focus was to adopt reforms necessary for negotiations on membership in the EU and NATO. Economic reforms that were adopted, however, deepened the economic inequalities among people.

Election in 2006 was won by SMER, self-declared 3rd way party as the British Labour party. However, they formed government with the party of Vladimir Meciar and the Slovak national party of controversial Jan Slota. Before the election, a corruption scandal was uncovered, under the name Gorila – information appeared about recordings conducted by national intelligence where politicians discuss politics and economic reforms with rich businessmen in a flat located in the centre of Bratislava. An investigation was opened by the prosecutor but the case remains open until today.

SMER party has governed Slovakia until the election in February 2020, with a short interruption from 2010 to 2012. In this period the country experienced several scandals, cases of corruption, and blackmailing that were never really prosecuted. Connections between politicians and business people with doubtful activities were uncovered by journalists. Nepotism was part of political culture. Nevertheless, SMER has won every election since 2006 (except the last one). The support for the party came mainly from the elderly and people with lower education - from economically weaker groups of society.

As a result of disillusionment of the public with the state of affairs, populist and nationalist party started to win support. Firstly, it was manifested at regional level, when regional election in central Slovakia (Banska Bystrica) were won by Marian Kotleba, former chairman of dissolved party, declared unconstitutional by Constitutional court. He had formed a new party – People's Party Our Slovakia and assumed position of head of a region. Additionally, in the parliamentary election of 2016 his party conquered 5% quorum and entered the National Council. Support for this party is steadily growing. The party is openly anti-systemic, nationalistic, anti-American, anti-European, xenophobic with neo-Nazi tendencies. Phenomenon of growth of support for this party was accompanied by appearance of conspiracy prone “news” websites and journals.



When looking at the opinion polls published in Slovakia in 2016²⁵ we see that 40% of respondents consider the quality of democracy bad, 33% nor good nor bad and only 26% as good. The reasons why democracy fails are: politicians do not work in public interest (79% with 48% definitely agreeing), uneconomic handling of state fortune and money is not punished as it is not in the interest of those in power (79%), people are not equal before law and the law enforcement is low (78%), the inequality among people's property (75%), the state is failing in providing security, good quality health care or education (75%), the controlling and regulation agencies do not prevent power abuse (75%), social system is abused by those who are not willing to work (75%), the laws are of a low quality and changed too often (73%), poverty is increasing in the society (72%), decent people are not engaging in public life (62%), Slovakia loses too much sovereignty vis-à-vis transnational corporations (61%), the human and minority rights are not sufficiently protected (57%).

When an alternative to current situation was asked, 24% and 28% agreed that the democracy should be substituted respectively by dictatorship, a return of the regime existing before 1989. Additionally, 41% of respondents have seen as an alternative the presence of a strong leader with strengthened competencies. This trend is striking, and it confirms the arguments that Central Europe is more prone to authoritarianism. However, it is difficult to read from the poll if the strong leader means a change of the principles of democracy or it is meant as charismatic and decisive leadership.

However, more than 60% of people believed that participation of decent people in public affairs and strengthening the independence of police, prosecutor's offices, judiciary, agencies of control and regulation would help to improve democracy in Slovakia. More than a half of respondents (52%) agreed that democracy needs to be strengthened as there is not better possibility, in terms of political regime.

What we can read from this opinion poll is that people are in general not happy on how democracy has turned out. The main reason is how democracy has been handled by political elites, by the level of corruption, and by the lack of accountability, both vertical and horizontal.

From a published results of group interview²⁶ with the right-wing voters of People's Party Our Slovakia, it is obvious that the corruption cases and other scandals are one of the reasons why they support this party. The other is the fact that their living standard is lower to what they would like it to be, and they do not see many ways how to improve it, as they are already full time employed. So social and economic differences are another factor. When asked how this situation should be solved, state was mentioned as the body responsible for people, so their life is calmer, easier, more predictable. Also, there is some nostalgia for the previous regime, as the state has provided certain guarantees and social securities. At some point they have agreed that too much freedom and the lack of borders (in all terms – state, personal) is not good. However, the main issue they have identified was the situation in the healthcare system, that in order to get a proper care you need to have money, and most of the people cannot afford that.

