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**"Post-EU Accession Democratic Trends in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia:  
Analyzing Consolidation and Backsliding"**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the trajectory and dynamics of democracy in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, countries that joined the European Union (EU) in 2007 and 2013. Unlike the extensively studied cases of Poland and Hungary, these nations have received limited scholarly attention regarding their democratic consolidation and potential backsliding. Using Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan's framework, which includes civil society, political society, rule of law, state apparatus, and economic society, this research offers a comprehensive analysis spanning from their EU accession until 2022. The study employs both qualitative case study methods and quantitative analysis using V-Dem indices to assess democratic health across these five arenas. Findings suggest that while these countries have experienced fluctuations in democratic practices, systemic backsliding is not as pronounced as in some other Central and Eastern European nations. By providing a holistic view of their democratic evolution, this thesis contributes to the broader understanding of democratic governance in the post-communist EU member states and informs ongoing discussions about the stability and resilience of new democracies within the European Union framework.

**Key Words:** Democratic Backsliding, Democratic Consolidation, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia.

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**“Democracy is a poor system of government at best; the only thing that can honestly be said in its favor is that it is about eight times as good as any other method the human race has ever tried.”**

**- Robert A. Heinlein**

## **1 Introduction**

The events that led to the dissolvement of the infamous Iron Curtain in the late 1980s would fundamentally change the course of the European continent. The eastern bloc ceased to exist, and in its place, democracy rose to prominence in the newly free central-eastern European countries. Most of these countries moved on to become promising democratic nations when they became members of the European Union. The majority of the central-eastern European countries and the Baltic states joined the EU during the enlargement phases of 2004, 2007 and 2013.

However, in recent years, there has been abundant scholarly discussion on the state of democracy and democratic backsliding around the world, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, in the countries which have transitioned to democracy from communism (Labanino and Dobbins 2023; Vachudova 2020; Stanley 2019). Nonetheless, most of this scholarly attention was predominantly centered around Poland and Hungary and other post-communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 (Bernhard 2021; Everett 2021). There is considerably less attention given to the countries which became members of the EU in 2007 and 2013 - namely Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia. Existing works focus on particular aspects of democracy like the political reforms or elections and cover relatively limited time periods, usually the first few accession years (Mares et al 2016; Stoyanova 2016; Sedelmeier 2013). This thesis endeavors to address this gap by examining the trajectory and dynamics of democracy in these three specific countries by focusing on providing a more comprehensive account of multiple components of democracy stretched over a longer period of time.

Firstly, by diversifying the geographic focus beyond the more frequently studied cases of Poland and Hungary and some other 2004 EU accession states, this thesis contributes to a more inclusive understanding of democratic governance in Central and Eastern Europe. It recognizes the unique historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts of Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, and seeks to

explore how these factors have influenced their democratic trajectories post accession. Secondly, by adopting a longitudinal perspective, this thesis moves beyond the early years following accession to the EU and explores the long-term trajectory of democracy (until 2022) in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. By tracing the evolution of democratic institutions and practices over time, this research seeks to identify patterns, trends, and potential turning points in their democratic development. Furthermore, this thesis acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of democracy and aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that encompasses political, social, economic, and civic dimensions. By examining a wide range of factors that contribute to democratic governance, including but not limited to political reforms and electoral processes, this research offers a holistic understanding of the state of democracy in these three countries.

Since the European Union membership and EU values state that a country which becomes a member of the union is expected to maintain certain standards of democracy and promise to uphold the democratic values (European Commission), I wish to assess how this dynamic has unfolded in Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia post their accession. Romania and Bulgaria became members of the union in 2007 and the last country to join the EU was Croatia in 2013. Therefore, the timeframe that will be analyzed in this thesis is from 2007 to 2022, for Bulgaria and Romania and from 2013 to 2022, for Croatia.

This is done by utilizing Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan's seminal framework on the five major arenas of a democratic consolidated state as a theoretical foundation (Linz and Stepan 1996). Linz and Stepan framework provide a comprehensive lens to analyze the health and resilience of democratic institutions. By evaluating the five arenas - Civil Society, Political Society, Rule of Law, State Bureaucracy and Economic Society within each respective nation, this study aims to assess the extent to which democratic backsliding has/has not occurred in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. What constitutes these five arenas and how they are operationalized and assessed against the backdrop of these three case studies will be explained in the sections below.

## **1.1 Research Question**

Essentially, the research question which guides this thesis is as follows - *“Has democracy backslided in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia after their accession to the European Union?”*

## **1.2 Significance of the Research**

The significance of this research lies in its potential to broaden our understanding of the dynamics of democracy within the Eastern European region beyond the commonly studied cases of the countries which saw EU accession in 2004. Secondly, the study is timely given the recent scholarly discourse on the state of democracy not just in Central and Eastern Europe, but around the world. Furthermore, the study employs a robust theoretical framework developed by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, which focuses on ‘multiple’ facets of a democratic consolidated state. Lastly, by focusing on Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, the research offers valuable insights into the complexities of democratic governance within the context of European integration, thereby informing both academic discourse and policymaking efforts in the region.

## **1.3 Disposition**

The thesis is structured as follows and is divided into seven sections. The introduction section is followed by a literature review section which provides a brief overview of the state of the art, especially on democracy and democratic consolidation, democratic backsliding and democratic backsliding, specifically in the Central Eastern European region. The third section of this thesis is dedicated to discussing the theory. This thesis uses Linz and Stepan’s framework of a consolidated democracy as a base to further conduct the analysis. Following that, there is a methods section where the research method, material used for the research, limitations and delimitations of this thesis along with how the theory will be operationalized will be mentioned. The fifth section is the empirical part, where the three countries - Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia will be assessed against the backdrop of their performance based on certain index scores produced by V-Dem. Sixth section is essentially about answering the question - Is democratic backsliding happening in these three countries? If so, to what extent and if no, then what is actually happening. Finally, there is the conclusion section to summarize the thesis and its arguments and also to mention the other aspects which are to be explored in the future research.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Democracy and Democratic Consolidation**

Democracy, as a concept, has been a subject to endless interpretations. However, the word Democracy itself means ‘the rule of the people’. Various scholars have defined and explained democracy, either in a minimalist or maximalist capacity but one scholar’s work that stands out is Dahl’s. Robert A Dahl has pointed out the most vital aspects of a democracy and he mentions seven institutions that define a democratic regime - Elected officials, Free and Fair elections, Inclusive suffrage, Right to run for office, Freedom of expression, Access to alternative information and Associational Autonomy (Dahl 1989, 222). A point worth noting is that Linz and Stepan’s view of a democratic regime does not differ significantly from Robert A Dahl’s view of the same, which forms the theoretical base for this thesis and will be explained in the next section.

Now that the definitions and institutions required for a democratic regime are established, what is democratic consolidation? When a country is experiencing a democratic transition from authoritarianism, the outcome will be that the country will evolve into a democracy. Further on, if a country has transitioned into a democracy, it could thereafter consolidate its democracy by strengthening its political, economic, and civil society as well as the state apparatus and the rule of law. Democratic consolidation refers to the fact that a country has had a successful democratic transition and subsequently has cemented its democratic position. Linz and Stepan (1996) mentions three working definitions of a consolidated democracy. I find it compelling to use Linz and Stepan's definition of a consolidated democracy as their work will form the theoretical base for this paper.

First, behaviorally, a democratic regime in a territory is consolidated when no significant national, social, economic, or institutional actors spend significant resources attempting to achieve their objectives by creating a non-democratic regime or turning to violence or foreign intervention to secede from the state. Second, attitudinally, a democratic regime is consolidated when a strong majority of public opinion holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life in society such as theirs and

when the support for anti-system alternatives is quite small or more or less isolated from the pro-democratic forces. Third, constitutionally, a democratic regime is consolidated when governmental and non-governmental forces alike, throughout the territory of the state, become subjected to, and adapted to, the resolution of conflict within the specific laws, measures, and institutions endorsed by the new democratic process (Linz and Stepan 1996, 6). In short, with consolidation, democracy becomes routinized as well as deeply internalized in social, institutional, and even psychological life, as well as in calculations for attaining success (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5).

One needs to understand that this 3-point definition of Linz and Stepan is different from the 5-point framework that will be used as a theoretical base for this thesis. Nevertheless, I am mentioning the 3-point definition here as it offers a broad, general framework ideal for initial assessments of democratic consolidation, focusing on essential attitudes and behaviors like the widespread acceptance of democratic norms and the absence of attempts to subvert democracy. This simplicity is particularly useful for quick diagnostics in newer or transitioning democracies. In contrast, the 5-point framework that will be explained in section 3.1 provides a more detailed examination of specific institutional and societal aspects, such as the independence of the judiciary, the vibrancy of civil society, and the integrity of economic systems, making it suitable for addressing subtle issues of democratic backsliding or institutional inefficiency in more established democracies. In short, it is the difference between ‘people accepting that democracy is the only game in town’ and ‘the actual solidification of the game by polishing the nitty-gritties of it’ (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5). Since the aim of this thesis is to look at multiple aspects of democracy and the countries under consideration are established democracies, the 5-point framework will be used as a theoretical base. Together, these frameworks allow researchers and policymakers to adapt their analysis to different contexts, serving initially as guidelines for democratic reforms and later as a comprehensive strategy for building robust institutions and fully integrating democratic norms into all societal and governance areas.

## **2.2 Democratic Backsliding**

Democratic backsliding is the term used to describe how democratic norms and institutions gradually erode within a political system. A deliberate and systematic weakening of democratic

principles that lowers democracy's standard is a common characteristic of this phenomenon. There is no consensus on a definition of democratic backsliding (Lust & Waldner 2015, 2), but when democracy itself is an essentially contested concept, it follows that democratic backsliding also is contested. Democratic backsliding has been defined and understood in part by a number of academic researchers. I would like to highlight the work of four such scholars whose definitions cover the common themes and indicators associated with this concept.

In their work, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt stress the “value of unwritten laws and norms” in maintaining democracy. They claim that political actors who transgress unwritten rules, like adherence to democratic principles, tolerance for political opponents, and respect for the law, frequently commit democratic backsliding. The erosion of these informal norms can pave the way for a more explicit undermining of democratic institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Nancy Bermeo focuses on the idea of "contestation" in democratic systems of government. She contends that a decline in the level of political rivalry and a political actor's unwillingness to play by the rules are signs of democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding happens when political elites grow less devoted to democratic competition and more inclined to employ non-democratic methods to further their objectives (Bermeo 2016, 5-19).

Another scholar by name Andreas Schedler highlights how "vertical accountability" functions in democratic systems. The ability of citizens to hold those in authority accountable through systems like elections and the rule of law is known as "vertical accountability." Schedler claims that a weakening of these accountability systems is a sign of Democratic backsliding because it makes it easier for those in power to act without facing consequences (Schedler 2019, 4-7).

Fareed Zakaria and Beatriz Magaloni emphasize the significance of "executive aggrandizement" as an indicator of a regression in democratic values. The concentration of power in the hands of the executive branch, frequently at the expense of other branches of government, is known as executive aggrandizement. As a result, the system of checks and balances may deteriorate, undermining democracy as a whole (Zakaria 1997; Magaloni 2006).

While much has been written on democratization, democratic backsliding is causally different (Dresden & Howard 2015, 1123). Democratic backsliding is simply not reversed democratization, since factors contributing to democratization do not have to, in their absence, cause democratic backsliding. Democratization focuses on the process towards democracy, and backsliding on the process away from democracy. A problem with conceptualizing democratic backsliding is its possible extensiveness, as pointed out by Bermeo (2016). It covers many processes and possibly multiple agents. However, many can agree that democratic backsliding is a gradual process (Bermeo 2016, 6; Lust & Waldner 2015, 6).

### **2.3 Democratic Backsliding in the Central Eastern European region**

There are several works (mentioned in the introduction section) which claim that democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is deteriorating, which has been referred to as ‘backsliding’ for over a decade. While this new perspective has primarily emphasized the most notable instances in Poland and Hungary, it has also directed attention toward the observable signs of executive power expansion and the rise of non-liberal nationalism, which are the defining features of these two countries’ paths.

By the end of the 1990s, as the first post-communist decade ended, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was widely regarded as a clear example of democratic triumph. Experts in regional democratization have contended that earlier apprehensions regarding a democratic recession in Central and Eastern Europe, which were predicated on vague comparisons to Latin America, were unfounded. They underline that nations such as Poland and Hungary had swiftly achieved democratic stability to a point where a regression to authoritarian rule seemed beyond possibility. However, recent works suggest that the formerly positive outlook on democratic evolution in East-Central Europe warrants reevaluation, given the considerable challenges currently impeding the region's democratic advancement.

It is widely recognized that these challenges extend beyond the issues typically linked to the legacies of communist or pre-communist authoritarianism, as well as the complexities of transitional politics. These difficulties encompass various aspects of weak democratic governance, such as “problems with the development of civil society, disconnected citizens, the

connection between political parties and societies, and problems associated with corruption and administration” (Cianetti et al 2018, 244). Instead, the region appears to be caught in a series of detrimental events commonly known as ‘democratic backsliding,’ which pose a threat to democracy due to the government's potential inclination towards authoritarianism.

Furthermore, Poland and Hungary, which were once considered democratic frontrunners in the region, are now the most prominent cases of backsliding. Following its decisive victory in the 2010 elections, Viktor Orbán has consistently undermined the separation of powers, manipulated the electoral system, exerted greater control over state institutions, media, and civil society, and “promoted an anti-liberal ideology to disgrace opponents by portraying them as incompatible with the national identity” (Cianetti et al 2018, 244-245). Orbán's regime, which is commonly referred to as "national cooperation", is based on a strong foundation of public support, as evidenced by his consecutive general election victories. However, this support is built on a distorted and unequal playing field. The Administration of Law and Justice (PiS) is a political party with a Christian conservative ideology that won a significant election victory in 2015, giving them an absolute majority in the country's parliament. (Cianetti et al 2018, 245).

The seminal work by these three scholars, Licia Cianetti, James Dawson and Sean Hanley is one of a kind in exploring the dynamics of democracy in the CEE region in the sense that it goes beyond the two most dramatic cases of Poland and Hungary. Their book reflects on the ‘backsliding’ debate through the experience of CEE countries such as the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Estonia, as well as neighboring post-communist regions such as the Western Balkans and former Soviet Union (cases such as Moldova and Ukraine), whose patterns of failing or partial democratization may be newly instructive for analyzing the development of CEE. Contributors to this book present less frequently considered perspectives on ‘democratic backsliding’ in the CEE region, such as the role of oligarchization and wealth concentration; the potential of ethnographic approaches to democracy evaluation; the trade-offs between democratic quality and democratic stability; and the long-term interplay between social movements, state-building, and democratization.

Beyond Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley's work, there exists a part of the literature focusing on explaining the key factors/contributors of democratic backsliding in the CEE region. Ben Stanley in his work claims that the quality and durability of democracy in the CEE region is more fragile and provisional than commonly assumed. The emergence in Central and Eastern Europe of populist and illiberal political parties, some of which have succeeded in gaining power and implementing controversial reforms, has prompted this concern about the condition of democracy and he attempts to theorize and explain these changes (Stanley 2019).

Another work was published by Bela Greskovits in this field and this essay identifies two main dangers to East Central Europe's young democracies: declining popular involvement (hollowing) and destabilization (backsliding) towards semi-authoritarian practices. It finds an intricate pattern where these syndromes may coincide or not, with significant cross-country variation in severity. Pure neoliberal capitalist regimes tend to undermine political participation more than those balancing marketization with social protection. A comparative case study of Hungary and Latvia offers insights for democracy promotion and civil society development activists (Greskovits 2015).

Bojan Bugarič, in his work analyzes the unique form of populism emerging in Eastern and Central Europe, particularly in Hungary and Poland, characterized by a blend of populism, ethnonationalism, and authoritarianism. These governments have swiftly eroded democratic institutions, targeting rule of law, civil liberties, media freedom, and electoral integrity. The surge of populism in the region highlights the vulnerability of constitutional democracy when its principles lack broad support (Bugarič 2019).

The article by Daniel Bochsler and Andreas Juon examines the recent signs of democratic deconsolidation in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Hungary, Poland, and Serbia, questioning whether these trends are part of a broader regional pattern. Using updated data from the Democracy Barometer spanning from 1990 to 2016, it re-evaluates three key explanations for democratic backsliding: the emergence of populist parties, the European Union's limitations in safeguarding democracy post-accession, and the impact of the global financial crisis (Bochsler and Juon 2019).

## **2.4 Democratic Backsliding in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia**

This subsection is for reviewing the literature on democratic backsliding in the three countries under the scope of this thesis - Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia.

Rachel A. Epstein and Wade Jacoby discuss Romania in their broader regional analysis on Eastern Enlargement. They focus on the effects of EU policies on democratic norms in new member states, including Romania. Their findings suggest that while EU enlargement has offered significant opportunities for democratic consolidation, it also presents challenges, such as managing nationalist sentiments and ensuring the adherence to democratic norms in the face of populist pressures (Epstein and Jacoby 2014). Another notable work is by Remus Gabriel Anghel and Anotolie Cosciug who discuss the societal and political dynamics in Romania in the context of immigration debates. Their work highlights the political and social tensions that arise in the context of broader demographic and political changes, which also influenced the trajectory of democratic governance (Anghel and Cosciug 2018). Both these works provide a nuanced understanding of how Romania navigates its post-EU accession phase, dealing with both opportunities and challenges in maintaining democratic governance.

