

**Democracies under Threat: Explaining Democratic Backsliding in Central  
Eastern Europe**

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## Summary

This thesis aims to explain democratic backsliding in the European Union member states of Central Eastern Europe (CEE). Despite a successful transition to a democratic regime in the post-communist countries, multiple democracy indices have shown a decline of democracy in the region. The EU aims to reverse this process by measures such as sanctions, yet so far without success.

To tackle the issue of backsliding, it is necessary to understand why the process has been happening. Studies on explaining backsliding, however, are dispersed and disagree with each other. Therefore, this thesis has combined the different theories explaining backsliding in the previous literature into two different models. This thesis will test which model is most likely to explain democratic backsliding. Therefore, the following research question is formulated: “Does the top-down model or bottom-up model better explains democratic backsliding in EU Central Eastern European countries?”

To investigate this, a congruence analysis is performed. The two countries with the highest levels of democratic backsliding according to the V-dem index are taken as cases: Hungary and Poland. One model is tested by examining the populist rhetoric of political leaders and the proportionality of the electoral system. The other model is tested by analysing citizens’ satisfaction with democracy and economic development.

According to the analysis, the top-down model is most likely to explain backsliding in CEE. This means that the reasons behind backsliding are mainly found in the organisation of the state. Therefore, the EU is advised to revise measures and make sure sanctions specifically target the leader, or change the electoral system in a country.

This research is limited in both its external and internal validity. Although a correlation is found between the propositions and backsliding, information is lacking to establish a causal relationship. Future research should test both models more extensively and with more cases.

Keywords: Central Eastern Europe, democracy, democratic backsliding, European Union, Hungary, Poland.

## Preface

During my master International Public Management and Public Policy and my bachelor in Political Science, I have learned the ins and outs of policy making on an international level. As a Dutch student, I have had the opportunity to voice my concerns about policies and critique them. However, I also realise that not everyone in the world has the same opportunities. Even in Europe, citizens are not always able to fully express themselves. I believe that everyone should be able to have a voice in the policies that are affecting them. Therefore, with this thesis, I hope to make a difference in tackling these threats to freedom of expression by looking at the issue of democratic backsliding.

I have chosen to focus on Central Eastern Europe, as I find it fascinating that these countries have recently seen such a successful transition to democracy, but now see a reverse process. How can this be happening? Moreover, I am worried about the response of the European Union. Or rather, the inability of the Union to respond effectively.

I also would like to make clear that, although I have Polish ancestors, I am not from Central Eastern Europe. In this thesis, I have tried not to make any assumptions about the region.

Finally, I would like to thank professor dr. Asya Zhelyazkova for her guidance during this thesis process. Her patience and clear feedback have definitely helped me successfully finishing this Master thesis. In addition, I would like to thank my fellow IMP students, who took the time to carefully evaluate my thesis and discuss the feedback during the thesis circles. Finally, I especially would like to thank my father, Manfred Zielinski, for his mental support the last years. Without him, I would not have been able to finish this thesis.

Isabelle Zielinski,

Rotterdam, July 2022

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### **List of Abbreviations**

EU	European Union
CEE	Central Eastern Europe
V-Dem index	Varieties of Democracy Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPD	Global Populism Database
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development



## **1. Introduction**

“Democracy provides an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely expressed will of people is exercised. People have a say in decisions and can hold decision-makers to account. Women and men have equal rights and all people are free from discrimination” (United Nations, n.d., §4).

Democracy is seen as one of the most fundamental values in the Western world. In 2015, world leaders agreed in the Sustainable Development Agenda that a world with democratic institutions in which the rule of law is followed, will result in more sustainability (UN General Assembly, 2015). Democracy ensures more equality, participation and human development. It makes sure that people have a say in decision-making and can hold their governments into account (United Nations, n.d.).

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

In the past decade, scholars and international organisations warn that democracy is in danger. In every region in the world, the fundamental values of democracy are under attack by incumbent leaders and their governments. Attacks on democratic institutions are spreading faster than ever (Csaky, 2021). More and more alternative forms of government are taking root. Anti-democratic leaders have begun to change the democratic norms and share their practices with other leaders, causing an accelerating process.

Countries are trapped in a cycle of setbacks (Freedom House, 2021). A report by Freedom House (2022) shows that in 2021, democracies globally were declining for the sixteenth time in a row. A quarter of the world’s population is living in a country in which democracy is eroding. This is not only happening in countries that are still implementing democratic institutions, but also in long-established democratic regimes (Freedom House 2022). As a report from the Freedom House (2022) states: “The global order is nearing a tipping point and if democracy’s defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail” (p. 1).

The phenomenon of gradual erosion of democracy is also called democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016). Countries that witness democratic backsliding generally

face three attacks on democracy. Firstly, elections are undermined, causing them to lack transparency and fairness. Secondly, civil and political rights are attacked, such as freedom of speech. Finally, judicial autonomy is sabotaged and biased in favour of the incumbent. These attacks are often initiated by a non-democratic leader in office (Bermeo, 2016; Bellamy & Kröger, 2021).

There are multiple international organisations that aim to tackle democratic backsliding and defend democracy. One of the most important international advocates of democratic values is the European Union (EU). The Union aims to support democratisation both externally and internally. Externally, the EU firstly encourages participation in partner countries. Moreover, the EU has so-called election observer missions, during which they inspect elections in other countries to make sure they are free and fair. Finally, the European Parliament has a dedicated body that works on ensuring democracy abroad (Vandeputte & Luciani, 2018). Internally, the Union places strong emphasis on the importance of democracy and its liberal values. This can for example be seen with the Copenhagen Criteria, which are the accession criteria by which countries need to abide by when they want to join the EU. The political criterion is: “stability of institutions, guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities” (European Commission, n.d., §2). Moreover, to enhance democracies, the EU has created the European Democracy Action Plan. The plan is designed to empower citizens by promoting free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom and countering disinformation (European Commission, 2020).

Despite the efforts of the European Union, there has also been indications of democratic backsliding in member state countries (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022). Especially in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) alarms have been raised, while this is a region that was once hailed because of its successful democratic transformation after the fall of the Soviet Union. A report of the Freedom House shows that attacks on democracy in that region are “spreading faster than ever” (Freedom House, 2022, §1).

Threats to democracy especially stand out in Hungary and Poland. Hungary is, according to Freedom House, not a free country anymore. Poland has known the steepest decline in democracy in the past years. The ruling parties in both countries have been openly spreading anti-democratic practices. Elections are rarely fair.

Criticism of the government or assemblies is seen as a threat by the incumbent. Judicial autonomy is harmed by corruption (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022).

Other countries in CEE are following this trend, such as Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania. For instance, Slovenia had the steepest decline in democracy scores in 2021. The current right-wing government has continued to attack democratic institutions and independent media. For instance, prime minister Jansa has verbally offended the media, the judiciary and other civil society organisations. The new government has also passed new media laws that would increase the political influence over broadcasts (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022; Freedom House, 2021).

These recent developments in Central Eastern Europe have brought the issue of democratic backsliding in both the political and academic centre. The erosion of democracy can be seen as one of the most existential threats to the European Union (Serhan, 2022). Yet, both academics and policymakers are uncertain about how to address this problem.

## **1.2. Research Question**

In order to tackle the problem of democratic backsliding, it is necessary to get to the roots of the problem. This thesis has combined the different theories explaining backsliding in the previous literature into two different models; the top-down model and the bottom-up model. Subsequently, this study examines which model is most likely to explain democratic backsliding. Therefore, the following research question is formulated:

*Does the top-down model or the bottom-up model better explain democratic backsliding in EU Central Eastern European Countries?*

## **1.3. Societal Relevance**

This thesis contributes to society in various ways. To begin, it is relevant for the European Union to know what explains democratic backsliding in Central Eastern Europe. The state of democracy in the member states matters to the EU, as it has an impact on the legitimacy of the EU. If there is democratic backsliding, this can show that the EU lacks credibility. Moreover, the non-democratic leaders have a say in decision-making in the European Parliament and indirectly via the Council of the EU. Non-democratic leaders do not represent their citizens justly and thus can twist

EU policy. As a result, member states that are backsliding can add to the democratic deficit of the EU. In addition, the EU gives structural funds to countries such as Hungary and Poland. When there is democratic backsliding in such countries, it is feared that these funds are misused in favour of the ruling party, which undermines the purpose (Bellamy & Kröger, 2021).

The Union has already aimed to tackle the problem of democratic backsliding in the member states by multiple measures. The European Commission has tried to launch Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty against Poland and Hungary. This means that a country has breached the EU's fundamental laws, such as freedom of speech and rule of law (Treaty on the European Union, Article 7, 2008). As a result, a country can be suspended from certain rights. However, this procedure has proven to be ineffective, as it needs unanimity for the measure to proceed. Both Hungary and Poland will back each other up in the Council (Serhan, 2020). The EU has also tried to limit the funding to Hungary and Poland, yet this requires the support of both the EU head of state and the European Parliament. Other member states are reluctant to withhold the funding, as they are afraid this can happen to themselves in the future (Serhan, 2020). Finally, the EU has initiated a formal infringement procedure against Hungary and Poland. This means that the countries have not implemented EU rule of law and are therefore referred to the EU Court of Justice, where they can face financial penalties (European Commission, n.d.). So far, there have been three infringement procedures against Hungary and one against Poland. The disadvantage of this measure is that it takes time and does not ensure improvement (Serhan, 2020).

