

From democratic success to democratic backsliding
A comparative case study of Poland's democratic backsliding in contrast to
Estonia



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"Backsliding, after all, is an outcome of political struggles made possible by shifting balances of power; coalitional strength and its change over time are one fruitful way to explain these shifts in balances of power." – Waldner & Lust, 2018;109

Abstract

Democratic backsliding is becoming a bigger trend around the globe. This study examines how democratic backsliding has transpired in two post-Soviet countries, Poland and Estonia. This study has been conducted with the help of the comparative case study method where the time frame has been demarcated from the year the countries joined the European Union (2004) to present year. The theory democratic backsliding has been operationalized to four different parameters in order for the phenomenon to be measured. The four parameters are political polarization, competitive electoral procedures, restriction to opposite sides autonomy and civil rights. The results have shown that Poland's democratic backsliding is the results of different factors. To the contrast, Estonia has not seen any remarkable signs of democratic backsliding. The findings have been linked to political polarization, and restriction to Poland's press freedom after the party Law and Justice (PiS) came to power.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, Poland, Estonia, Democracy, Eastern Europe

Wordcount: 8659

Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 RESEARCH AIM	1
1.3 HISTORICAL CASE DESCRIPTION	2
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION	3
1.5 DISPOSITION OF THE PAPER	3
1.6 PREVIOUS RESEARCH	4
2. THEORY	6
2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	6
2.2 OPERATIONALIZATION OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING	6
2.2.1 Political polarization	7
2.2.2. Competitive electoral procedures	8
2.2.3. Restriction to opposing sides autonomy	8
2.2.4. Civil Rights	9
3. METHOD, MATERIAL AND DEMARCATION	9
3.1 METHOD	9
3.2 MATERIAL	11
3.2.1 Nancy Bermeo’s theoretical framework	11
3.2.4 Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy	11
3.3 DEMARCATION	11
3.4 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY	12
4. RESULTS	12
4.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF POLAND	12
4.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ESTONIA	14
4.3 POLITICAL POLARIZATION	15
4.4 COMPETITIVE ELECTORAL PROCEDURES	18
4.5 RESTRICTION TO OPPOSING SIDES AUTONOMY	20
4.6 CIVIL RIGHTS	21
5. ANALYSIS	22
6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	25
6.1 DISCUSSION	25
6.2 CONCLUSION	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY	27

1. Introduction

The epicenter of the third wave of democratization began in 1989 where the former states of USSR transitioned from communism to a democracy. The democratic values were integrated into the countries political, economic and social systems (Huntington, 2021;13f). Finally, the unification of democratic prosperity consisted of the countries joining the European Union (EU) in 2004 (European Union, n.d). Although the third wave of democratization consisted of the international integration of both democracy and partnership, a handful of countries are failing to maintain the democratic values. This has led to the phenomenon democratic backsliding which has been studied upon by a great number of scholars. The world has seen an increase of populism and a decline of liberal democracies. Furthermore, 70% of the population living in a democracy are currently in a country where backsliding is occurring (International IDEA, 2021;6). Moreover, the erosion of democracies is continuously growing, and studies have shown that the global level of democracy has dropped to the same level it was before the year 2000 (Mechkova et.al 2017;162).

As stated above, ten countries joined the EU in 2004, including Poland and Estonia. While Poland has joined the global trend and become one of the most prominent studies of democratic backsliding, Estonia has seen next to minimal backsliding. The study of global politics and democratic erosion is important. Therefore, it would be interesting to study geographically equal countries that have seen different results of democratic backsliding. By studying Poland and Estonia, it should give us a deeper understanding of the two cases, including a clearer answer to why Poland is experiencing democratic backsliding while Estonia has not.

1.2 Research aim

This paper aims to study and compare two countries that are geographically equal in the East European Region to fulfill a deeper understanding of democratic backsliding. Moreover, the study should give the most prominent contributing factors to democratic backsliding in Poland, and explain the differences between the two countries' political environment. It is also important to note that because of the low amount of democratic backsliding in Estonia,

the paper will naturally focus on Poland's democratic erosion. It is as well understandable that the findings on Estonia's democratic backsliding might not be as clear as the ones on Poland.

1.3 Historical case description

Although the case selection is based on different studies in regard to backsliding, the historical aspect of these countries should not be dismissed. It is important to note that these two countries were under the influence of the Soviet Union, and also experienced a series of challenges. Both Poland and Estonia have been used as battleground by German and USSR soldiers, and also experiences invasion and political change. This section will state the possible characteristics that might have influenced the democracy in the countries.

During the 1940s, Poland became a subject to occupation by Germany, Soviet Union, Slovakia and Lithuania. Furthermore, the division of the country occurred when both Germany and the Soviet Union had occupied parts of the country. However, Poland was later on occupied by the Soviet Union after World War II, and the occupation ranged from the year 1945 to 1989. Poland experiences a barrage of reformations (Petrova & Aydin-Düzgit, 2021). Poland was a so-called satellite state in which the country was considered independent, but was influenced heavily by the Soviet Union's political, economic and military agenda. The Soviet Union implemented policy that affected the institutions and the domestic population in Poland (Institute of National Remembrance, n.d). Moreover, an important factor to state is that Poland became a Communist People's Republic in 1947. The Stalinist leadership affected Poland and the Soviet Union started to run the elections in the occupied country (BBC, 2018). Another important factor is that Poland joined the Warsaw-pact in 1955, which was organized by the Soviet Union. Eventually, the fall of communism in 1989 contributed to Poland regaining its independence. The Polish parliament adopted a new constitution in 1997 (ibid). It is also important to mention that the Polish anti-communist movement "Solidarity" began to promote their agenda and helped allies to fight out the Soviet system (Institute of National Remembrance, n.d).

In Estonia's case, the occupation of the Soviet Union has been almost similar to Poland's case. Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union towards the end of the summer in 1940. However, German soldiers invaded the country the year after and Estonia was reattached to

the Soviet Union in 1944. The country did not experience similar reformations like Poland and Estonia's independence was restored in 1991 which contributed to the country flourishing. Moreover, Estonia adopted a new constitution in 1992. The Russian-Estonian relation was strained after Estonia implemented a range of policy changes which affected the Russian refugees. Estonia required Russian refugees to apply for citizenship. Although Estonia was under the influence and occupation of the Soviet Union, the country did not experience heavy reforms like Poland. The country later started to develop a stable democracy (BBC, 2018).

After Estonia and Poland's independence, the two countries began to implement a series of changes in regard to political and economic reforms to meet the requirements for the EU and NATO. The introduction of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 helped new states transition into more consolidated democracies. International democracy support became one of the two countries' most important reforms to their foreign policy (Zamfir & Dobрева, 2019;4).

1.4 Research question

The research question for this paper is formulated to give an explanation to what extent democratic backsliding has occurred in the two chosen countries. Furthermore, the research question's aim is to give the most prominent examples of democratic backsliding and capture the regime changes. This should as well provide the historical case and development of the erosion that has happened or is happening. Therefore, the research question reads as follows.

To what extent has democratic backsliding transpired in Poland and Estonia from 2004 to present year?