Democratic backsliding in Bulgaria is primarily examined through the lens of post-EU accession challenges, institutional erosion, and the impacts of corruption and governance deficiencies. Eli Gateva's work underscores the ineffectiveness of EU post-accession monitoring mechanisms, arguing that the lack of continued pressure has allowed democratic erosion in Bulgaria, particularly in areas like judicial reforms and corruption control (Gateva 2010). Similarly, Rachel A. Epstein and Wade Jacoby, mentioned above, discuss the resurgence of nationalist and populist politics which undermines democratic norms established during the EU accession process. Their analysis is framed within the broader context of Eastern enlargement and its effects on new EU member states, highlighting the complexities of balancing national sovereignty with EU expectations (Epstein and Jacoby 2014). These works underscore the complexities of democratic transitions in the face of internal political dynamics and external pressures, illustrating the multifaceted nature of democratic backsliding in the region.

One significant work on Croatian democratic backsliding is by Dario Cepo. This research examines the resurgence of illiberal practices in Croatia, highlighting how the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) has influenced democratic backsliding through the control of independent agencies, the judiciary, and the media. The study attributes these illiberal tendencies to structural weaknesses within the political system, exacerbated by the lack of internal checks and diminished EU conditionality pressures post-2013 (Cepo 2020). Dario Nikic Cakar and Goran Cular's work focuses on the relation between electoral systems and democracy consolidation and backsliding in Croatia. They claim that the adoption of proportional representation in 1999 initially fostered democratic consolidation, but later, amid severe economic recession and widespread political corruption, it was blamed for contributing to democratic backsliding, prompting debates on electoral system reform (Cakar and Cular 2022). Both these works are crucial in understanding the effect of political and electoral systems on democratic governance in Croatia.

After looking at this wide array of literature on democratic governance mentioned in this section, it is nothing out of ordinary to comprehend that there has been democratic backsliding occurring in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia in the past few years. However, the author's presumption is that it is not true which will be explained and justified in the theoretical outcomes in section 3.2.

### **3 Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Linz and Stepan - Democracy Consolidation Framework**

The theoretical base of this thesis is Linz and Stepan's framework of consolidated democracy. Linz and Stepan believe that consolidated democracies need to have in place five interacting arenas which reinforce one another. These are namely Civil Society, Political Society, Rule of Law, State Apparatus and Economic Society. Each of these arenas have a primary organizing principle on which they are based. In order to measure the state of democracy in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia after EU accession, this thesis will use Linz and Stepan's theory of the five arenas. This section focuses on explaining what those five arenas are and what they are constituted of.

### **3.1.1 The Civil Society**

The first arena that is required for a modern consolidated democracy is the civil society. Civil society could be everything from a network of groups and organizations to communities of different shapes. The primary organizing principle of the civil society is the freedom of association and communication; thus, the civil society has to have the freedom to function freely and independently from the control of the ruling regime. The civil society also requires necessary support from other arenas in order to establish legitimacy (Linz and Stepan 1996, 7-8). For instance, the civil society needs support by the rule of law which establishes legal guarantees and the state apparatus as well in order to enforce rights of the civil society to organize. If these rights are in jeopardy, the economic society can, with sufficient pluralism, be able to support the necessary degree of autonomy and liveliness of the civil society (Linz and Stepan 1996, 14).

The civil society could also promote and strengthen other arenas such as the political society, this could be possible when interests and values of the civil society are strong. The civil society establishes ideas and helps monitor the state apparatus and the economic society in order to keep a clear transparency in the country (Linz and Stepan 1996, 7). The civil society's primary organizing principle is the freedom of association and communication. Freedom of association and communication refers to the freedom the population has, to align themselves with organizations without the interference of the regime (Linz and Stepan 1996, 14).

### **3.1.2 The Political Society**

The second arena is the political society which needs to have, as a primary organizing principle, free and inclusive electoral contestation. The political society could be described as the executive and legislative body in a consolidated democracy. The political society needs legitimacy from other arenas to be able to achieve a functioning and flourishing political society. The political society needs legitimacy from the civil society as well as legal guarantees anchored in rule of law and maintained by an impartial state apparatus (Linz and Stepan 1996, 14).

The political society also contributes to strengthening the rule of law by crafting the constitution and establishing major laws, the political society also manages the state apparatus and produces an overall regulatory framework for the economic society (Linz and Stepan 1996, 8). The

political society's primary organizing principle is free and inclusive electoral contestation. Free and inclusive electoral contestation refers to the transparency of the decision makers such as the ruling regime as well as the parliament. The elected officials need to take into account the electorate and therefore include them in the decision making of the country, for instance by arranging referendums on certain matters that would have a major impact on the electorate (Linz and Stepan 1996, 13).

### **3.1.3 The Rule of Law**

The third arena of a modern consolidated democracy is the rule of law, which is the legislative part of a consolidated democracy and executes laws put in place by the political society. The primary organizing principle for the rule of law is constitutionalism which is established by the political society. The rule of law needs a legal culture with strong and significant roots in the civil society as well as being respected by the political society and the state apparatus. Rule of law also contributes to establishing a hierarchy of norms that make action by, and upon, other arenas legitimate and predictable (Linz and Stepan 1996, 10). The rule of law's primary organizing principle is that of constitutionalism. In order to cement the rule of law, the constitution of a state needs to be followed by institutions such as the courts in order to function as a democratic institution (Linz and Stepan 1996, 15).

### **3.1.4 The State Apparatus**

The fourth arena established by Linz and Stepan for a consolidated democracy is the state apparatus. The primary organizing principle of the state apparatus is rational-legal bureaucratic norms. The state apparatus needs normative support from the civil society for rational-legal authority and its attendant monopoly of legitimate force. It also needs monetary support provided by the political society and produced as well rendered to the state by a functioning economic society, which has produced a sufficient taxable surplus (Linz and Stepan 1996, 10-11).

The state apparatus is also functioning in the way it strengthens other arenas by imperative enforcement on civil, political, and economic societies of democratically sanctioned laws and procedures established by the political society (Linz and Stepan 1996, p. 11). The organizing principles of the state apparatus are rational-legal bureaucratic norms. Rational-legal

bureaucratic norms refer to the authority of a ruling regime, which is obliged to legal rationality, bureaucracy, and legal legitimacy. When these aspects are enabled, only then a state is able to have a functioning state apparatus (Linz and Stepan 1996, 13).

### **3.1.5 The Economic Society**

The last of the five major arenas for a consolidated democracy is the economic society which includes the monetary body of a state. Its primary organizing principle is institutionalized market. The economic society needs a legal and regulatory framework established by the political society, it also needs to be respected by the political society and enforced by the state apparatus to function. The economic society is also contributing to the strengthening of other arenas by producing indispensable surplus to allow the state to carry out its collective good functions. The economic society also provides a material base for the pluralism and autonomy of the civil society as well as the political society (Linz and Stepan 1996, 11). If the previous mentioned arenas meet the requirements, only then can a country position itself as a consolidated democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996, 15). The primary organizing principle of the economic society is the institutionalized market and the economic society functions as a mediator between the state and the market. The institutionalized market consists of rules and regulations applied to the economy. For instance, everything from goods and services needs to be regulated, at least to a certain degree, in order to have domestic economic growth. However, the institutionalized market can only function if it has a legal and regulatory framework produced by the political society (Linz and Stepan 1996, 14).

As explained in the above subsections, there is a primary organizing principle on which the five arenas are based. Here is a table of the specific arena and its primary organizing principle for a clearer understanding of the framework.

Table 1: Linz and Stepan's five primary organizing principles based on five arenas.

<u><i>Linz and Stepan's Five Arenas of a Modern Consolidated Democracy</i></u>	<u><i>Primary Organizing Principle</i></u>
The Civil Society	Freedom of Association and Communication
The Political Society	Free and Inclusive Electoral Contestation
Rule of Law	Constitutionalism
The State Apparatus	Rational-Legal Bureaucratic Norms
The Economic Society	Institutionalized Market

The aim of the thesis is to use these five arenas of democracy consolidation proposed by Linz and Stepan against the backdrop of Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia and assess the status of democracy in these countries post EU accession. To have a broader understanding of whether these countries are actually experiencing democratic backsliding or on the verge of backsliding or are stable democracies is the primary component of this thesis research.

### **3.2 Theoretical Outcomes**

By juxtaposing the five arenas with the literature review on democratic backsliding in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, it is reasonable to assume that there is democratic backsliding happening in these three countries as they do not complement each other. For example, Judicial autonomy is necessary for consolidation but as mentioned above, Bulgaria's and Croatia's judicial system is experiencing challenges with the executive interference. Similarly, the political society is facing problems in Romania due to nationalist sentiments and populist pressures.

Despite this information, the author presumes that there is no backsliding happening in these countries. There are two reasons - First, one needs to understand that the literature on this topic,

as mentioned in the introduction, is either focused on assessing limited aspects of democracy or restrictive in its time frame of assessment. Therefore, trying to fit one and a half decade of democratic trajectories of these countries (a decade in case of Croatia) within the narrow scope of the research articles mentioned in 2.4 does not seem valid to conclude that democratic backsliding is, in fact, happening. Second, there are other works suggesting the same. For instance, a paper was published by Central European University mapping backsliding in the EU (CEU Center for Policy Studies 2016). It includes the analysis of the performance of political rights and civil liberties in Romania and Croatia as well, with the help of data from Freedom House and claims that backsliding has not happened in Romania and Croatia as the scores remain stable through the years under scrutiny. Another work by Philip Levitz and Grigore Pop-Eleches corroborates this claim as well (Levitz and Pop-Eleches 2010). They use cross-national governance indicators and evidence from a survey to examine political reforms since EU accession and find no systematic evidence of backsliding, thereby countering post-accession backsliding in Romania and Bulgaria.

The arguments of these seminal works form the hypothesis of this thesis. Essentially, the hypothesis is - "*Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia have not experienced democratic backsliding since their accession to the EU.*" This hypothesis will be tested using V-Dem data in section 5.

## **4 Methodological Framework**

### **4.1 Research Method**

#### **4.1.1 Case study**

A case study is a common method in the social sciences and helps the researcher to maintain the gap within the research area as well as create meaningfulness, as in this case, within international relations (Yin 2007, 17). A research design as a case study focuses on one or more specific cases and tries with the study to describe the case together with theoretical input. The outcome of the research will hopefully provide a deeper explanation for the phenomena within the chosen case (George & Bennett 2005, 5-6, 20).

The choice of method for studies can usually be decided by how the problem formulation and the research question are shaped, as well as the focus that the researcher wants to have on its study. Studies that have research questions with a "how" or "why" formulation are suitable for case studies, like this thesis' research question.

Just like all other method choices, there are advantages and disadvantages to case studies. The choice of a methodological choice such as case studies has been criticized by social scientists who believe that case studies are more suitable for the exploratory phase and that there are more suitable methods for the descriptive phase and for causal investigations. In contrast, for example, Graham Allison (1971) and other researchers have carried out research within the various phases with a case study as the method chosen, which refutes the critics (Yin 2007, 17-20).

#### **4.1.2 Qualitative Theory Consuming Case Study**

In order to be able to answer the question put forward in this thesis, the method chosen has fallen upon a "qualitative theory consuming case study". A qualitative theory-consuming case study refers to a research approach that deeply investigates a particular case or cases to develop or evaluate a theoretical framework. The aim of this approach is to explain a problem/situation with a theory and apply it to a particular case / set of cases (Esaiasson et al 2017, 89) In this regard, it is Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia that the essay will examine and how these countries have experienced democracy post EU Accession. The theory that is used as the foundation of this thesis is, as previously mentioned, Linz and Stepan's five arenas of Democracy consolidation. A theory consuming case study is therefore relevant in this study.

It is vital that the case itself stands in focus, the implication of that is to explain the status of democracy in these three countries by using Linz and Stepan's theory (Esaiasson et al 2017, 42). In theory consuming studies, it is not particularly important to what extent the outcome of the research is also valid in other contexts. Rather, the goal is to see how a given aspect can explain a certain outcome in the particular case/cases that is/are being studied (Esaiasson et al 2017, 89-90). The theory is applied to the case as a means to explain a certain trend in that particular case. Furthermore, the questions listed in this research need to be answered in the most clear and efficient way possible in order to provide the reader a clear understanding of the status of

democracy in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. It is of the utmost importance that this theory consuming study has a theory to lead the course of the thesis (Esaiasson et al 2017, 42). In conclusion, a theory consuming case study is recognized by the fact that there exist two components - primary and secondary. The primary choice concerns the object of the study, which in this case is the status of democracy in these three countries and the theoretical element is given a secondary role, which is Linz and Stepan's five arenas of democracy consolidation (Esaiasson et al 2017, 42).

The approach of theory-consuming and theory testing can be similar since both of them are explanatory of the empirical research and the theory is determined from the start comparable to an approach of theory-developing which does not have the theory in place from the start. One of the differences between theory-consuming and theory testing is the purpose of whether the result could be generalized or not. The former position the case in the center and does not place significant weight on the fact that the study's results must be valid for other studies. The latter which positions the theory in the center lays more weight on the fact that the results could be generalized in other cases (Esaiasson et al 2017, 89). Since this study does not aim to be generalizable, a theory-consuming based study is appropriate for this research.

While the primary aim of a qualitative theory-consuming case study is not generalizability, the findings of this thesis can still be useful and potentially generalizable in certain instances. First, insights from examining democracy in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia post-EU accession can inform analysis in other Eastern European countries with similar historical, political, and socio-economic contexts, especially the countries in the process of joining the EU. These countries might face comparable challenges in democratic consolidation, and scholars and policymakers can use the findings to anticipate issues and develop strategies for fostering democracy. Second, the study's structured framework (methodology and theoretical application) can be replicated or adapted by other researchers to study different regions, enriching the academic discourse on democracy and political transitions. Recognizing these applications, research can provide valuable lessons and contribute to broader discussions on democracy and consolidation, despite focusing on specific cases.

### 4.1.3 Quantitative Study

In addition to employing a qualitative theory-consuming case study approach, this thesis also incorporates a quantitative study methodology. The quantitative aspect of the research utilizes the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) indices and their respective scores to analyze the status of democracy in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia post-EU accession. V-Dem provides a comprehensive set of indices that measure various dimensions of democracy. These indices offer a robust and empirical foundation for assessing democratic consolidation by providing a statistical basis for the qualitative assessments derived from Linz and Stepan's theory.

The inclusion of quantitative data enhances the rigor and objectivity of the analysis (Pounder 1993). By leveraging V-Dem indices, the research can systematically quantify changes and trends in the democratic status of the three countries under study. This allows for a more precise evaluation of the theoretical framework being applied. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods ensures a more holistic understanding of the phenomena, as the qualitative analysis provides depth and context, while the quantitative analysis offers empirical validation (Imran and Yusoff 2015).

The quantitative approach is well-suited for this thesis for several reasons. First, it enables the identification of patterns and correlations that may not be apparent through qualitative analysis alone. Second, it allows for a statistical comparison of democratic performance across different countries and time periods, providing a broader perspective on the research findings. Lastly, the use of V-Dem indices facilitates transparency and replicability, as other researchers can access the same data and verify the results.

By integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this thesis aims to offer a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of democratic consolidation in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. The quantitative data from V-Dem indices not only supports the qualitative findings but also strengthens the overall validity and reliability of the research.

## **4.2 Material and Data**

The materials used in this thesis primarily consist of secondary sources that provide comprehensive insights into the democratic trajectories of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia post their EU accession. These include academic articles and journals that discuss consolidation, backsliding, and the political developments in Central and Eastern Europe, majorly focusing on Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. Secondly, news articles and media reports that cover significant political events, public protests, electoral outcomes, and governmental changes in the three countries. These sources help to understand the public discourse and the immediate reactions to political developments. Third, the data utilized in this thesis is sourced from V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy), which is an independent, non-governmental and no political affiliation research institute that measures democracy in different countries and provides extensive and detailed indices on various dimensions of democracy. Lastly, the main book utilized in this study is the one written by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan - "Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe" (1996) which forms the theoretical base of this thesis.

## **4.3 Case selection, Delimitations and Limitations**

According to Geddes (1990, 131), one of the most durable conventions about what constitutes an appropriate research strategy is the selection of cases. The selection of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia as the focal cases for this study is driven by one primary objective, as previously mentioned in the introduction. These countries represent the last two waves of EU enlargement, with Romania and Bulgaria joining in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. Not much attention has been paid to studying democracy in these countries. Therefore, the choice of these countries helps address a significant gap in the existing literature, which has predominantly focused on the 2004 accession countries like Poland and Hungary. By examining Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, this research aims to diversify the geographic focus and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of democratic dynamics in the region.

With regards to delimitations, the temporal scope of the study is from 2007 to 2022 for Romania and Bulgaria, and from 2013 to 2022 for Croatia. This timeframe allows for an in-depth analysis of the post-accession period, offering not just the immediate impacts of EU accession but deeper

insights into the long-term evolving political, social, and economic contexts over a significant duration. The study is also delimited to examining democratic consolidation through the lens of Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan's five arenas of a consolidated democracy. This framework provides a structured and multidimensional approach to assess the health of democratic institutions and practices in the selected countries.

