



## STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL EUROPE AFTER THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

Lucia Husenicova<sup>1</sup>

*Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica. Slovakia.*

### Abstract:

The central question of this article is why Russian military aggression in Ukraine has failed to strengthen support for democracy and cooperation with partners in some Central European countries. In addition, the article examines the link between military conflict in the immediate neighbourhood and the crisis of democracy. Based on a review of the extensive literature on the crisis of democracy, the article integrates findings from several opinion polls conducted in Central European countries. Looking primarily at the Visegrad countries, clear patterns emerge in responses and attitudes towards Russia. We can see the influence of the political discourse in these countries, the narratives used by political elites and, more recently, war fatigue and economic consequences. The article argues that a military conflict in the vicinity of democratic countries exacerbates the crisis of democracy. The information warfare that is part of this conflict and the susceptibility of the political elite to the dissemination of enemy propaganda undermines trust in democratic institutions and democracy.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Central Europe, Ukraine, Russia, military aggression

*Titulo en Español: Estado de la democracia en Europa Central tras la invasión rusa de Ucrania*

### Resumen:

*La cuestión central de este artículo es ¿por qué la agresión militar rusa en Ucrania no ha conseguido reforzar el apoyo a la democracia y la cooperación con los socios en algunos países centroeuropeos? Además, el artículo examina el vínculo entre el conflicto militar en la vecindad inmediata y la crisis de la democracia. Basándose en una revisión de la extensa literatura sobre la crisis de la democracia, el artículo integra los resultados de varias encuestas de opinión realizadas en países centroeuropeos. Observando principalmente a los países de Visegrado, surgen patrones claros en las respuestas y actitudes hacia Rusia. Podemos ver la influencia del discurso político en estos países, las narrativas utilizadas por las élites políticas y, más recientemente, la fatiga de la guerra y las consecuencias económicas. El artículo sostiene que un conflicto militar en las proximidades de países democráticos exagera la crisis de la democracia. La guerra de la información que forma parte de este conflicto y la susceptibilidad de las élites políticas a la difusión de la propaganda enemiga socavan la confianza en las instituciones democráticas y en la democracia.*

**Palabras Clave:** Democracia, Europa Central, Ucrania, Rusia, agresión militar

Copyright © UNISCI, 2024.

Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores, y no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. *The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI*

---

<sup>1</sup>Lucia Husenicova is an Associate Professor of International Relations, Department of Security Studies, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia.

E-mail: lucia.husenicova@umb.sk

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-210>



## 1. Introduction<sup>2</sup>

In order to assess the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on the countries of Central Europe (in this article we will focus on the Visegrad countries - the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia), we first need to set a broader context. The war started on 24 February 2022 and coincided with the still ongoing global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 disease. The pandemic affected not only the quality of life of the population, especially their health<sup>3</sup> and longevity, but also the economy, social relations and the political situation. In addition, Europe is only beginning to understand the impact of the events of the last two years on people's perceptions of the state and the role of the state and government when faced with unexpected circumstances. Studies show how trust in states and international institutions, especially the EU, has evolved during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Although it might be expected that people would unite and rally round the flag in the event of an unexpected event, this did not happen. In many countries, the restrictions imposed by the government to slow the spread of the virus were seen by the people as a road to dictatorship. Groups of people all over Europe (probably the world, but that is not the point of this article) were vocal about the need to protect their human rights. They gathered to protest against the measures, especially as the pandemic dragged on through its various phases (Germany, Slovakia, etc.).

Those who were most vocal in their criticism of governments had something in common: not only did they use the same rhetoric and slogans, but they were also COVID deniers and supporters of national populism. We could see this in the US among President Trump's voters, in Germany among the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and supporters of right-wing groups, and in Slovakia among far-right parties and supporters of Robert Fico's SMER party. Another thing these people had in common was their anti-vaccination stance and belief in conspiracy theories. Following the news, similar groups could be found in most countries where measures were taken to slow the spread of the virus. These groups became even more active when vaccination cards were introduced. The tense atmosphere in society was exacerbated by layoffs, the cancellation and postponement of social, cultural and sporting events, and recommendations for isolation, as people across Europe challenged government decisions. In February 2022, while many of these measures were still in place, war broke out in Ukraine. The initial shock, support for Ukraine, help for Ukrainian refugees, criticism and condemnation of Russia's actions, and the growing threat of war were over time replaced by so-called war fatigue. People returned to their everyday lives and to the problems that had arisen during the pandemic, but had been present in each country before.

Looking at the reaction of the political elite in the Visegrad Four countries, the governments of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia were among the most vocal supporters of Ukraine from the outset. Hungary's position was ambivalent from the outset.

---

<sup>2</sup> This study was prepared within the framework of VEGA project n° 1/0578/23, "Cyber-social security threats in contemporary world: case study on threats on disinformation and emerging security threats in the societal context"

<sup>3</sup> We are just now learning about how the average length of life around the world was affected by the pandemic

<sup>4</sup> Carraro, Carlo; Dhand, Otilia ; Eichengreen, Barry; Mills, Melinda; Rey, Helene; Sapir, Andre; Scharzer, Daniela (2022): *A new Era for Europe – How the European Union Can Make the Most of its Pandemic Recovery, Pursue Sustainable Growth, and Promote Global Stability*, Luxembourg, Publication Office of the European Union; Ratto, Marco; Szyekely, Istvan P. (2023): *A New Era for Europe. Volume II: Emerging challenges*, Luxembourg, Publication Office of the European Union.



Although it supported the EU's sanctions against Russia and NATO's position, the government never acted bilaterally.<sup>5</sup> This has not changed until today.

Looking at the population's attitude towards Russia (based on GLOBSEC Trends) in 2022, 87% of Poles, 78% of Czechs, 51% of Slovaks and 48% of Hungarians agreed that Russia was the country responsible for starting the war in Ukraine. When asked if Russia was a strategic partner for their country, 37% of Slovaks and 35% of Hungarians agreed, in stark contrast to 2% of Poles and 6% of Czechs.<sup>6</sup> While in the Czech Republic and Poland there is a strong correlation between people's opinions and the actions of their governments, in Hungary the ambivalence of Viktor Orban's government is reflected in the polls. Slovakia is an interesting case because the initial reaction of the government is in line with the reaction of the population. According to an opinion poll conducted in Slovakia in early March 2022, 78% of respondents supported the initial reaction of the Slovak government to the start of the war in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that the population initially rallied around the flag, if we understand this as support for the government's actions. However, this has since changed. Robert Fico's SMER party won the snap election in September 2023 by campaigning for peace and appeasement with Russia, and promising to stop arms supplies to Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, 58% of respondents approved of the government's actions between March and May 2022.<sup>8</sup>

As these polls were conducted nationally, this article does not have access to the position of people in Poland or Hungary. However, it can be assumed that in Poland, support for the government's actions was rather strong due to general anti-Russian trends among the population.

Another phenomenon that needs to be taken into account is the information war that Russia is waging against Europe. This war is being waged mainly through social media and the support of alternative information sources and far-right politicians. We know of several cases of Russian involvement in Western politics. The most notable is its involvement in the 2016 US presidential election. In addition, Russian support for alternative opinions and harsh criticism of democracy and governments on social media has spread, especially in countries that did not react quickly and pay much attention to online discourse. One such country is Slovakia.