1.5 Disposition of the paper

The structure of the paper states as follow: in the next section, the previous research on gives the reader an understanding of how democratic backsliding may occur and in which areas it is relevant to study. Chapter two presents the chosen theory and the parameters in which have been chosen to operationalize. Chapter three presents the method used to conduct this study, and also the material that has been used. Chapter four presents the results from relevant previous research and also figures of the different indicators. The last chapter presents a

discussion on the results in regard to the theoretical framework. It includes reflections as well on the methodological approach,

1.6 Previous research

Democratic backsliding, also known as de-democratization or democratic erosion is the process in which a state gradually declines its democratic characteristics. The phenomenon identifies the different ways a state could break down (Bermeo, 2016;5). In the view of the fact that democratic backsliding is a broad concept, there has been a multitude of studies concerning this issue. One of the most notable papers of democratic backsliding comes from Nancy Bermeo. She argues that the study of democratic backsliding mostly explains why democracies break down but rarely how (ibid). Furthermore, the author discusses the different forms of backsliding in which coups d'état and election day fraud has been declining since the cold war. However, another form of democratic backsliding, the debilitation of democratic process from within, has increased.

Nancy Bermeo identifies two different types backsliding that often tend together. The first one, executive aggrandizement, translates into the process of becoming a more authoritarian regime in which the democratic institutions in the country are used as a main weapon. The elected executive subsequently alters the institutions which entangles the opposition sides power (Bermeo, 2016;10). Furthermore, this type of backsliding often associated with the weakening of institutions, affects courts or legislations in which the executive controls the power to their favor. This could occur after the executive side has gained power after an election in which they pass a number of laws to burrow the accountability of institutions. The affected domains are usually the press freedom and the autonomy of courts of law. In other words, the executive power will assign positions in which the person of interest sympathizes with them (Bermeo, 2016;11).

The other form of backsliding is strategically manipulating elections that tend with executive aggrandizement but could as well be the main factor of backsliding. Strategically manipulating elections consists of the process of detonating a series of changes to affect the political environment. Moreover, the changes affect the opposition in which the amount of power to

challenge the party is weakened. The author implies that this could be done by hampering with the media access or using the state fund to finance their own election campaign (Bermeo, 2016;13). According to the author, this type of backsliding rarely occurs on the day of election but consists of a series of limitations throughout time. This, as well, occurs within the democratic institutions in order to legitimize the changes (ibid).

Moreover, Bermeo argues that democratic erosion would rather be gradual rather than sudden. It is also important to understand that the institutions in a democracy are remade by different actors at respective time frame (Bermeo, 2016;14). On the domestic level, democratic backsliding affects the view of international grounds or organizations. The international organizations are portrayed in a way where the domestic population might believe they are fighting for their self-interests instead of the domestic interest in the country. This is as well targeted towards individuals in which they are portrayed someone with specific interests. The two types of democratic backsliding that tend together, as stated above, usually do not just appear from the thin air. They stem from the fact that the opposition side may have some internal troubles (ibid).

Additionally, Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2021) argue that democratic backsliding stems from a chain reaction in which their basis comes from the political leadership. This occurs when the political leadership damages the institutions that are in charge of the democratic quality. Their definition of democratic backsliding states as *“the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by autocratic leader”* (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;1). According to the authors, democratic backsliding's nature tends to stealth its way forward. The incremental nature of democratic backsliding can only be judged and analyzed after the various components of democratic backsliding have already occurred (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;7). This refers back to the statement that democratic backsliding occurs throughout time and will not occur suddenly. The decline of the democratic process gradually weakens as the executive autocrats shift the political environment in the country causing a multitude of consequences on the democracy in the country (ibid). The most notable consequences of this phenomenon damage the pillars of democracy, freedom of speech of the media and individuals, assembly and association (ibid). Most of the damage occurs by changing the laws,

including the voting rights, the erosion of independent electoral system, and as well the restriction of opposing electives in order to fulfill a stronger chance of win the election (ibid). These consequences are a step towards a more authoritarian rule and the authors present it as political polarization.

The decline of global freedom and rights has increased (Waldner & Lust, 2018;94). The authors of the paper separate the definition of democracies and autocratic regimes. Their way of conceptualizing democratic backsliding is to look at backsliding in democratic governance rather than autocratic regimes (Waldner & Lust, 2018;95). They, as well, note that backsliding occurs throughout a series of incremental actions and examine different indicators in which could be an explanation of democratic backsliding. The conducted study has underlined different factors to examine when researching about democratic backsliding. The different factors state as follows: competitive electoral procedures, civil and political liberties, and accountability. Furthermore, the emphasize that backsliding happens in combination with those factors and consist of "*changes in the rules and informal procedures that shape those elections, rights, and accountability*" (Lust & Waldner, 2015;3).

2. Theory

2.1 Theoretical framework

This paper explores the theory of democratic backsliding. As mention before, democratic backsliding includes various aspect of democracy. The issue with a broad concept such as democracy is that it may be difficult to measure seeing that there are a multitude of contributing factors as well as approaches. Therefore, it is with great interest to examine different approaches and factors of democratic backsliding as the previous research mentions. To fulfill the aim of this paper and be able to measure democratic backsliding in Poland as well as Estonia, the concept will be given measurable attributes.

2.2 Operationalization of democratic backsliding

The process of operationalize a concept is to give it measurable attributes and properties (Esaiasson, et al, 2017;56). In order for this paper to fulfill its purpose, there has to be a certain emphasize on democracy and which factors that might be affected by democratic backsliding. Therefore, the operationalization should not be too broad or to narrow. With the combination

of the previous studies, this paper will focus on four different parameters that explain democratic backsliding. The four parameters in which are I find relevant to measure democratic backsliding in Estonia and Poland are political polarization, competitive electoral procedures, restrictions to the opposing sides autonomy, as well as the restriction to civil rights. The parameters are gathered from previous research on democratic backsliding. The next section below will present and explain the different parameters as well as the indicator(s) used for respective parameter.

The operationalization of democratic backsliding could be viewed from different standpoints. Waldner & Lust (2018) explains that to study democratic backsliding, it is best done by studying “*competitive electoral procedures, civil and political liberties, and accountability*” (Waldner & Lust, 2015;2). The authors also mention that “*backsliding accountability, and that backsliding occurs through a series of discrete changes in the rules and informal procedures that shape those elections, rights, and accountability.*” (ibid). However, this paper explores merely competitive electoral procedures and civil and political liberties for the purpose of fulfilling a broader understanding of backsliding.

2.2.1 Political polarization

Political polarization is explored to be one of the contributing factors to democratic backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;14). The authors define the phenomenon as the increasing division of political elites and public. Polarization occurs whenever the two different groups in the society are divided over ideology or policy (ibid). The common trends of democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe has partially been explained by polarization. The increase of populism tends to be one of the main factors of political polarization (Stanley, 2019;345), (Roberts, 2021;1).

The indicators that will be used for political polarization are the ones that are mentioned by Haggard and Kaufman. They emphasize four different V-Dem indicators that are relevant to study political polarization. The four indicators measure political polarization both in elite- and mass polarization. These indicators measure 1) respect counterarguments, 2) hate speech in rhetoric during debate, 3) polarization in society, 4) extent of anti-system civil society and social movements (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;17f).