Several limitations are inherent in this study. Firstly, reliance on secondary data and the V-Dem indices may introduce biases related to data collection and interpretation by the original data providers (Kern and Mustasilta 2023). Although V-Dem is robust and widely recognized, any limitations in its data will affect this study's findings. Secondly, the qualitative, theory-consuming case study approach provides deep insights into specific cases but may not be easily generalizable to other contexts or regions. The focus on Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia means conclusions may not apply to other Central and Eastern European countries with different backgrounds. Thirdly, focusing on post-EU accession democratic consolidation excludes the pre-accession period and broader geopolitical influences, potentially overlooking significant factors affecting democratic trajectories. Lastly, the study aims to be comprehensive, but the complexity of democratic processes means some nuances may be lost. The interplay of domestic and international influences, informal institutions, and specific political events may require further exploration beyond this research's scope.

#### **4.4 Operationalization**

The research will be operationalized by using the definitions stated from Linz and Stepan's theory of the five arenas of democratic consolidation. Every arena has a certain primary organizing principle as listed in the table above. In order to measure and materialize that principle in the context of the three case study countries, it is necessary to examine the existing data. The data for this paper will be sourced from V-dem. V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) has a unique approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy, essentially an institute that studies the qualities of government using multiple indices. I have juxtaposed the primary organizing principles and the various indices that V-Dem publishes every year. This juxtaposition has provided me with a set of V-dem Indices that can actually measure the five arenas of

democratic consolidation proposed by Linz and Stepan. I will be examining two different indices from V-Dem under each primary organizing principle. They are listed in a table below:

*Table 2: Operationalization of primary organizing principles into V-Dem Indices.*

<b><u>Primary Organizing Principles</u></b>	<b><u>Operationalization into VDem indices</u></b>
Freedom of Association and Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Civil Society Index</li> <li>- Freedom of Association Index (thick)</li> </ul>
Free and Inclusive Electoral Contestation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Election Free and Fair Index</li> <li>- Electoral Democracy Index</li> </ul>
Constitutionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rule of Law index</li> <li>- Executive respects Constitution Index</li> </ul>
Rational-Legal Bureaucratic Norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rational-Legal Legitimation Index</li> <li>- Performance Legitimation Index</li> </ul>
Institutionalized Market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index</li> <li>- Equal Distribution of Resources Index</li> </ul>

The following text in this section is dedicated to justifying why these selected V-Dem indices are a correct fit to measure the primary organizing principles.

*1) Freedom of Association and Communication:*

The core civil society index (CCSI) and the Freedom of Association index from V-Dem serve as highly suitable metrics for evaluating the primary organizing principle of the first arena of democratic consolidation, as outlined by Linz and Stepan, which underscores the importance of the freedom of association and communication within civil society.

Beginning with the core civil society index (CCSI), this measure encapsulates the essence of civil society as a vibrant space where individuals come together to pursue common interests and ideals, distinct from both the private sphere and the state (V-Dem 2021, 305). Linz and Stepan (1996, 7-8) emphasize that a robust civil society operates autonomously from the ruling regime, enabling citizens to actively engage in political and civic pursuits without undue interference. The CCSI effectively captures this notion by assessing the degree to which civil society organizations (CSOs) function independently and thrive in their endeavors. By evaluating the extent to which citizens are free to pursue their political and civic goals within civil society, the CCSI provides valuable insights into the vitality and autonomy of this crucial component of democratic society.

Furthermore, the Freedom of Association index (thick) complements the CCSI by zooming in on a specific aspect of civil society: the freedom of association. This index scrutinizes the extent to which political parties, including opposition groups, and civil society organizations are permitted to form and operate without impediment from the ruling authorities (V-Dem 2021, 47). Linz and Stepan (1996, 7-8) emphasize the pivotal role of freedom of association in ensuring that civil society remains independent and vibrant, capable of fulfilling its functions of monitoring the state, promoting transparency, and advocating for citizen interests. By assessing the legal and practical constraints on the formation and operation of parties and CSOs, the Freedom of Association index offers a nuanced understanding of the extent to which the primary organizing principle of freedom of association is upheld within civil society.

## *2) Free and Inclusive Electoral Contestation:*

The second arena of democratic consolidation, as conceptualized by Linz and Stepan, underscores the critical importance of fostering free and inclusive electoral contestation within the political society. This core principle revolves around ensuring that the decision-making processes within a democratic system are transparent, participatory, and conducted with integrity. To effectively gauge the extent to which this principle is upheld, two indices provided by V-Dem, namely the Election Free and Fair Index and the Electoral Democracy Index, emerge as robust measures.

The Election Free and Fair Index serves as a meticulous yardstick for evaluating the fairness and transparency of national elections. It meticulously assesses various facets of the electoral process, spanning from the pre-election period through to election day operations and post-election procedures (V-Dem 2021, 69). This index meticulously examines whether elections provide a level playing field for all stakeholders, including political parties, candidates, and voters. It directly aligns with the concept of free and inclusive electoral contestation by scrutinizing the extent to which decision-making bodies such as the ruling regime and the parliament exhibit transparency and inclusivity in their actions and deliberations, echoing the sentiments put forth by Linz and Stepan (1996, 8-10).

Conversely, the Electoral Democracy Index offers a broader perspective on the ideals of electoral democracy, encompassing not only the procedural fairness of elections but also the broader democratic landscape between electoral cycles. This index delves into the responsiveness of elected officials to the electorate, the degree of freedom enjoyed by political and civil society organizations, the integrity of electoral processes, and the independence of the media in presenting diverse viewpoints (V-Dem 2021, 43). In essence, it evaluates the overall democratic environment, including mechanisms for citizen participation and the protection of fundamental rights. This comprehensive approach encapsulates the essence of free and inclusive electoral contestation, as it examines not only the conduct of elections but also the broader democratic ethos within which they occur.

### 3) *Constitutionalism:*

The Rule of Law Index and the Executive Respects Constitution Index from V-Dem are exceptionally well-suited to measure the third primary organizing principle of Linz and Stepan's framework, which is constitutionalism.

Firstly, let's delve into the Rule of Law Index. This index serves as a comprehensive measure of the extent to which legal systems within a country function transparently, independently, predictably, impartially, and equally (V-Dem 2021, 299). These criteria directly resonate with the fundamental tenets of constitutionalism, which places paramount importance on the adherence to constitutional principles and the rule of law. Constitutionalism dictates that the governance of a

nation should be guided by a set of fundamental laws that are transparently enforced and applied equally to all citizens. Therefore, the Rule of Law Index provides an invaluable tool for assessing the degree to which constitutional principles are upheld within the legal system of a country.

Moving on to the Executive Respects Constitution Index, this metric specifically evaluates the behavior of key executive actors, including the head of state, head of government, and cabinet ministers, with regard to their adherence to the constitution (V-Dem 2021, 112). Constitutionalism hinges on the principle that governmental powers are limited and delineated by the constitution, and that those in positions of authority must operate within these constitutional constraints. Consequently, the Executive Respects Constitution Index directly addresses this core aspect of constitutionalism by examining whether executive officials abide by the constitutional framework in their actions and decisions. This index thus offers valuable insights into the extent to which constitutional norms and principles are respected and upheld within the highest echelons of government.

#### *4) Rational-Legal Bureaucratic Norms:*

The fourth arena of democratic consolidation, outlined by Linz and Stepan, delves into the state apparatus and its fundamental organizing principle: rational-legal bureaucratic norms. This principle underscores the critical importance of adhering to legal norms, regulations, and rational bureaucratic processes within the state apparatus to ensure its effective functioning and legitimacy within a democratic framework. In selecting V-Dem's Rational-Legal Legitimation Index and Performance Legitimation Index as measures, we find a seamless alignment with this organizing principle for several compelling reasons.

Firstly, the Rational-Legal Legitimation Index provides a nuanced assessment of the extent to which a government leans on legal norms and regulations to justify its regime. This index directly reflects the emphasis placed on legal legitimacy and adherence to rule-bound behavior within the state apparatus (V-Dem 2021, 222-223). By evaluating the degree to which the government grounds its actions in legal justifications, this index serves as a robust indicator of the commitment to the rule of law and bureaucratic procedures – both fundamental elements for the operation of the state apparatus within a consolidated democracy. Governments scoring high

on this index are more likely to demonstrate a propensity for operating within established legal frameworks, thereby solidifying the foundation of rational-legal bureaucratic norms as delineated by Linz and Stepan (1996, 11).

Secondly, the Performance Legitimation Index offers a broader perspective by assessing the extent to which a government relies on performance-based metrics, such as economic growth, poverty reduction, effective governance, and security provision, to justify its regime (V-Dem 2021, 222). While initially appearing tangential to the concept of rational-legal bureaucratic norms, this index plays a complementary role. A robust state apparatus not only operates within legal parameters but also delivers tangible benefits to society. By evaluating the extent to which the government justifies its actions based on performance outcomes, this index captures the efficacy of the state apparatus in fulfilling its obligations beyond mere legal compliance. It reflects the state's capacity to meet the expectations and demands of civil, political, and economic societies – a critical aspect underscored by Linz and Stepan (1996, 11) in their framework for democratic consolidation.

##### *5) Institutionalized Market:*

The choice of utilizing the "Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index" and the "Equal Distribution of Resources Index" from V-Dem to measure the fifth primary organizing principle of Linz and Stepan's theory, the institutionalized market, is a strategic and comprehensive approach. This is because the institutionalized market, as defined by Linz and Stepan, emphasizes the importance of a legal and regulatory framework established by the political society for the functioning of the economic society. The institutionalized market encompasses rules and regulations applied to the economy, crucial for domestic economic growth. It implies that economic transactions, including the distribution of resources and access to public services, must occur within a structured framework governed by law.

The "Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index" is particularly pertinent to this principle as it directly evaluates whether access to basic public services, such as order and security, education, water, and healthcare, is distributed equally across different socio-economic strata (V-Dem 2021, 209). This index effectively measures the extent to which

the legal and regulatory framework ensures equitable access to essential services, reflecting the functioning of the institutionalized market. If there is a significant disparity in access based on socio-economic position, it indicates weaknesses in the institutionalized market, suggesting potential inefficiencies or inequalities in the economic system.

“Equal Distribution of Resources Index” resonates directly with the institutionalized market principle by appraising the fairness in resource allocation within society. In an institutionalized market framework, the equitable distribution of both tangible and intangible resources is pivotal for fostering economic equilibrium, alleviating poverty, and enabling comprehensive civic participation (V-Dem 2021, 56). By scrutinizing the allocation of essential goods and services, alongside the levels of disparity therein, this index captures the degree to which a democratic system upholds the tenets of egalitarian democracy. Moreover, by encompassing the examination of power dynamics across diverse socio-economic groups and genders, this index offers a holistic assessment of the interconnectedness between economic and political disparities, central to the institutionalized market principle.

#### *Making of Graphs:*

Citing graphs directly from the V-Dem website in the analysis section seemed a little tricky as this thesis analyzes different time frames for different countries and it isn't possible to customize a graph according to the time period under scrutiny. Therefore, I decided to make the graphs by using the data from V-Dem. Microsoft Excel has been used in making these graphs. To visualize trends over time, specific columns such as "Year", "Bulgaria", "Croatia", "Romania" and "European Union" are selected from the graph data that has been downloaded as CSV from the V-dem database (V-Dem n.d.). Utilizing Excel's functionality, a 2D Line graph is generated to illustrate the data points effectively. To enhance clarity, data labels are added to denote the starting and ending points of each series on the graph. Additionally, the graph is refined with the inclusion of a Title and Legend, providing comprehensive information and context to facilitate a clear understanding of the presented data. This systematic approach within excel ensures a visually informative representation of trends between the specified countries over the years.

## **5 Empirical Analysis**

The analysis for this thesis will be driven based on the data and the graphs sourced from V-Dem. This empirical review is guided by the five primary organizing principles of Linz and Stepan's theory of consolidated democracy and the above-mentioned 10 V-Dem indices that were derived further to operationalize them.

Additionally, European Union data is also presented in the graph figures that will be presented in this section by a pink line. This doesn't mean that the thesis' focus is on the democratic trends in the EU or, in no way, is a comparative study with the European Union scores. It is just to give the reader a broad understanding of where the democratic scores and trends of Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia stand in relation to the European Union trends. A detailed record of the data with accurate numbers of the V-Dem scores can be found in the appendix below.

### **5.1 Core Civil Society Index**

The Core Civil Society Index (CCSI) measures the robustness of civil society, which lies between the private sphere and the state. It includes groups like interest groups, labor unions, and charities. The CCSI assesses the autonomy of these civil society organizations (CSOs) from the state and the active civic engagement of citizens (V-Dem 2021, 305).

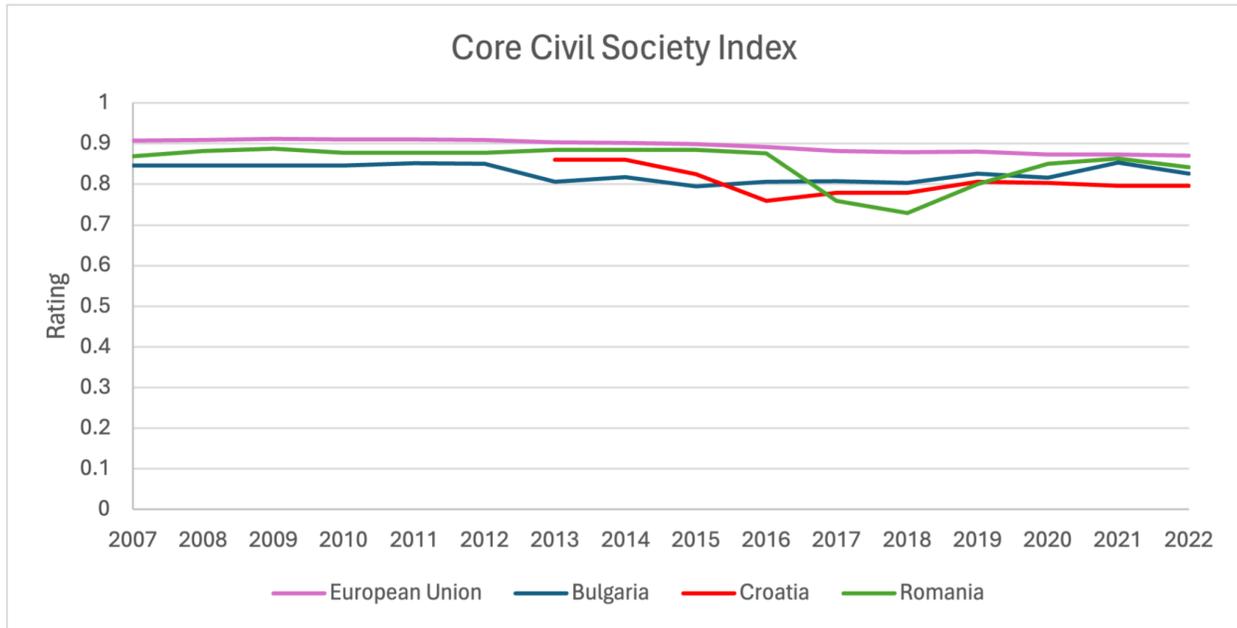


Figure 1: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 1 where 0 is the worst result and 1 is the best result in terms of Core Civil Society performance.

### Romania:

The green line in Figure 1 represents Romania. Romania's EU accession in January 2007 spurred optimism for democratic governance and civil society, providing more funding and support for NGOs. This led to a growth in diverse CSOs, including those focused on transparency, human rights, and the environment (Mirimanova 2010). From 2007 to 2016, even though there were periods of political turbulence, civic engagement peaked. For example, the 2012 political crisis to impeach President Traian Basescu (“Romania votes to impeach”, 2012) and the 2015 Colectiv nightclub fire tragedy saw significant CSO and citizen involvement in protests and debates, demanding accountability, reforms and a government resignation (“Romania PM Ponta resigns”, 2015), as evident from the stability of green line in figure 1.

However, 2016 to 2018 brought challenges for civil society, with political and legal pressures restricting CSO effectiveness, explaining why the green line goes downward. In 2017, proposed legislative changes aimed at increasing NGO oversight were perceived as attempts to stifle opposition, creating an uncertain environment for CSOs (Pardavi et al 2020). This polarized

political climate also reduced public trust in NGOs, particularly those involved in political activism.

A positive shift occurred in 2019 with the downfall of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) (Hegedus 2019), the party heading the government until then and re-election of Klaus Iohannis as the president, an anti-corruption advocate, easing legislative pressures on CSOs and improving the political climate for civil society (“Pro-European Iohannis re-elected”, 2019). This positive trend remained until 2022, as evident in figure 1.

### **Bulgaria:**

The blue line in figure 1 represents Bulgaria. In the early post-EU accession years, Bulgaria's CCSI remained stable due to optimism and structural reforms, initiated as part of EU integration processes, which provided new funding and partnership opportunities for CSOs, bolstering civil society activities (Hristova 2013).

A small decline in the CCSI from 2012 to 2013 occurred due to two main factors. The delayed impact of the financial crisis strained CSOs with reduced funding and increased socio-economic challenges (Guasti 2016). Additionally, the resignation of the Boyko Borissov government in early 2013, prompted by protests over high electricity prices, corruption, and poor governance (Brunwasser and Bilefsky 2013), marked a low point in the CCSI. Though these protests highlighted active civic engagement, they also revealed struggles and confrontations between civil society and the state.