The preliminary research shows a change in democratic stability in all V4 countries. However, it is unlikely to be directly influenced by the Russian war in Ukraine. There is a complexity of factors that play a role in stability and popular support for democracy. Democracy has been in decline, regression or even crisis for almost a decade. There is a considerable literature on the causes and effects. However, no one has looked at the impact of military conflict in the vicinity of democracy. Therefore, this article will be more of an exploratory discourse on what needs to be considered if we want to assess the impact of military conflict on the quality and stability of democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Jozwiak, Veronika: Hungary's Reaction to the War in Ukraine, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs* 2 March 2022, at <https://www.pism.pl/publications/hungarys-reaction-to-the-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>6</sup> GLOBSEC Trends 2020, at [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020\\_read-version.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Verejnost' podporuje reakciu štátu na vojnu na Ukrajine, Ako sa mate Slovensko? (How are you Slovakia?), 2 March 2022, Slovak Academy of Social Science, at [https://www.akosamateslovensko.sk/verejnost-podporuje-reakciu-statu-na-vojnu-na-ukrajine/](https://www.akosamateslovensko.sk/verejnost-podporuje-reakciu-statu-na-vojnu-na-ukrajine/https://www.akosamateslovensko.sk/verejnost-podporuje-reakciu-statu-na-vojnu-na-ukrajine/)

<sup>8</sup> Cadova, Nadezda; Cervenka, Jan: Obcane o situaci na Ukrajine – unor 2024 (Citizens on the situation on Ukraine, February 2024) Public Opinion Research Centre 2024, at <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/mezinarodni-vztahy/5815-obcane-o-situaci-na-ukrajine---unor-2024>



## 2. Literature review

Looking at the existing literature on democratic regression or the decline of democracy, a considerable number of publications and research has been devoted to this phenomenon in the last decade or so. However, democratic recession or de-democratisation is not a new concept. In his *Third Wave of Democratisation* (1993), Samuel Huntington<sup>9</sup> described in detail what he called a backward wave in seven steps: 1. Democratic values are weak among the population and the elite, 2. the country experiences an economic crisis and social conflict intensifies, 3. social and political polarisation, 4. certain groups decide to exclude others from political power, 5. breakdown of law and order as a result of terrorism, 6. intervention by a foreign non-democratic government, 7. snowballing as democracy is overthrown in other countries.<sup>10</sup>

Larry Diamond wrote about the democratic recession in his 2008 book *Spirit of Democracy*. In it, he describes what he calls the democratic recession in Pakistan: "deterioration of justice and the rule of law, polarisation along ethnic and religious lines, economic failure and injustice".<sup>11</sup> He saw it as a "harbinger" of a process different from other democratic breakdowns since 1974.<sup>12</sup> Fast-forward to 2010 in Central Europe, and Hungary in particular, the decline of Hungarian democracy began with the election of Victor Orban's Fidesz party and his subsequent changes to the electoral system, control of the judiciary, the media, later the universities and many aspects of Hungarian society.

Fast forward again to 2016, when Donald Trump was elected US president, and the threat of democratic backsliding started to be taken seriously. Until then, although the data showed backsliding and stagnation of democratisation, this has happened in countries that democratised since the end of the Cold War or were outside the "former West". Larry Diamond warned of this recession in democracy in his 2015 chapter, where he created a time frame for when this process started back in 2006.<sup>13</sup> In this context, Diamond defined several tendencies that support his argument: The first tendency he defined is the increasing number of states that have gone through what he calls "the collapse of democracy".<sup>14</sup> Since 2000, democracy has collapsed in 25 countries in a variety of ways: military coups or military intervention, the removal of a legitimately elected government by the opposition, or a so-called executive coup. However, most of these problems were caused by the breakdown of democratic institutions and practices by a legitimately and democratically elected government. In particular, the deliberate undermining of existing institutions is a common method of dismantling democracy. Violation of the rule of law by modifying legislation to suit the needs of the political elite that legitimately came to power, i.e. abuse of power. Another manifestation is corruption in society and its deepening. Restriction of some civil and political freedoms, introduction of new rules to make it more difficult for a section of the population to participate in elections, complicating the process of registering parties for elections, restricting the opposition's access to the media, limiting the participation of civil society, etc. Another example is the demonisation of the opposition, which is identified as the enemy of the people and the nation.

The second trend is the deterioration in the quality and stability of democracy, especially in emerging economies, the so-called "swing states".<sup>15</sup> These are states with large populations

---

<sup>9</sup> Huntington, Samuel. P. (1991): *The Third Wave, Democratization in Late Twentieth Century*. (e-book) Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58

<sup>12</sup> 1974 is the year when the third democratization wave started.

<sup>13</sup> Diamond, Larry: *Facing Up to the Democratic Recession*. In Diamond, Larry – Plattner, Mark F. (2015): *Democracy in Decline?* (e-book) Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, p.101

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107



or large economies, such as South Korea, India, Brazil, Turkey, Ukraine, Thailand, etc. The third trend is what he calls the "deepening of authoritarianism" in large and strategically important states such as Russia and China, which have inspired other countries such as Venezuela. In all of them, state or party control over the population, politics and the economy is expanding and deepening in different ways. The fourth trend is that even stable democracies (the US and the EU) are experiencing significant problems and are losing the ability and willingness to promote democracy abroad.<sup>16</sup>

One of the first texts that attempted to conceptualise democratic backsliding was Nancy Bermeo's 2016 piece 'On Democratic Backsliding'.<sup>17</sup> She focuses on six variants of backsliding that vary over time. In the past, she says, backsliding was more blatant, but now it is replaced by more vaxing procedures. She pairs three known models of backsliding from the past with processes that can be observed in the present. The first pair is the classic coup d'état and the so-called promissory coups. Historically, a coup is carried out by the military or a group of state elites to seize power, usually by force with human casualties. Today, the more common type is the "promissory coup", where the removal of an elected government from power is justified as a "defence of democratic legality".<sup>18</sup> while promising to organise new elections and restore democracy as soon as possible. This type of coup is characterised by an emphasis on the inevitability and temporary nature of the situation. The second pair consists of executive coups, which occurred in the past when a person who was the head of the executive abrogated the constitution in order to seize power at a decisive moment. The current and more common process is "executive aggrandisement", which takes place slowly, without a change of government. It is a situation in which the government gradually removes systems of constitutional checks and balances, limiting the ability of the opposition to challenge the process in any way. These changes are possible because the government has the support of the legislature, which allows it to legally change the constitution and laws. In this type of coup, executive power is in the hands of the winners of free parliamentary elections. The third pair is the electoral fraud of the past. In general, it took place on the day of the elections. Today, however, it is difficult to carry out as there are national and international monitoring mechanisms. What is happening today is "strategic harassment and manipulation". It is often linked to executive aggrandisement, "a series of actions aimed at tilting the electoral playing field in favour of incumbents".<sup>19</sup> It differs from electoral fraud in that it is more permanent and takes a variety of forms, ranging from the use of state resources for campaigning and changes to the electoral law, to preventing the registration of voters or opposition parties, to intimidating opponents or restricting their media space. It can be described as strategic because it is difficult to detect by international observers who are in the country just before and during the elections.

After Donald Trump was elected president, scholars and academics in the US began to pay more attention to the backsliding. Namely, Levitsky and Ziblatt in their 2018 book "How democracy dies".<sup>20</sup> Mapping developments over the past fifteen years, they suggest that "democracies erode slowly, with barely visible steps".<sup>21</sup> We can compare this to Bermeo's executive aggrandisement here, as the erosion takes place after the elections and is based on successive changes to the laws and the constitution itself. You note that "most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers, but by elected governments".<sup>22</sup> The

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101

<sup>17</sup> Bermeo, Nancy: *Democratic Backsliding*. *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 27, n° 1 (2016), p. 5-19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>20</sup> Levitsky, Steven – Ziblatt, Daniel (2018): *How Democracies Die*. (e-book) New York, Crown Publishing. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10



point at which this process begins is difficult to determine, because elected leaders do not change the institutions; they maintain the appearance of democracy on the outside, but change it from within. Legislatures and courts often sanction these changes. They are often explained as intentions to improve democracy, aimed at "fighting corruption or cleaning up elections, improving the quality of democracy or enhancing national security".<sup>23</sup> The changes to restrict citizens' rights and freedoms are often invisible to citizens and the media.

Levitsky and Ziblatt have formulated a litmus test to help people assess what is happening in their democracy. The test is based on the entry into the political arena of a politician described as an extremist demagogue. This type of person has historically appeared in every society, including democracies. Politicians with authoritarian tendencies can be identified by four signs: 1. He or she rejects (or has weak ties to) the democratic rules of the game, describes the system as undemocratic, promises change in the form of real democracy, the return of power to the hands of the people, 2. refuses to recognise the legitimacy of political opponents, 3. tolerates or supports violence, 4. is prepared to restrict the civil liberties of opponents, including the media.<sup>24</sup>

If such a politician emerges, there are mechanisms in a democracy that should prevent him from coming to power. The first is the extent to which existing political parties will treat such a person. That is, they will refuse to include him on the list of candidates and thus give him a platform to appeal to the voters. It should be added that such a person can create his own political party, especially in countries with multi-party systems.