2.2.2. Competitive electoral procedures

This factor of democratic procedures consists of the fact that the elections are undermined, and the civil society tend to lose their rights when it comes to the elections. To have a competitive electoral procedure, the ruling government should not be elected for indefinite amount of time and also the civil society's votes are the ones who determine the election. The results of an election should also not be predetermined as it should only reflect the civil society's will (Waldner & Lust, 2018;95). Furthermore, this parameter can be explained by examining the elections to see whether there has been election fraud, or the interference of a certain part in an election. As previously mentioned, vote or election fraud could be defined by a load of different factors. This may include financing the campaign with the state fund, as Bermeo (2016) mentions, or spreading political propaganda which may damage the opposing party. Furthermore, this includes the strategic manipulation of the electoral system in which the voting system could be compromised during or before the election day. (Bermeo 2016;7ff), (Haggard & Raufman, 2021;3). Another way to restrict the fair elections is to minimize the amount of polling booth and restrain certain parts communities from voting.

The indicators used for this section are 1) government censorship effort, and 2) clean elections index. Government censorship effort consists of the measurements of the media freedom and in regard to the government trying to censor various political messages. This indicator is relevant because of the amount of power the media holds during an election period. This also shows to what extend the opposition can criticize the government leading to the neutrality of a free election. Clean elections index measures how fair the elections are and includes foul play such as buying votes, or fraud.

2.2.3. Restriction to opposing sides autonomy

This aspect of democratic backsliding explores the various methods used by the executive power in order for them to maintain their power. This method may be used by autocrats because they can control the power of the judiciary and the civil society (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;7f). They may encroach the oppositions side to express themselves politically, or also, damage the rights of the opposition side. The consequences of this are that the opposition side may have a lower chance of promoting and implementing changes within their agenda

(ibid). Other factors that are included in the restriction of the opposing sides autonomy are the constitutional and democratic factors in which the executive side may block the opposing side from voting down their policy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;44). This, as mentioned above, helps them maintain their power and create policy that is in favor to the executive side.

2.2.4. Civil Rights

The restriction to civic rights is a typical trait for democratic backsliding seeing that the democratic practice of the people may be frozen. In a fair society, people should not have any restrictions within the political process. This second may seem similar to competitive electoral procedures (2.2.2) but should not be mixed together seeing that this focuses more on the civil society and section 2.2.2. focuses on the electoral procedures. Furthermore, this parameter can be explained by examining to what extent the civil society has the freedom based on their political rights. This may include legislations that affect the freedom of media, participation and engagement in political context.

The indicators used for this section are 1) Freedom house internet censorship effort as it shows to what extent the government may exclude political information or freedom of speech in political context, 2) civil liberties explain to what extent the civil society have the freedom to express their political opinions and also 3) political liberties which includes the factors of to what extent the civil society can participate and vote in political elections where they have the option to choose the party they want to vote for.

3. Method, Material and Demarcation

3.1 Method

The two methods used to conduct a reason are qualitative and quantitative. This is dependent on what the author aims to answer (Esaiasson, et al, 2017;195f). In view of what this study aims to examine, the most suitable methodological approach is a qualitative method. Moreover, the research question *“to what extent has democratic backsliding transpired in Poland and Estonia from 2004 to present year?”* will be answered by conducting a comparative case study where Poland and Estonia will be examined to see why Poland is backsliding while Estonia is not. It is as well important to have two different cases in order to be able to study

two different units. This provides a deeper understanding of the cases as well as contributes to the comparative factor (Esaiasson, et al, 2017;109).

The analysis will reflect a most-similar system design. This strategy of using a most-similar design makes it easier to find the factors that may not be causal or have an effect on the research issue. Furthermore, the usage of this design attempts to uncover the contributing factors that may affect the dependent variable, seeing that they work as a control variable, more specifically, as elements that are contributing to the cases being similar. The design is often used in comparative politics when it comes to comparing two very similar cases. The two cases may be similar in many ways; however, it is usually used when they differ in the dependent variable. Therefore, as mention, this analytical design contributes to cross out the factors that may not affect the dependent variable (Esaiasson, et al, 2017;101f).

Furthermore, the nonscientific research would in this case be the usage of relevant parameters for democratic backsliding, with other words, how they are applied to the topic. However, it is also important to state that the scientific research has not completely been fulfilled due to the fact that previous research and databases on democratic backsliding has been used instead of gathering data (Esaiasson et al, 2017;32). Because of the limited time and resources, this paper solely builds on previous research. In addition to this, the paper will provide a deeper understanding of the cases and provide insight to why Poland is backsliding while Estonia is not although they have had the same conditions. In today's society, the study of democratic promotion has great importance and brings a different aspect to democratic backsliding. Moreover, to continue the discussion on democracy, it has brought the study of authoritarian states and how they could affect the world, the consequences and as well gives us an insight of how the development could look like throughout time.

Poland and Estonia share historical and political characteristics which could increase the generalizability since the countries are somewhat similar. They both share the same history of being annexed by the Soviet Union, and share a similar development of democracy. This method should give an explanation of which factor(s) are the most prominent when it comes to backsliding.

3.2 Material

The section below presents the main articles and findings for the paper. The keywords for the findings have been democratic backsliding, Poland and Estonia. The material is limited to previous research on democratic backsliding and this also includes findings of that could be relevant to explain the phenomenon in the two countries, for instance different datasets, research projects and reports from organizations. The usage of the datasets will be discussed in section 3.2.4.

3.2.1 Nancy Bermeo's theoretical framework

The author presents reliable findings on democratic backsliding and her paper "*On democratic backsliding*" has been used by a multitude of researchers and lay a fundamental basis on democratic backsliding. Furthermore, her work has also been published in the Journal of Democracy.

3.2.4 Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy

This paper will use datapoints from Freedom House (n.d) and Varieties of Democracy (V-dem) (n.d). V-dem is a research project where the study of democracy and democratization is the main priority. Freedom House is an independent American organization that works with promoting democracy and democratic growth. The data from Freedom house and V-Dem will consists of different indicators which have been connected to the four different parameters: political polarization, competitive electoral procedures, restrictions to the opposing sides autonomy, as well as the civil rights. The parameters have been connected to different variables/indicator from Freedom House and V-Dem as they can be found in section 2.2.1 to 2.2.4. The connection of the parameters and the variables/indicator have been identified seeing that they share the same dimensions.

3.3 Demarcation

This paper aims to compare Poland and Estonia in regard to democratic backsliding. The countries have been chosen by looking at different datasets that shows the amount of democratic backsliding in the countries. Poland was chosen for the reason that the country has seen democratic backsliding during a long period of time. Estonia has been chosen

because the country has not seen any remarkable changes. Moreover, the geographical scope should be taken into consideration due to the fact that both countries were ruled by the Soviet Union, but had different ties to the Union. Moreover, the time span of the study remains from 2004 to the present year. The reason for this is that the EU began its democratic promotion in the beginning of the 1990s, and alongside with eight other countries, Poland and Hungary joined in 2004. Therefore, the mark of democratic success could be argued that it started the year the countries joined the EU. Another reason for the chosen time scope is for the reason that democratic backsliding does not occur all of the sudden but requires years of changes.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are two important factors when conducting a study of this kind. The validity in this study is the connection between the operationalization and the theoretical framework in which the study measures what it is supposed to. This is an important factor to get reliable conclusions on the research problem (Esaiasson, et al, 2017;57). Reliability is as well important because it shows that the author measures and if the study or results could be remade with the same circumstances (Esaiasson, et al, 2017;64).