The return of Boyko Borissov in 2014 brought temporary political stability (Gardner 2014), which helped stabilize the civil society sector. Modest economic growth during this period improved the operating environment for CSOs, enabling better funding and more effective advocacy and community service activities (“2018 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index”, 2019, 58-66). This continued until 2018.

The period from 2018 to 2022 is a period of slight Improvement amidst Stabilization. Especially, in 2020, the pandemic posed challenges and opportunities for civil society. While initial

restrictions hindered operations, many organizations adapted quickly, playing key roles in the community response (“Bulgaria: 2020 CSO sustainability index published”, 2021). Also, large-scale protests in 2020 against corruption (“Bulgaria protests enter 100th day”, 2020) and the handling of the pandemic underscored the vibrancy of civil society, slightly improving the CCSI score, as shown in figure 1's blue line by reflecting its resilience and critical role during crises.

### **Croatia:**

The red line in figure 1 represents Croatia and there is a downward trend observed from 2013 to 2016. Although EU membership was expected to boost civil society through increased funding and broader networks, Croatia's CCSI showed a slight decline. Initial integration challenges and adapting to EU regulations disrupted traditional CSO funding. The economic recession until 2015 also reduced public funding and private donations, crucial for CSO sustainability (Vandor et al 2017, 111-125). High unemployment and emigration of younger citizens further diminished civic participation and available human resources (Tomic and Taylor 2018). Between 2013 and 2016, legislative changes and proposed reforms threatened CSO autonomy, creating an uncertain environment (Jasic 2020). Proposals to reduce state funding for certain civil activities added to these challenges.

As Croatia's economy recovered from 2016, there was an increase in funding through both private and public channels and participation in civil society, leading to a noticeable improvement in the CCSI, as evident from the spike of red line in figure 1. Post-2016 until 2019, a more stable government and efforts to create favorable legal and policy environments benefited CSOs. Increased transparency and accountability in public administration fostered cooperation between the state and CSOs (Latsabidze 2017,10-17). High-profile issues like environmental protection and human rights energized public participation, enhancing civil society's role in advocating for social change.

From 2020 till 2022, stable democratic practices established in the previous years supported a thriving civil society. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, Croatian civil society

maintained its activities through digital engagement and remote advocacy, reflecting stability in the CCSI (Baturina 2022).

### 5.2 Freedom of Association Index (Thick)

Freedom of Association Index (Thick) measures to what extent are parties, including opposition parties, allowed to form and to participate in elections, and to what extent are civil society organizations able to form and operate freely (V-Dem 2021, 47).

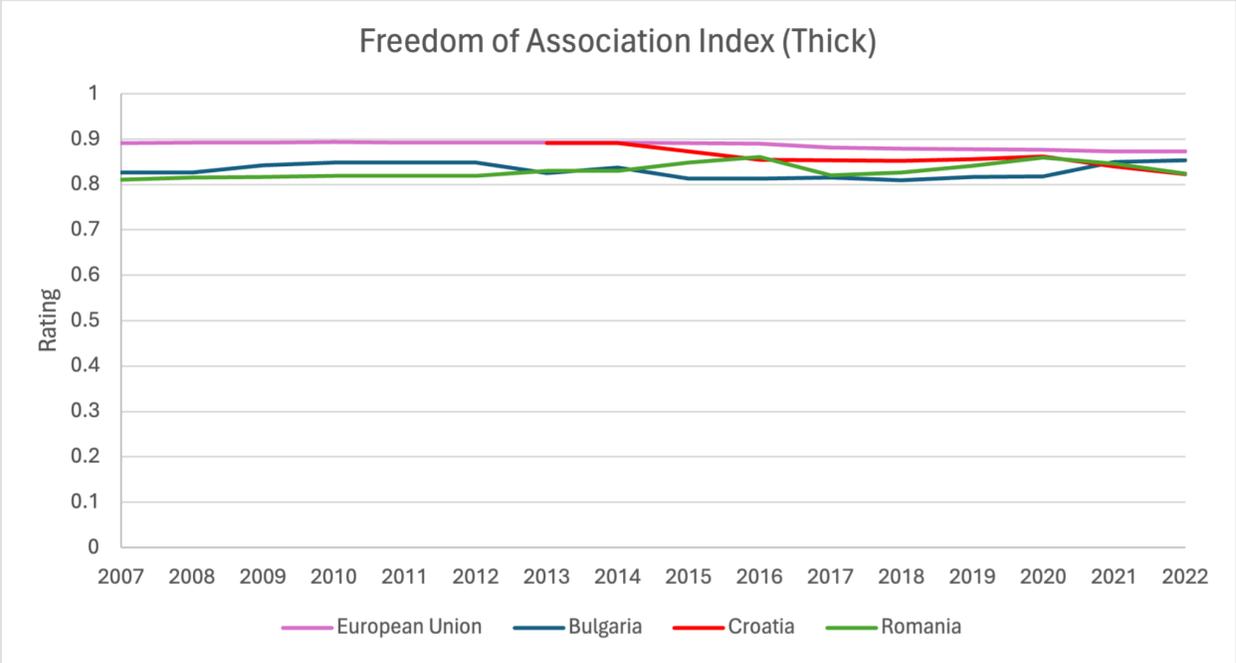


Figure 2: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 1 where 0 is the worst result and 1 is the best result in terms of Freedom of Association.

#### Romania:

This index remains remarkably stable across the period, staying close to 0.8, which indicates a consistent level of freedom of association. Despite the general stability, minor fluctuations occur, but these do not indicate significant systemic changes within the period analyzed, with an exception from 2014-16.

As mentioned before, the tragic nightclub fire incident led to widespread protests demonstrating a high degree of mobilization and participation from both political opposition and civil society sectors. The mere ability to organize and execute large-scale protests without severe repression from the state is a strong indicator of a healthy freedom of association. These events contributed positively to the index as they demonstrated effective use of civic rights by the populace, and hence a spike in the green line in figure 2 from 2014 - 2016.

The remarkable stability in this index can be attributed to the consistent legal framework in Romania that upholds the right to form associations and assemble. The Romanian constitution and its alignment with EU regulations provide strong protection for these rights, which is reflected in the stable index value (OECD 2023). This stability indicates that despite economic or political turbulence, the fundamental legal right to associate and organize has been upheld, which is crucial for a functioning democracy.

### **Bulgaria:**

For Bulgaria, represented by the blue line, the graph indicates relatively stable conditions with only minor fluctuations. Bulgaria's accession to the European Union brought it under closer scrutiny regarding its adherence to democratic norms, including the freedom of association. This inclusion helped stabilize and maintain a relatively steady level of freedom for parties and CSOs to form and operate, as reflected in the stable scores on the index (Trauner 2009).

Throughout the 2007-2022 period, Bulgaria experienced various government changes and political crises, particularly around 2013 (Medarov 2014) and again starting in 2018 (Riport 2018) with multiple elections resulting from political instability. Despite these political upheavals, the impact on the freedom of association appears to have been minimal in terms of legal and systemic restrictions, suggesting that the foundational legal frameworks supporting association rights remained intact.

Large-scale protests in 2013 and 2020, which were primarily against corruption and lack of transparency in the government, demonstrated the practical exercise of freedom of association (Yotova 2020). The fact that these protests occurred and led to significant political actions (like

the resignation of governments) without leading to long-term restrictions on civil freedoms reflects the resilience of the freedom of association in Bulgaria.

The pandemic could have been a period where restrictions were expected due to emergency measures limiting public gatherings. However, the index shows that these restrictions did not severely impact the structural ability of parties and CSOs to operate, indicating a distinction between temporary public health measures and permanent associative freedoms.

### **Croatia:**

The red line in the figure shows little variation over the years, maintaining a high rating between 0.8 and 0.9. This suggests that Croatia has upheld a strong commitment to freedom of association, allowing various groups including political parties, NGOs, and other civil society organizations to operate without significant restrictions. This success can be attributed to Croatia's accession to the EU which often comes with stringent requirements for protecting civil liberties and freedom of association, which help explain the stability of the index.

Instances of public protests and advocacy, such as those against governmental corruption or for environmental causes (“Protests in UNESCO”, 2017) or those against the Istanbul Convention in 2018 (Milekic 2018), demonstrate the practical application of freedom of association. The ability of citizens to organize and express dissent or support for various causes without fear of repression is a key indicator of the health of this freedom.

The Croatian constitution provides strong protections for freedom of association, which are upheld by the legal and judicial systems. This continuous support contributed to the stable index ratings across the years. Croatia’s judiciary has played a crucial role in protecting the rights of associations, ensuring that any legislative changes or governmental actions do not infringe on civil liberties (“2022 Country reports”, 2022).

### 5.3 Election Free and Fair Index

Election Free and Fair Index - Taking all aspects of the pre-election period, election day, and the post-election process into account, would you consider this national election to be free and fair? The index doesn't consider the extent of suffrage by law. Thus, a free and fair election can occur even if the law excludes significant groups (V-Dem 2021, 69).

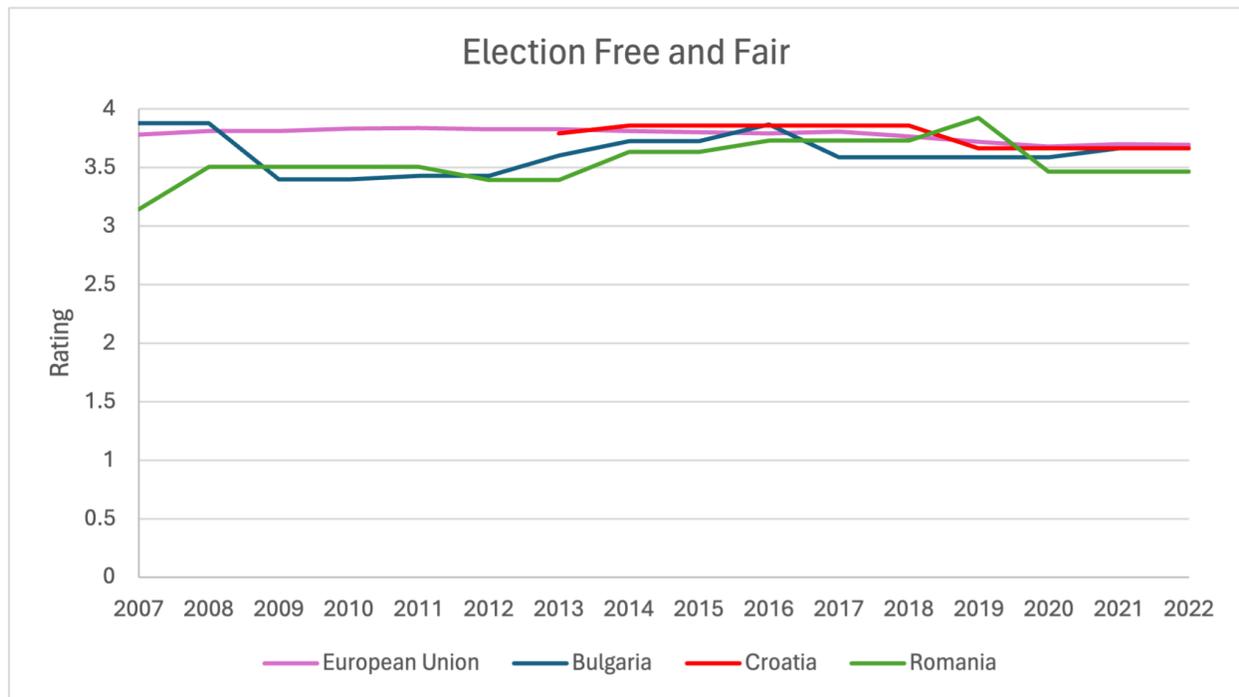


Figure 3: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 4 where 0 is the worst result and 4 is the best result for elections being free and fair<sup>1</sup>.

#### Romania:

Romania is represented by the green line. Leading up to and following EU accession, Romania implemented numerous reforms to improve its electoral system and governance, targeting

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<sup>1</sup> 0: No, not at all. The elections were fundamentally flawed and the official results had little if anything to do with the will of the people. 1: Not really. While the elections allowed for some competition, the irregularities in the end affected the outcome of the election. 2: Ambiguous. There was substantial competition and freedom of participation but there were also significant irregularities. It is hard to determine whether the irregularities affected the outcome or not. 3: Yes, somewhat. There were deficiencies and some degree of fraud and irregularities but these did not in the end affect the outcome. 4: Yes. There was some amount of human error and logistical restrictions but these were largely unintentional and without significant consequences.

corruption reduction, legal framework enhancement, and electoral transparency (Papakostas 2012). These reforms positively impacted election fairness, reflected by a spike in the green line from 3.15 in 2007 to 3.51 in 2008.

The 2008 parliamentary elections were seen as competitive and fair, maintaining stability until 2011 (Tismaneanu n.d.). However, between 2011 and 2013, political instability, including President Băsescu's impeachment followed by a controversial referendum alleged to be manipulated and three different prime ministers serving in 2012, led to a dip in the index due to public skepticism about electoral fairness (Volintiru 2012).

From 2013 to 2019, significant anti-corruption efforts, prosecutions of high-profile figures, and governmental transparency initiatives improved public trust in the electoral process (Radwan et al n.d.). Advances in technology and better election monitoring for 2014 presidential elections and 2016 parliamentary elections also contributed to smoother and more transparent elections (Staaq and Wolf 2019, 77-79), with the green line rising from 3.39 in 2013 to 3.93 in 2019.

Because of the fall of the government through a no-confidence vote in October 2019 (“Romania government collapses”, 2019) along with logistical issues and electoral administration bias in the 2020 parliamentary elections (OSCE 2021), the index reflected a dip in electoral fairness in 2020. However, it remained stable until 2022, indicating ongoing challenges but no significant decline in electoral integrity.

### **Bulgaria:**

The Blue line represents Bulgaria. In 2009, the Election Free and Fair index declined due to allegations of vote-buying, electoral fraud, media influence, misuse of administrative resources, and voter intimidation during the 2009 parliamentary elections (OSCE 2009).

The blue line in figure 3 remained stagnant from 2009 to 2012, but then spiked, reaching 3.87 in 2016. Improvements in administrative aspects of conducting elections, such as voter registration, vote counting transparency, and election officials training contributed to this increase (OSCE 2016). Key legal and institutional reforms include the 2014 Electoral Code Consolidation

(Stoyanov 2015), stronger enforcement against electoral fraud by the Central Election Commission (CEC) and enhancing the independence and professionalism of electoral bodies (United States Department of State 2017).

Leading up to the 2017 elections, controversial changes in electoral laws, such as restricting voting rights for Bulgarians abroad, affected perceptions of fairness (Fumarola 2016). The 2017 parliamentary elections were also marked by allegations of vote-buying and voter coercion (“Bulgaria: Bulgarian Anti-Corruption Unit”, 2017), causing a dip to 3.59 in 2017, as evident from figure 3. The index remained stagnant until 2020 but then saw a slight increase.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bulgaria conducted elections with health precautions, demonstrating a commitment to democratic processes. The relatively smooth conduct of multiple elections in 2021 (April and July 2021 parliamentary elections and a November presidential election) amidst political instability (Velev 2021), indicated effective management by electoral bodies, contributing positively to electoral fairness.

### **Croatia:**

The red line represents Croatia. From 2013 to 2018, Croatia's Election Free and Fair Index remained consistently high, as seen in figure 3, indicating a robust and trustworthy electoral environment. This period was marked by stable governance, which correlated with transparent and fair electoral processes. The absence of significant electoral disputes or controversies reinforced public confidence in the electoral system (United States Department of State n.d.).

Croatia's solid legal framework for elections, consistently applied and enforced, contributed to this perception. EU membership also bolstered Croatia's commitment to maintaining high electoral standards, with local and international observers, such as Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), positively reflecting on the conduct of elections (“OSCE/ODIHR final report”, 2016).

After 2018, Croatia experienced political instability, including government reshuffles and coalition disputes (Kuljanac 2018), leading to a slight decline in public trust in electoral

processes as the populace feels that political maneuvering overshadows electoral integrity. This decline is reflected in the index's slight downward trend between 2018 and 2019. Additionally, the elections in Croatia during 2019 and 2020 raised concerns about disinformation campaigns (Democracy Reporting n.d.). Despite these challenges, the index score remained stable at 3.67 until 2022, indicating ongoing, albeit slightly diminished, public confidence in electoral fairness.

### 5.4 Electoral Democracy Index

The Electoral Democracy Index measures the extent to which the ideal of electoral democracy is achieved in its fullest sense. It assesses how well rulers are held accountable through competitive, clean elections with extensive suffrage. It ensures political and civil society organizations operate freely, and elections influence the chief executive's composition. Additionally, it considers freedom of expression and an independent media presenting alternative political views between elections (V-Dem 2021, 43).