Thus, current responses of the EU have proven to be insufficient. For the EU to tackle the issue of democratic backsliding in the member states, it is necessary to get to the root of the problem. This thesis aims to contribute to the knowledge of the factors driving backsliding, in order to help the EU address this issue.

It is not only for European policymakers relevant to explain democratic backsliding in CEE. Politicians around the world can learn from the results of this study. There are currently still a lot of countries undergoing a democratic transition. The explanations behind democratic backsliding in Central Eastern Europe, could help combat or even prevent backsliding in other regions in the world.

#### **1.4. Academic Relevance**

Currently, there is a vast amount of research that aims to explain backsliding worldwide. These studies focus on different explanations. Therefore, the academic literature is extremely dispersed. There have been previous attempts to create coherent models of explanations of democratic backsliding (e.g. Tomini & Wagemann, 2018; Gerschewski, 2021) However, these models are outdated or do not explain the situation correctly in Central Eastern Europe. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by combining factors from previous literature into two new models: the top-down model and the bottom-up model.

Additionally, a lot of the previous research has theorised explanations for democratic backsliding in Central Eastern Europe. However, the majority of the studies have not empirically tested their theories on cases. Thus, this thesis also adds to the previous literature in that it tests multiple existing theories.

#### **1.3. Structure**

Chapter 2 starts with an overview of the previous literature. The concept of democratic backsliding will be further elaborated on and previous theories explaining democratic backsliding will be outlined.

Chapter 3 provides the theoretical framework of this study. The two new approaches; the top-down and the bottom-up approach will be explained and propositions for each model will be formulated.

Chapter 4 discusses the research design of this study. Also, the relevant concepts will be defined and it will be explained how this will be measured. This chapter further describes possible threats to the reliability and validity of the study.

In chapter 5, the congruence analysis will be performed. Both the top-down, as the bottom-up model will be tested for the cases Hungary and Poland. In both cases, the propositions will be tested with data from international organizations and scholars.

Subsequently, in chapter 6, the data gathered from both Hungary and Poland will be set side by side. Furthermore, the results will be compared to the previous literature in this field.

Finally, in chapter 7, a conclusion will be drawn on which model is most likely to explain democratic backsliding. Possible limitations and suggestions for future research and policymakers will be drawn up.

## **2. Literature Review**

In what will follow, an overview will be given of the current literature on democratic backsliding. First, a conceptual overview will be given on democratisation and its reverse process. Next, literature on the different variants of democratic backsliding and the trends over the recent decades will be analysed. Subsequently, an overview will be given of previous literature on the causes of democratic backsliding in Central Eastern Europe. Finally, previous studies that have created models of the explanations behind backsliding will be described.

### **2.1. Conceptualising Democracy and its Reverse Process**

#### ***2.1.1. Conceptualisation of Democracy***

In the past decades, there has been a vast amount of research on democracies and explaining why democracies would transform. Before looking into this research, it is important to establish a clear definition of democracy. There has been a lot of ambiguity in defining democracy, but in general, there is an agreement in the literature that a country would classify as a democracy if it has integrated three different pillars (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021).

The first pillar entails that democracy must have free and fair elections. Fair elections make sure that it is possible to turn over the executive government. As a result, fair elections can ensure vertical accountability, which means that citizens can hold governments responsible for their actions. Free and fair elections can be threatened in various ways. On the one hand, attacks can be subtle, such as disinformation campaigns that deceive voters or efforts to suppress votes through specific voting laws. On the other hand, it can also be in more extreme ways, such as meddling in the process itself or even fraud with the votes (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021).

The second pillar of democracy is the protection of political rights and civil liberties, such as free speech, the right to assemble and the rights of minorities. These political rights are crucial for citizens, organisations and political parties to criticise the government. The protection of the media also falls under this pillar (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021).

The third pillar of democracy is the horizontal checks. This can be traced back to Montesquieu's famous "*trias politica*", also called the separation of powers (1748). This means that the executive, legislative and judicial branches must be separated, to prevent a concentration of power and to make sure that there are sufficient checks and balances. When democracy is under threat, a collapse can be seen in the separation of these institutions, for example by the appointment of loyalists, or attacks on other independent institutions like the ombudsman (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021).

In the past decade, there have been increasing concerns by academics that these three fundamental pillars of democracy are under threat in countries across the world. Political scientists claim that in history, three surges of democracy have occurred, which have been referred to as "waves of democracy" (Huntington, 1991). The first wave took place in the nineteenth century, during which Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom turned democratic. The victory of the Allies at the end of the Second World War sparked a second wave of democratisation. Finally, the third wave of democratisation is identified, which was initiated around the end of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, after which democratic change spread to South-Asia, the post-Communist bloc in Eastern Europe and countries in Africa (Huntington, 1991).

However, this third wave of democratisation might be reversing, as democratic elements are traded in for autocratic components. As a consequence, Lührman and Lindberg (2019) have introduced the concept "waves of autocratisation", which is defined as "a time period during which the number of countries undergoing democratisation declines, while at the same time autocratisation affects more and more countries" (p.1102). The authors argue that since 1994, there is a third wave of autocratisation happening, during which democratic institutions across the world are facing gradual setbacks (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

### **2.1.2. Conceptualisation Reverse Process**

There has been disagreement in the literature on how to conceptualise this reverse process. Different concepts have been used, such as democratic breakdown, collapse, overthrown, democratic backsliding, deterioration, de-democratisation etcetera (Cassani & Tomini, 2020). Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) argue that these

different ways of conceptualising the reverse democratisation process can be distinguished into three different categories.

Firstly, there is a “breakdown of democracy”, which means that there is a sudden collapse of democracy and the regime fully turns back into an autocracy. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) argue that this conceptualisation is limited, as it is hard to measure a certain point when a democracy fully collapses and turns into an autocracy.

Secondly, there is the notion of “democratic backsliding”. Democratic backsliding is defined by a variety of scholars. Bermeo (2016) defines democratic backsliding as “state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (p.5). There are many different political institutions that can be impacted by backsliding and multiple agents that can set this process in motion. Therefore, Bermeo (2016) acknowledges that this is still a wide definition and more specification is needed for its practical meaning. Another definition that is often referred to in the literature is by Haggard and Kaufmann (2021), which define democratic backsliding as “the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that result from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader” (p.1). Haggard and Kaufmann (2021) highlight the importance of erosion of institutions. This means that backsliding is a gradual process and not, like democratic breakdown, a full reversion.

Finally, Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) distinguish the concept of “autocratisation”, which they view as a more overarching term. It covers both the sudden breakdown of democracies and the gradual process of democratic backsliding. Autocratisation is seen as “any move away from democracy” (p.1099). Hence, while democratic backsliding happens in countries that have had some form of democracy, autocratisation can also be found in countries that already have an autocratic regime and have become even more autocratic (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

The scope of this thesis is to examine democratic countries in which the three democratic pillars are gradually threatened, therefore the focus will be on the concept of democratic backsliding. This thesis will use the democratic backsliding definition of Haggard and Kaufmann (2021) which means that democratic institutions, rules and norms are slowly eroded, often by an elected government.



Gora and de Wilde (2022) specify this definition and argue that democratic backsliding can happen on three different dimensions, which highlight different aspects of backsliding in a country. Firstly, there is a decay of liberal values and institutions in the rule of law. Secondly, the political discourse is deteriorated, making it difficult for citizens to criticise the incumbent government. The final dimension is declining participation. This means that in a country with democratic backsliding, elections are not free and fair, and turnout is declining. The three dimensions do not exclude each other. For instance, a country can already be backsliding when there is only a deterioration of political discourse (Gora & de Wilde, 2022).

## **2.2. Trends of Democratic Backsliding**

There has been extensive literature written on different trends of democratic backsliding after signals of erosion of democracy in the world. Nancy Bermeo (2016) is one of the most prominent scholars that has identified and empirically researched different trends of backsliding.

To begin, she argues that since the Cold War, three different forms of democratic backsliding have been perceived less often. Firstly, there is a decline in the classic coup d'état. A coup d'état is an effort, organised by for example the military or state elites, to remove the current executive organ. The likelihood of a successful coup declined to zero in the 2000s. Secondly, there is a decline in executive coups, or also called self-coups, which happens when the elected nation's leader enhances its power by removing the powers of other branches of government. The number of executive coups was fairly high during the Cold War, but has plummeted substantially in the past decades. Finally, there has also been a decrease in election-day vote fraud. This could be caused by normative changes or due to increased election monitoring (Bermeo, 2016).

Despite the perceived decline in these three different variants of democratic backsliding, other forms of democratic backsliding remain unchallenged or are even on the rise in the past decade (Bermeo, 2016). To begin, the promissory coup, which happens when the elected government is overthrown with the excuse to increase democratic legality. However, democratic institutions rarely improve or democracy is not even restored (Bermeo, 2016). Secondly, a form of democratic backsliding that

has increased is executive aggrandisement. This is a process where elected executives weaken checks and balances one by one. The checks are often removed by elected officials that have a strong popular mandate. As a result, this process happens frequently via legal channels, such as referenda (Bermeo, 2016). Finally, a form of democratic backsliding that has been on the surge is the strategic manipulation of elections. This entails measures that tilt the electoral playing ground in favour of the government in office. Examples are; hampering voting registration, using government money for campaigns or harassing opponents. These actions are often so subtle that it is not seen as fraud, or election monitors are not able to observe them (Bermeo, 2016).