4. Results

This section will present the results particularly related to the research question. As mentioned in section 1.2 (research aim), the results presented below will naturally focus on Poland's democratic erosion. However, the results will as well present relevant findings on Estonia's democratic development.

In a recent report from 2021, the attacks on democracy have intensified in Eastern Europe. Although Hungary has had the biggest decline measured in "Nations of Transit" (Freedom House, 2021a), Poland's decline has been more precipitous over the past five years (ibid).

4.1 Historical background of Poland

During the 2010s, Poland was considered to be one of the most prominent examples of democratic prosperity. Poland was considered one of the countries who had the best conditions to develop a stable democracy (Przybylski, 2018;52). However, this did not occur, and Poland has since then been classified as a semi-consolidated democracy (Freedom House,

2021a). Moreover, the regression in Poland's democratic institutions should be viewed throughout time, seeing as the erosion of democratic practice occurs gradually.

As mentioned in section 1.2 (historical case description), Poland gained independence in 1989 after the fall of the soviet-communism leadership in which Poland regained control over its institutions and gradually developed a stronger democracy (Przybylski, 2018;52f). However, as a consequence from the fall of the former soviet regime, the inflation hit 640 percent in relation to the extreme changes, the civil society was left with major economic difficulties. Poland was left with the option of pulling the lifeline to join the Western multinational organizations such as the EU (2004) and NATO (1999) which contributed to Poland needing economic reforms. However, the economic reforms were followed up by multiple policy changes (Przybylski, 2018;53).

Poland held a strong position after this period, and even after the economic reforms and the hit to the global market in 2008, Poland managed to continue its economic development and the democratic institutions remained balanced (Przybylski, 2018;55). However, the focus shifted from escaping the crisis to securing Poland's position within the organizations leading to a spark in the political polarization between the political parties Civic Platform (PO), and Law and Justice (PiS) seeing that Poland already had reached its goals (ibid). Automatically, the two parties targeted and drew their support from different social groups. While PiS targeted small to medium towns in Poland, PO targeted larger urban areas. It is as well important to mention that the socioeconomic fragile regions supported PiS (ibid).

The event that led to a chain reaction and changed Poland's political sphere occurred in 2010 in which a plane crashed, leading to the death of multiple generals, government officials, and also at the time, the sitting president Lech Kaczyński (Przybylski, 2018;55). The incident did not initially have any major consequences seeing that Poland had a new presidential election and constitutional prosperity, however, Kaczyński twin brother, Jarosław Kaczyński later used his brother's death as a mechanism to shift the political culture in his party PiS and Poland. Kaczyński prime argument consisted of the fact that the incident was not an accident, but foul play, leading to the beginning of his conspiracy narrative. Although Kaczyński initial plan was

not to resuscitate the communist ideologies, he implemented a centralized model where the political power surged from the top (Przybylski, 2018;56).

The conspiracies were implemented into PiS political agenda which resulted in a more moderate appeal to the public eye. The party gained voters from after the incident and the PiS presidential candidate became victorious in 2015. The massive surge of new voters and party supporters from the middle class, did however not solely stem from the conspiracy narrative, but rather the combination of the moderate appeal to the civil society. PiS began to hide and shut off their most extremist politicians meanwhile their conspiracy narrative continued (Przybylski, 2018;56f).

4.2 Historical background of Estonia

Estonia is considered to be a consolidated democracy (Freedom House 2021b). The country seems to be a unique example among the Central European Countries when it comes to democratic backsliding. After Soviet Union annexed and heavily influenced Estonia's governmental structures, the country developed its democratic practice through a series of national liberated values during the independence of the country. Estonia started to build its institutions and the kept the promise to the EU during the Europeanization, a process in which the EU integrated the Estonia into a more western democracy building (Cianetti, 2018;325). When it comes to democratic backsliding, Estonia is rarely mentioned, but the common trend of analyzing Poland and Hungary in Central Eastern Europe seems more prominent. Estonia is mainly used as an example of democratic succession as a post-communist country (Cianetti, 2018;319).

Furthermore, Estonia's history with a large number of Russian-speaking minorities and democratic succession seems to be unforeseen, seeing that 29 percent of the population is Russian-speaking (Cianetti, 2018;319). Estonia's party politics is as well divided between minorities and titular nations in which the Estonian Russian-speaking population has a lower representation in the parliament. Moreover, the Estonian Centre Party have maintained the Russian-speaking voters to their favor, (Cianetti, 2018;320).

Cianetti (2018) builds her findings on Estonia on previous research on “hollowness” and “backsliding”. The Estonian state and democracy have its core principals built by an ethnic-majority, excluding the Estonian Russian-speaking population from the elites. As mentioned in section 1.3 (historical case description), the Estonian and Russian relation was strained after Estonia’s citizen laws came to action, forcing a large number of the Russian population out from the democracy building in the country (Cianetti, 2018;326). Moreover, the small Baltic-language has shaped policies in Estonia, contributing to a highly politicalized topic (ibid). Moreover, the author emphasizes on ethnic exclusion as a form of hollowness when it comes to democracy, seeing that has effects on the democratic practice and also excludes minorities’ opinions leading to an empty debate (Cianetti, 2018;318).

As of today, Estonia is a country with a solid democracy. However, in 2021, the prime minister Jüri Ratas had to resign after allegations regarding corruption. The allegations concerned bribery and peddling for a development project in the capital, Tallinn (Politico, 2021).

4.3 Political Polarization

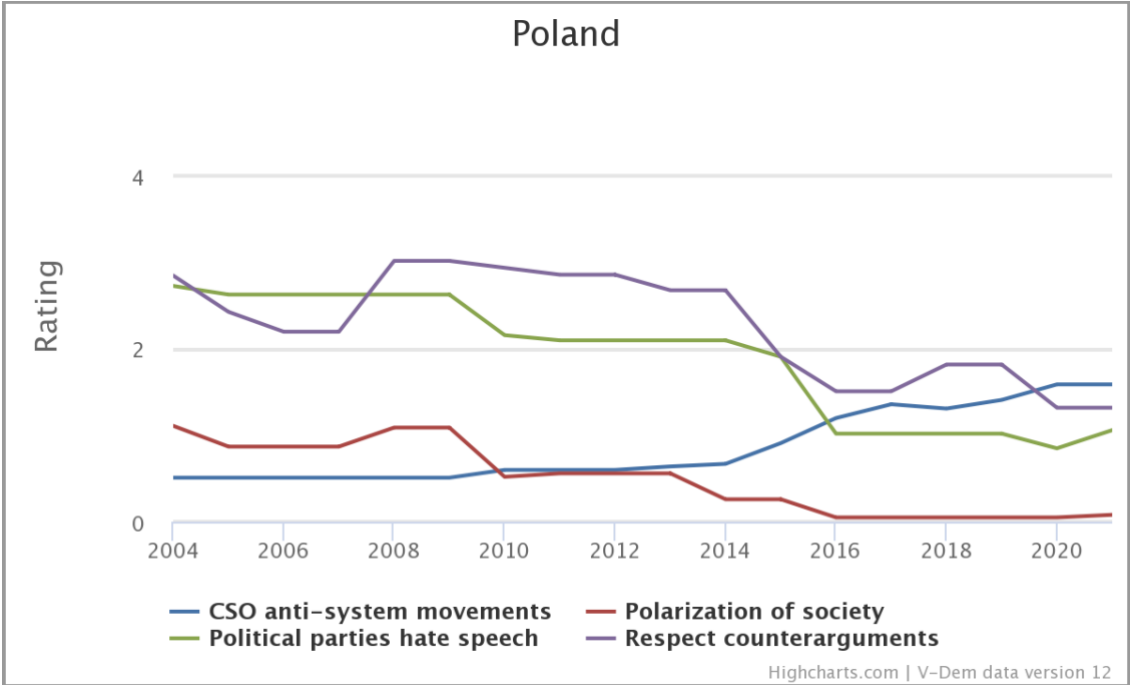


Figure 1: Political polarization in Poland (V-Dem, 2022)

Political polarization has increased in the Eastern European Region and it is not just a trend in Poland. Polarization is viewed by looking at different groups in the society to see the extent of division when it comes to their narratives. Haggard & Kaufman (2021) mention how political polarization is defined as the process of two groups in society splitting up groups based on the “us” against “them” dilemma. Furthermore, political polarization in Poland has increased since the party PiS took the executive power in the country (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;14f).