If we look at the two groups interviewed we see that the economic and social issues are the reason that pulls them to support the radical party as the leader is promising to change this and bring some sort of security, equality to the people (even though Roma group is strongly

²⁵ *Demokraciu na Slovensku ohrozuje populizmus a korupcia*, INEKO, February 2017, at <http://www.ineko.sk/projekty/podpora-demokracie>.

²⁶ The focus groups discussions were organized by 2muse agency in cooperation with one of the leading news paper DennikN. Article is published in Slovak language only on the following link. <https://dennikn.sk/1626477/kto-sa-o-nas-postara-mozno-mano-kotleba-pocuvali-sme-beznych-ludi-preco-volia-lsns/>.



criticized, and the party is strongly nationalistic and xenophobic) and more independence in food security, energy areas etc. In addition, the party strongly advocates for national identity as opposed to liberal Europe and US. However, majority of the interviewed voters was not so anti-liberal or anti-democratic as was expected.

This suggests that the disillusionment with liberal democracy might be caused more by the state of socio-economic situation within the state, rather than general dislike of liberal values.

The dissatisfaction of Slovaks with the state of affairs was apparent in the last 2 years at several occasions. After the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, a group of young people and activists have organized mass protests around the country. The name of the protests was “For decent Slovakia” and demanded the proper and impartial investigation of the murder. At the end, the protests have led to shifts in government, when prime minister Fico stepped down to be replaced by younger rising SMER politician Peter Pellegrini. In addition, in 2019 Slovaks have elected a first female president. Zuzana Caputova, relatively unknown public activist and lawyer, defeated Euro-commissioner Maros Sefcovic who was nominated by the SMER party. Caputova, with her openly liberal values, probably attracted voters with her calm and rational expression, she has refused personal attacks on opponents during the campaign, we could say that she represented the decency among Slovak politicians and aspiring politicians.

In 2020 parliamentary election SMER party was defeated by unorthodox movement of “Ordinary people and independent personalities” led by controversial politician Igor Matovic. The movement was running the campaign on anti-corruption, anti-nepotism and anti-SMER rhetoric. Moreover, the movement is rather conservative, as it includes many pro-life advocates and known conservative politicians, as former MEP Anna Zaborska. Another paradox of the last election was the fate of openly liberal coalition of parties Progressive Slovakia/Together which did not meet the 7% margin set for parties running in coalition. The party missed the quorum for less than 1000 votes. About 200 000 liberal voters are therefore not represented in Slovak parliament.

To summarize, it is obvious that Slovak public is rather united in their opinion when it comes to corruption, social and economic differences. However, the population is polarized. There are obvious differences between conservative voters and younger, more liberal voters living in cities. The supporters of radical right created a separate group, relying on conspiracy spreading web platforms, being strongly conservative and nationalistic. What is quite obvious when following social networks is that this is a group of people with rather low understanding of liberal values and democracy in general, besides of the freedom of speech they would passionately defend and demand.

4.2. Czech Republic

Political development in this part of former Czechoslovakia was evolving differently, but not less interestingly. What is seen as a root of current political problems is the perception of party politics in Czech Republic through the only party that has been allowed in previous regime. The term party was associated with Communist party, the new actor Civic Forum was supposed to be for everyone. This is today seen as a reason why non-traditional parties get support from people. Nevertheless, the 1990s were marked by the reforms done for the purpose of European integration and severe competition between liberal conservative Civic-democratic party of first prime minister Vaclav Klaus, and Social democratic party of Milos Zeman took place. They both presented themselves at particular time as saviours of Czech Republic, as prime ministers and also as presidents. However, they were not the only politicians that seen themselves in this way. Even deeper personalization came with Jiri Paroubek of Czech social-democratic party



and Mirek Topolanek when he took over the leadership of Civic-democratic Party. In the election of 2010 both parties lost significant number of voters, about 30-40%,²⁷ which meant an erosion of the relatively stable electoral support and party system.²⁸ Although, the election of 2010 was preceded by a governmental crisis, when government of Mirek Topolanek lost the confidence vote in parliament in March 2009 (that was a time when Czech Republic presided over Council of EU) and was substituted by the government of independents and experts led by Jan Fischer. His provisional government adopted a series of positively perceived reforms.