If such a person comes to power, the second important aspect is whether he can "undermine democratic institutions".<sup>25</sup> or whether the institutions will limit its scope for action. At this point, the state constitution and its checks and balances also play an important role.

When we talk about the decline of democracy, we assume that the institutions did not limit the autocratic politician, but that he started to change them. The authors compare the steps taken by democratically elected autocratic politicians to football. The basic idea is to get the referees on your side, push out or eliminate opponents and rewrite the rules of the game. In practical terms, the first group of actions involves filling independent state institutions with members of one's own party or close associates. These are institutions whose leaders are appointed by the executive. In the case of institutions beyond the reach of the government, autocratic politicians resort to blackmailing their representatives, often using intelligence services to obtain compromising material. Another option is to offer bribes to these people. If none of these methods work, the government changes the rules for appointing these institutions - for example, changing the way judges are appointed, strengthening the powers of some courts at the expense of others, etc.

The second group of activities that follows the acquisition of control over institutions is the silencing and elimination of the political opposition. This includes active opposition politicians and their supporters in business, the media and various interest, cultural or religious groups. The easiest way to do this is to bribe opponents, for example by offering them public positions in exchange for not being critical. Another way is to imprison, exile or even murder rivals, or to use controlled courts to compromise opponents. Attacks on media unwilling to stop criticising the government can result in their being banned, stripped of their licence, etc. As a result, other media often resort to self-censorship.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23-24

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12



Finally, autocratic politicians focus on changing the rules of the game. They do this by changing the constitution, the electoral system and all the institutions that can be used to their advantage, and most often they justify this on the grounds of public interest. In the case of electoral systems, the rules are usually changed so that part of the population has a complicated way of voting or is excluded from the electoral process altogether. "The tragic paradox of the electoral road to authoritarianism is that the murderers of democracy use the very institutions of democracy - gradually, subtly, and even legally - to kill it".<sup>26</sup> More recently, Grillo-Nalepa-Luo-Prato have developed these theoretical concepts into a mathematical and statistical model.<sup>27</sup>

What we can conclude from the literature is that there are both external and internal conditions that fuel the process of democratic decline or democratic regression. Diamond described the external conditions in 2015, while the internal conditions are related to the willingness of the political elite to change the regime in order to stay in power. However, regime change is not absolute. The terminology used by Diamond and V-Dem is helpful here - electoral autocracy seems to be the regime to which democracy is regressing, and the next phase of closed autocracy is happening outside the West for now. Although there is an ongoing debate about what to call this type of regime: delegative democracy,<sup>28</sup> autocratic legalism<sup>29</sup>, post-democracy<sup>30</sup> and new despotism.<sup>31</sup> Some of these concepts overlap partially.

Moreover, democratic regression does not take place in isolation from society and is not just about institutional change. For a demagogue or a populist politician, coming to power means gaining popular support and winning elections. Therefore, when analysing democratic regression, it is placed in a wider context of social development. Among the most important and researched are economic development and widening gaps between income groups and a generally worsening outlook for social mobility,<sup>32</sup> polarisation reinforced by so-called identity politics,<sup>33</sup> populism<sup>34</sup> and the faltering of the party system populism<sup>35</sup>. In conclusion, voters themselves often enable democratic backsliding. They vote for populist politicians who then

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>27</sup> Grillo, Edoardo; Nalepa, Monika; Luo, Zhaotian; Prato, Carlo: Theories of Democratic Backsliding, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 27, (July 2024), pp 381-400, at <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041322-025352>

<sup>28</sup> O'Donnell, Guillermo: "Delegative Democracy?", Kellogg Institute, 1993, at [https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old\\_files/documents/172\\_0.pdf](https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old_files/documents/172_0.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Scheppele, Kim Lane: "Autocratic Legalism", *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 85, n° 2 (March 2018), pp. 545-584.

<sup>30</sup> Crouch, Colin (2004): *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Crouch, Colin (2020): *Post-Democracy After the Crisis*, (e-book) Cambridge, Polity Press.

<sup>31</sup> Keane, John (2020): *The New Despotism*, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Mounk, Yasha (2018): *The People vs Democracy. Why our freedom is in danger & How to save it*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press. Skidelsky, Robert: "How does austerity politics weaken democracy?", in *Democracy in Question*, Podcast, 14 January 2021 at <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/how-does-austerity-politics-weaken-democracy>

<sup>33</sup> Mounk, Yasha (2023): *The Identity Trap: A story of ideas and power in our time*, Dublin, Penguin Press

Fukuyama, Francis (2019): *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, London, Profile Books

<sup>34</sup> Svobik, Milan: When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue: Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by Incumbents, 3 September 2018, SSRN, at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3243470>

Haggard, Stephan; Kaufman, Robert (2021): *Backsliding. Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

<sup>35</sup> Crouch, Colin (2004): *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Crouch, Colin (2020): *Post-Democracy After the Crisis*, (e-book) Cambridge, Polity Press.

Sandel, Michael J. (2021): *The Tyranny of Merit. What's Become of the Common Good?* Dublin, Penguin Random House

Fukuyama, Francis (2019): *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, London, Profile Books.



promise economic benefits and a general improvement in their social and economic situation. In addition, populist politicians often play the identity card, stressing the importance of traditions, the need to preserve values and protect national interests, and the threats posed by modern society and globalisation. Moreover, voters of populist politicians often feel left behind by political parties and state institutions compared to the rest of society.

Nevertheless, if we look only at the processes defined by Bermeo (2016), Svobik (2018), Haggard-Kaufman (2021), Mounk (2018), Crouch (2004), Fukuyama (2019), Appelbaum (2020) and Sandel (2021), we can conclude that Hungary has been experiencing regression or executive takeover since 2010, Poland<sup>36</sup> has been on a similar path until the October 2023 elections, and Slovakia has been on it since the September 2023 snap elections. However, before the current takeover, there have been attempts to follow a backsliding playbook. The Czech Republic appears to be the only Visegrad Four country that has managed to avoid backsliding, but opinion polls ahead of parliamentary elections in 2025 leave the door open, with a party led by populist-minded former Prime Minister Babis.

The decline of democracy as a research topic is no stranger to authors and scholars in Central and Eastern Europe, precisely because it has taken place in the region, with Hungary and Poland leading the way. The fact that the development in other countries has been different is analysed in Bustikova-Gausti<sup>37</sup>, where the authors write about episodes of illiberal turn or what they call "illiberal swings". Attila Agh<sup>38</sup> describes Hungary as a declining democracy and analyses in detail the various crises that caused this development. In 2021, a book published by Palgrave focused on illiberal trends and anti-EU politics in East Central Europe<sup>39</sup>, different authors in the volume specifically analysed the V4 countries and the trends taking place there in different areas as the societal roots of the illiberal and anti-EU trends and policies, the illiberal and anti-EU rhetoric and practices of the political elite, as well as the EU's reaction to these developments.

### **3. Methodology**

In terms of methodology, this article uses variable resources; first and foremost, it analyses the existing discourse related to changes in the quality of democracy. The selection of resources is focused on the original works that have defined the specificities of democratic backsliding. The author is aware of the proliferation of publications on the subject. However, the intention was to work with original resources and apply the theoretical characteristics to a selected region. To date, no literature has focused on how a military conflict taking place in the vicinity of a democratic country affects stability and popular perceptions of democracy.

The author has hypothesized that the proximity of a military conflict, in particular the war waged by Russia in Ukraine, would lead to a rally-around-the-flag phenomenon, and that people who are afraid of the unknown and the threat of war spreading would support not only the invaded country and its people, but also the government and those institutions that provide security guarantees.

This assumption was only partially confirmed in the immediate aftermath of the war. After two years of conflict, people are preoccupied with other issues and their perceptions and

---

<sup>36</sup> The decline of Polish democracy is brilliantly described in a book by Anne Appelbaum (2020): *Twilight of Democracy. The seductive lure of authoritarianism*, New York, Doubleday.