As of today, PiS has divided Poland between party supporters and critics seeing that issues such as LGBTQ+, abortion laws, and also basic freedom and rights are being compromised. Furthermore, the political polarization in Poland can be explained by looking at the reformation of the systems. The system of party politics changed in Poland in 2005 and went from a two-bloc system to a two-party system as PiS and PO took over the parliament. The two different parties, with different agenda and policy, changed the nature of Polish politics. In the 2005 and 2007 elections, PO’s agenda consisted of the *“individual liberties, procedural democracy, and entrepreneurial freedom as the basis of economic growth”* (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;33f), while PiS, did the complete opposite and promoted their agenda on populist and conservative ideas. The party has promoted nationalism and Euroscepticism to contribute to the polarization in the country. The Euroscepticism has been brought forwardly by promoting the idea of alienated powers trying to take over the Polish society, which is as well strengthening the Polish nationalism. Furthermore, the Polish society has seen Jarosław Kaczyński and PiS’s conspiratorial narratives fuse into the party’s agenda. After the incident in 2010, the political narrative of PiS changed drastically. Kaczyński divided the society by his narratives, causing the social cleavages. Moreover, it has been divided by those who follow his conspiratorial narratives and those who are against it. According to Robert & Kaufman (2021), polarization should not solely be analyzed through the socioeconomic factor but rather than how politicians use narratives to spread their agenda and causing a broad division between society’s different groups whether it concerns factual political issues, or in this case, conspiratorial narratives (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;34).

An efficient way of polarizing the society is through the usage of media. The press freedom in Poland has been under attack during the past few years, and the public media has been limited

to an extent where they are not allowed to provide relevant information concerning regarding their country (RSF, n.d.)

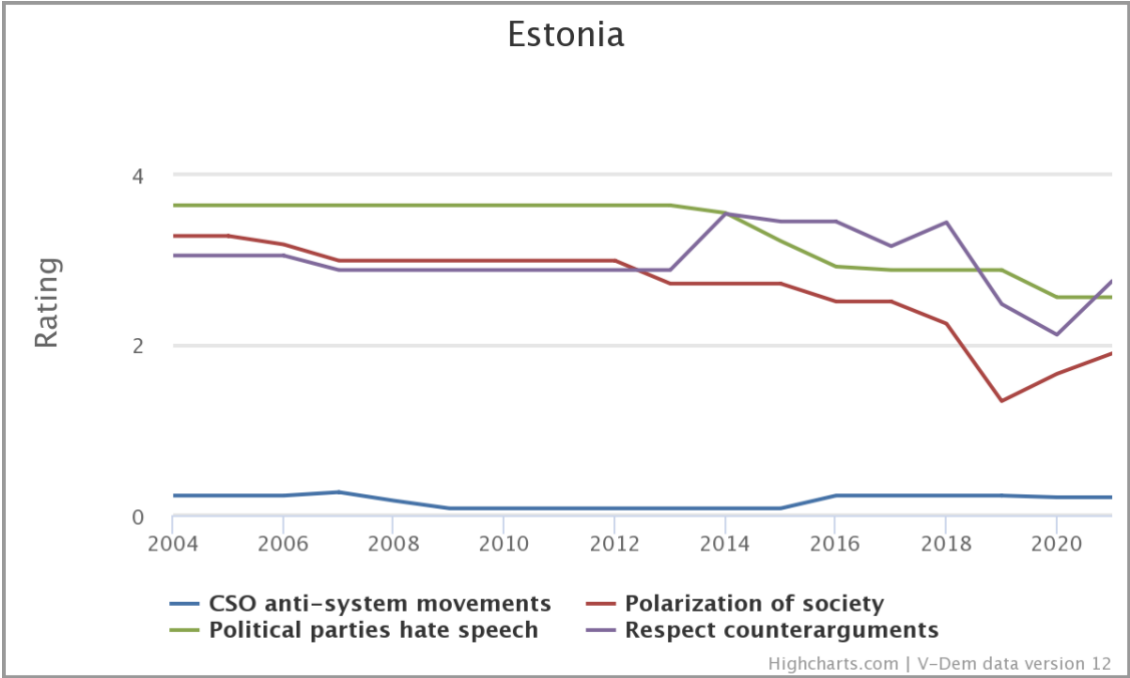


Figure 2: Political Polarization in Estonia (V-Dem, 2022)

Political polarization is not solely unique to Poland, as it has been seen even in Estonia. The emergence of polarization, as mentioned earlier, has increased in East Europe. Estonia has been a prominent example of flourishing democracy and rationality; however certain aspects came to change the scene between 2014 and 2015. The anti-European conservative populist party, Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE), began to collect voters, leading to party gaining approximately 20 percent of the support in 2019, all the way from around 3 percent in 2010 (Veebel, 2019). EKRE managed to gain votes by openly discussing the social issues that other parties avoided, the increase of support to radical right-wing and anti-European parties, and also due to political issues within the other parties (ibid).

**Figures 1 and 2 shows the political polarization in the country. Respect counterarguments measures from zero to five where zero means the counterarguments are not allowed, and five that elites always respect counterarguments. Polarization of society and political parties hate speech is measured zero to four, in which zero is high and four is minimal. CSO anti-system movements is measured from zero to four where zero is minimal and four high anti-system movements.*