After the two dominant parties lost their supporters, it opened a way for newly created parties. In the election of 2010 two newly created parties joined the Chamber of Deputies. One was the TOP09 party, also rather personalized around its leader, prince Karel Schwarzenberg. Another was the Public Affairs Party, first business-firm party²⁹ in Czech Republic. Another similar party was created in 2011, and in the election of 2013 joined the Chamber of Deputies. This party is the ANO 2011 (Association of dissatisfied citizens 2011) established by a successful businessman of Slovak origin, Andrej Babis, who is currently a prime minister.

Czech Republic also has its experience with a populist party, or rather a movement. The Dawn of Direct Democracy was created by Tomio Okamura in 2013 and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies. However, in 2015 Okamura was elected as a chairman of the newly created movement, Freedom and Direct Democracy. Tomio Okamura is a business man of Czech-Japanese origin with relatively colourful political experience, as he was a member of Senate, candidate for a presidency and today he is in position of vice-chairman of Chamber of Deputies. He is famous for his anti-Roma, anti-immigration, anti-NATO and anti-European rhetoric.

When looking at current development in Czech Republic, the minority government of prime minister Andrej Babis is affected by scandals associated with business interests of Babis himself. When elected for the first time, he was the second wealthiest person in Czech Republic, CEO of Agrofert Group which owns around 210 companies ranging from agriculture to media. He was investigated by police and OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office) as allegation appeared that anonymous company controlled by Babis unlawfully received funding from European Regional Development Fund.³⁰ Investigation was however hampered when he was re-elected in 2017 and received parliamentary immunity.

When looking at how people perceive political system in the country in contrast to Slovakia, Czechs seem to value their democracy regardless of the scandals and affairs of political elites.

Opinion poll conducted by Czech private sociological research company STEM suggests that overall perception of positive impact of Velvet revolution is strongest in Czech Republic, when compared to its Visegrad neighbours. The poll was asking about changes the people experienced in the last 30 years and perceptions of whether their life turned out better or worse. It seems that about 72% of poll participants are satisfied with the quality of their life.

²⁷ Cabada, Ladislav: “Český stranický systém v roce 2016: personalizační tendence, populismus a anti-politické přístupy” *Politics in Central Europe* vol. 12 n°. 2 (2016) p. 67-68.

²⁸ Just, Petr – Charvat, Jakub: “Business-Firm Parties and the Czech Party System after 2010”, *Politics in Central Europe* vol. 12, n°. 3 (2016) p. 84, at https://www.politicsincentraleurope.eu/documents/file/PCE_2016_3_12_a.pdf.

²⁹ For further information see Just, Petr – Charvat, Jakub, *op.cit* and Cabada, Ladislav, *op.cit*.

³⁰ Rettman, Andrew: “Czech PM attacks EU after fraud report prompts oustag”, *EU Observer*, June 5, 2019 at <https://euobserver.com/justice/145079>.



What is interesting to see is that around 92% of respondents consider access to products and services (not accessible before 1989) as the most positive outcomes. When looking at the truly liberal values of the system, above 86% sees as positive the freedom of speech and freedom to express own opinion, 85% sees as positive the multipartism, and 80% the ability to create interest groups and civil society movements. For 83% of the respondents it is positive to be able to control his own life, and 81% sees the possibilities for clever and skilful people as a positive feature of society. Additionally, 84% values the quality of education system.

However, when it comes to social and economic differences, as well as quality of relations between people, the more negative positions dominate. The order and lawfulness in the society is seen rather negatively by 59% of respondents. In this case, the order could be seen as part of the rule of law. About 65% sees the character of relations between people as negative (that is lacking mutual respect and decency), the morale of the society is seen negatively by 70% of people. Additionally, 67% sees negatively economic differences existing among people.³¹

Despite the Czech Republic polls showing strong support for democracy, the V-Dem institute places Czech Republic among the countries where the quality of democracy worsens. One of the reasons might be the president's office and his criticism of liberal values and western orientation of the country. The prime minister is associated with companies that control the largest newspapers in the country.