<sup>37</sup> Bustikova, Lenka; Gausti, Petra: "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance* Vol. 5, n° 4 (2017), pp. 166-176

<sup>38</sup> Agh, Attila: "Decline of Democracy in East-Central Europe: The Last Decade as the Lost Decade in the ECE Democratization," *Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol 7, n° 2 (2016), pp.4-33.

<sup>39</sup> Lorenz, Astrid; Anders, Lisa H. (2021): *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan



evaluations of the political and security situation do not seem to be related to the conflict in their neighborhood. Nevertheless, the conflict in the neighborhood could partly be perceived as a factor affecting people's perceptions of democracy and their satisfaction with, and even trust in, the work of their governments. The main reason is that although there is no direct military action in Ukraine, Russia has been waging what we call an information war against countries in Europe for over a decade. We can see this in the activity of channels on various social media platforms and through direct financial support to media outlets and political figures in many European countries. There have been cases in Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic where a network of individuals and organizations has been uncovered working to spread Russian narratives through these channels and to report back to Russia on what is happening in these countries. These actions do not take place in this region.

To clarify terminology, it is important to emphasize that Larry Diamond's<sup>40</sup> definitions inspire the authors' understanding of democracy and electoral democracy. Electoral democracy is "a constitutional system in which the legislature and the chief executive are chosen through regular, competitive, multiparty elections by universal suffrage". Liberal democracy includes, in addition to the electoral element, the rule of law with an independent and non-discriminatory judiciary, guaranteed freedoms of speech, belief, publication, association and assembly. In addition, there is strong protection for minorities, whether ethnic, cultural, religious or otherwise, and a developed civil society that provides citizens with multiple opportunities for participation outside the electoral process. People are free to express their opinions and differences without discrimination. In addition, the military is under civilian control.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, this article uses democratic regression and democratic decline as synonyms, as is often the case in the existing literature.

In order to assess the position of the people in the Visegrad countries, this article uses the GLOBSEC Trends opinion polls, which are published annually and cover all four selected countries. The methodology of these surveys is described at the end of each published report. To summarize, the surveys are conducted on a sample of 1000 people per country. The respondent profiles are representative of each country in terms of age, gender, education, place of residence and size of settlement. The surveys are carried out by a polling organization in each country using a form of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).<sup>42</sup>

In addition, the article is based on the analysis and interpretation of the surveys conducted in Slovakia by the Slovak Academy of Sciences - How are you Slovakia? The data sets collected in this survey (from March 2020 to July 2022) are available online. This survey was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the country was under the first lockdown, but it is currently an ongoing project. In the case of the Czech Republic, the article uses the results of polls and surveys conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre. The article interprets the results directly, while attempting to provide a broader context of political events and happenings within the specific countries as well as in their immediate neighborhood. In addition, the article situates the results within a broader discourse on the quality or state of democracy in each of the selected countries.

The article also presents and analyses findings from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) research project. Its methodology is described in detail on its website. It is important to note that they classify political systems on a scale of liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy and closed autocracy. Their operational terminology is based on the

<sup>40</sup> Diamond, Larry (1999): *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10 - 11

<sup>42</sup> GLOBSEC Trends 2024 at <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Globsec%20TRENDS%202024.pdf> p. 96



distinction between democratization and authorization. Their understanding of democracy is based on Dahl's polyarchy and their aim is to better measure democracy.<sup>43</sup> Their robust data covers every country in the world, assessing the quality of the political system using a dataset that measures over 600 indicators from 1789 to the present.<sup>44</sup> However, the main respondents to their questionnaires are country experts; to date, 3700 people have participated in the project by responding to an online survey. In this article, their results are only used to establish an overall quality of democracy in all four countries and to compare it with existing opinion polls.

The chosen methodology has several limitations. First and foremost, the application and interpretation of the existing theoretical discourse on the selected countries is not unique and may conflict with work already written on the subject. Secondly, the opinion polls used here are only a secondary source; the article primarily works with published reports presenting the results of the polls, not with original data sets.

What seems clear from the start of this article is that there is no correlation between the war in Ukraine and the worsening of democratic backsliding in the selected region. What we can see, however, is that the populist political elite seems to be taking advantage of the positions and sentiments of the population not only towards Russia, but also towards Ukraine as a country and Ukrainian refugees, as well as the support they have received from the states in which they have found refuge. These trends are most pronounced in the case of Slovakia and the 2023 early elections, but we can also see some signs in recent opinion polls published ahead of the 2025 elections in the Czech Republic, where a populist-minded former prime minister, Babis, is leading. The article therefore offers two sets of observations, the first related to governments' reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and people's perceptions of Russia. The second part briefly summarizes the processes of regression in the region. Perceptions of democracy are also reflected in this part.

#### **4. Reactions of Visegrad governments and perceptions of Russia**

The start of the war on 24 February 2002 shocked many of the political elite in Europe and the region concerned. On the second anniversary of the start of the war, a Slovak newspaper<sup>45</sup> short interviews and recollections from politicians who were part of the government at the time. It is clear from the article that hours before the invasion began, people in the government, ministries and state offices did not believe that war was imminent. We know from public statements by opposition representatives in Slovakia that they did not believe that a conflict would start,<sup>46</sup> and they quoted President Putin's words. We would expect a similar situation in other countries.

Nevertheless, what we can say about the actions of the Visegrad governments is that three out of four strongly condemned the Russian invasion and called for support for Ukraine from the outset. In contrast, the fourth, Hungary, while condemning the military actions and expressing support for Ukraine, refrained from any additional actions or initiatives.<sup>47</sup> All four countries have provided humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees, trying to facilitate their

---

<sup>43</sup> Coppedge, Michael: V-Dem's Conceptions of Democracy and Their Consequences, Working Paper Series, February 2023, The Varieties of Democracy Institute, at [https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/wp\\_135.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/wp_135.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> V-Dem 2024 Report, The Varieties of Democracy Institute, at <https://www.v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/>

<sup>45</sup> Čorej Tomáš: Čaputová sa dozvedela, že Rusi zaútočia, večer predtým, Nad' ani nešiel spať. Ako slovenskí politici reagovali na začiatok vojny, Dennik N, 23 February 2024, at <https://dennikn.sk/3839722/najdlhsi-den-v-zivote-co-po-ruskom-utoku-citili-a-ako-rozmyslali-caputova-heger-ci-nad/>

<sup>46</sup> To use a direct quote from the vice-president of the SMER party, who is currently the vice-president of the parliament (National Council of the Slovak Republic), two weeks before the war, "War in Ukraine is one gigantic hoax created by the Americans to anger and scare Europe".

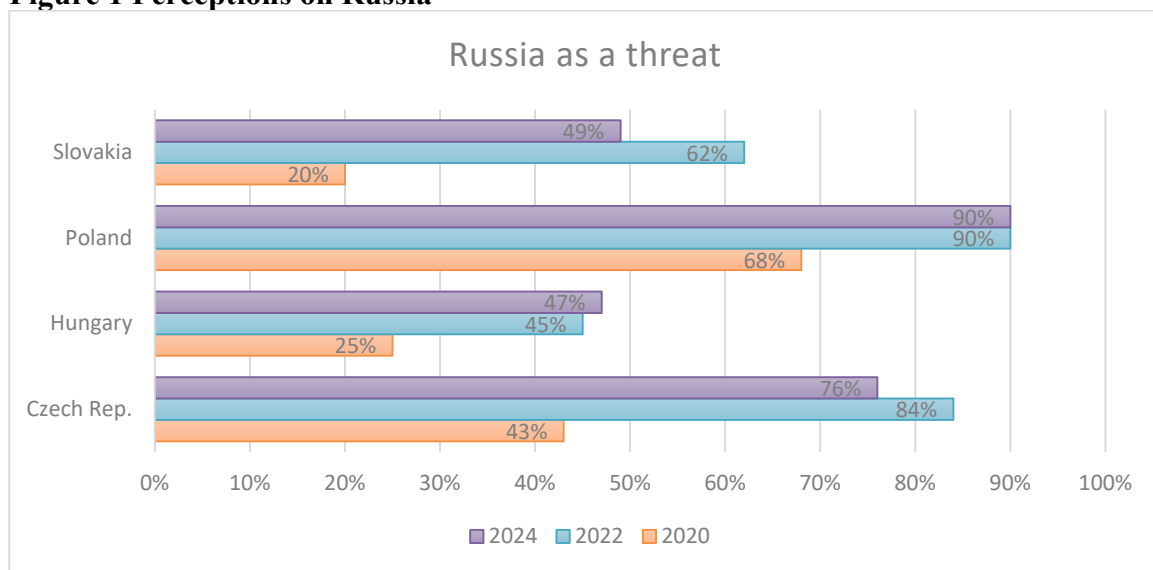
<sup>47</sup> Jozwiak, Veronika: Hungary's Reaction to the War in Ukraine, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2 March 2022, at <https://www.pism.pl/publications/hungarys-reaction-to-the-war-in-ukraine>

stay and settlement in their countries, providing access to social services and school places for their children.