The trends identified by Bermeo (2016) are also seen in other empirical studies. For example, Lürhmann and Lindberg (2019) made an empirical overview of all autocratisation episodes from 1900 by using the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem). They found that elected leaders now mainly use legal and gradual strategies to undermine democracies. Strong leaders have “learned their lesson” and now work more cautiously when trying to overhaul democracy (p. 1108).

### **2.3. Theories on Democratic Backsliding**

Besides the literature that aims to conceptualise democratic backsliding, there have also been studies on the causes of this phenomenon. One of the most prominent studies in explaining democratic backsliding is done by Waldner and Lust (2018). They have identified five different strands of theories that explain democratic backsliding by categorising the already existing studies into different strands. In what will follow, an overview will be given of these different strands.

To begin, the first family of theories that aims to explain democratic backsliding in countries is agency-based theories. This subset of theories argues that the regression of democracy can be explained by the behaviour of the political leader. For example, a political leader has a certain personal attribute, (e.g. a temperament) or is seeking power, that results in the gradual erosion of democratic institutions (Waldner & Lust, 2018).

The second family of theories explains backsliding by looking at the political culture. This subset of theories looks at the way attitudes, beliefs, norms and practices can influence democracy. Culture can change democratic outcomes

directly, namely by creating a preference for a certain form of political practice, but also indirectly, such as by creating a manner to cooperate with other political actors (Waldner & Lust, 2018).

The third factor that has been used to explain democratic backsliding is the effects of political institutions and the institutional design of a country. Political institutions can influence the extent of democratic backsliding in three ways. To begin, the type of political institutions of a country can change the level of vertical accountability, which means that citizens can hold governments responsible for their actions (Lührmann et al., 2020). For example, governments can have institutions that are less responsive to citizens. Secondly, political institutions can have an effect on horizontal accountability, which are the checks and balances in a country. Governmental agencies can have more or less power to restrain an authoritarian leader from taking power. For example, Linz (1990) and Reynolds (2011) have found that institutions based on proportional representation can prevent democratic backsliding from happening, while presidential systems can increase the chances of backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018).

The fourth approach to explain democratic backsliding is by looking at the political economy of a country. This is an approach that looks more at external factors influencing democracy in a country (Waldner & Lust, 2018). In the literature, four different political-economic variables are identified that could explain democratic backsliding; 1) the level of income in a country, 2) the degree of income inequality, 3) the extent to which a country is a rentier state and 4) the short-term macro-economic performances. In general, poor economic performance in a country could lead to citizens accepting non-democratic alternatives. Yet, the causal link between economic conditions and democratic backsliding should be further investigated (Waldner & Lust, 2018).

The fifth theory looks at the social structure and political coalitions. This family of theories argues that major divisions in society could lead to conflict. Two dimensions of division can be identified: an economic structure and a sociocultural dimension. The economic dimension contains divisions in society due to conflicting interests, such as town versus country. The socioeconomic dimension contains divisions due to religious, linguistic or ethnic attributes in society. These divisions can be used by political leaders to get into power and use non-democratic actions or

can lead to less democratic support in general. For example, in a heterogeneous society, there is more chance of polarisation between different groups, which in turn could lead to more democratic backsliding (Wander & Lust, 2018).

The final explanation for democratic backsliding found in the previous literature is international influences. This strand of theories argues that the international system, instead of domestic actors, is the sole reason for democratic backsliding. To begin, Levitsky and Way (2006) explain democratic progress by looking at Western leverage and linkage. Western leverage means that authoritarian regimes are pressured by liberal countries to democratise. This can be done by linkage, which are economic, political or social ties between countries. Therefore, Levitsky and Way (2006) argue that if young democracies have little exposure to leverage and linkage, they are more likely to backslide, as they have fewer incentives to stay democratic. A second theory is that of so-called regional diffusion. Gleditsch and Ward (2006) have argued that democratic backsliding is less likely to happen if a country is part of a democratic international organisation or part of a region where other countries are democratic. For example, a democratic movement in one country can diffuse to another country. A third explanation is used by Hyde (2007), who argues that international electoral monitoring can prevent electoral fraud and therefore decreases democratic backsliding in countries.

#### **2.4. Explaining Democratic Backsliding in CEE**

Concerns about more democratic backsliding have also been raised in the European Union, where illiberal trends are seen in Central Eastern Europe. Specifically, scholars have argued that there are signs of executive aggrandisement, meaning that the incumbent government is eroding checks and balances one by one (Cianetti, Dawson & Hanley, 2018; Gora & de Wilde, 2020; Lorenz & Anders, 2020).

Previous literature has aimed to explain democratic backsliding in CEE. In what will follow, an overview will be given of these explanations. The studies are categorised into the relevant strands of theories, identified by Waldner and Lust (2018); 1) political economic factors, 2) political institutional factors, 3) political cultural factors and 4) agency-based theories. Appendix A provides a systematic overview of the different studies.

### ***2.4.1. Political Economic Factors***

To begin, multiple studies have argued that economic and financial problems are the reason behind the increased democratic erosion in CEE. Szente (2017) claims that a possible cause of the erosion of democratic institutions is the economic and financial problems of the country. He argues that there has been a widespread disappointment in the gains of EU membership in CEE. For example, the rate at which Hungary converges economically with the rest of the EU has been slower than before its accession. Also, the living standards in Hungary have stayed behind compared to other EU countries. The model of liberalisation has thus not delivered its promises and welfare for the majority of the citizens has stayed behind. As a result, the Fidesz government could use the economic and financial problems as an argument to justify non-democratic behaviour. As Szente (2017) states: “economic liberalisation was promoted at the expense of political liberalisation” (p.471). The theory of Szente (2017) is limited in that it has only looked at the case of Hungary. Other countries in the region, such as Poland, have not seen similar macro-economic problems, while they did experience democratic backsliding.

Karolewski and Benedikter (2017) have looked at the case of Poland to investigate democratic backsliding in the region. They have found that in the entire CEE region, democratic backsliding can be accounted for by poor economic governance domestically. During the accession period, the post-communist countries adopted the neoliberal economic model. This quickly resulted in economic development, with strong growth in the gross domestic product (GDP) and a newly emerging middle class and financial upper class. However, the neoliberal approach also resulted in more inequality and certain groups of society were excluded from the benefits of economic development. A large portion of society was not able to find a job, there was low social mobility, and a lacking welfare system. This caused citizens to be in constant fear of socio-economic decline. Hence, although the macro-economic data of some countries in CEE, such as Poland, might look promising, neoliberal economic governance in the long-term caused social inequality in the CEE region. The disappointing results of the neoliberal model have resulted in more resentment towards the democratic liberal model post-accession and more tolerance of the non-democratic behaviour of leaders (Karolewski & Benedikter, 2017).

Another often-cited reason for democratic backsliding in CEE is the financial crisis of 2007-2008. The severe economic consequences due to the crisis could have led to a decline in trust in the government and increasing dissatisfaction with the current system, leading to a possible collapse of democracy. Bochsler and Juon (2019) have researched whether the financial crisis had an influence on democratic backsliding in CEE countries. However, based on a systematic analysis of the region, they concluded that the financial crisis did not initiate backsliding (Bochsler & Juon, 2019).

Finally, a more controversial research has been done by Arató and Benedek (2021). They have investigated whether democratic backsliding and abstaining from the Eurozone are connected. They hypothesised that Eurozone countries are less likely to democratically backslide, as they have tighter co-operation in fiscal policy and bank supervision, causing more shared sovereignty in democratic institutions. They found that being part of the Eurozone can decrease the chances of democratic backsliding. Arató and Benedek (2021) do emphasise that their study is limited, as they were able to find a correlation, but not necessarily a causal relationship. They are not implying that being a Eurozone country automatically means democratic stability. Yet, the study does theorise that it is a factor that could add to the stability of democracy and rule of law.

#### ***2.4.2. Political-Institutional Factors***

In addition to scholars that have attributed democratic backsliding in CEE to political-economic reasons, other scholars have argued that it is caused by political-institutional factors. Batory (2015) has investigated the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in CEE by looking at the case of Hungary. She makes the link between populism and its negative consequences for democracy in a country, as populist parties disrespect the foundations of democracy, in order to gain electoral victories. Batory (2015) emphasises the importance of the institutional system for the victory of such populist governments. Specifically, in Hungary the constitution that was established in 1989 for the electoral system includes disproportional elements. This makes it easier for larger parties to have landslide victories and harder for the political opposition to control them. As a result, the electoral system made it easier for the Hungarian Fidesz party to override democratic checks and balances and to change the constitution even more to their advantage (Batory, 2015; Buzogány, 2017).

### **2.4.3. Political-Cultural Factors**

Different studies have attributed democratic backsliding in CEE to political-cultural factors. A new study by Wunsch et al. (2022) has examined why citizens still vote for political candidates that openly violate democratic standards. They argued that the political culture could explain democratic backsliding, as there might be a distinct view on democracy. To examine this, they surveyed Polish citizens and measured their attitudes towards democracy. The results show that democratic backsliding can be explained by the fact that the Polish electorate prefers authoritarian and are thus more indifferent toward a political leader that erodes democracy. This can be explained by the communist legacy that is still embedded in the Polish culture (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017; Wunsch et al, 2022).