In 2019 mass demonstrations took place in Prague, comparable to those of Velvet revolution. Protesters demanded resignation of the prime minister, who was allegedly involved in several scandals. In addition, a resignation of the minister of Justice related to one of the scandals involving the prime minister was another reason for the demonstration. The group "Million moments for Democracy" blames the government for burring the change people were protesting for in 1989. People do value democracy and liberal ideals.

When looking at Czech and Slovak experience, they do bear certain similarities. First of all, both countries share a significant amount of their, not only modern, history. Secondly, both experienced a swift transformation of economic processes and politics. Thirdly, politicians in both countries have created rather personalized parties or have become the dominant figures within parties. Fourthly, both share significant amount of corruption scandals. When looking at the opinion polls in both, people are not happy with the economic situation, especially the differences among people. Both countries experienced a surge of civic activism, caused by corruption scandals and affairs, and in Slovakia by even more serious event of murder of journalist.

The remaining two members of Visegrad group are currently at different level when compared to Slovakia and Czech Republic. They both are often analysed together in the articles on democratic backsliding or change into electoral democracies. However, Hungary has crossed the line, and is nowadays considered an electoral authoritarianism. We will look how is the situation in these two countries when it comes to the perception of democracy from their citizens, and what role has political leadership and economic situation played in both as possible influence on people's perceptions of democracy.

4.3. Poland

Political and economic development in Poland was not less turbulent than in previous two Visegrad countries. Poland experienced its first election where independent candidates could run already in the summer of 1989, when one-third of seats in Polish parliament – Sejm, were taken by candidates supported by the Solidarity movement. This new parliament started with

³¹ Opinion poll published at <https://www.stem.cz/co-nam-prineslo-tricet-let-svobody/>.



the economic but also political reforms. The economic shock therapy has caused collapse of large factories and companies and led to 20% unemployment that took 15 years to recover from.³²

In the last 30 years, Poland has held parliamentary election 10 times. Until the election in 2019, none of the governing parties managed to secure two consecutive terms. That would suggest rather unstable party system on one hand, or dissatisfaction of the people with the performance of the government on the other. Both of these options seem to be true. After the 1991 election, 29 parties were in parliament, no surprise that the next round of election took place just 2 years later. In addition, the personality of presidents intervened into political processes and party quarrels quite often.³³

What is obvious from the Pew Research opinion poll done in 2019, is that 66% Poles are among those most satisfied with democracy in Europe. The score is even 1% higher than in Germany, and most of the Visegrad Group. When looking at the perception of how elected officials care about interests of people, Poland is again on the top of the list with 48% feeling that politicians do not care about their needs and 45% who have the feeling that they do. So, we could say that the population is equally divided in this matter.

Looking at the most important features of working democracy, Poles value the fairest judiciary with 72%, surprisingly enough the least important from the list is the free opposition with only 49%. The religious freedoms and free civil society are important for approximately the same amount of people, 56% and 57% respectively. Additionally, regular elections are valued by 63% of population, and 61% values the freedom of speech. However, as shown in the Figure. 1, half of the population feels that their democracy is under threat.

These polls do not suggest that Polish citizens are disillusioned with democracy, and that they would prefer any other political regime. Naturally a question opens, as to why they voted for the conservative Law and Justice party in two consecutive elections, when this party has started to undermine the principles of democracy, especially the one Poles value the most. An article published by the Warsaw Institute presented a few reasons, mainly explaining that, as ruling party, they were trying to meet the needs of their voters. In foreign policy, Poles are against joining the euro-zone, anti-migration and they view negatively Muslims.³⁴ Domestically and in terms of values the majority of Poles are conservative. In addition, the government has launched redistribution of income policies to economically weakest groups.³⁵ As an article published in *Foreign Policy* suggests, the voters of ruling party come mainly from provincial areas, but their motivation to vote for Law and Justice is not necessarily the centre-periphery divide and economic and social hardship in the peripheral areas. Based on the analysis offered in the article which, in turn, is based on the author who coordinated the opinion poll, “the Polish voters are rational actors with a good grasp of politics.”³⁶ As the quoted poll suggests, what place a role in supporting any party in Poland is not necessarily the value system and ideals the party is built on, but the social benefits voters received in the past and were promised in the future. The example used is the subsidy of 500 zloty (130 euro) monthly per

³² Sierakovski, Slawomir(a): “Why Poland’s Populists Keep Winning?”, *Foreign Policy*, 9 October 2019, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/09/polands-populism-winning-welfare-state/>.