In a broader context, since the start of the war in Ukraine, parliamentary elections have taken place in three Visegrad countries: in Hungary in 2022, in Poland in 2023 and a snap election in Slovakia. While in Poland and Hungary there was no change in the countries' policy towards Ukraine and their position on the war, the situation was different in Slovakia, where representatives of the winning SMER party were among those spreading Russian narratives on social media and calling for an immediate ceasefire regardless of Russia's demands.

Looking at people's reactions using the comparative results of GLOBSEC Trends published from 2020 to 2024, we see an increase in the perception of Russia as a threat, especially between 2020 and 2022. The slight decrease in 2024, with the exception of Poland, may be due to information fatigue about the war.<sup>48</sup> In the case of Slovakia and Hungary, the actions and rhetoric of politicians must also be taken into account.

**Figure 1 Perceptions on Russia**



Source: Based on GLOBSEC Trends 2020 and GLOBSEC Trends 2024

#### 4.1 Czech Republic

The position of the Czech government has not changed since the start of the war in Ukraine. The government not only condemned Russia for launching the invasion, but also expelled dozens of Russian diplomats suspected of spying<sup>49</sup> over the past two years. Czech representatives also reportedly called for a ban on Schengen visas for Russian diplomats. Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, together with his Slovenian and Polish counterparts, was the first official representative of an EU and NATO member state to visit Ukraine since the start of the Russian invasion.

The Czech government remains a strong critic of Russia's actions in Ukraine and the atrocities its troops are committing against civilians. At the same time, Czech politicians criticise Vladimir Putin and his policies. They also show their displeasure with the behaviour of Viktor Orban's government and its relations with Russia.

<sup>48</sup> The term explains why and how people go about their daily lives when nothing is happening around them.

<sup>49</sup> Zachova, Aneta: "Czechia wants to ban Schengen travel for Russian Diplomats", *Euractiv*, 22 November 2023, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/czechia-wants-to-ban-schengen-travel-for-russian-diplomats/>



In early 2024, the Czech government proposed an initiative to compensate for Europe's lack of production capacity. Under this initiative, ammunition for Ukraine would be purchased in third countries. More than 15 countries have pledged money for the initiative, and the first deliveries should start in June 2024.<sup>50</sup>

However, the European Parliament elections in the Czech Republic were won by the opposition ANO party of former Prime Minister Andrej Babis, who appears to be less critical of Russia and supportive of Ukraine than the current government.

#### 4.2 Hungary

As mentioned above, the Hungarian reaction was to condemn the start of the war. The country provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine and Ukrainians and supported EU sanctions against Russia and all NATO activities related to the war in Ukraine.

However, no bilateral sanctions were adopted against Russia, and Hungary negotiated an exception to the EU's goal of limiting its dependence on Russia for oil and gas. At the end of 2023, Hungary blocked the EU's €50 billion humanitarian aid package, which was finally approved in February 2024. Viktor Orban's argument was that Ukraine was a corrupt regime and he demanded regular revisions of the spending from this aid package.

However, the policy of blocking aid to Ukraine is not unwavering, and it appears that Hungary is willing to not block aid packages, whether humanitarian or military, if certain conditions are met or if funds previously frozen as the EU's response to democratic backsliding in the country are released.

#### 4.3 Poland

Poland's reaction to the start of the war in Ukraine was decisive. From the beginning of the conflict, Poland became Ukraine's biggest supporter and arms supplier. There are several reasons for this: firstly, Poland borders the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, which could be a potential launching pad for an invasion. Secondly, there is a deep-rooted historical animosity, as Russia took part in the partition of Poland and occupied parts of its territory,<sup>51</sup> as stated in the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Moreover, hostility to Soviet domination during the Communist Party's rule is still present in the population. Relations were further strained after a tragic plane crash involving the then Polish president and twin brother of PiS (Law and Justice) leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski. He was the one who openly accused Russia of being involved.<sup>52</sup>

Poland was therefore one of the leading members of the EU and NATO to call for direct support for Ukraine and to provide direct military aid. Different political representatives regularly visited Kyiv, confirming their support for Ukraine, the first being Mateusz Morawiecki in March 2022. This did not change after the October 2023 elections, when a new government led by Donald Tusk was formed. On the contrary, as the recent meeting between the Polish Prime Minister and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy suggests. They

---

<sup>50</sup> Zachova Aneta: "Ammunition bought under Czech initiative could reach Ukraine in June", *Euractiv*, 13 March 2024, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/ammunition-bought-under-czech-initiative-could-reach-ukraine-in-june/>

<sup>51</sup> Silva, Catarina; Hertl, Jonas: Poland's reaction to the Ukraine war and its effects on the European security architecture, *Finabel – The European Army Interoperability Centre*, February 2024, at <https://finabel.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IF-PDFs-1-2.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> Tilles, Daniel: Kaczynski: Smolensk crash "was attack decided at the highest level of Kremlin", *Notes from Poland*, 4 April 2022, at <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/04/04/kaczynski-smolensk-crash-was-attack-decided-at-highest-level-of-kremlin/>



agreed to strengthen mutual ties, and Poland has provided Ukraine with 44 military aid packages and promised more in the coming months and years..<sup>53</sup>

#### 4.4 Slovakia

Initial support for Ukraine was swift and direct; the Slovak government condemned Russia's actions and, together with Poland, called for support for Ukraine. In addition to direct humanitarian aid focused on Ukrainian refugees entering the country through a shared border, the country delivered its S-300 air defence system to Ukraine in April, becoming the first NATO member to provide this type of weapon to Ukraine.<sup>54</sup> Since then, the Prime Minister (Eduard Heger, in office April 2021 - May 2023) and the President (Zuzana Caputova, in office June 2019 - June 2024) have visited Kyiv several times. Until the elections in September 2023, the two Slovak governments had approved several packages of humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine and adopted sanctions against Russia.

Although initial support for the government's response to the war in Ukraine stood at 78%, this began to change. The Slovak population in general has a rather positive and romantic perception of Russia. This can be seen in GLOBSEC Trends 2020: 78% of Slovak respondents agreed with the statement “Russia is my country's traditional Slavic brother/sister nation”.<sup>5556</sup>

This suggests a generally positive attitude of the Slovak population towards Russia. The reasons for this have been discussed.

As suggested, this positive sentiment towards Russia was used by the former opposition (especially by representatives of the current ruling SMER party and the Republika party, which did not gain enough support to reach the 5% quorum in September 2023), although no direct link can be drawn here, the positive image of Russia in the country may have helped the SMER party. A specific opinion poll would be needed to confirm this. However, in January 2022, 78.6% of SMER party voters blamed the US for the tensions in Ukraine, while only 10.6% saw Russia as responsible.<sup>57</sup> This is in line with the official reaction of the SMER, published after the war began: “The military conflict in Ukraine is not a conflict between Ukraine and Russia; it is a conflict between the USA and Russia, and Ukrainian citizens are the victims.”<sup>58</sup>

After the formation of Robert Fico's government, although Slovakia still supports EU sanctions against Russia and has never vetoed a decision at EU or NATO level, the rhetoric of members of the SMER party and the Slovak National Party (as a member of the coalition) has not changed. Looking at his social media posts, it openly spreads Russian narratives. In January 2023, it claimed that Ukraine was not sovereign and had given up its territory.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Melkozerova, Veronika: “Ukraine strikes security deal with Poland”, *Politico*, 8 July 2024, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-poland-security-deal-aid-package-war-russia/>

<sup>54</sup> Muller, Robert: “Slovakia sends its air defence system to Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 8 April 2022 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovakia-gives-s-300-air-defence-system-ukraine-prime-minister-2022-04-08/>

<sup>55</sup>This was the highest among the Slavic nations of the Visegrad Four, while only 30% of Poles and 47% of Czechs agreed.