4.4 Competitive electoral procedures

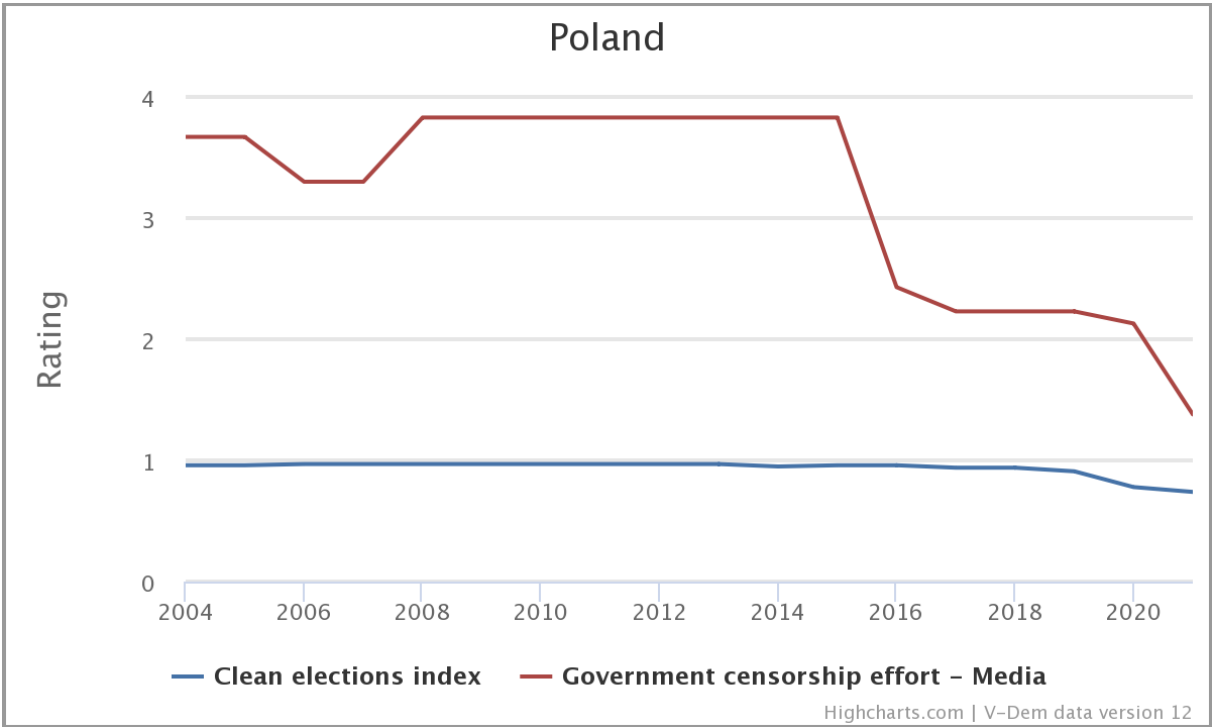


Figure 3: Competitive Electoral Procedures in Poland (V-dem, 2022)

Poland has seen some issues when it comes to clean elections. When the Polish party PiS came to power, the elections became less competitive and the electoral process in which is one of the most fundamental factors of democracy became compromised. In 2015, PiS and the president, Andrzej Duda signed a bill that would allow the ruling party to have a full control of the government state media (The Guardian, 2015). Companies outside the European Economic Area were hindered from having ownership of the Polish media, including TV-channels. Moreover, this has contributed to a partisan news coverage in which the ruling party PiS has been portrayed in a positive way meanwhile the opposition in a negative. During the 2019 EU elections, out of the 105 items in the poll, 69 of them were about the ruling party PiS, in which only one was neutral meanwhile all 33 of the opposition's were negative (The Guardian, 2021).

In 2020, the presidential election was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemics. With the elections postponed, campaigning was as well paused to make the election fair. Human Rights Watch (HRW) warned that this election would not be fair, predictable and free. As the election

day was approaching, the ruling party PiS proposed a mail-in system as well as extending the presidential term from five to seven years (Euronews, 2020). The government tried to introduce a change in the electoral system weeks before the election and HRW warned the about the unconstitutional basis of the election in Poland. (ibid). Both of the proposals were heavily contested, and the election was held between 28 June to 12 July.

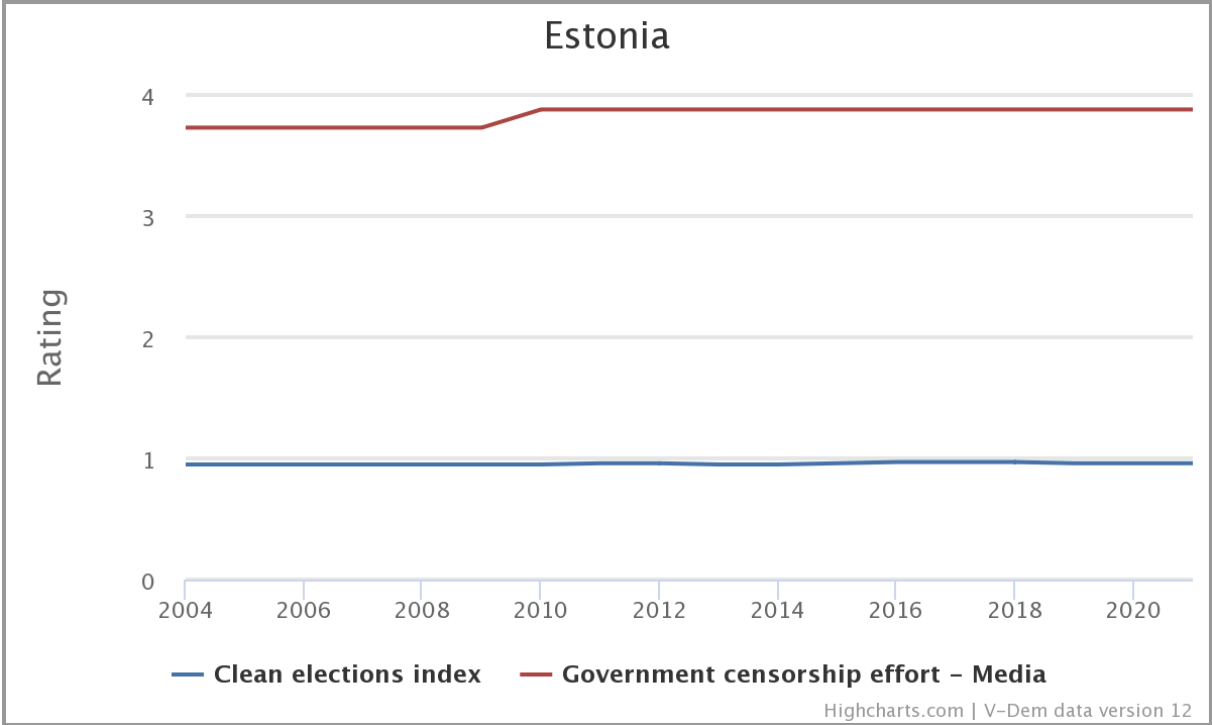


Figure 4: Competitive Electoral Procedures in Estonia (V-Dem, 2022)

In Estonia’s case, the press freedom and the clean elections have been fairly stable. The country’s media consists of two major media houses and several independent platforms. Moreover, the political atmosphere has not restricted the media, and journalists are free to express their critique towards the government without being at risk of maltreatment (RSF, n.d.).

**Figures 3 and 4 shows competitive electoral procedures in the country. Clean elections are measured from zero to one, where zero is low number of clean elections and one is high. Government censorship effort when it comes to media measures from zero in which the government censors the media, and four where the government rarely censors any media.*

4.5 Restriction to opposing sides autonomy

When it comes to democracy and different sides in a political environment, there has to be room for different political opinions without shadowing the opposition. It is natural that political parties have different ideologies in which they are allowed to express freely in the democratic practice. From there, the voters are represented in the parliament by elections. Should this be compromised, it will lead to the society not being represented in the parliament.