Ágh (2016) has also analysed the case of Hungary. He theorises that weak democratic institutions in CEE cause democratic backsliding. Specifically, he argues that the political institutions established in the post-communist states have not been socially consolidated. Citizens do not support democracy, as the institutions were introduced in a different social-cultural context than the West. These weak institutions make people believe less in democracy, making it easier for parties to implement anti-democratic practices (Ágh, 2016).

### **2.4.4. Agency-based Factors**

There is also a strand of literature that focuses on the strategies of political actors and their discourses to explain democratic backsliding in CEE. To begin, Dawson and Hanley (2019) criticise rational-institutional approaches to explain backsliding, like institutional and economic factors, as they are too focused on fixed institutions and often empirically fail to prove their claims. Instead, they argue that there should be more focus on the influence of political actors on shaping democracy. Therefore, they argue for the so-called discursive institutionalist approach, developed by Schmidt (2008). This approach focuses on the importance of the discourse of political actors in forming and changing institutions. Political actors do not always have fixed preferences, but instead follow a logic of communication and are flexible. Leaders base their decisions on the meaning of a wider context. As a consequence, political actors can limit democratic institutions. Using this approach, Dawson and Hanley (2019) found that democratic backsliding in CEE is mainly caused by the suggestions of political actors of the so-called titular state, which is the

idea that a state should only belong to the dominant ethnic group. This is seen in both Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, where ideas of ethnically exclusive states have increased anti-liberal sentiments. Thus, the study theorises that democratic backsliding cannot be explained by exogenous shocks, such as the financial crisis or refugee crisis. Instead, it is driven by the ideology and discourse of the parties in power, which have driven illiberal sentiment in their countries by a discourse of exclusivity (Dawson and Hanley, 2019).

This view is shared by Herman (2016), who analysed the case of Hungary. She emphasises the importance of mainstream parties' strategies of mobilisation. Mainstream parties' commitment to democracy is essential in preventing democratic erosion, as it indicates that democratic norms are deeply rooted in society. Herman (2016) argues that in CEE, mainstream parties have often adopted the rhetoric of populists, making it easier for populist parties to continue their illiberal actions.

Another theory for explaining democratic backsliding from an agency-based approach is created by Vachudova (2020), who has analysed countries in CEE and blames leaders who take a so-called ethno-populist strategy in their politics. This means that they frame citizens from another culture, ethnicity, race or religion as the enemy, such as immigrants and refugees. These people would threaten national security, the economy and the survival of their state. Moreover, these "enemies" would work together with opposition parties and the independent media to disadvantage the "true people" of the nation (Vachudova, 2020). In turn, this ethno-populist discourse can be used by the political leaders to be elected, but also, once in power, to legitimise illiberal attacks on the state. Political leaders frame non-democratic behaviour as necessary to protect the state from these enemies and to defend the will of the "true" people (Vachudova, 2020).

## **2.5. Models Explaining Democratic Backsliding**

In the previous literature on democratic backsliding in the CEE region, a lot of different factors are identified to explain backsliding. Yet, it is important to have a coherent image of what causes democratic backsliding. Therefore, previous scholars have attempted to combine these different explanations into models explaining



backsliding. In what will follow, a review of the existing theoretical approaches will be given.

### ***2.5.1. The Opposition-based Model versus the Crisis-based Model***

Tomini and Wagemann (2018) have looked into the causes of democratic backsliding. They emphasise that the current literature on democratic regression is deeply fragmented. There is a lack of studies that compare different cases in different regions. Therefore, Tomini and Wagemann (2018) aim to fill this gap by performing a comparative analysis of patterns of democratic backsliding, including regions other than Western Europe and Latin America. They adopt the same theories that are outlined by Wander and Lust (2018), but investigate whether there is also multi-causality between the various factors to create a comprehensive explanation of democratic backsliding. Based on the results, Tomini and Wagemann (2018) propose two new models of democratic backsliding: an opposition-based model and a crisis-based model.

The opposition-based model argues that backsliding takes place in a country with a lack of economic development and ethnolinguistic fractionalisation. A lack of economic development is perceived as a consequence of bad government performance and ethnolinguistic fractionalisation causes strong political divisions. Next to that, there must be a volatile party system and an accumulation of executive power in the country. As the name suggests, the role of the opposition is crucial in causing democratic backsliding. Two different scenarios can be identified. Firstly, the ethnic divisions and poor performance of the current government cause more support for the opposition. As a result, the incumbent government feels threatened and feel urged to adopt authoritarian measures. A second option is that the opposition seizes power through elections but is disloyal to democratic practices. This is for example seen in Venezuela, where Hugo Chaves was first a critical player in the opposition. However, once elected into government, he immediately consolidated all power (Tomini & Wagemann, 2018).

The crisis-based model also happens in countries with a lack of economic development, combined with ethnolinguistic fractionalisation or strong socioeconomic inequality. However, the key motion that causes democratic backsliding here is not the opposition, but the presence of a crisis. In this model, two processes can be initiated. The crisis can cause the government to feel threatened by

the protests and social movements, causing them to reduce civil and political rights. A second option is that citizens are discontent with the government and overthrown them by a coup, after which democratic institutions do not return (Tomini & Wagemann, 2018).

The research of Tomini and Wagemann (2018) is limited, as conditions in countries are simplified and it is difficult to distinguish certain structural conditions. Moreover, the two models cannot fully explain democratic backsliding in CEE according to the previous literature outlined in chapter 2.4.

### ***2.5.2. The Exogenous Model versus the Endogenous Model***

Another attempt to model explanations of democratic backsliding has been done by Gerschewski (2021). He argues that democratic backsliding is a multi-caused process and a complex phenomenon. Therefore, he establishes a new axis along which the existing causes can be classified: exogenous and endogenous explanations. Exogenous explanations are causes that are located outside the institution. These include sources that are associated with forms of erosion of democracy. An example of this is the linkage and leverage causes, as outlined by Levitsky and Way (2006). Endogenous explanations are causes that are located inside the institutions, such as a disproportionate electoral system. Gerschewski (2021) argues that the phrase “erosion of democracy” is often used in the literature, but exogenous factors rarely explain democratic backsliding. Instead, endogenous causes are more convincing and more widespread. Future research is advised to use this distinction between exogenous and endogenous causes. The distinction made by Gerschewski (2021) can be criticised, as it might be too simplistic in explaining the situation in CEE.

### ***2.5.3. The Supply Side versus the Demand Side***

Another model to explain democratic backsliding is made by Wunsch et al. (2022). They distinguish between supply and demand side explanations. On the one hand, the supply side of democracy focuses on the political elite. Authoritarian leaders that come into power convince the electorate to vote for them through buyouts and ideological rhetoric. On the other hand, the demand side focuses on the political culture of a country and the citizens to explain democratic backsliding. For example, they argue that the demand side is the best model to explain backsliding in

Poland, as the citizens do not support democracy (Wunsch et al. 2022). Although for a large part, the supply versus demand side model could work for CEE, it still misses some explanatory factors that are mentioned in previous literature, such as the disproportionality of the electoral system.

#### ***2.5.4. The Micro level versus the Macro Level***

A final model to explain democratic backsliding is seen in an article by Orhan (2021). By empirically analysing 170 elections in 54 countries, he identifies macro-level and micro-level explanations for democratic backsliding. The macro-level looks at the bigger picture and focuses on factors such as economic inequality, or collusion between economic and government shortcomings. Micro-level explanations, however, focus solely on the behaviour of citizens and why they vote for non-democratic leaders. Examples are disbelief in democracy, differing norms or uncertainty (Orhan, 2021). Like Wunsch et al. (2022), Orhan (2021) emphasises that citizen behaviour is the most important factor to explain democratic backsliding, thus arguing for the micro-level approach. It can be argued that this model is also too simplistic to explain backsliding in CEE.