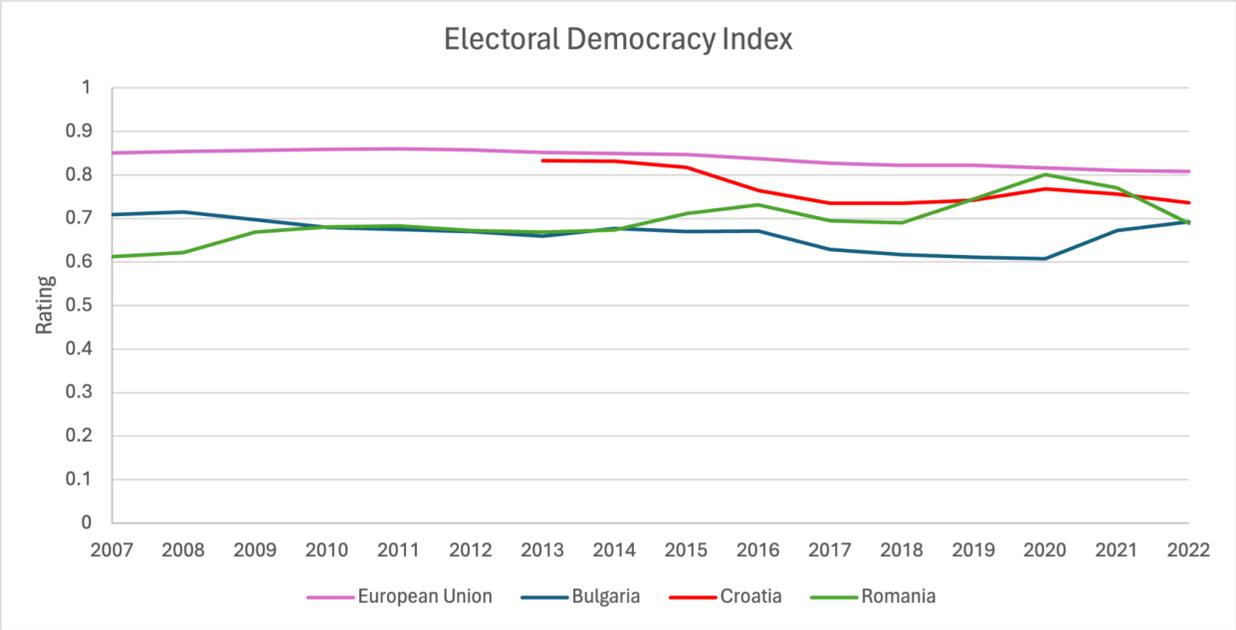


Figure 4: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 1 where 0 is the worst result and 1 is the best result in terms of these countries maintaining the standard of an electoral democracy.

## **Romania:**

As seen in figure 4, from 2007 to 2014, Romania's Electoral Democracy Index gradually increased from 0.61 to 0.67, reflecting slow democratic development. Political scene was relatively stable but marred by coalition governments (Stefan 2019), slowing decision-making and policy implementation. The political landscape was competitive, with frequent changes in leadership and policy direction that affected the pace of democratic reforms (Stefan 2019). The focus during this period was on economic stability and EU integration (Oehler-Sincai 2023), with democratic reforms taking a secondary role. As this was a period of the global financial crisis and its aftermath, economic stability often precedes aggressive democratic reforms as a priority for governments managing crisis periods. Media freedom was present but occasionally hindered by ownership transparency issues and politicization (Stetka 2013), contributing to the slow improvement. All these factors resulted in 'almost negligible to very gradual increase' in democratic values in Romania from 2007 - 2014.

From 2014 to 2016, the index saw a considerable increase due to the National Anti-Corruption Directorate's (DNA) active pursuit of high-profile cases (Daborowski 2015), boosting perceptions of fairness and transparency. However, from 2016 to 2018, the index dipped due to issues with media freedom and oligarchic influence, leading to public doubts about electoral fairness ("Romania's press freedom in free fall", 2018).

The period from 2018 to 2020 was a peak for Romania's electoral democracy, with the index reaching 0.8 in 2020. Effective anti-corruption efforts and government responses to public demands for better governance such as legislative changes and policy adjustments enhanced the electoral part of democracy (Bajpai and Myers 2020).

However, there is a reversal of this positive trend during the period of 2020-2022, as seen in figure 4's green line. Emergency measures during the pandemic expanded executive powers, affecting democratic balance. Frequent no-confidence votes and resultant government changes eroded public confidence in governance, impacting perceptions of democratic integrity (Selejan-Gutan 2020).

## **Bulgaria:**

From 2007 to 2020, Bulgaria's Electoral Democracy Index gradually declined from 0.71 to 0.61, thereafter stabilizing and slightly recovering by 2022, as shown in figure 4. The global financial crisis impacted Bulgaria's economy, which translated to political instability. The economic pressures and austerity measures that followed have contributed to public dissatisfaction with the government, affecting perceptions of election fairness (Meinardus 2009).

During 2008-09, Bulgaria faced political challenges under Sergei Stanishev's government, criticized for ineffective corruption and organized crime combat. Boyko Borissov's administration, starting in 2009, also struggled with systemic issues. Persistent high corruption levels in Bulgaria, consistently ranked on the top corrupt EU nations, eroded public trust in electoral integrity, exacerbated by scandals and opaque government operations (“Crime without Punishment”, 2011). Oligarchical influences further tarnished political life. Media freedom concerns compounded the problem, with media dominated by politically linked entities, limiting diverse viewpoints and informed public debate - key components of a robust electoral democracy (“Media freedom in Bulgaria”, n.d.).

In the summer of 2020, significant anti-government protests erupted due to corruption, lack of transparency, and rule of law failures (Koseva 2020; “Bulgaria: Justice minister out”, 2020). These protests highlighted a strong civil society and public demand for accountability, prompting political leaders to pursue more substantive democratic reforms (Slavev 2021), reflected in the slight recovery of the Electoral Democracy Index towards 2022, as the blue line rises up.

## **Croatia:**

Red line represents Croatia. From 2013 to 2015, Croatia's Electoral Democracy Index remained high at 0.83, but it gradually declined during 2015-2018, indicating a slow erosion of electoral democracy, as shown in figure 4.

Periodic adjustments to electoral laws, such as changes to the electoral threshold (the minimum percentage of votes a party must receive to enter parliament) or configuration of district

boundaries, can significantly impact the political landscape. This, in itself, is not necessarily a negative thing. However, the manner in which these changes are implemented, including the level of transparency and consultation with opposition parties and the public matters and that is the point of concern in Croatia (Prelec and Brown 2015). Poor communication and controversial changes led to perceptions of manipulation or unfairness, resulting in a dip in the graph. Reports from organizations like Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House noted a decline in press freedom, correlating with the downward trend. Media restrictions and pressures on journalists hindered their ability to freely criticize the government, impacting the index (Rudic 2017).

From 2018 to 2022, the index remained relatively stable between 0.73 and 0.74, with a slight spike in 2020. Croatia's presidency of the Council of the European Union in early 2020 positively influenced its international image and perceptions of democratic effectiveness ("Croatian Presidency", n.d.). Additionally, the July 2020 parliamentary elections, conducted despite the COVID-19 pandemic, were relatively free from major disruptions or controversies (OSCE 2020), contributing to the stability in the index during this period.

## **5.5 Rule of Law Index**

The Rule of Law Index measures the extent to which the laws are transparently, independently, predictably, impartially, and equally enforced, and to what extent do the actions of government officials comply with the law (V-Dem 2021, 299).

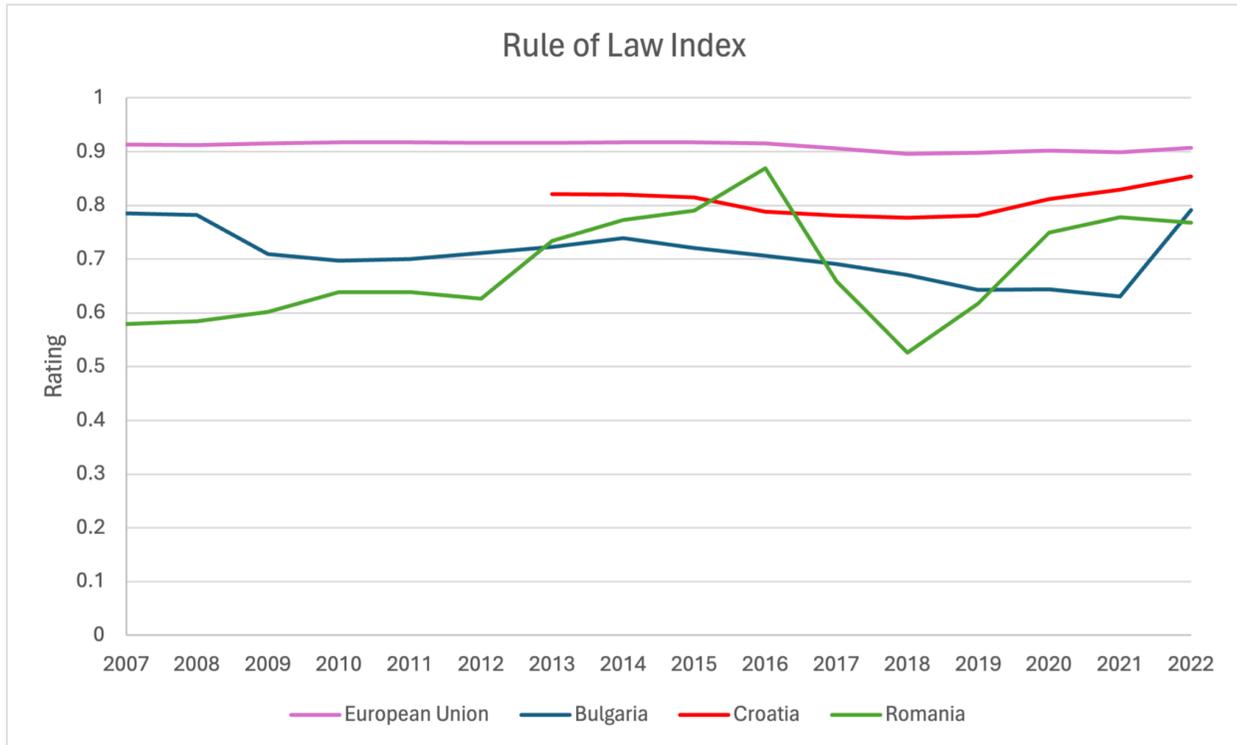


Figure 5: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 1 where 0 is the worst result and 1 is the best result in terms of upholding the rule of law.

### Romania:

As evident from figure 5's green line, Romania saw a steady increase in its rule of law index from 2007 and peaking at 0.87 in 2016. This improvement was driven by judicial reforms to meet EU standards, strengthened by the European Union's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) (European Commission 2022a). The National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA), led by figures like Laura Codruța Kövesi, made significant strides in prosecuting high-level corruption, bolstered by substantial international support to enhance its legal framework and domestic support for anti-corruption initiatives (Gillet 2017).

However, from late 2016, the trend reversed due to two main reasons. First, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) attempted to pass ordinances decriminalizing certain corruption offenses (Paun 2019) and dismissed Kövesi in 2018, undermining legal transparency and accountability ("Laura Codruta Kovesi", n.d.). Secondly, proposed changes to the judicial system

in 2017 and 2018 by PSD aimed to increase political control over the judiciary. This was criticized by the Venice Commission (“Council of Europe”, n.d.) , an advisory body of the Council of Europe as they posed risks to judicial autonomy.

There is a reversal of trend starting 2019, as seen in figure 5. There is a shift in political leadership following the 2019 presidential and 2020 parliamentary elections that led to renewed efforts to strengthen the rule of law. The new administration prioritized reform and adherence to EU norms, working to undo previous measures threatening judicial independence and reinforcing the integrity of legal institutions (Prillwitz 2020).

### **Bulgaria:**

Blue line represents Bulgaria. After joining the EU, Bulgaria's Rule of Law Index saw a slight dip due to the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. It impacted government stability and economic performance. Economic difficulties strain public institutions, reduce resources available for judicial reforms, and increase susceptibility to corruption, all of which undermine the rule of law (Vachudova and Spendzharova 2012). The judicial system faced criticism for lack of independence, accountability, transparency and inefficiency, slow court proceedings and a backlog of cases. The score remained stagnant between 2009 and 2014 (only with minor fluctuations), hovering between 0.71 and 0.74.

However, from 2014 to 2021, the score gradually decreased to 0.63. This decline was driven by political turbulence, frequent government and leadership changes, and resignations in 2014 due to public dissatisfaction with corruption and lack of transparency (Rashkova 2014). Corruption remained a significant issue, with Bulgaria having one of the worst records in the EU. Ineffective judicial reforms, organized crime, and the influence of oligarchs further eroded public trust in institutions. The pandemic exacerbated governance issues, diverting attention from reforms and leading to rushed opaque decision-making processes (Vassileva 2020a).

However, there was notable improvement from 2021 to 2022. During this period, the Bulgarian President's veto of a law infringing on judicial independence was seen as a positive step (“President Radev Vetoes”, 2020). The European Commission's continuous monitoring and EU

recovery funds tied to governance reforms incentivized improvements, bolstering Bulgaria's rule of law (Council of Europe 2019).

### **Croatia:**

Red line in figure 5 shows minor fluctuations in Croatia for the Rule of Law Index from EU accession in 2013 until 2022. The score remained stable at 0.82 in 2013 and 2014 but dipped slightly to 0.78 by 2017. This decline followed the 2015 parliamentary election, which resulted in a fragmented legislature, difficulty in forming a stable government and political instability which led to legislative gridlock (Kolar 2021). High-profile corruption cases, notably involving former Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, highlighted systemic corruption and affected the Rule of Law index. His trial's crucial developments happened during this period and he was accused of accepting bribes, engaging in war profiteering, and manipulating energy deals with foreign corporations (“Croatia: former PM”, 2018). His cases were emblematic of systemic corruption at the highest levels of Croatian politics.

However, from 2017 to 2019, the score stagnated before increasing to 0.85 in 2022. Improvements were driven by judicial reforms enhancing efficiency and transparency, reducing case backlogs, and promoting alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms like mediation and arbitration. Croatia implemented modern court management systems and made courtroom proceedings more accessible (The World bank 2019). Anti-corruption efforts included updating laws to align with EU standards, protecting whistleblowers, strengthening the Office for the Prevention of Corruption and Organized Crime (USKOK), and engaging in international legal cooperation (European Commission 2023a). These measures contributed to Croatia's ongoing commitment to addressing corruption and improving the rule of law.

## **5.6 Executive Respects Constitution Index**

What does the Executive Respects Constitution Index measure?

Do members of the executive (the head of state, the head of government, and cabinet ministers) respect the constitution (V-Dem 2021, 112)?

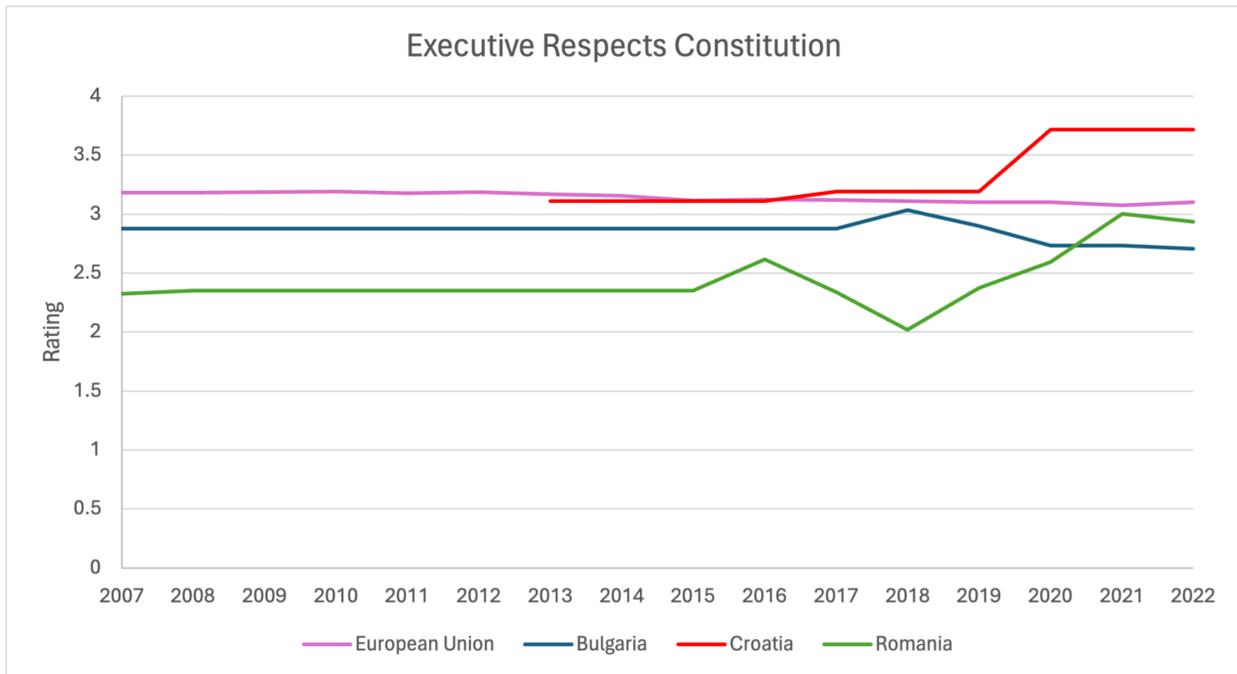


Figure 6: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 4 where 0 is the worst result and 4 is the best result in terms of how well the executive respects the constitution<sup>2</sup>.

### Romania:

As seen in figure 6, from EU accession until 2015, Romania's Executive Respects Constitution index remained constant and moderate at 2.35. This period saw political continuity with moderate reforms under the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) and later the Social Democratic Party (PSD), who managed to maintain a semblance of stability in their respect for constitutional frameworks. Romania also experienced steady economic growth during this period which contributed to political stability, reducing the need for unconstitutional measures.