In Poland's case, there has been multitude of attempts to restrict the opposition of their autonomy and power. While Poland might not be the clearest example of the threatening the opposition for them not to have their powers, certain factors are contributing to the subtle modern democratic backsliding. Firstly, the political tension and rivalry between PiS and PO has intensified. To keep the power, PiS has implemented various changes in order for them to remain their power. The party has placed state officials, ones that are most likely to support the party, in high positions and in charge of various judiciary (Przybylski, 2018;57f). Not only this, but the ruling party PiS has also implemented various reforms to the press and media. 20 out of the 24 regional newspapers have been bought up by the government. Moreover, the government has used the public media as tools for their propaganda (RSF, n.d.). The members of the government attack as well critical journalists in order to silent them (RSF, n.d.). This may not be directly an attack to the opposition, however, the control of press freedom and ownership of several of Poland's biggest medias could contribute to the executive side spreading propaganda which may damage the opposition side.

There were no findings of the Estonian government restricting the opposite sides autonomy.

4.6 Civil Rights

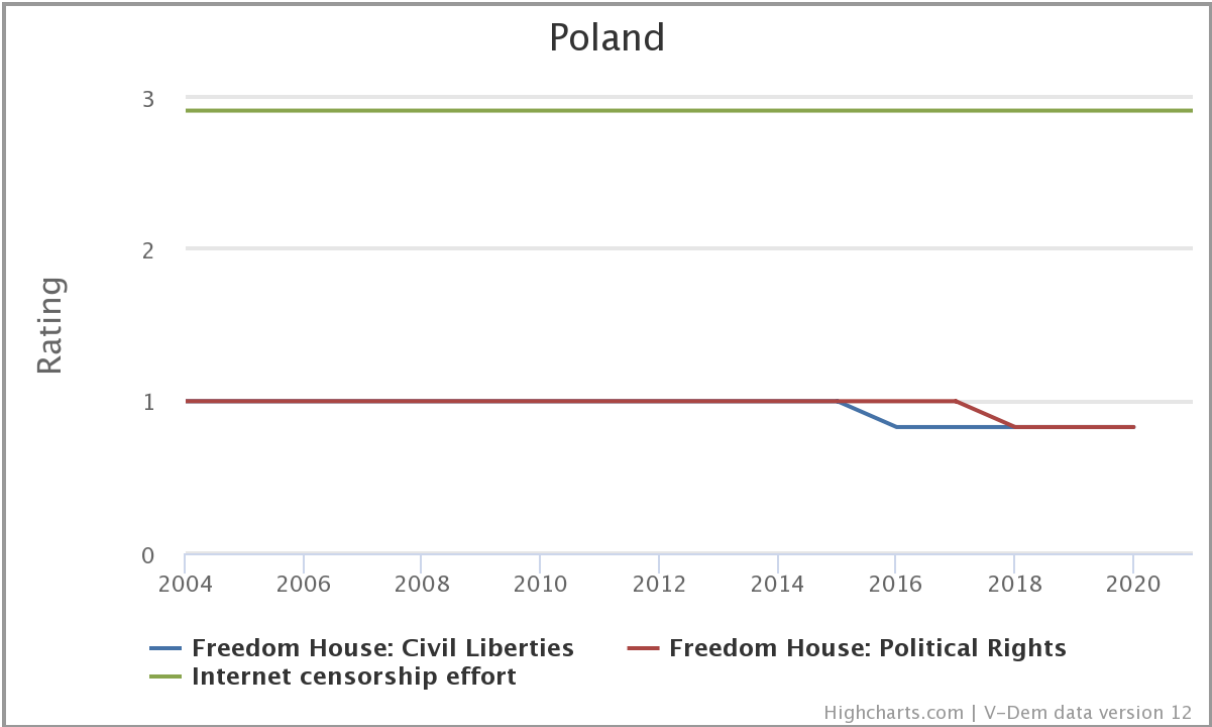


Figure 5: Civil Rights (V-Dem, 2022)

There are no obvious or remarkable limitation to civil rights in Poland. The party PiS has had high support during elections. The party won the 2015 parliamentary election with a majority of the votes, reaching 37,6% (BBC, 2015). The civic society has the rights to participate in elections and run up as candidates. However, LGBTQ+ people face challenges when it comes to running up as candidates in elections due to the governments, including officials and state-owned media, rhetoric (Freedom House, 2022). Furthermore, the country has some jarring laws when it comes to offending religious beliefs or insulting the president of Poland, Andrzej Duda. During the past few years, this has been followed up with criminal cases (ibid).

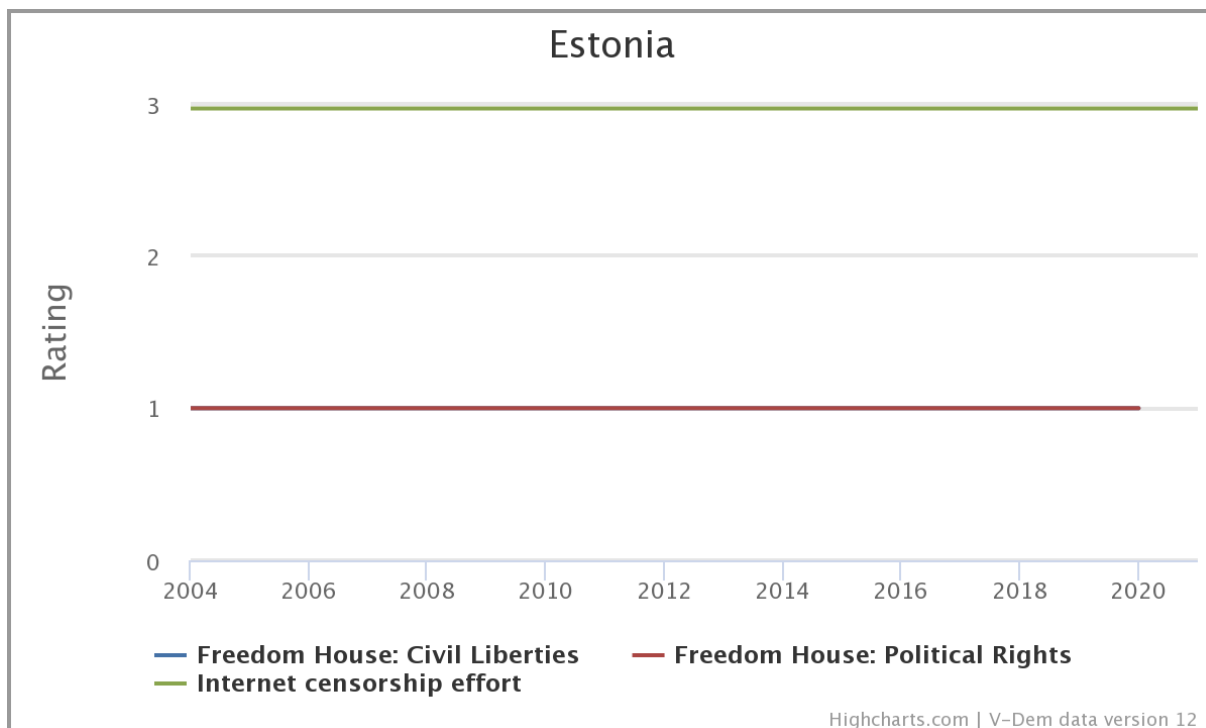


Figure 6: Civil Rights Estonia (V-Dem, 2022)

The national citizens of Estonia have very stable political rights and electoral opportunities. However, around five percent of the Estonian population consists of Russian ethnic minorities (Freedom house, 2021b). These ethnic minorities are stateless and are not allowed to participate in national elections but are allowed to vote in the election to the European Parliament, as well as the local elections. They are, however, not restricted from running up as a candidate (Freedom house, 2021b).