<sup>56</sup> GLOBSEC Trends 2020, at [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020\\_read-version.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf) p.40

<sup>57</sup> Kysel, Tomas: Vacsina Slovakov vini z napatia na Ukrajine USA. Volici Smeru brania Rusko a volici SaS Spojene staty (Majority of Slovaks blames the US for the war in Ukraine. Smer voter defend RUSSIA and SaS voters defend the US) *Aktuality.sk*, 30 January 2022, at <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/xq8sp8y/vacsina-slovakov-vini-z-napatia-na-ukrajine-usa-volici-smeru-brania-rusko-volici-sas-spojene-staty/>

<sup>58</sup> Dennik N (2022) at <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/2736941/>

<sup>59</sup> Duleba, Alexander: Duleba analyzuje Ficova utoky proti Ukraine: Hrozi ze zo Slovanka urobi ciernu dieru vo velmi nebezpečnych casoch (Duleba analyzes Fico's attacks on Ukraine: Is possible that he will do a black hole



#### 4.5 Closing summary

All four countries responded with criticism and condemnation of Russia's invasion and war effort in Ukraine. All countries supported the EU and NATO responses. They agreed to sanctions against Russia and voted in favour of humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. At the same time, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland agreed to strengthen NATO's forward presence on their territory.

While the Czech Republic's and Poland's support for Ukraine is unwavering, Hungary is somewhere in between<sup>60</sup>, and Slovakia's position is vulnerable to change. The ruling coalition is more inclined to portray the conflict in line with Russian narratives, claiming that it is a Russian war against the US and calling for peace negotiations with Russia. In practice, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs met with Sergei Lavrov, President Pellegrini posed for a photo with the Russian ambassador before the presidential elections in April, and SMER MPs regularly meet with representatives of the Russian embassy in Slovakia.

When we look at how people perceive the provision of military equipment and weapons to Ukraine in GLOBSEC Trends 2024, we see that 92% of Poles agree that it is helping Ukraine defend itself, along with 77% of Czechs and 63% of Slovaks; when the statement is rephrased so that helping Ukraine is provoking Russia, 32% of Poles and 42% of Czechs agree. In the case of Slovakia, we see the highest number of people agreeing with this statement of all the countries surveyed, at 64%.<sup>61</sup> Again, we can assume that the way how politicians present this topic internally has an impact on people's perceptions. In the case of Slovakia, as both numbers are almost identical, we can also see how divided the society is. In addition, when asked if Ukrainian migrants threaten their own identity and values, 44% of Slovaks agreed, together with 30% of Czechs, 23% of Hungarians and 28% of Poles.<sup>62</sup> Yet again, the number of people who felt that Ukrainians threatened their identity was highest in Slovakia among all surveyed countries.

These popular sentiments are being exploited by political elites in all the countries concerned. Since Slovaks in general are sceptical and feel most threatened either by support for Ukraine or by Ukrainians themselves, some political parties use these feelings to gain popular support. By condemning the previous government's actions in supporting Ukraine and supplying arms, and by using rhetoric critical of Ukraine and Ukrainians, representatives of the SMER party tried to attract people's attention and support. Although we cannot prove a direct link between this kind of rhetoric and the party's victory in the by-elections, the politicians took advantage of public sentiment.

#### 5. Democratic Backsliding in Visegrad countries

As we have already noted, it is not possible at this stage to establish a direct link between the Russian war in Ukraine and the state of democracy in neighbouring countries. As the literature review shows, democratic backsliding takes place over a longer period of time. The length of the period depends on the strength of internal and external constraints. The internal constraints are the rules and regulations for constitutional amendments, the position of the judiciary in terms of its dependence on the executive, and the support for the government in the country's parliament or assembly. External constraints, as in the case of the Visegrad countries, lie in the

---

from Slovakia in very dangerous times) Dennik N, 23 January 2024, at <https://dennikn.sk/3790001/duleba-analyzuje-ficove-utoky-proti-ukrajine-hrozi-ze-zo-slovenska-urobi-ciernu-dieru-vo-velmi-nebezpecnych-casoch/>

<sup>60</sup> This transpired in early July 2024, when days after assuming the presidency of the EU's Council, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán travelled first to Kyiv and then to Russia.

<sup>61</sup> GLOBSEC Trends 2024, at <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Globsec%20TRENDS%202024.pdf> p. 63

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65



state's membership of an organisation or integration grouping. The institutions of this grouping may be able to comment on, criticise or condemn the internal actions of its members. In the case of the Visegrad Four, it is the EU institutions that play this role.

As mentioned in the methodology section, democracy in the Visegrad countries is assessed on the basis of the surveys conducted by the V-Dem project. Terminologically, the project assesses the quality of political systems, with the best being a liberal democracy and the worst being a closed autocracy, with electoral democracy and electoral autocracy lying in between. The project also allows for two grey areas, where a country is somewhere between electoral democracy and autocracy, called the autocratic grey area and the democratic grey area.

The latest report was published in March 2024; in its Liberal Democracy Index, which maps developments between 2013 and 2023, it shows Poland and Hungary among the countries experiencing autocratization, while Slovakia and the Czech Republic are shown as rather stable democracies. The Czech Republic is the only Visegrad country assessed by the V-Dem project as a liberal democracy. Poland and Slovakia fall into the category of electoral democracy, while Hungary is assessed as an electoral autocracy.<sup>63</sup> The report does not take into account the change of government in Poland and Slovakia, both of which took place at the end of 2023. The Polish government is expected to reverse the wave of autocratization and begin a process of re-democratisation. In the case of Slovakia, we can already see that the current government, led by the SMER party, has initiated processes leading to regression. In little more than half a year in power, all the key positions in the state, including the head of the secret service, have been filled by people who are members of or close to the parties that make up the ruling coalition, the country's penal code has been amended, the special prosecutor's office responsible for major corruption cases has been disbanded, the prime minister has verbally attacked the judges of the constitutional court, and recently a law was passed that puts the national TV and radio under the control of the ministry of culture, headed by a person known from a conspiratorial YouTube channel. The government is putting pressure on all private TV stations not to report critically on its activities through advertisements from state companies. The main reason for all these changes is that the government has the support of 78 out of 150 members of the National Council, who vote for these laws in unison, without taking part in the discussion that the members of the opposition parties are trying to initiate, and often without even knowing what the adopted laws contain. This was the case with the first vote on the penal code, when an amendment had to be adopted only a few days after the initial vote.<sup>64</sup> Applying the litmus test described in the literature review by Lewitsky-Ziblat (2018), we can follow the democratic regression in Slovakia. What is striking is that this is happening despite the attempts of the opposition in parliament and the public protests that have been organised almost since Prime Minister Fico's government came to power. An additional factor is the increasing polarisation of Slovak society, and as we have noted, polarisation is one of the variables that facilitates backsliding. Although measuring polarisation is a complex issue, several issues appear to be polarising: EU membership, LGBTQ+ rights, the decriminalisation of marijuana, migration and the systematic treatment of Roma communities.<sup>65</sup>

When we look at how citizens view the importance of democracy in their country, we return to GLOBSEC Trends, which has tracked people's attitudes towards democracy and liberal democracy for the past four years.