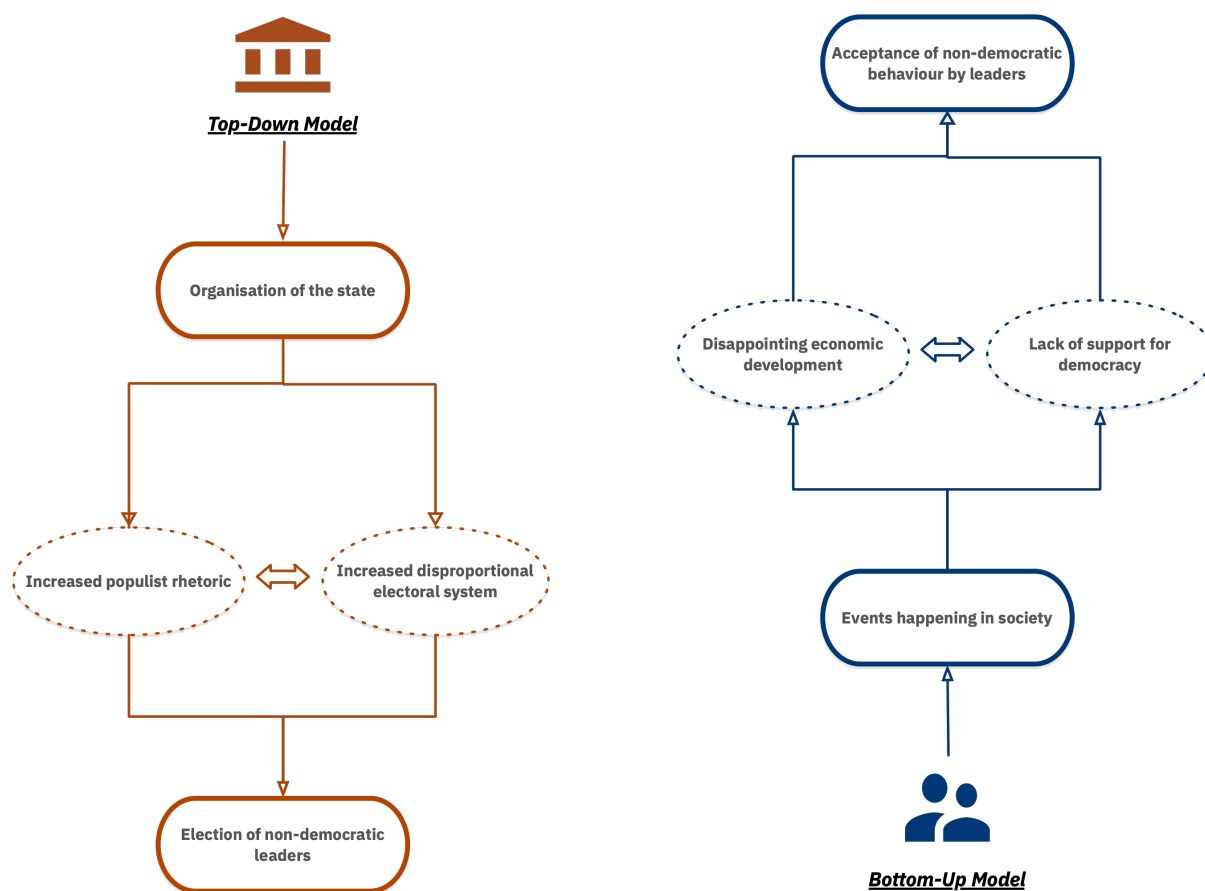
### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.2. A New Model

In the literature review, models that combine factors explaining democratic backsliding have been assessed (see chapter 2.5.). These models make a fair attempt to explain democratic backsliding. Yet, when analysing the previous literature on democratic backsliding in Central Eastern Europe, it can be argued that they do not fully explain why the erosion of democratic institutions has been happening. Therefore, this thesis combines the different explanations in the previous literature into two new models to explain backsliding: a top-down model and a bottom-up model. Figure 1 shows a systematic overview of both models. In what will follow, these two approaches will be elaborated upon.

**Figure 1**

*Schematic Overview Top-down Model & Bottom-up Model*



### **3.2.1. Top-Down Model**

The first model to explain democratic backsliding has a top-down approach. This approach focuses on the organisation of a state to explain backsliding, such as government policies or the institutional design of a country. Influences that come from the institutions of a state cause non-democratic leaders to be elected. This model contains often more structural explanations.

Building on the previous literature that explains democratic backsliding in CEE, multiple factors can be identified that fall under this top-down approach. Firstly, many different articles in the literature on backsliding in CEE argue that it is the behaviour of the political leader that explains democratic backsliding, also called agency-based theories. To begin, Dawson and Hanley (2019) argue that it is the discourse of the political elites in a country and the framing of these elites that causes institutions to change. This argument is supported by Vachudova (2020), who argues that political leaders in CEE spread an ethno-populist rhetoric, framing people from another culture as the enemy and defending the general will. Similarly, Kósa et al. (2021) have found that framing by political leaders and the media has resulted in polarisation, which in turn increased the chances of backsliding. Finally, the behaviour of mainstream parties falls under the top-down approach to explain democratic backsliding. Herman (2016) found that if mainstream parties adopted the rhetoric of populist parties, democratic backsliding was more likely to occur. Therefore, based on the previous literature, the following proposition for the top-down model is formulated:

*Proposition 1: An increasingly populist discourse of political leaders, increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*

Besides the behaviour of the political elites in a country, also studies that attribute democratic backsliding to the institutional design fall under the top-down approach. Batory (2015) has found that democratic backsliding in CEE is caused by the disproportionality of the electoral system, which makes it easier for non-democratic governments to override democratic checks and balances. As a result, the following proposition can be formulated:

*Proposition 2: An increasingly disproportional electoral system, increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*

### **3.2.1. Bottom-up Model**

Contradictory to the top-down model, the bottom-up model focuses on society and citizens to explain backsliding. When voting, citizens can make a trade-off between democratic practices and other considerations, such as exogenous shocks like economic or refugee crises. For example, when in an economic crisis, citizens may decide to choose non-democratic leaders in the hope to get more welfare (Nyhan et al., 2020). The bottom-up model looks at specific reasons that could explain this trade-off.

Looking at the previous literature on democratic backsliding in CEE, multiple factors fall under this bottom-up approach. To begin, the political culture theory argues that citizens have a weak democratic commitment in general, due to the post-Communist background of the countries in this region (Ágh, 2019; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017; Wunsch et al., 2022). The degree of democratic commitment of citizens can influence democratic backsliding in multiple ways. Firstly, if citizens initially support democratic principles, it is less likely that non-democratic principles are tolerated. Moreover, the general attitude toward democracy can influence the degree to which citizens participate in democratic processes, which in turn can influence democratic backsliding (Fuchs & Roller, 2017). Therefore, the following proposition is formulated:

*Proposition 3: Decreasing support for democracy by citizens increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*

Besides this historical account, economic factors fall under the bottom-up approach to explain democratic backsliding. This set of factors explains democratic backsliding in the region by looking at economic problems. It is argued that after communism, development was promised by adopting the Western neoliberal model. However, decades after the adaptation, countries in Central Eastern Europe have seen disappointing economic benefits from this neoliberal model, such as little social security, high unemployment rates and rising inequality. These negative economic development rates could result in a feeling of dissatisfaction with the economy. As a result, citizens would accept non-democratic policies and actions, as they are promised more economic development in return (Szente, 2017; Karolewski & Benedikter, 2017). Therefore, the following proposition is formulated:

*Proposition 4: Decreasing economic development, increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*

## 4. Methodology

This chapter elaborates on which methodology will be used. First, the research design will be explained. Next, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the different propositions will be described. Finally, the cases will be selected and how the validity and reliability will be guaranteed will be explained.

### 4.1. Research Design

To begin, this research has an explanatory purpose, as it tries to explain the reason behind democratic backsliding in CEE. To examine this, a qualitative research design will be used. Thus, this study will have a small-N design, which means that only a few cases will be examined (Babbie, 2013). This approach is chosen, instead of a quantitative approach with a large number of cases, for multiple reasons. Firstly, there are not enough countries in CEE to perform a quantitative analysis. Additionally, a qualitative analysis has the advantage that it can give a more in-depth explanation of a phenomenon than a quantitative analysis. Finally, a small-N design makes it more efficient to examine different observations per case. The multiplicity of observations makes it possible to connect the cases to theories (Babbie, 2013; Buttolph Johnson et al., 2016).

There are various types of qualitative research in social science studies. In this thesis, a congruence analysis will be performed, which means that different case studies will be analysed to examine which theory explains a phenomenon better (Blatter & Haverland, 2014). As this thesis aims to find the reason behind backsliding, a congruence analysis is the best research design. There are currently many different explanations for why democratic backsliding is happening in CEE and this thesis aims to investigate which model explains it best by empirical testing.

Blatter and Haverland (2014) identify two distinct approaches that can be taken when performing a congruence analysis; 1) a competing theories approach and 2) a complementary approach. The competing theories approach assumes that theories are opposed to each other and that empirical evidence shows that one theory is falsified, while the other is verified. The complementary approach, on the other hand, implies that theories can supplement each other in the real world. Multiple theories can even lead to a better understanding of a phenomenon and thus it is advised to look for new theories that explain an event (Blatter & Haverland,



2014). In this thesis, a complementary approach will be taken, as demographic backsliding is a complex phenomenon, with a lot of different facets. Thus it is expected that the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach complement each other in real life.

Finally, to investigate whether the top-down or bottom-up approach better explains demographic backsliding in Central Eastern Europe, both quantitative and qualitative data will be used. Data will be gathered from reports and data sets of international organisations and scholars.

## **4.2. Conceptualisation & Operationalisation**

To test the propositions established in the theoretical framework, it is important to acquire clear definitions of the concepts that will be researched, which is also called conceptualisation. Moreover, it must be decided how these concepts will be tested, which is called operationalisation (Buttolph Johnson et al., 2016). An overview of the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the following concepts will be given; 1) democratic backsliding, 2) populist rhetoric, 3) proportionality of the electoral system, 4) citizen support for democracy and 5) economic development.

### **4.2.1. Democratic Backsliding**

To begin, as explained in the literature review, democratic backsliding in this thesis will be conceptualised according to the definition of Haggard and Kaufman (2021): “The incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that result from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader” (p.1). As this is still an ambiguous concept, this thesis will specify this concept from the three perspectives of Gora and de Wilde (2022), outlined in the literature review. This means that a country is backsliding when there is erosion by a typically autocratic leader on at least one of the following dimensions:

1. Decay of liberal values and institutions in the rule of law (institutional-legal dimension).
2. Deterioration of political discourse (cultural-discursive dimension).
3. Declining participation (participatory dimension).