After Prime Minister Victor Ponta's resignation, a technocratic government led by Dacian Cioloș took office in November 2015, perceived as more independent and committed to constitutional boundaries (Chiriac 2016), resulting in a spike in the index in 2016.

<sup>2</sup> 0: Members of the executive violate the constitution whenever they want to, without legal consequences. 1: Members of the executive violate most provisions of the constitution without legal consequences, but still must respect certain provisions. 2: Somewhere in between (1) and (3). Members of the executive would face legal consequences for violating most provisions of the constitution, but can disregard some provisions without any legal consequences. 3: Members of the executive rarely violate the constitution, and when it happens they face legal charges. 4: Members of the executive never violate the constitution.

From 2016 to 2018, Romania faced political turmoil under the PSD and leader Liviu Dragnea. Judicial reforms criticized for weakening judicial independence and shielding politicians from corruption charges led to large-scale protests (MacDowall 2018). The PSD's use of emergency decrees to bypass legislative processes and conflicts between the executive and the judiciary reflected a disregard for the principle of separation of powers.

The government change in 2019 brought hope, with a more pro-European and reformist stance (“Joint Press Statement”, 2019), and hence the spike in the green line in figure 6. This shift contributed to restoring constitutional respect. The constitutional court and judiciary bodies played crucial roles in checking executive power, blocking controversial reforms, and reinforcing constitutional adherence and the balance of powers (Selejan Gutan 2018).

### **Bulgaria:**

As the blue line in figure 6 indicates, Bulgaria's "Executive Respects Constitution" index remained stable around 2.88 for a decade after EU accession. This period saw political continuity under Boyko Borissov's GERB party, leading in 2009-2013 and 2014-2017 (Karasimeonov 2019). This explains relative stability in constitutional respect, as changes in policy and governance style were minimized.

There were ongoing, but slow or superficial, EU-driven judicial reforms (EUR-Lex 2015), which explains why the index did not show significant improvement but rather remained steady. This political continuity and EU pressure resulted in adherence to constitutional norms, though deeper systemic changes were lacking.

The period from 2017 to 2018 showed a slight improvement, coinciding with Bulgaria's Presidency of the Council of the European Union (“Priorities of the Bulgarian”, 2017). This role involves intensifying efforts to showcase adherence to constitutional principles and rule-bound governance. This period also saw efforts to make judicial appointments more transparent and reduce political influence, particularly involving the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) (European Commission 2023b).

Post-2018, the index declined due to political instability, frequent government changes, and fractured parliamentary compositions (“Bulgaria Country Report”, 2024). This instability compromised adherence to constitutional norms as leaders prioritized power consolidation. Public protests erupted over perceived legal norm violations by officials, such as illegal wiretapping and abuses of power by high-ranking figures, notably Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev (Koseva 2023). These actions undermined public trust and reflected significant breaches of constitutional and legal standards, contributing to the downward trend in the index.

### **Croatia:**

From 2013 to 2019, Croatia's "Executive Respects Constitution" index remained stable, representing a moderate compliance with a score slightly above 3, as seen in figure 6. This period saw Croatia adjusting its legal and institutional frameworks to align with EU standards after joining in 2013 and is a gradual process (Hina 2014). Then there was a problem of corruption where officials act outside their legal boundaries and there were ongoing efforts to combat it. Political instability, the slow pace of necessary reforms, economic pressures, and corruption are likely contributing factors that impacted the executive's adherence to constitutional norms during this period. These factors created a complex environment where improvements in one area could be offset by setbacks in another, leading to an overall stable yet moderate performance in respecting constitutional norms.

A drastic spike occurred from 2019 to 2020, with the index reaching 3.72 and remaining stable until 2022. This improvement was due to several factors - First, increased public accountability and transparency measures, including more rigorous declarations of assets by public officials, promoted transparency and helped identify potential conflicts of interest or illicit enrichment (“Improving Transparency”, n.d.). Second, judicial reforms aimed at increasing independence and efficiency, such as making the appointment of judges more transparent and merit-based, limited executive overreach and reduced political influence (Council of Europe 2022). Third, enhanced anti-corruption legislation, including stricter penalties for corruption-related offenses and expanded definitions of corrupt activities, aligned executive actions more closely with constitutional requirements (Hall 2022). These reforms and increased accountability measures

contributed to the significant improvement in Croatia's executive respect for constitutional norms during this period.

### 5.7 Rational Legal Legitimation Index

The Rational Legal Legitimation Index measures how much a government refers to legal norms and regulations to justify its regime. This includes adherence to constitutional provisions for gaining and exercising power, such as through elections and rule of law. Both electoral and non-electoral regimes that emphasize rule-boundedness can score high on this index (V-Dem 2021, 222-223).

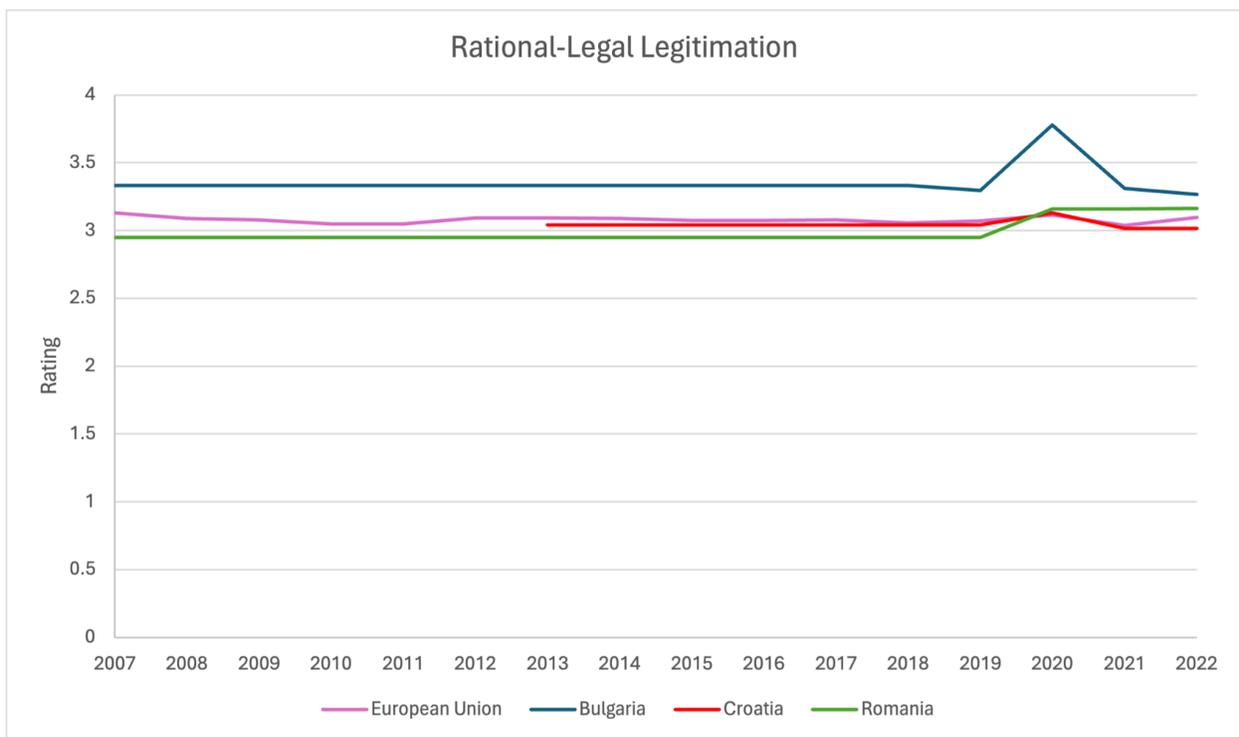


Figure 7: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 4 where 0 is the worst result and 4 is the best result for rational-legal legitimation by the government<sup>3</sup>.

#### Romania:

<sup>3</sup> 0: Not at all. 1: To a small extent. 2: To some extent but it is not the most important component. 3: To a large extent but not exclusively. 4: Almost exclusively.

Green line represents Romania's score. From 2007 to 2019, Romania's Rational-Legal Legitimation Index remained stable, reflecting a consistent governance approach based on legal norms. This stability can be attributed to several factors. First, Romania's 2007 EU accession required adherence to EU legal standards, fostering ongoing reforms and stable governance (EUR-Lex 2007). Despite frequent leadership changes, political parties generally upheld the constitution and legal processes. Third, Anti-corruption efforts by bodies like the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) worked to curb corruption, reinforcing the state's legitimacy and public trust in legal institutions (MacDowall 2016). Lastly, laws were passed through proper parliamentary procedures, ensuring commitment to debate, public consultation and voting and adherence to constitutional and legal frameworks, even in times of political turmoil (Ciobanu 2012).

Post-2019, the index spiked above 3, reaching 3.16 and maintaining this level for three years. This increase was due to high-profile court rulings, particularly those that have gone against the government's immediate interests and upheld the constitution, protecting opposition rights, media freedoms, civil liberties, and prosecuting corruption cases of former prime ministers (Mungiu-Pippidi and Simon 2018). Additionally, the government introduced significant legislative reforms in healthcare, education, judiciary, economic policy, and social welfare, demonstrating a commitment to legal norms and constitutional provisions. For example, judicial reforms aimed at restoring independence addressed EU concerns and improved the government's legal legitimacy (European Commission 2022b). These factors collectively contributed to the positive trend in Romania's Rational-Legal Legitimation Index from 2019 to 2022.

### **Bulgaria:**

From EU accession in 2007 until 2019, Bulgaria's Rational-Legal Legitimation Index remained stable, as seen in figure 7. This stability was driven by comprehensive reforms to align with EU standards, particularly in the judiciary, anti-corruption measures, and public administration. These efforts emphasized transparency, accountability, and adherence to the EU Acquis Communautaire (Council of Europe 2013). Regular legislative updates in various sectors and consistent judicial enforcement reinforced legal legitimacy. Government adherence to court rulings, including those from the European Court of Justice, and responses to public protests

demanding legal and constitutional compliance also maintained stability. Public protests in 2013 over energy prices, corruption, and judicial independence led to policy adjustments under strict legal scrutiny, upholding constitutional norms (Junes 2013).

A significant spike in the index from 2019 to 2020 reflected governmental efforts to enhance transparency and accountability, such as reforms in the Supreme Judicial Council, public procurement processes, and whistleblower protections (“Bulgaria: support to the inspectorate”, n.d.; Mikov and Novakova 2017). This shows that the government is persistent in grounding its governance according to the legal norms. However, this trend reversed in 2021, with the index declining from 3.78 to 3.31 due to political instability, corruption scandals, and public protests against judicial independence and power monopolization. These protests were triggered by several high-profile incidents, including raids on the offices of key opposition figures and alleged misuse of state resources (Vassileva 2020b). Multiple elections in 2021 and high-profile incidents eroded public trust in legal governance, negatively impacting the index.

### **Croatia:**

Figure 7 conveys that, from 2013 to 2022, Croatia's Rational-Legal Legitimation Index remained stable, starting at 3.04 and ending at 3.02. This stability reflects a consistent commitment to upholding legal norms and constitutional mandates. Fluctuations occurred between 2019 and 2021.

In 2019, under Prime Minister Andrej Plenković's leadership, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) took measures to stabilize governance and ensure consistent law application. This effort was partly due to Croatia's upcoming EU presidency in 2020, which required aligning national laws with EU standards and improving administrative capacities. These actions boosted the country's score in the rational-legal legitimation index. Croatia's handling of regional issues including relations with neighboring countries, the migrant crisis, and the initial COVID-19 response in early 2020 also required legally grounded governance, enhancing the index (European Commission 2024; “Croatia’s regional development”, 2024). Efficient handling of such crises made the government take pride in its actions for being rule bound.

But this declines in the following year, as seen in figure 7. This is due to emergency measures during the pandemic in the later stages, which sometimes lacked legislative scrutiny or public debate and were seen as infringing on personal freedoms (Selanec 2020). This perceived overreach impacted the index, which stabilized at 3.02 in 2021 and 2022.

**5.8 Performance Legitimation Index**

The Performance Legitimation Index measures the extent to which the government refers to performance (such as providing economic growth, poverty reduction, effective and non-corrupt governance, and/or providing security) in order to justify the regime in place (V-Dem 2021, 222).

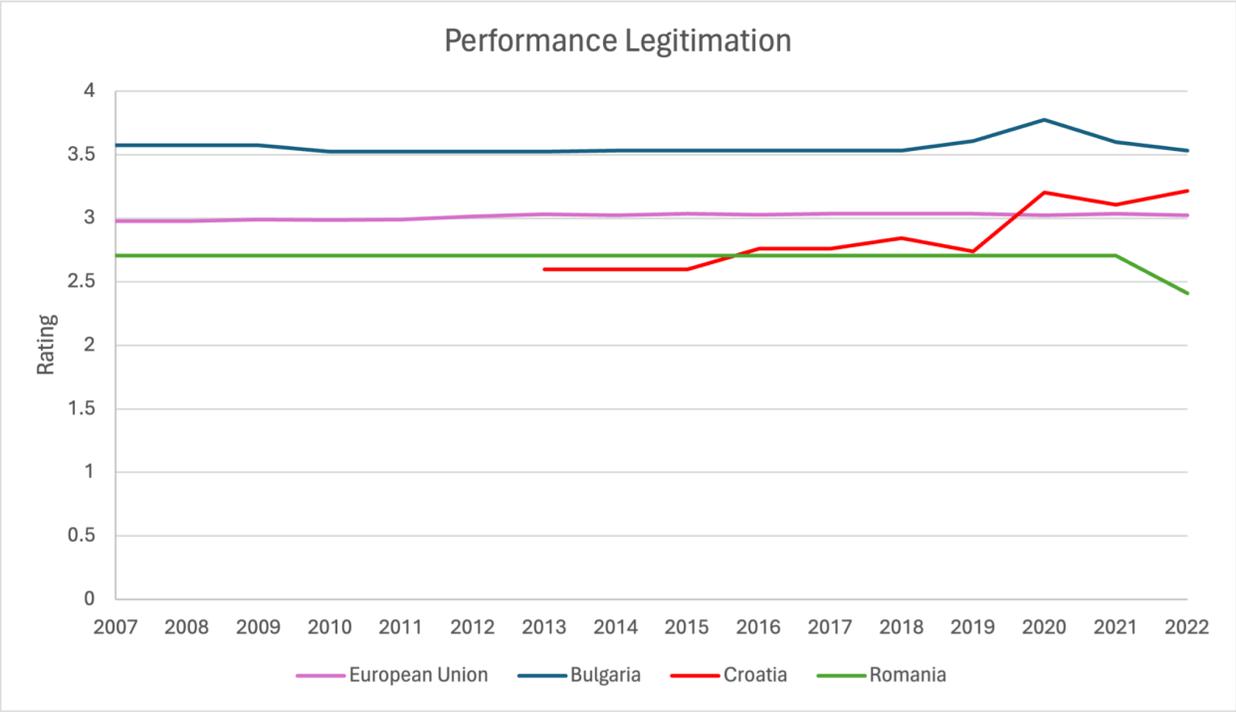


Figure 8: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 4 where 0 is the worst result and 4 is the best result for performance legitimation by the government<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> 0: Not at all. 1: To a small extent. 2: To some extent but it is not the most important component. 3: To a large extent but not exclusively. 4: Almost exclusively.

## **Romania:**

From 2007 to 2021, Romania's Performance Legitimation Index remained stable at 2.71, as visible in figure 8, due to several key factors. EU membership since 2007 brought significant structural and investment funds, aiding infrastructure development and economic growth (Pascal and Marton 2021). The IT sector, automotive industry, and services expanded, attracting foreign investment and creating jobs, thus stabilizing the economy (Sandu and Sorescu 2016). This economic diversification helped stabilize the economy and provided a tangible measure of government performance in fostering economic development. Efforts to improve social inclusion and compliance with EU standards enhanced governance practices, reducing poverty and improving living standards (“The National Strategy”, 2016). These actions maintained a positive view of government performance and legitimacy.

The green line sees a decline to 2.41 in 2022. Despite Romania's recovery in GDP growth after the initial economic downturn in 2020, the country faced a significant inflation surge in 2022, driven by increasing energy prices (Coutinho and Licchetta 2024). This impacted the cost of living and public confidence in economic management. Additionally, disruptions in trade, reduced consumer spending, and increased unemployment further strained the economy (“Unemployment rate 2023”). Inadequate pensions, early retirement options, and a low birth rate exacerbated systemic inefficiencies in social safety nets (Popovici 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these issues, stressing public finances and social systems, leading to public dissatisfaction resulting in the observed decline in the index.

## **Bulgaria:**

From 2007 to 2018, Bulgaria's Performance Legitimation Index remained stable around 3.52 to 3.57, as seen in figure 8. This stability was driven by consistent economic growth, increased foreign investment, and access to EU funds for development projects, which improved infrastructure and quality of life (Georgiev 2018). Bulgaria maintained low public debt and prudent fiscal management, contributing to positive perceptions of governance (Shen and Barisone 2021). Despite challenges in healthcare, education, and social security, gradual progress helped sustain public approval.

However, there were persistent concerns over corruption and the rule of law. While these issues did impact the government's legitimacy, the positive factors mentioned above helped counterbalance these negatives to some extent, leading to overall stability in the Performance Legitimation Index until around 2018.

The slight peak in the index from 2018 to 2020 reflects robust GDP growth, increased exports, rising domestic demand and low unemployment rates (The World Bank n.d.; Eures 2023). The Bulgarian government was banking on this economic factor to validate and legitimize its governance, thereby bolstering the government's performance legitimation.