---

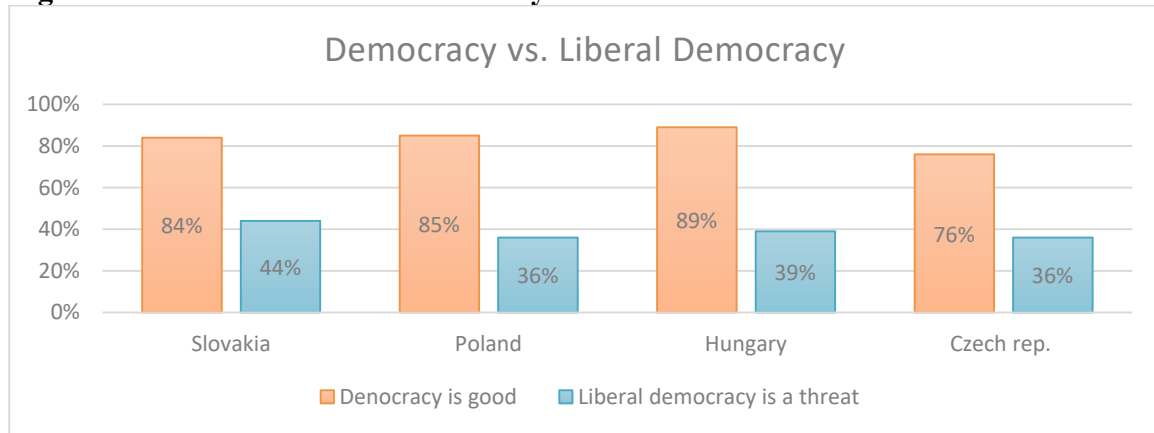
<sup>63</sup> V-Dem 2024 Report, p. 60, at <https://www.v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/>

<sup>64</sup> The part that needed to be changed was the statute of limitations for violent crimes, particularly rape. The government faced a huge backlash from the opposition, its voters, but also from its own supporters.

<sup>65</sup> For more details see in Slovak language: Tlačové Správy: #1 Polarizacia spoločnosti: Toto su temy ktore najviac polarizuju spoločnosť (Polarisation of Society: Here are the most polarising topics), MNS, 14 February 2023, at <https://nms.global/sk/polarizacia-na-slovensku-toto-su-temy-ktore-polarizuju-slovensku-spolocnost/>

The 2020 survey asked people to agree or disagree with two statements: 1) Democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms, and the rule of law is good for our country, and 2) Liberal democracy threatens our traditional values and identity.

**Figure 2. Attitudes towards Democracy**

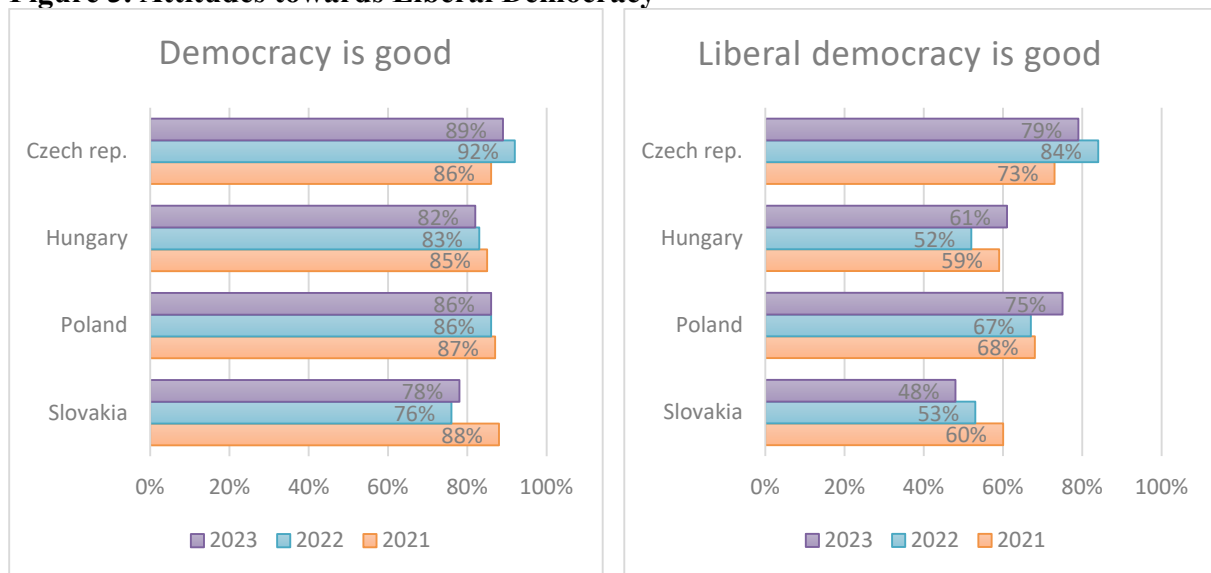


Source: Based on GLOBSEC Trends 2020

The report concludes that because some politicians demonise liberalism, people perceive the concept of liberal democracy as a threat. By contrast, democracy without any adjective is seen as a boon for their country.

In the 2021-2023 surveys, the statements were slightly modified. People were asked to express their agreement with the following statements: 1) Democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms and the rule of law is good for our country, and 2) Liberal democracy as a system based on equality, human rights and freedoms and the rule of law is good for our country.

**Figure 3. Attitudes towards Liberal Democracy**



Source: Based on GLOBSEC Trends 2021, 2022, 2023

The biggest difference between how good you think democracy or liberal democracy is for your country is in Hungary and Slovakia. Politicians in both countries - Viktor Orban himself in Hungary and Robert Fico and other members of the SMER party in Slovakia - are critical of liberalism. In the case of Slovakia, the leader of the Slovak National Party coined a new term as early as 2019 at the celebrations of the Slovak National Uprising: liberal fascism. This oxymoron remained in the rhetoric of the Slovak National Party and was adopted by SMER



politicians. In their rhetoric, liberalism is seen as a threat to the nation, culture and tradition; it is often associated with progressivism, which is also painted in dark colours as something that brings anti-national features to the country, such as issues and rights of sexual minorities, gender issues, Islam, etc. Because the concept of liberalism is so politicised in the country, it is not possible to distinguish whether people know what liberalism means and what system of values it stands for. The same could be said about Hungary, as Viktor Orban presents the country as an illiberal democracy.

## **6. Conclusion**

What we have seen in Hungary since 2010 and in Poland since 2016 is now happening in Slovakia. The countries are experiencing democratic backsliding, although, as mentioned above, the new Polish government is expected to reverse the process. What will happen in the Czech Republic depends on how active the current coalition parties will be in monopolising voters so that they do not vote for the party of the former prime minister.

When it comes to assessing the regression of regional democracy, people's attitudes seem to be important. Democracy and liberal democracy are perceived differently by different segments of the population. Liberalism is not a very popular term in the region, which is certainly due to its demonisation by the political elite. However, it would be interesting to know what people think liberalism means and whether they associate values and policies with the right concepts. We can assume that democracy is perceived mainly in terms of regular elections and free competition between parties. At the same time, liberalism is seen as something foreign and unrelated to freedoms and rights at the value level, free markets and limited state intervention at the policy level.

The aim of this article was to examine what impact, if any, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had on the state of democracy in the Visegrad Four countries. As suggested in the introduction, there does not seem to be a clear link between the war in the neighbourhood and the state and perception of democracy in these countries. While the initial shock temporarily triggered the "rally around the flag" phenomenon, when people supported their governments' actions against Russia, this does not seem to be the case after more than two years of conflict. People's everyday problems, the growing polarisation of societies, internal grievances and differences play a more important role than the external threat and the government's response to it.

The survey results examined suggest that people are more influenced by the internal political situation, the narratives used by political representatives and their own social and economic situation than by what happens beyond their borders. On the other hand, politicians use public opinion to gain support.

Even if we cannot establish a link between the war and the deterioration or improvement of democratic backsliding in the Visegrad countries, several phenomena are worth noting. First an examination of the Russian information war in these countries could shed light on the state of popular perceptions of Russia - of particular interest here would be Slovakia, Hungary and possibly the Czech Republic ahead of next year's parliamentary elections. Second, it will be interesting to assess the results of the aforementioned Czech elections and possible changes in the government and its policy towards Ukraine. Third, the state of democracy in Slovakia after one year of Prime Minister Fico's government will show whether the early signs of regression have fully materialised. Fourth, a survey of what those who claim that liberalism is a danger to their nation mean by liberalism would certainly help to understand the aversion to liberal democracy among the citizens of Slovakia and Hungary. It would also show the extent to which people repeat the rhetoric and slogans of their favourite politicians. Fifth, what would help prove the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on people's perceptions of democracy would be to



track Russian anti-liberal narratives and compare them with anti-liberal narratives spread in the region.