³³ Sierakowski, Slawomir (b): “I was 10 when communism fell in Poland. My world become colourful – but unstable”, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2019, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/04/communism-poland-democracy-pepsi>.

³⁴ In the Pew Research Report 2019, 66% of Poles see Muslims unfavourable, comparing to 26% who have opposite opinion. More in Pew Research Report 2019 *op.cit.*

³⁵ Grosse, Tomasz Grzegorz: *On Democracy in Poland*, Warsaw Institute, 4 December 2019 at <https://warsawinstitute.org/on-democracy-in-poland/>.

³⁶ Sierakowski, Slawomir (b): *op.cit.*



child that the Law and Justice government has implemented. This quoted study³⁷ suggests that there is a great degree of political cynicism observable at the voters, that they often answer as politicians and take care of who they address and how. In addition, it shows how some people perceive the corruption, they despise it when it is for personal gains but are willing to tolerate if it is for greater good.

What comes out from the Pew Research Report as quite interesting is the 49% support for free opposition, which is the lowest from all Visegrad countries. It seems that people are generally displeased with the activities of opposition, in this case more liberal and social democratic, or leftist parties. Based on the opinion of a philosophy professor from Wrocław University, we have to look also at the value system the Polish opposition represents. However, this is more valid for loyal, hard-core Law and Justice electorate. Many people in Poland believe that Catholic Church has played an important role during the years of transformation from the previous socialist regime. It is likely caused by the fact that, in this period, the Pope, John Paul II., was Polish. Church values and traditions still play important role in the society and its own identity. There are issues that seem to be off topic in Poland – the abortion would be one of the most obvious. As Chmielewski points out, the Law and Justice party is an example of populist authoritarianism and it deals with two main problems of Polish society, that are shared with the whole Europe: the elite universal egalitarianism and return to identity politics under the fast-changing world. The Law and Justice traditional voters identify with the party through its nationalism, conservatism and xenophobia.³⁸ The problem of opposition, mainly liberal, is that it is too focused on economy and creation of middle class and does not threat the rest of the liberal value system as equally important.³⁹ Another opposition group on the left side of the spectrum has failed to face the inequality problems in society and the Law and Justice Party stepped in.

To summarize, Poles are in generally satisfied with democracy, they even score relatively high when it comes to value the most important democratic and liberal values. Nothing suggests that they are disillusioned with their reality to the grade that they would want to radically change it.

4.4. Hungary

The first free multiparty election took place in 1990, with conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum and liberal Alliance for Free Democrats receiving above 20% of votes. This was not surprising, as in most of the post-communist countries were winning parties representing the other political spectrum. What distinguishes Hungary from other Visegrad countries, is a rather stable party system. Fidesz as “ultra-liberal party”⁴⁰ was running already in the 1990 election, and most of the parties who joined the first democratically elected National Assembly still exist. Also, when looking at the regularity of election, they were taking place without any problems every four years, since the first one.

However, the support for liberal Alliance started to wane as more and more people felt left out by the marketization of the economy. This have led to growing support for Hungarian Socialist Party in the 1990s which received over 30% of votes in two consecutive elections. However, since the mid of the nineties, Fidesz, that time liberal conservative party, started to

³⁷ Sadura, Przemysław – Sierankowski, Sławomir: *Political Cynicism, The Case of Poland*, 2019, at <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/file/sites/4/2017/10/Political-cynicism-Resume-in-English.pdf>.

³⁸ Chmielewski, Adam J.: “Perception and Politics – the case of Poland: coping with political apparitions”, 1 October 2019, at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/perception-and-politics-the-case-of-poland-coping-with-political-apparitions/>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Ungváry, Krizstián: *Hungary and the European Union 1989-2014 – a Success Story?* Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 28 October 2014, at <https://eu.boell.org/en/2014/10/28/hungary-and-european-union-1989-2014-success-story>.



gain support. From approximately 1995 to 2006 Fidezs managed to bring together all right-wing parties in Hungary. Nevertheless, a radical populist party, Jobbik, was created by former Fidezs members and succeeded in rural and poor areas with anti-Semitic rhetoric.⁴¹

Atila Agh⁴² is offering an interesting insight into the evolution of Hungary since 1990s, and points out 3 key crisis that took place and led to the growth of support of conservative, nationalistic populist Fidesz party.