There is an extensive amount of research on how to operationalise democratic backsliding. In general, four different indexes are used in the literature to measure

democratic backsliding in a country. These indices use different conceptualisations and operationalisations of democracy (see Appendix B). This paper will use the Varieties of Democracy index (V-dem index) to measure democratic backsliding in CEE. The V-dem index is founded in 2014 and is now perceived as one of the most established indexes in the world to measure democracy (V-dem, 2022). The index measures the five core principles of democracy individually to establish democratic backsliding:

1. The electoral democracy index, which measures whether there are free and fair elections.
2. The liberal democracy index, which looks at the rule of law and civil liberties in a country.
3. The participatory democracy index, which measures to what extent citizens can participate in democracy.
4. The deliberative democracy index, which looks at the degree all citizens are represented.
5. The egalitarian democracy index, which measures whether all citizens have equal access to resources.

The V-dem index is chosen as previous literature recommends using the V-dem index to measure backsliding (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Pelke & Croissant, 2021). In addition, the criteria of the V-dem index are most in line with the conceptualisation used in this thesis.

It should be noted that only three out of the five indexes from the V-dem index are chosen to analyse backsliding in CEE; 1) the electoral democracy index, 2) the liberal democracy index and 3) the participatory democracy index. Only these three indices are chosen, as they are most in line with the conceptualisation of democratic backsliding used in this thesis. Democratic backsliding starts when there is a relative decline in one of these three indices.

#### ***4.2.2. Populist Rhetoric***

Many different approaches have been taken to define populism. Generally, populism is a strategy taken by political elites, in which they claim to stand up for the “general will” of the citizens (Urbinati, 2019). Following the previous literature on

backsliding in CEE, this thesis looks at populism as rhetoric, thus treating it as a discourse of political elites. It is not about the personal conviction of these elites, but their construction and style of argument to convince voters (Norris, 2020).

To measure the populist rhetoric of political leaders, the discourse of leaders will be examined. Since 2006, a global network of scholars called Team Populism has been creating a dataset of populist discourse for political leaders, which is called The Global Populism Database (GPD) (Lewis et al., 2019). To measure the degree of populist rhetoric, scholars have performed a textual analysis of the speeches of political leaders. The texts have been analysed by a special technique called holistic grading, which means that texts are judged by their entirety instead of based on word frequencies. Holistic grading is chosen as a method, as it is important to understand the undertone, themes and ideas in speeches (Hawkings et al., 2019).

A quota sample is used consisting of four different speeches for every time a leader is in office. The following types of speeches are elected; 1) a campaign speech, 2) a ribbon-cutting speech, 3) an international speech, and 4) a famous speech that is widely circulated. Elements of the speech are judged on the degree of populism. The project does not view populism as a binary concept, but instead argues that there is a varying degree. Elements of the speeches are given a score from 0-2. Table 1 gives an overview of the meaning of each score.

**Table 1**

*Scores Global Populist Database*

<b>Score</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
0	Few if any populist elements in speech
1	Speeches include strong populist elements, but not consistently or uses non-populist elements to the same degree
2	Extremely populist speech; close to ideal populist discourse

*Note.* Information retrieved from Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al. 2019)

The average score of all speeches is the degree of populist rhetoric of a leader in their term. The project defines populism as “every instance in which the will of the common people is in conflict with a conspiring elite” (Hawkings et al., 2019, p. 2). The

dataset will be used in this thesis to measure the degree of populist rhetoric since the accession of a country to the EU.

A limitation of the Global Populism Dataset is that there are not always sufficient speeches analysed. For example, in Poland, there are only two speeches analysed, instead of four. Besides that, the database only contains analysed speeches until 2019.

#### ***4.2.3. Disproportionality of the Electoral System***

The second independent variable is the disproportionality of the electoral system. Haggard and Kaufman (2021) define disproportionality as “the differences between the popular vote and legislative seats shares” (p.49).

There are many different indices to measure the disproportionality of an electoral system (Karpov, 2008). One of the most famous works on proportionality of electoral systems is done by the scholar Michael Gallagher (1991). He argues that every electoral system aims for proportionality, which means that parties have the same number of seats as they have received votes. Yet, not every system results in the same proportionality. Therefore, he created the so-called Gallagher index. This index looks at whether the proportion of seats a party gets is similar to the proportion of shares a party receives during an election. This allows us to compare different elections and see whether the outcomes of the elections represent the voters. The scale goes from 0-100 and the larger the score, the more disproportionate the electoral system. The disproportionality is measured per election (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2015).

As this index is one of the most prestigious and most-used indices, this will also be used in this thesis. The data will be collected from the Gallagher Election Indices Dataset (2019) in order to analyse the disproportionality of the electoral system and its influence on democratic backsliding. The sole limitation of this data set is that it does not contain the elections of 2020-2021.

To complement the quantitative data of the Gallagher Index, reports of independent international organisations will be analysed. Specifically, reports published by the International Election Observer Mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) will be used. This organisation observes elections and the electoral systems in countries and assesses whether these are fair.

Moreover, they assist countries in order to improve their legislative system (OSCE, n.d.).

#### ***4.2.4. Citizen Support for Democracy***

The third independent variable is the support for the democracy of citizens. This concept focuses on the perception of citizens of a democratic regime. It should be emphasised that this does not refer to a citizen's evaluation of the quality or trust of their government during a period, as this does not give information about citizens' perception of a democratic regime in general. One can be unsatisfied with the democracy, but still prefer the regime and thus will not tolerate non-democratic practices. Instead, commitment to democracy refers to the degree to which citizens support the normative values and principles of a democratic regime (Fuchs & Roller, 2006; Fuchs & Roller, 2017).

Regarding the operationalisation, Fuchs and Roller (2006) are one of the most significant scholars that have measured citizens' commitment to democracy. They measured citizens' support of democracy by surveying the support for democracy in general and asked which form of government is preferred. This thesis will measure citizens' support accordingly and thus look at the perception of citizens' support for a democratic regime. This will be done by using survey data from the Pew Research Center, which is a non-partisan American think-tank that conducts public opinion polls and demographic research (Pew Research Center, n.d.). The think-tank has conducted so-called flash surveys on democratic support in CEE. A flash survey is conducted ad-hoc, due to a societal interest in a particular topic. The surveys have analysed the democratic support in the region in 2009 and 2017 by asking for citizens' support for key democratic values, such as freedom of speech and religion. The data is limited, as there is only information about two years instead of longitudinal data. Moreover, the survey in 2009 does not ask the same questions as the survey in 2017. Yet, it does give a picture of the commitment of citizens to democracy.

#### ***4.2.5. Economic Development***

The last independent variable is economic development. Following the previous literature on democratic backsliding in CEE, this thesis defines economic

development as the improvement of economic well-being and quality of life of citizens (Jedrzejczak-Gas et al., 2021).

There are different ways to measure economic development. The most used way to measure prosperity is looking at the GDP per capita, which looks at the output per citizen. However, scholars have criticised using GDP per capita as a measure of economic development, as it does not give a full picture of the actual prosperity of the citizens (e.g. Moore, 2021). Therefore, the EU advises analysing economic development by looking at micro-data sources, rather than macro-economic measures. They propose to measure the equivalised disposable income as a key measure to analyse prosperity within each economy (Eurostat, 2018). This is defined as: “the total income of a household, after tax and other deductions, that is available for spending and saving, divided by the number of household members converted into equalised adults” (Eurostat, n.d., § 1). The household members are weighted according to their age, using a scale from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Consequently, the median equivalised net income is converted into purchasing power standards, to take into account the price level differences across countries (Eurostat, 2018).

Thus, the median equivalised net income measures the average living standards per country. Yet, this fails to offer a complete picture, as it does not give information on the distribution of income within a country and whether there is economic inequality. Therefore, the EU advises also looking at the Gini coefficient, which is a popular indicator to measure income inequality. The coefficient ranges from 0, which means that there is perfect equality in a country, to 100, which means that the income distribution in a country is fully unequal (Eurostat, 2018).

This thesis will follow the advice of the EU and measure economic development by looking at the median equivalised net income and the income distribution, using the Gini coefficient. The data will be analysed for the selected cases from 2004 till 2021, using the data set from the OECD. Moreover, the data will be compared to the average of the EU, to give an indication of whether economic development is relatively low for the selected cases. Finally, country evaluation reports of the OECD are used to interpret and analyse the quantitative data.

### 4.3. Case Selection

The scope of this thesis is EU member states in Central Eastern Europe. The following countries are part of this region: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (OECD, n.d.). As this sample is not large enough to perform probability sampling, this research will make use of a non-probability sample. Specifically, purposive sampling will be used, which means that cases will be selected based on knowledge. Purposive sampling is chosen, as the aim of this study is to specifically look at the deviant cases among the countries in CEE, namely countries where extreme democratic backsliding takes place (Babbie, 2013).