**Figures 5 and 6 show the civil rights in the country. Freedom House Civil Liberties and Freedom House Political Rights are measured from zero to one, in which zero is least free and one is most free. Internet censorship efforts is measured from zero to three, where zero means the government blocks the internet, and three is when the internet is not restricted to any extents.*

5. Analysis

This chapter analyzes the results that have been presented in the previous chapter to answer the research question *-To what extent has democratic backsliding transpired in Poland and Estonia from 2004 to present year?-* by analyzing it through the chosen theoretical framework and the operationalized parameters. The theory democratic backsliding has been

operationalized into four different parameters that have helped to measure the democratic erosion in the two chosen countries.

In regard to the first two figures, we can see the political polarization in both Poland and Estonia which have been operationalized to four different indicators. In Poland's case the results show a decline, or an increase depending on the measurement, on all four indicators. The political polarization in Poland has been increasing and the indicators have not been stable from 2004 as we can see in figure 1. The figure shows as well as a decline in 2014, right before the election in which the political party PiS managed to win the parliamentary election. In Estonia's case, the political polarization has remained fairly stable from 2004, and at some points, it has increased in a positive note. However, like Poland, there is a negative direction of the indicators in Estonia which started around 2014-2015, at the same time where the conservative party EKRE started to gain support from the civic society.

When it comes to competitive electoral procedures, we can see a massive decline in Poland's government media censorship from 2015. Figure 3 shows a small decline from 2005 to 2006, and then remained stable until the year 2015, in which the political party PiS won the parliamentary election. The vast decline in 2015 is linked to the government having state ownership of the media, allowing the press freedom to be restricted. Furthermore, the elections in Poland have rather been stable, until the 2020 presidential election. The government tried to introduce changes in the electoral system which would be in their favor, however, this was contested. To the contrast, the Estonian electoral procedures are rather competitive, and there have been no relevant findings that would link it to backsliding.

The restriction to opposite sides autonomy seems to be an issue in Poland. The political party PiS have implemented various changes that would allow the opposite side to not be able to successfully challenge the executive power. However, the political party PiS has as well managed to win a majority of the votes in the election which has given them the power to implement changes on their own. Furthermore, to connect this to democratic backsliding, PiS has restricted the opposition by not allowing them to partake in meetings, allowing party members in high positions within the judiciary, giving PiS an advantage in many ways of

governing. While Poland has some subtle backsliding within this parameter, Estonia has not seen any restriction to opposite sides autonomy.

Lastly, figure 5 and 6 show the civil rights in Poland and Estonia. As seen in figure 5, the civil rights in the country have remained fairly stable. However, there is a small decline in both civil liberties in 2015, and in political rights in 2017. The internet censorship effort has as well remained stable from 2004 to present year. Poland's political culture allows everyone to participate in elections, however, as mentioned earlier in the results, LGBTQ+ people are facing some serious issues when it comes to their political rights. While in Estonia's case, the figures show that the civil rights in the country have remained very stable.

While we can see a clear democratic erosion in Poland, Estonia has as well experienced some traits that would indicate that it may be backsliding. However, the political polarization in East-Europe has been increasing and it is not solely unique to Poland or Estonia. Moreover, we can see that Estonia's institutions remain strong, and the press freedom is not restricted to any extent. While in Poland, the political party PiS has implemented its narratives into the society and taken control of the different media outlets to promote their own agenda, and at the same time, limiting their opposition. The theory of democratic backsliding is rather broad, to operationalize these different parameters of democracy, I have looked at the factors that may contribute to democratic backsliding over time. While the political polarization seems to be a trend that is dividing societies in the world, Poland has seen a decline in other factors that may cause backsliding, such as electoral system in which PiS tried to compromise in 2020 during the presidential election.

Furthermore, Poland's two-party system has contributed to the polarization in the society. The civic society, as of today, as only the opportunity to vote for either PO or PiS, which makes it easier for the executive power to implement non-democratic legislations, bills, or contribute to the democratic backsliding.

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Discussion

It is important to note the historical backgrounds of both Poland and Estonia. While both of the countries were annexed by the Soviet Union and both developed a democratic practice during the third wave of democratization, the democracy and institutions have in the two countries has been different. The results presented show that Poland's trend began in 2015 when the political party PiS took the executive power of the parliament, and while having a president, Andrzej Duda, to support their narrative. It is however not solely PiS that are causing these issues within Poland's democracy. It may be just the political culture of Poland where the nationalistic aspects play a role. Seeing how Poland took back the control from the Soviet Union and developed the democracy they needed, the support from the civic society remains strong. The issues with the EU, seeing that Poland has been sanctioned by EU for not following the democratic values, are not taken greatly upon by PiS. It is the fact that PiS still has a strong support from the civic society, the EU sanctions are not working as they should. This may be due to the civic society supporting PiS as they trust in the government to lead them to the direction that is necessary for Poland, rather than having the EU interfere with the Polish governing systems. Moreover, Estonia's relation to the Russian ethnic minorities and the exclusion/hollowness of institutions seems to be some sort of hit to the democratic practice in the country. However, a large amount of the minorities are not citizens of Estonia, which makes it difficult to completely understand to what extent they have the same rights as the Estonian citizens.

The previous research has shown that democratic backsliding does not occur all of the sudden. It is a more strategic way of disorienting the different institutions which hold the democratic values and practices as Bermeo (2016) mentions. The biggest hit that Poland has taken is to the press freedom in which the government has restricted journalists to publish critique, and also taking ownership of the media. The findings on censorship, at least in Poland's case, have been similar to the previous research on democratic backsliding. Moreover, the results that have shown democratic backsliding can be linked to Haggard and Kaufman's (2021) findings seeing that they emphasize on the incremental change of democracy that is often fueled by a leader. In Poland's case, the democratic backsliding may have been fueled by the political

party PiS. The authors argue that Poland's democratic backsliding has occurred as well due to the fact that the executive power has attempted, and sometimes succeeded, to change the laws without any consequences (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021;7). One of the most plausible reasons to why democratic backsliding has occurred and can be supported by the results as well as the previous research, is that the backsliding occurs throughout time. When democratic backsliding is happening, and there is no one to be able to document it, or that it does not get enough attention, it becomes subtle which the civic society may see as normal. The issue might not be clear to the society until it is too late, and the country is already backsliding (ibid).

For future research on topic of democratic backsliding, I hope that it would be possible to conduct a study based on Poland's democratic backsliding with the mere purpose of examining the press freedom in the country. Seeing how much press freedom affects the democratic values, hopefully a more defined study of one of the parameters would create a deeper understanding of how the political party PiS has narrated their success.

6.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to study the democratic backsliding in Poland and Estonia with the theory democratic backsliding. The theory has been operationalized into four different parameters in which relevant indicators have given the results of to what extent there has been democratic backsliding in the two countries. To answer the research question: *To what extent has democratic backsliding transpired in Poland and Estonia from 2004 to present year?*, a comparative case study has been conducted which has shown the results that Poland is backsliding due to different factors. One of the most prominent one being the political polarization between PiS and PO, leading to PiS, from 2015 and onwards, controlling and affecting the press freedom in the country.

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