These 3 crises were present in the process of democratization from the start; however, they have an underlining historical background. As Agh states, democratization was taking place, or was supposed to take place, in 3 areas – political, economic, and social. He stresses that in the nineties, attention was paid to the first two crises, the third was expected to evolve along, however, it did not happen. First crisis was one of transformation that was conducted in formal democratization of political institutions and in marketization-privatization of the economy. The social area was left out from this process. Hungary was historically a disintegrated society, when reforms, even those in mid-19th century, affected just parts of the society. The same has happened in the nineties where the low skilled work force that has lost jobs due to privatization was left behind on the margins of society, untouched by the positive changes for individuals. In addition, these people did not feel represented by politicians, so the dissatisfaction and frustration were growing. In this state came the second crisis, caused by the atmosphere created after the accession to the EU. In general, people have expected that the entrance will bring changes in their life. However, the country was missing not only civil society but democratic political culture, as precondition for a consolidated democracy. The support from the EU was coming, however it was not directed to the already disillusioned low skilled workers. Moreover, the growing unemployment affected even the less skilled people. The dissatisfaction with the EU was shown in 2009 when only 20% of Hungarians believed that the EU membership was a good thing.⁴³ Moreover, in 2006 Hungary experienced protests that have disputed the most important feature of democracy – the results of election. This was organized by party that did not manage to secure victory, the party of Victor Orbán. Hungary in this way experienced not only socio-economic but also political crisis, and the fragile pillars of democracy started to crack even more.

The third crisis is connected to the global economic crisis of 2008 and austerity measures that have followed. In the process where all the countries started to compete over investments, Hungary have experienced inability to compete. The unemployment rate was growing again, disbanding the middle class that has been built since the 1990s. In this atmosphere, the parliamentary election was won by Fidesz, using populist and nationalistic rhetoric. As Fidesz secured constitutional majority in parliament they have started with demolition of democratic features. They have put their people in the body controlling the media, in state audit office, as well as in the presidential office. The problems the country has faced were blamed mainly on the European Union; the crisis that was ongoing was explained by prime minister as a sort of punishment for Europe losing its religious path.

When looking at how people perceive democracy in Hungary, more than a half of the population believes that democracy is being threatened. From among the democratic priorities, 95% of respondents have chosen the judicial fairness as most important. High numbers have also gender equality (85%), free speech and regular election, both with 87%, and free religion with 83%. However, as shown in the other poll, 52% of Hungarians does not trust that elections

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Ágh, Attila: “The tripple crisis in Hungary: the “backsliding” of Hungarian democracy after twenty years” *Romanian Journal of Political Science* vol. 1, nº. 1, January 2013, pp. 25-51.

⁴³ See more details in Pew Research Report 2019, chapter 9, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2009/11/02/chapter-9-rating-the-eu-and-nato/>.



are free and fair on one hand. On the other hand, when it comes to the free opposition, 68% agrees that it is important in the country, with 63% supporting the free civil society. This would suggest that Hungarians in general have a strong sense of support for democracy - at the end, none of the categories scored less than 63% support of respondents.

Nevertheless, in the poll's results when we talk about democratic backsliding or autocratization as a process, Hungary is among the prime examples. However, the Fidesz party of Victor Orbán gained almost 50% of all votes in 2018 parliamentary election and seized 133 seats in 199-member parliament.

There are discussions going on among scholars of how to call the current political regime in Hungary.⁴⁴ The need to find a proper definition has a lot to do with the mentioned wave of autoritarization that has been ongoing.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to address the hypothesis that the people in Visegrad countries are disillusioned with liberal democracy and are looking for alternatives. As it is obvious from what has been written here, it is hardly possible to confirm the assumption, but also to contradict it with certainty. There is a number of reasons why is it so.