The decline from 2020 to 2022 was due to political, economic, and pandemic challenges. Mixed handling of the pandemic, including health crisis management and economic support, led to public dissatisfaction (Dzakula et al 2022). The economic downturn increased unemployment and business disruptions, affecting views on economic stability. Additionally, political instability, anti-government protests, and criticism of Boyko Borissov's government for corruption and lack of transparency (Tsolova 2021), contributed to the observed dip seen in the blue line in figure 8, during this period.

### **Croatia:**

From 2013 to 2022, Croatia's Performance Legitimation Index increased from 2.6 to 3.22, reflecting improved public perception of government performance. Joining the EU in 2013 provided significant economic opportunities, access to markets, and substantial EU funds, boosting infrastructure and competitiveness. Croatia received approximately €10.7 billion from EU cohesion policy funds between 2014 and 2020 (European Commission 2023c).

Economic recovery began in 2015, with GDP growth rates rising to 3.5% in 2017 and maintaining moderate growth thereafter (“Croatia full year GDP growth”, n.d.). Unemployment rates also improved, dropping from over 17% in 2013 to around 6% by 2019, supported by access to the broader EU labor market (“Croatia Unemployment rate”, n.d.). Governance reforms, including enhancing public administration efficiency, transparency, and judicial reforms

to combat corruption, contributed positively to the index. Efforts included digitizing government services, decentralizing administrative responsibilities, and improving public information access (European Commission n.d.; Lopizic and Toman 2023).

Additionally, Croatia's active role in regional security and international relations, particularly in the Balkans, bolstered national pride and trust in the government (Prodan 2020). Aligning with EU security policies and participating in regional peace initiatives enhanced Croatia's reputation and influence, strengthening the government's performance legitimacy throughout this period, domestically and internationally.

### **5.9 Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index**

The Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index measures whether basic public services, such as security, primary education, clean water, and healthcare are distributed equally according to socio-economic position. It evaluates if socio-economic status significantly affects the distribution of these services. If access inequalities exist but are not mainly due to socio-economic differences, the score should be “4” (equal). It considers whether most services are distributed equally or unequally across socio-economic groups (V-Dem 2021, 209).

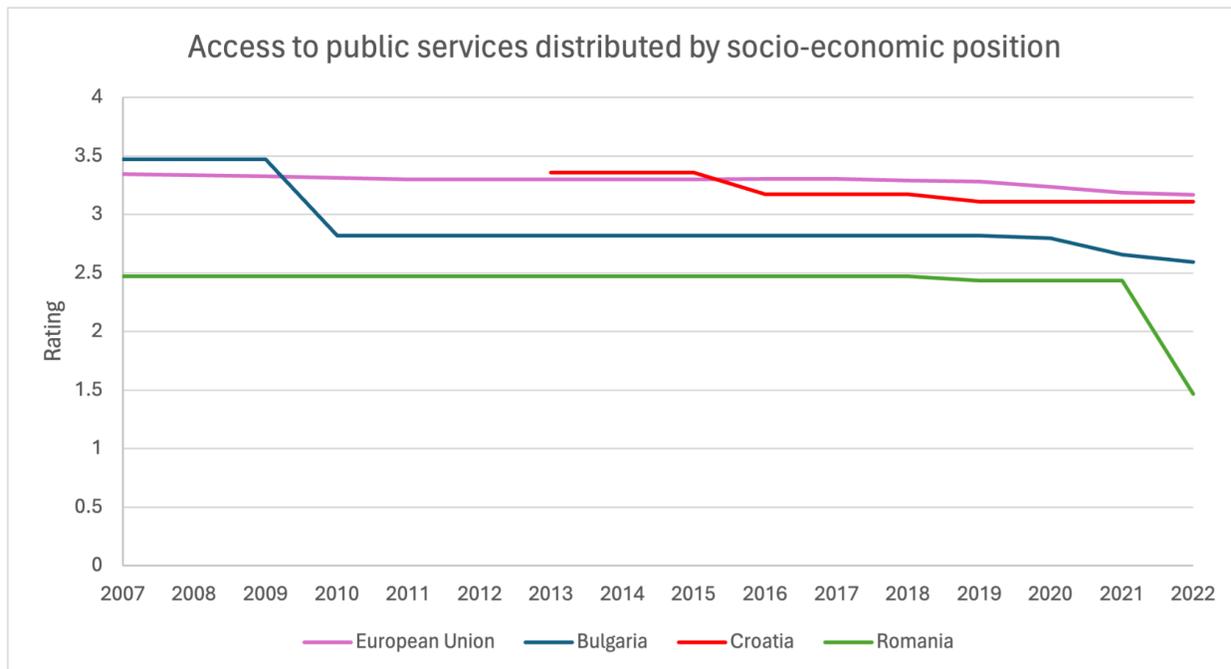


Figure 9: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 4 where 0 is the worst result and 4 is the best result in terms of accessibility to public services based on socio-economic position<sup>5</sup>.

### Romania:

As evident from figure 9, from 2007 to 2021, Romania's Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index remained stable at around 2.47. This stability is due to several factors. Reforms aimed at improving healthcare and education, such as decentralizing services, increasing funding, and improving accessibility, helped maintain fair distribution across socio-economic groups (Purcarea et al 2015). EU membership in 2007 provided access to European Structural and Investment Funds, enhancing infrastructure and aligning policies with EU standards for equity and non-discrimination. Social programs targeting lower-income populations and marginalized communities also contributed to reducing disparities (Adascalitei et al 2020).

<sup>5</sup> 0: Extreme. Because of poverty or low income, 75 percent or more of the population lack access to basic public services of good quality. 1: Unequal. Because of poverty or low income, 25 percent or more of the population lack access to basic public services of good quality. 2: Somewhat Equal. Because of poverty or low income, 10 to 25 percent of the population lack access to basic public services of good quality. 3: Relatively Equal. Because of poverty or low income, 5 to 10 percent of the population lack access to basic public services of good quality. 4: Equal. Because of poverty or low income, less than 5 percent of the population lack access to basic public services of good quality.

Though the consistency in the index reflects a continuity in governmental policies that did not drastically alter the landscape of public service provision, the index scores also indicate that while policies were adequate to prevent deterioration in service access, they were not transformative enough to significantly improve it, especially concerning reducing disparities between different socio-economic groups and hence is reflected in a very moderate 2.47 rating throughout.

The sharp decline from 2021 to 2022 seen in the green line in figure 9 is primarily attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic strained Romania's healthcare system, leading to disparities in access to critical services like ICU beds and ventilators, favoring higher socio-economic groups (Thorpe 2021). Lockdowns and restrictive measures disrupted public services, disproportionately affecting lower socio-economic groups lacking resources for remote learning or telecommuting (Sostero et al 2020). Additionally, the economic downturn increased unemployment and reduced incomes, particularly impacting lower socio-economic groups.

### **Bulgaria:**

The Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index for Bulgaria remained high and stable initially after joining the EU, as seen in figure 9 but dropped sharply in 2010 due to the global financial crisis. The crisis led to GDP contraction, reduced public spending, budget cuts in healthcare, education, and social services. Furthermore, it led to higher unemployment rates and increased poverty. These factors disproportionately affected lower socio-economic groups, exacerbating inequalities in access to public services (“The hidden economy”, 2011).

From 2010 to 2020, the index remained stable but stagnant. Modest economic growth helped stabilize government revenue and public service funding, but wasn't enough to significantly improve service quality or distribution (Mihailov 2011). EU funds aimed at improving infrastructure had limited impact due to corruption, mismanagement, and weakened local governance (Myklebust 2017).

After a decade, there is a drop in the index scores in 2021 and 2022. The reasons for this decline are similar to the ones in Romania. It was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, which strained Bulgaria's healthcare system and disrupted education. The economic fallout increased unemployment and reduced incomes, worsening access to services for lower socio-economic groups. These combined effects highlighted and intensified existing socio-economic disparities in access to essential public resources.

### **Croatia:**

Figure 9's red line shows that Croatia maintained a high and stable score in the Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index from 2013 to 2015 and this is due to effective social policies. Subsidized healthcare, free primary education, and social welfare programs ensured equal access. Healthcare subsidies included increased funding for public hospitals and rural services, while education provisions offered free textbooks, subsidized school meals, and transportation for low-income students (UNICEF 2022).

A slight drop in the index between 2015 and 2016 occurred due to austerity measures implemented to address the high public debt which was aimed at improving fiscal sustainability (European Commission 2016), leading to short-term reductions in public service quality and accessibility, particularly for lower socio-economic groups.

From 2016 to 2022, the index remained stable, fluctuating slightly within the 3.1 to 3.2 range. This stability resulted from affordable housing policies, labor market integration efforts, family support programs, and a strong civil society (OHCHR n.d.; “social welfare system”, n.d.). Subsidies for low-income housing, vocational training, job placement services, and child care subsidies helped ensure equitable access to services (“family services”, 2024). Additionally, civil society advocacy played a crucial role in maintaining government commitments to equitable service distribution.

### 5.10 Equal Distribution of Resources Index

The Equal Distribution of Resources Index measures how evenly resources are distributed in society, both tangible and intangible. It supports egalitarian democracy by ensuring that all individuals, regardless of socio-economic status, can participate in politics and government. This index considers poverty rates, the distribution of essential goods and services (such as food, water, housing, education, and healthcare), and levels of inequality. High resource inequality can undermine the political participation of poorer populations. Additionally, the index includes measures of the distribution of power among different socio-economic groups and genders, addressing how social and economic inequalities can translate into political inequalities (V-Dem 2021, 56).

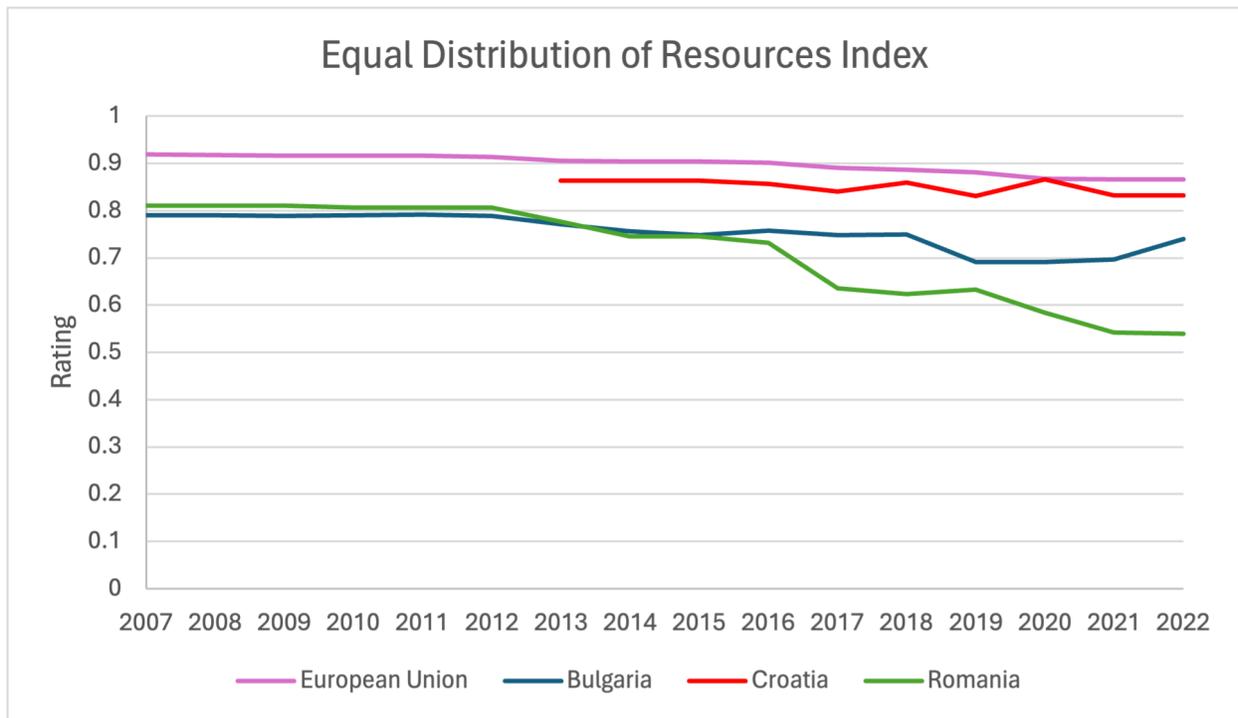


Figure 10: The graph shows a scale between 0 to 1 where 0 is the worst result and 1 is the best result in terms of how equally the resources are distributed.

#### Romania:

From 2007 to 2012, Romania's government-maintained stability in resource distribution, maintaining a score just above 0.8 through effective social welfare programs, educational

funding, and healthcare improvements. EU-supported initiatives played a crucial role, with investments in education infrastructure in rural areas, efforts to reduce school dropout rates, and enhancements in healthcare services for disadvantaged regions (World Bank n.d.). Additionally, increased child benefits, pension adjustments, support for the disabled, and rural development efforts ensured equitable resource distribution, providing a safety net for vulnerable populations and reducing poverty (“Children with disabilities”, n.d.).

However, from 2012 to 2022, the Equal Distribution of Resources Index underperformed, as shown in figure 10, due to various interlinked factors. Economic growth during this period was uneven, benefiting urban areas like Bucharest more significantly than rural regions, exacerbating inequalities (Bansescu 2021). The healthcare system faced persistent issues such as underfunding, corruption, and brain drain, where highly skilled professionals sought opportunities abroad (Sebastian and Alma 2022; Iacob 2018). The education system also struggled to meet the needs of all socio-economic groups, particularly in rural areas, directly impacting resource distribution.

Corruption and mismanagement within public institutions became more pronounced during crises, notably the COVID-19 pandemic (Abdou et al 2021). The effectiveness of social policies in reducing poverty and supporting vulnerable populations was often inadequate. During economic downturns, the government prioritized immediate economic recovery over long-term social welfare programs, further worsening inequality and affecting the equitable distribution of resources (Hammer and Hallegatte 2020).

### **Bulgaria:**

From 2007 to 2012, Bulgaria maintained stability in the Equal Distribution of Resources Index through effective social policies, efforts to improve living standards, reduce poverty, and relatively stable governance.

However, from 2012 to 2020, there was a steady decline in the index due to several factors. First, the economy grew but income inequality also increased. Higher income inequality led to greater

disparities in access to resources since these resources were not adequately directed and managed to target underserved populations (Hallaert 2020). Second, effective social policies require strong political commitment. If reducing inequality and supporting vulnerable populations are not prioritized politically, these issues may not receive the necessary attention or resources. This lack of political will has been seen in the Bulgarian governments during this period and has stemmed from various factors, including electoral strategies that favor more visible or popular investments over long-term social programs (European Commission 2021). Third, resistance from powerful interest groups also hindered equitable distribution, while persistent corruption and inefficiency in the public sector affected resource allocation.

Changes in social support systems further influenced resource distribution. Pension reforms around 2015 (Petkov 2020) and tighter unemployment benefits during the early 2010s (Stovicek and Turrini 2012) worsened economic stability for lower-income groups, exacerbating inequality.

A slight increase in the index from 2020 to 2022, as seen in figure 10 is attributed to increased activities by community groups and NGOs during the pandemic (UNICEF n.d.). These groups filled gaps in government services, providing essential resources to underprivileged and vulnerable populations, contributing to a more equitable distribution reflected in the V-Dem index.

### **Croatia:**

From 2013 to 2022, Croatia maintained a stable and relatively high performance on the Equal Distribution of Resources Index, consistently scoring above 0.8, as evident from figure 10. This success is attributed to several interrelated factors that include governmental policies, economic factors, international influences, and societal changes.

First, governmental policies, such as implementing progressive tax systems, social welfare benefits, and public pensions, helped distribute resources more equally (Inchauste and Rubil 2017). Social programs aimed at reducing poverty and improving access to education and healthcare also contributed to equitable resource distribution. Second, higher and inclusive employment rates during this period ensured a more even distribution of income across

socio-economic groups, reducing economic disparities (Bulman 2023). Integrating marginalized groups into the workforce further enhanced this effect. Third, adhering to EU standards and regulations required maintaining levels of equality and nondiscrimination, promoting better resource distribution (European Commission 2013). Finally, post-2008 financial crisis, there was a cultural shift towards valuing equality and fairness, influencing policy decisions and behaviors to support more egalitarian resource distribution (Morlino and Raniolo 2020).

These factors collectively contributed to Croatia's stable and positive performance on the Equal Distribution of Resources Index, reinforcing each other to create a comprehensive framework supporting egalitarian principles.

## **6 Discussion**

The focus of this section is to answer the central question of the thesis - whether or not democratic backsliding has been happening in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia since their accession to the European Union. After an in-depth analysis, it is posited that democratic backsliding is not occurring in these countries. This means that the hypothesis presented in section 3 turns out to be true. This conclusion is reached through a nuanced understanding that separates democratic stability from democratic quality and recognition of the potential trade-offs between the two. This is explained in detail below.

### **a) Democratic Stability vs. Democratic Quality**

A critical distinction must be made between democratic stability and democratic quality. Democratic stability refers to the endurance of democratic institutions and the avoidance of significant disruptions to the democratic process. On the other hand, democratic quality pertains to the depth and inclusiveness of democratic practices, such as the protection of civil liberties, judicial independence, and political pluralism (Cianetti et al 2018, 250).