In conclusion, this article is a summary of developments in the theoretical world of democratic backsliding and the practical world of people's satisfaction and dissatisfaction with democracy and their governments' actions.

### Bibliography

Agh, Atilla: "Decline of Democracy in East-Central Europe: The Last Decade as the Lost Decade in the ECE Democratization", *Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol 7, n° 2 (2016), p.4-33.

Appelbaum, Anne (2020): *Twilight of Democracy. The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. New York, Doubleday.

Bermeo, Nancy: "Democratic Backsliding". *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 27, n° 1 (2016), p. 5-19.

Bustikova, Lenka; Gausti, Petra: "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance* Vol. 5, n° 4 (2017), pp. 166-176.

Cadova, Nadezda; Cervenka, Jan: *Obcane o situaci na Ukrajine – unor 2024* (Citizens on the situation on Ukraine – February 2024) Public Opinion Research Centre 2024, at <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/mezinarodni-vztahy/5815-obcane-o-situaci-na-ukrajine---unor-2024>

Carraro, Carlo; Dhand, Otilia; Eichengreen, Barry; Mills, Melinda; Rey, Helene; Sapir, Andre; Scharzer, Daniela (2022): *A new Era for Europe – How the European Union Can Make the Most of its Pandemic Recovery, Pursue Sustainable Growth, and Promote Global Stability*, Luxembourg, Publication Office of the European Union

Coppedge, Michael: *V-Dem's Conceptions of Democracy and Their Consequences*, Working Paper Series, February 2023, The Varieties of Democracy Institute, at [https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/wp\\_135.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/wp_135.pdf)

Corej, Tomas: *Caputova sa dozvedela ze Rusi zautocia, vecer predtym, Nad ani nesiel spat. Ako slovenski politici reagovali na zaciatok vojny.* (Caputova was informe about Russian attack the evening before, Nad did not even go to sleep. How Slovak politician reacted to the start of war.) *Dennik N*, 23 February 2024, at <https://dennikn.sk/3839722/najdlhsi-den-v-zivote-co-poruskom-utoku-citili-a-ako-rozmyslali-caputova-heger-ci-nad/>

Crouch, Colin (2004): *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Crouch, Colin (2020): *Post-Democracy After the Crisis*, (e-book) Cambridge, Polity Press.

Diamond, Larry (1999): *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press.



Diamond, Larry: “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession“, in Diamond, Larry; Plattner, Mark F. (2015): *Democracy in Decline?* (e-book), Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dennik N (2022) <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/2736941/>

Duleba, Alexander: Duleba analyzuje Ficova utoky proti Ukraine: Hrozi ze zo Slovanka urobi ciernu dieru vo velmi nebezpecnych casoch (Duleba analyzes Fico’s attacks on Ukraine: Is possible that he will do a black hole from Slovakia in very dangerous times) Dennik N, 23 January 2024, at <https://dennikn.sk/3790001/duleba-analyzuje-ficove-utoky-proti-ukrajine-hrozi-ze-zo-slovenska-urobi-ciernu-dieru-vo-velmi-nebezpecnych-casoch/>

Fukuyama, Francis (2019): *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, London, Profile Books.

GLOBSEC Trends 2020, at [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020\\_read-version.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf)

GLOBSEC Trends 2021, at [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021\\_final.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021_final.pdf)

GLOBSEC Trends 2022, at <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>

GLOBSEC Trends 2023, at <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>

GLOBSEC Trends 2024, at <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/Globsec%20TRENDS%202024.pdf>

Grillo, Edoardo; Nalepa, Monika; Luo, Zhaotian; Prato, Carlo: “Theories of Democratic Backsliding“, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 27, (July 2024), pp 381-400, at <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041322-025352>

Haggard, Stephan; Kaufman, Robert (2021): *Backsliding. Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Huntington, Samuel. P. (1991): *The Third Wave, Democratization in Late Twentieth Century*, (e-book), Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press.

Jozwiak, Veronika: Hungary’s Reaction to the War in Ukraine, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2 March 2022, at <https://www.pism.pl/publications/hungarys-reaction-to-the-war-in-ukraine>

Katuska, Michal: Pre Fica je priklon k Rusku nielen vyhodny, ale aj osobny. Ukrajinci ho ponizili (analyza) (For Fico to side with Russia is not only prosperous but also personal. Ukrainians humiliated him (analysis), *SME*, 2 November 2023, at <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23234309/ako-putinova-vojna-vratila-smeru-moc.html>

Keane, John (2020): *The New Despotism*, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press.

Kysel, Tomas: Vacsina Slovakov vini z napatia na Ukrajine USA. Volici Smeru brania Rusko a volici SaS Spojene staty (Majority of Slovaks blames the US for the war in Ukraine. Smer voter defend RUssia and SaS voters defend the US), *Aktuality.sk*, 30 January 2022, at <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/xq8sp8y/vacsina-slovakov-vini-z-napatia-na-ukrajine-usa-volici-smeru-brania-rusko-volici-sas-spojene-staty/>

Levitsky, Steven; Ziblatt, Daniel (2018): *How Democracies Die*. (e-book), New York, Crown Publishing. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.



Levitsky, Steven; Way, Lucan A. (2010): *Competitive Authoritarianism – Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Lorenz, Astrid; Anders, Lisa H. (2021): *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Melkozerova Veronika: “Ukraine strikes security deal with Poland”, *Politico*, 8 July 2024, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-poland-security-deal-aid-package-war-russia/>

Mounk, Yasha (2018): *The People vs Democracy. Why our freedom is in danger & How to save it*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press

Mounk, Yasha (2023): *The Identity Trap: A story of ideas and power in our time*. Dublin: Penguin Press

Muller, Robert: “Slovakia sends its air defence system to Ukraine”, *Reuters*, 8 April 2022 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovakia-gives-s-300-air-defence-system-ukraine-prime-minister-2022-04-08/>

O’Donnell, Guilermo: “Delegative Democracy?” *Kellogg Institute*, 1993, at [https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old\\_files/documents/172\\_0.pdf](https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old_files/documents/172_0.pdf)

Ratto, Marco, Szykely, Istvan P. (2023) *A New Era for Europe. Volume II: Emerging challenges*, Luxembourg, Publication Office of the European Union.

Sandel, Michael J. (2021): *The Tyranny of Merit. What’s Become of the Common Good?* Dublin, Penguin Random House

Scheppele, Kim Lane: “Autocratic Legalism“, *The University of Chicago Law Review* Vol. 85, n° 2 (March 2018), pp. 545-584.

Silva, Catarina; Hertl, Jonas: Poland’s reaction to the Ukraine war and its effects on the European security architecture, *Finabel – The European Army Interoperability Centre*, February 2024, at <https://finabel.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/IF-PDFs-1-2.pdf>

Skidelsky, Robert: “How does austerity politics weaken democracy?”, in *Democracy in Question*, Podcast, 14 January 2021 at <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/how-does-austerity-politics-weaken-democracy>

Svolik, Milan: When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue: Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by Incumbents, 3 September 2018, *SSRN*, at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3243470> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3243470>

Tilles, Daniel; Kaczynski: Smolensk crash “was attack decided at the highest level of Kremlin”, *Notes from Poland*, 4 April 2022, at <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/04/04/kaczynski-smolensk-crash-was-attack-decided-at-highest-level-of-kremlin/>

V-Dem 2024 Report, at <https://www.v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/>

Verejnost’ podporuje reakciu štátu na vojnu na Ukrajine, Ako sa mate Slovensko? (How are you Slovakia?), 2 March 2022, Slovak Academy of Social Science, at <https://www.akosamateslovensko.sk/verejnost-podporuje-reakciu-statu-na-vojnu-na-ukrajine/>

Waldner, David; Lust, Ellen: “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding“. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 21 (2018), pp. 93-113, at <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>



Zachova, Aneta: “Czechia wants to ban Schengen travel for Russian Diplomats”, *Euractiv*, 22 November 2023, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/czechia-wants-to-ban-schengen-travel-for-russian-diplomats/>

Zachova Aneta: “Ammunition bought under Czech initiative could reach Ukraine in June”, *Euractiv*, 13 March 2024, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/ammunition-bought-under-czech-initiative-could-reach-ukraine-in-june/>