First of all, when looking at the opinion polls conducted either by internationally operating institutions or by local agencies, we can see that they are all using terms democracy or liberal democracy interchangeably. This leads to a problem. In political science we are aware that there is not one universal definition of democracy, moreover we are aware that adding adjectives to democracy changes the meaning or features of the political regime. There are ongoing discussions about this issue, leading centuries to the past, and we are not closer to a common understanding which of these definitions should we use. In addition, as the current development suggests, new forms or types of democracy are being defined. In this regard, the simplest definition is the one talking about regular, fair, free and multiparty election with general suffrage. We see that elections are valued as important in all Visegrad countries, even though doubts are rising about how free and fair are they becoming, the right to vote is important. If we ask people to judge democracy based on regularity and fairness of election, we would probably receive rather positive and supporting results.

Secondly, we need to specify in opinion polls what we mean when talking about liberal values and democracy. What is obvious in Visegrad countries, people are aware of liberal values and value them highly, that goes to the free judiciary, freedom of speech, association, religion etc. In this regard, we cannot say that people are disillusioned with these rights and freedoms. At the end, population in all four countries is engaged in protests and demonstrations. Of course, there are differences in causes and reasons, but this right is also being exercised and we believe it is something people would not want to lose willingly. However, what is missing in Visegrad societies is a working civil society, not in a sense of charity oriented, but civil society at micro level, in the villages, cities, neighbourhoods. Organization that would give the people the feeling of institutional support, not necessarily from state but from more narrow communities.

Thirdly, there is no clear evidence that the Visegrad countries are more prone to the authoritarian regime with a dominant party or charismatic leader when compared to other democratic countries. Even though we might find evidence when looking at the strategic culture⁴⁵ for tendencies to authoritarianism in the past, at present there is no clear evidence that

⁴⁴ For rather complex list of definitions see Bogaards, Mattijhs, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13510347.2018.1485015?needAccess=true>.

⁴⁵ For more details on strategic culture see Ušiak, Jaroslav (2013): *Security and strategic culture of the Visegrad group countries*, Banská Bystrica: Univerzita Mateja Bela.



people would support it. The polls suggest that they value the democratic principles and are worried that they are threatened.

Nevertheless, what is clear from current situation is that an emphasis on the liberal value system is needed, and how it impacts the life of individual, and how it differs from authoritarianism. This should be incorporated within the education process. If we consider liberalism as the emancipation of the individual, the learning process of history should be focused on how the life of the individual has changed. This does not mean that we should look at the individualistic - egoistic nature of human beings. But more attention should be paid to the context of how the spread of liberal ideals has changed the lives of individuals throughout history, in the states of which they are citizens, in wider regional terms, and also globally.

To come closer to the conclusion of this article, what is obvious from the opinion polls, is that people are in general dissatisfied with how economy, and related social justice, turned out in all 4 countries. People have in general stressed their negative perception of the socio-economic differences in their society. In addition, there is an obvious displeasure with political elites and their responsibility and/or accountability. However, this is not something specific affecting the Visegrad countries, as these tendencies and positions can be seen all over the democratic world.

What we can conclude is that people in Visegrad countries are not different to those in western Europe or the US. They do not in general dispute liberal values which they know and are aware of. They just do not find fair how their societies are divided, and they look for politically simple solutions. They support those who are offering these. Even more so if they operate with notions as national identity, traditional values and religion, for some strata of society finds it attractive, as the talk is about issues they know.

People in Visegrad countries are not disillusioned with liberal democracy *per se*, they are disillusioned with the unfair socio-economic system that has come with the democratization process. These feelings are even emphasized by the elitism of politicians, technological changes, openness and connectedness of the world. However, these are not symptoms exclusively reserved for young democracies.

We conclude this article with a fitting quote from professor's Chmielewski cited article:

“why has liberalism failed to secure for itself a firm political ground in the region as well as in other places in the world? Its failure stemmed from the fact that various liberal formations, following their partial political success, became complacent, sunk into elitist exclusivism and conveniently forgot about the deterioration of the living conditions of many social groups. As soon as liberals become entrenched in their privileged position, they disregard the plight of the rest of the society. Limiting the scope of their political agendas, liberals have squandered the emancipatory and political potential of their ideology and neglected the social expectations they could tap into.”



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