In the case of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, the focus has largely been on maintaining democratic stability rather than enhancing democratic quality. This emphasis on stability can sometimes result in compromises that affect the perceived quality of democracy, such as

executive interference in the judiciary or the persistence of corruption. However, these issues do not necessarily equate to democratic backsliding but rather indicate areas where democratic practices can be improved.

For instance, in Bulgaria, the judiciary has faced criticism for its lack of independence and susceptibility to political influence. While this is a significant concern for the quality of democracy, it does not undermine the overall stability of democratic institutions in the country. Similarly, Romania has grappled with issues of corruption and political meddling in the judicial process, yet these challenges have not led to a systemic breakdown of democratic governance.

#### b) Empirical Evidence Against Democratic Backsliding

Empirical evidence supports the view that there has been no significant democratic backsliding in these countries. Studies, as mentioned in section 3.2, such as those by the Central European University, have shown stable scores in political rights and civil liberties for Romania and Croatia using data from Freedom House, indicating that these countries have maintained their democratic standards over time (CEU Center for Policy Studies 2016). The consistent scores reflect a continued commitment to democratic principles and institutions, even amidst challenges. Moreover, Philip Levitz and Grigore Pop-Eleches's (2010) research using cross-national governance indicators and survey evidence has found no systematic evidence of post-accession backsliding in Romania and Bulgaria.

These findings are corroborated by the V-Dem data analyzed in the empirical section of this thesis, which further supports the stability of democratic institutions in these countries. The V-Dem indices, which measure various aspects of democracy, including electoral integrity, freedom of expression, and government accountability, have shown that Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia have not experienced the sharp declines that characterize backsliding. Even in comparison to the average EU democratic scores, which are presented by the pink line in the above graph figures, these three countries are not far behind. Infact, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia are either on par with or perform better than the EU average in certain indices.

Essentially, what constitutes or is implied by backsliding is the steady one-directional dynamic process of deterioration (Cianetti et al 2018, 246). But, as seen from the empirical evidence in section 5, the graph trends do not follow a one directional path, instead, there are many fluctuations over the years in every index. Therefore, it is not valid to characterize what is happening in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia to be backsliding.

### c) The Broader Context of Democratic Backsliding

The concept of democratic backsliding has often been examined through the lens of Hungary and Poland, where significant democratic erosion has been observed. However, this narrow focus can obscure the more complex realities in other CEE countries. In contrast, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia do not exhibit the same degree of executive aggrandizement or illiberal nationalism that characterizes the backsliding seen in Hungary and Poland.

Moreover, as argued by Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley (2018, 246), the broader regional picture in Central and Eastern Europe suggests a pattern of relatively stable but low-quality democracies rather than a straightforward case of backsliding. This argument can be adapted to the cases of Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia as well. This perspective highlights that while there are governance challenges and areas needing improvement, the fundamental democratic structures in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia remain intact. The emphasis should thus be on understanding the specific dynamics at play in each country rather than applying a generalized model of backsliding.

For example, in Romania, despite the political turbulence and corruption scandals, the mechanisms for political competition and electoral processes remain functional. Civil society remains active, and there are continuous efforts to hold the government accountable through protests and advocacy. This engagement signifies a vibrant democratic culture that is not indicative of backsliding but rather of a maturing democracy grappling with typical challenges.

Another example, in Croatia, democratic institutions have remained robust, with regular free and fair elections, active political participation, and a relatively free press. While there have been issues related to media ownership and political pressure on journalists, these do not constitute

backsliding in the sense of a deliberate and systematic erosion of democratic norms and institutions. Instead, they represent ongoing challenges that require attention and reform but do not undermine the fundamental democratic framework of the country.

#### d) The Role of EU Integration

The integration of these countries into the European Union has played a crucial role in supporting democratic stability. EU membership imposes certain standards and expectations for democratic governance, which helps safeguard against significant backsliding. The adherence to EU norms and the continuous pressure for compliance have provided a stabilizing influence, ensuring that democratic institutions, even if not perfect, are maintained.

EU mechanisms, such as the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), have been instrumental in monitoring and encouraging reforms in the judiciary and anti-corruption measures. These mechanisms create an environment where backsliding is less likely because there is continuous oversight and a framework for accountability. Furthermore, EU membership brings economic benefits and political stability, which incentivizes governments to adhere to democratic norms to maintain their standing within the Union.

#### e) Comparative Perspective: Avoiding the Hungary and Poland Paradigm

One of the critical insights from the article by Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley (2018), as mentioned above, is the need to avoid using Hungary and Poland as the sole paradigms for understanding democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. Each country in the region has its unique historical, social, and political context, which influences its democratic trajectory.

In the case of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, their democratic challenges are more about addressing the remnants of their communist pasts and the ongoing struggle to build robust democratic institutions (Vachudova and Spendzharova 2012, 2). Unlike Hungary and Poland, where backsliding is driven by deliberate political strategies to concentrate power (Sata and Karolewski 2023), the issues in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia are more structural and require long-term reform efforts.

For instance, Romania's political landscape is characterized by frequent government changes and a dynamic civil society that often mobilizes against corruption and governmental abuses. These elements point to a resilient democratic culture rather than one in decline. Bulgaria's struggle with corruption and organized crime is a significant barrier to improving democratic quality. However, the presence of active civil society organizations and investigative journalism continues to expose and challenge these issues, indicating a functional democratic environment that is capable of self-correction. Croatia, having the most recent EU accession among the three, shows signs of steady democratic consolidation. The country has made significant strides in judicial reforms and anti-corruption measures, supported by continuous EU engagement and domestic efforts.

## **7 Conclusion**

This thesis embarked on an in-depth exploration of democratic trajectories in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia since their accession to the European Union, employing Linz and Stepan's five-point theoretical framework of democracy consolidation. The objective was to determine whether these countries have experienced democratic backsliding, a phenomenon marked by the gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions. The analysis utilized empirical data from the V-Dem indices, which provided a robust quantitative foundation for assessing the health of democratic practices in these nations.

The findings of this thesis suggest a more nuanced reality than the straightforward narrative of democratic backsliding that dominates current scholarly discussions. While challenges persist, the evidence does not support a significant, systemic erosion of democracy in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. Instead, these countries have demonstrated a level of democratic stability, albeit with notable areas requiring further consolidation and improvement.

Firstly, the data revealed that Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia have maintained relatively stable democratic structures post-EU accession. The empirical analysis, grounded in V-Dem indices, showed that core democratic principles such as free and fair elections, freedom of association, and civil society engagement have generally remained intact. Although there have been

fluctuations in graph trends, particularly during periods of political turmoil or economic crises, these have not amounted to a wholesale retreat from democratic governance. In fact, these very fluctuations stand as a testimony to the tradeoff between democratic stability and democratic quality.

In Romania, the persistence of anti-corruption measures and judicial reforms has been a significant factor in maintaining democratic norms. Despite political instability and occasional attempts to undermine judicial independence, the broader democratic framework has remained resilient. The role of civil society and public protests, particularly in response to corruption scandals, has been crucial in safeguarding democratic values and ensuring government accountability. Bulgaria has faced similar challenges, especially with regard to corruption and media freedom. Nonetheless, the data indicates that while these issues have impacted the quality of democracy, they have not led to a fundamental breakdown of democratic institutions. The Bulgarian judiciary, although under pressure, continues to function independently to a significant degree, and civil society remains active and engaged. Croatia's experience post-EU accession has been marked by political instability and economic challenges, yet its democratic institutions have shown resilience. The country's legal framework for elections and civil liberties has generally supported a stable democratic environment. Notably, Croatia has managed to conduct fair and competitive elections, even during times of political uncertainty, which underscores the robustness of its electoral democracy.

A critical factor in the stability of these democracies has been the influence of the European Union. The EU's mechanisms for oversight and support have played a pivotal role in promoting reforms and deterring backsliding. The continuous alignment with EU norms and the pressure to maintain standards of democratic governance have provided a stabilizing influence that has mitigated potential democratic erosion. This unique blend of support and pressure by the European Union helped these countries to uphold democratic norms.

Additionally, this thesis also highlights the distinction between democratic stability and democratic quality. While the fundamental structures of democracy in Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia have remained intact, the quality of democracy, as measured by factors such as judicial

independence, corruption control, and media freedom, remains a significant concern. These issues underscore the need for ongoing reforms and a deepening of democratic practices to ensure not just the survival but the flourishing of democracy in these countries.

Overall, this thesis contributes to the broader discourse on democratic backsliding by offering a detailed and empirical examination of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. The evidence suggests that these countries have not experienced substantial democratic backsliding but rather continue to face challenges in enhancing the quality of their democracies. Cumulatively, there is no backsliding in the countries under investigation. It is simply that stability has taken precedence over genuine democratization in Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia.

The emphasis should now be on supporting these countries in addressing their specific democratic challenges through targeted reforms, continued EU engagement, and fostering a political culture that values and protects democratic principles. This approach will ensure that these nations continue to build on their democratic foundations and move towards higher-quality democratic governance.

Future research should focus on the evolving interplay between domestic political dynamics and external influences, particularly the EU, in shaping the democratic trajectories of these nations. It would be beneficial to explore how these countries can overcome the persistent issues of corruption, media freedom, and judicial independence to achieve a higher quality of democracy. Additionally, comparative studies with other Eastern European countries could provide further insights into the regional patterns of democratic development and the factors that contribute to both stability and improvement in democratic practices.

This comprehensive analysis underscores the complexity of democratic development in post-communist Europe, highlighting that while progress has been made, significant work remains to ensure robust and high-quality democratic governance. The resilience demonstrated by Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia offers a hopeful outlook for the future of democracy in the region, provided that continuous efforts are made to address the existing challenges.

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## 9 Appendix

### Core Civil Society Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	0.908	0.847	0.832	0.869
2008	0.909	0.847	0.832	0.882
2009	0.912	0.846	0.843	0.888
2010	0.911	0.846	0.891	0.878
2011	0.91	0.852	0.898	0.878
2012	0.909	0.851	0.898	0.878
2013	0.904	0.807	0.86	0.885
2014	0.902	0.818	0.86	0.885
2015	0.899	0.795	0.825	0.885
2016	0.892	0.807	0.76	0.876
2017	0.882	0.808	0.779	0.759
2018	0.879	0.803	0.779	0.729
2019	0.881	0.826	0.807	0.8
2020	0.873	0.816	0.803	0.851
2021	0.873	0.853	0.796	0.863
2022	0.87	0.827	0.796	0.842

### Freedom of Association Index (Thick)

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	0.891	0.827	0.87	0.811
2008	0.893	0.827	0.871	0.816
2009	0.893	0.842	0.87	0.817
2010	0.894	0.848	0.898	0.819
2011	0.893	0.848	0.898	0.819
2012	0.893	0.848	0.898	0.819
2013	0.892	0.825	0.891	0.83
2014	0.892	0.838	0.891	0.83
2015	0.891	0.813	0.873	0.848
2016	0.89	0.813	0.855	0.861
2017	0.882	0.815	0.853	0.821
2018	0.879	0.809	0.852	0.827
2019	0.878	0.817	0.856	0.841
2020	0.877	0.818	0.862	0.859
2021	0.873	0.85	0.84	0.846
2022	0.873	0.854	0.823	0.824

## Election Free and Fair Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	3.782	3.88	3.366	3.145
2008	3.812	3.88	3.366	3.508
2009	3.812	3.4	3.798	3.508
2010	3.832	3.4	3.798	3.508
2011	3.84	3.431	3.794	3.508
2012	3.83	3.431	3.794	3.393
2013	3.831	3.602	3.794	3.393
2014	3.811	3.725	3.859	3.635
2015	3.805	3.725	3.859	3.635
2016	3.795	3.869	3.859	3.734
2017	3.809	3.589	3.859	3.734
2018	3.765	3.589	3.859	3.734
2019	3.724	3.589	3.666	3.928
2020	3.68	3.589	3.666	3.467
2021	3.702	3.666	3.666	3.467
2022	3.695	3.666	3.666	3.467

## Electoral Democracy Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	0.851	0.709	0.789	0.612
2008	0.854	0.715	0.786	0.622
2009	0.857	0.697	0.787	0.669
2010	0.859	0.68	0.847	0.681
2011	0.86	0.675	0.855	0.683
2012	0.858	0.67	0.855	0.672
2013	0.852	0.66	0.833	0.669
2014	0.849	0.677	0.832	0.674
2015	0.847	0.67	0.818	0.711
2016	0.838	0.671	0.764	0.732
2017	0.827	0.629	0.735	0.695
2018	0.822	0.617	0.735	0.69
2019	0.822	0.611	0.742	0.745
2020	0.816	0.608	0.768	0.801
2021	0.81	0.672	0.756	0.77
2022	0.808	0.692	0.736	0.689

## Rule of Law Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	0.913	0.785	0.683	0.579
2008	0.912	0.782	0.687	0.584
2009	0.915	0.709	0.759	0.602
2010	0.917	0.697	0.828	0.639
2011	0.918	0.7	0.84	0.639
2012	0.916	0.712	0.849	0.626
2013	0.916	0.723	0.821	0.734
2014	0.918	0.739	0.82	0.773
2015	0.917	0.721	0.815	0.79
2016	0.915	0.706	0.788	0.869
2017	0.906	0.691	0.781	0.659
2018	0.896	0.67	0.777	0.526
2019	0.898	0.643	0.781	0.617
2020	0.902	0.644	0.812	0.749
2021	0.899	0.631	0.829	0.778
2022	0.907	0.791	0.854	0.768

## Executive Respects Constitution Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	3.182	2.876	3.11	2.323
2008	3.183	2.876	3.11	2.353
2009	3.188	2.876	3.11	2.353
2010	3.191	2.876	3.11	2.353
2011	3.179	2.876	3.11	2.353
2012	3.188	2.876	3.11	2.353
2013	3.169	2.876	3.11	2.353
2014	3.154	2.876	3.11	2.353
2015	3.114	2.876	3.11	2.353
2016	3.125	2.876	3.11	2.616
2017	3.119	2.876	3.189	2.339
2018	3.109	3.036	3.189	2.021
2019	3.099	2.9	3.189	2.372
2020	3.099	2.732	3.718	2.593
2021	3.075	2.732	3.718	3.001
2022	3.101	2.705	3.718	2.934

## Rational Legal Legitimation Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	3.128	3.333	2.933	2.95
2008	3.088	3.333	2.933	2.95
2009	3.079	3.333	2.933	2.95
2010	3.049	3.333	3.04	2.95
2011	3.049	3.333	3.04	2.95
2012	3.094	3.333	3.04	2.95
2013	3.092	3.333	3.04	2.95
2014	3.087	3.333	3.04	2.95
2015	3.074	3.333	3.04	2.95
2016	3.075	3.333	3.04	2.95
2017	3.078	3.333	3.04	2.95
2018	3.055	3.333	3.04	2.95
2019	3.072	3.295	3.04	2.95
2020	3.114	3.779	3.131	3.16
2021	3.037	3.308	3.017	3.16
2022	3.096	3.264	3.017	3.162

## Performance Legitimation Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	2.978	3.574	2.739	2.705
2008	2.978	3.574	2.739	2.705
2009	2.991	3.574	2.739	2.705
2010	2.987	3.525	2.509	2.705
2011	2.99	3.525	2.599	2.705
2012	3.014	3.525	2.599	2.705
2013	3.033	3.525	2.599	2.705
2014	3.024	3.531	2.599	2.705
2015	3.038	3.531	2.599	2.705
2016	3.029	3.531	2.762	2.705
2017	3.038	3.531	2.762	2.705
2018	3.038	3.531	2.845	2.705
2019	3.037	3.609	2.739	2.705
2020	3.024	3.777	3.203	2.705
2021	3.034	3.599	3.108	2.705
2022	3.024	3.534	3.216	2.408

## Access to Public Services Distributed by Socio-Economic Position Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	3.344	3.469	2.897	2.472
2008	3.335	3.469	2.897	2.472
2009	3.325	3.469	2.897	2.472
2010	3.314	2.819	3.358	2.472
2011	3.298	2.819	3.358	2.472
2012	3.298	2.819	3.358	2.472
2013	3.297	2.819	3.358	2.472
2014	3.297	2.819	3.358	2.472
2015	3.297	2.819	3.358	2.472
2016	3.304	2.819	3.173	2.472
2017	3.304	2.819	3.173	2.472
2018	3.291	2.819	3.173	2.472
2019	3.279	2.819	3.109	2.434
2020	3.236	2.796	3.109	2.434
2021	3.188	2.657	3.109	2.434
2022	3.167	2.593	3.109	1.468

## Equal Distribution of Resources Index

Year	European Union	Bulgaria	Croatia	Romania
2007	0.919	0.79	0.864	0.81
2008	0.918	0.79	0.864	0.81
2009	0.917	0.789	0.871	0.81
2010	0.916	0.79	0.871	0.807
2011	0.916	0.792	0.871	0.807
2012	0.913	0.789	0.875	0.807
2013	0.906	0.771	0.864	0.777
2014	0.904	0.757	0.864	0.745
2015	0.904	0.748	0.864	0.745
2016	0.901	0.758	0.857	0.732
2017	0.891	0.748	0.84	0.636
2018	0.886	0.749	0.86	0.624
2019	0.881	0.691	0.831	0.633
2020	0.868	0.691	0.866	0.584
2021	0.866	0.696	0.832	0.542
2022	0.866	0.74	0.832	0.54