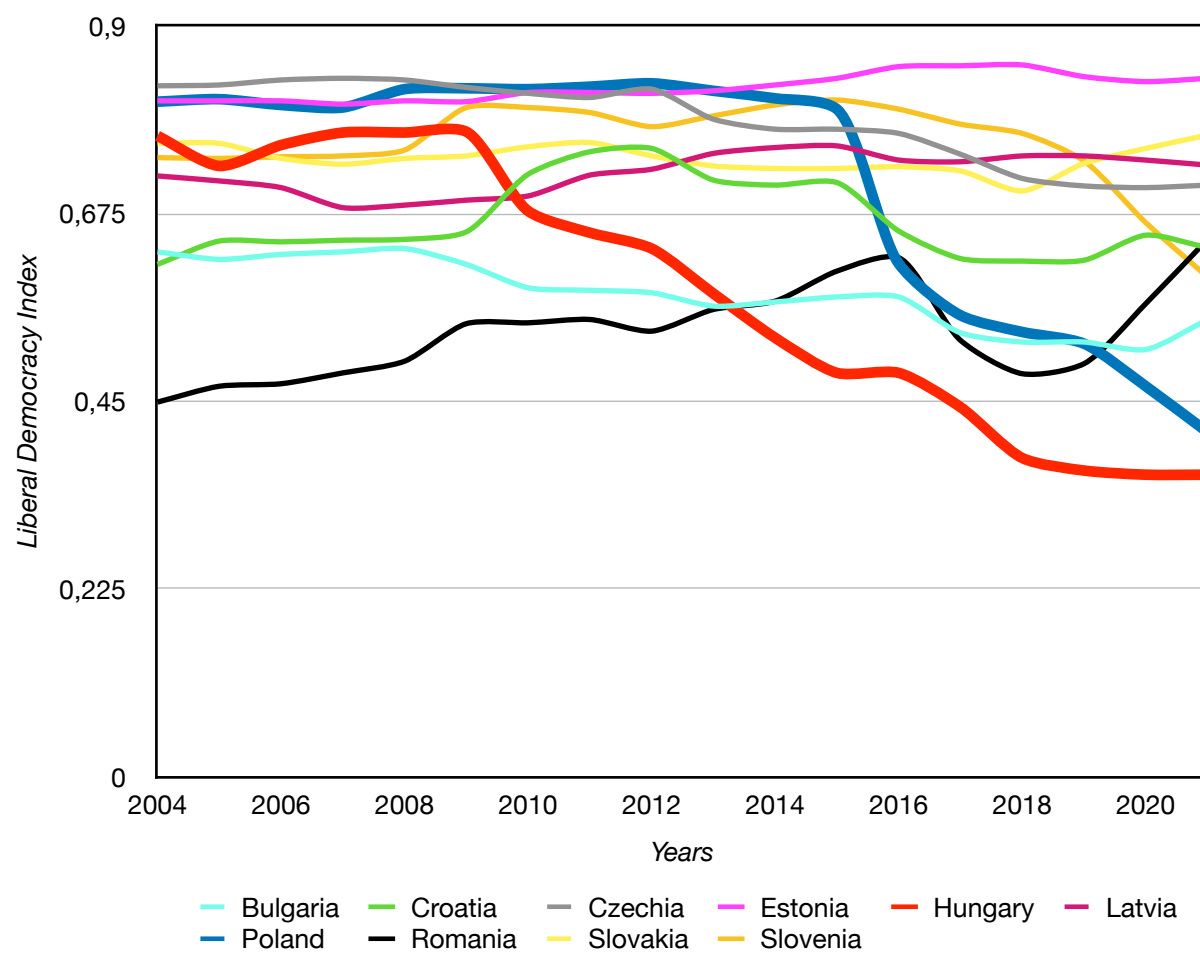
When selecting cases for a qualitative study, two different approaches can be identified. One option is to select the cases according to similarities among the cases or on differences in the independent variable, which is often done in a co-variational approach. Another option is to select cases with reference to the theory, which is often referred to as; most-likely or crucial cases. In this thesis, the last approach will be used, meaning that the cases will be selected with reference to the theory and by their extreme value on the dependent variable, democratic backsliding. Thus, the cases that are chosen are deviant or extreme compared to other cases in the sample (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). This method is chosen, as it is especially interesting to look at countries with extreme levels of democratic backsliding. In these countries, there will be more incidents regarding backsliding, which helps to test which model explains backsliding best. Previous scholars have also argued that this type of case selection method fits well with a congruence analysis. (Blatter & Haverland, 2014; Buttolph Johnson et al., 2016; Seawright, 2016). However, a disadvantage of this method is that it risks having a selection bias and that the cases do not necessarily represent the entire population, therefore decreasing the external validity of the study (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

To select the most-likely cases, it must be examined which EU member state in CEE has experienced the most backsliding since their accession to the EU. As described in the operationalisation of democratic backsliding, the best way to measure this is by using the V-dem dataset. Figure 2, 3 and 4 show the liberal democracy index, the electoral democracy index and the participatory democracy index of the EU countries in CEE from 2004 to 2021. This time frame is selected, as

most countries entered the European Union in 2004. Romania and Bulgaria are the exceptions, which both joined in 2007 (European Parliament, n.d.).

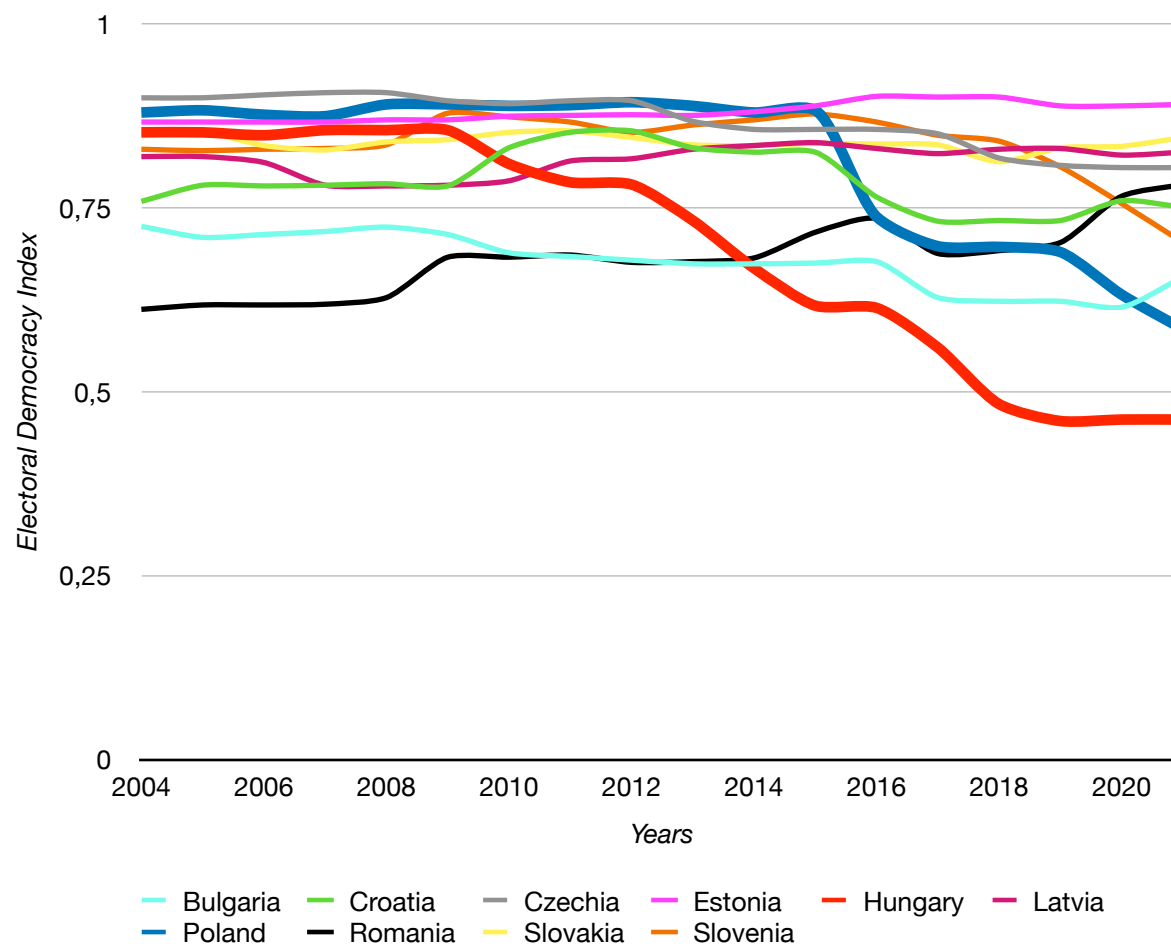
**Figure 2**

*Liberal democracy index of EU CEE countries*

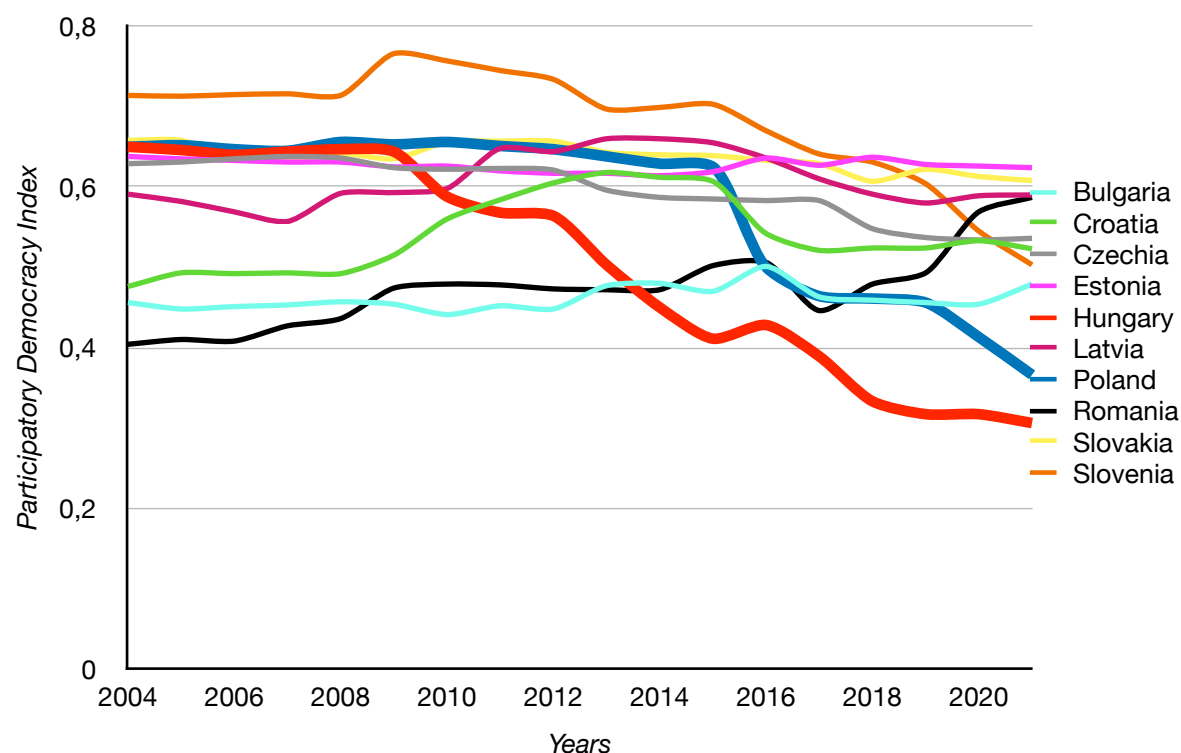


*Note.* Data collected from the V-dem index (2022).



**Figure 3***Electoral democracy index of EU CEE countries*

*Note.* Data collected from the V-dem index (2022).

**Figure 4***Participatory democracy index of EU CEE countries*

*Note.* Data collected from the V-dem index (2022).

As can be seen in the figures, the differences between countries are substantial. Estonia seems to be the only country that relatively improved on all indices since 2004. In the other countries, the scores remain stable or there has been erosion.

Following the most-likely case selection method, this thesis will look at the countries that have experienced a deterioration of their democracy on all three indices. The countries that have been experiencing this are Poland, Hungary and Slovenia. These three countries are the only countries in CEE that have had low scores on all indices in the past decade. Poland and Hungary, highlighted in all figures, are the most extreme examples. In both countries, electoral democracy, liberal democracy and participatory democracy have dropped extremely since 2015. This is in line with the conceptualisation of backsliding in this thesis.

The extreme extent of backsliding in Hungary and Poland cannot only be seen by looking at the numbers, also the policies of the EU confirm this. The EU has initiated an infringement procedure against Poland for violations of EU law and has

proposed sanctions against Hungary for its violations of human rights (European Commission, 2021; Henley, 2022). Thus, it can be concluded that Hungary and Poland are the most-likely cases of backsliding in this region and therefore will be analysed in this thesis.

#### **4.4. Reliability and Validity**

In this thesis, special attention is placed to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. Reliability is the extent to which the same results are yielded, every time the study is repeated. This means that the measurement of the variables in the propositions must be reliable (Babbie, 2013) This research ensures reliability by using measures that are widely used and regarded as reliable by prior research. Moreover, reliability is ensured by using empirical observations and quantitative data of profound institutions and organisations. In addition, all propositions are tested consistently for each case study.

Besides that, the validity of the measurement is taken into account in this study. The validity refers to the extent to which a measure accurately reflects what it is supposed to measure. Validity can be divided into external and internal validity. External validity refers to the degree to which the findings can be generalised to other circumstances (Babbie, 2013). This is in jeopardy in this study, as the congruence analysis is not possible for a large sample. To increase the external validity, not one country is investigated, but two countries. Internal validity is the extent to which the dependent variable is caused by the independent variable, and not due to other factors. It is difficult to fully ensure internal validity in this research, as it is impossible to fully rule out alternative explanations. Even if a correlation is established between a variable and democratic backsliding, this does not mean that this is the only cause. For example, if there is a more populist rhetoric at the same time as there is more democratic backsliding in a country, this relationship might be caused by something else. This study has aimed to tackle this issue by making sure that the cause preceded the democratic backsliding, that they vary together and take into account that there might be alternative explanations. Moreover, the operationalisation of the different concepts is carefully selected, making sure that they do not measure any other phenomena.

## 5. Analysis

In this chapter, the cases of Hungary and Poland will be examined to determine whether the bottom-up model better explains democratic backsliding in CEE. For each case, first, a short background will be given of the countries, including evidence of backsliding on the three different dimensions by Gora and de Wilde (2022). Then, the top-down model will be tested by examining the proposition of polarisation and electoral disproportionality. Subsequently, the bottom-up model will be tested by examining data on the propositions of support of democratic regimes and economic satisfaction.

### Hungary

#### 5.1. Background

From 1945 to 1989, Hungary was part of the Soviet Bloc, during which there was a totalitarian regime (Bozóki & Simon, 2012). However, after the fall of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, Hungary enjoyed, for the first time, a democratic system. After such a long period of totalitarian rule, it was a priority to ensure freedom in human rights and follow the economic neoliberal ideology. Moreover, there was an incentive to transition to a democratic regime so they could join the EU in 2004. Regime change happened smoothly, and Hungary became a parliamentary democracy. The country was known for having one of the best transitions to democracy in CEE (Bozóki & Simon, 2012).

Recently, however, there have been indicators that the democracy in Hungary has been eroding. The latest report of the Freedom House has even argued that Hungary is not considered “free” anymore. The erosion of democracy has specifically been happening since the re-election of the Fidesz party in 2010, led by the current prime minister Viktor Orbán. Orbán’s party won the elections with a constitutional majority, meaning that they won by at least two-thirds of the votes. The popularity of the Fidesz party is explained by its anti-establishment rhetoric. They positioned themselves as an alternative to the socialist MSZP party, which was involved in many scandals and accused of corruption (Bozóki & Simon, 2012).

Scholars and international organisations have argued that Fidesz has pushed through amendments to the Constitution that made it harder to oppose Orbán’s

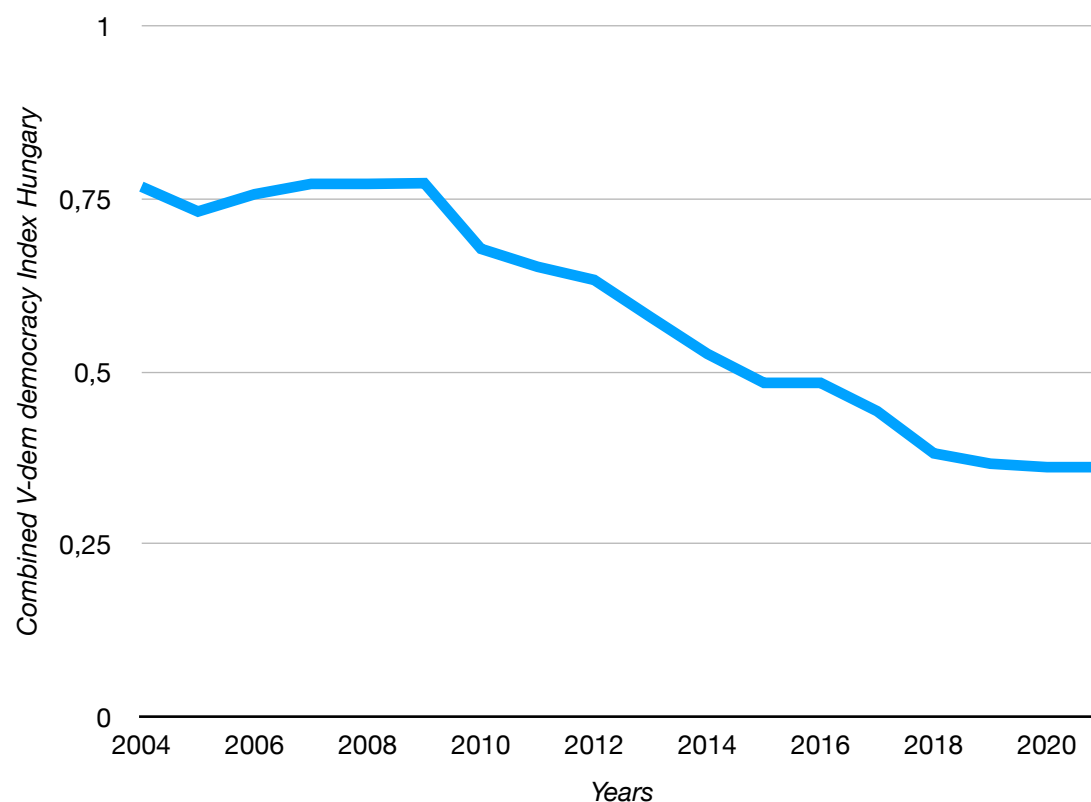
power and therefore increased democratic backsliding (Gomez & Leunig, 2021; Freedom House, 2022; NHC, 2022). Indeed, examples of the changes in law can be found in all three dimensions of democratic backsliding by Gora and de Wilde (2022), explained in the literature review.

To begin with, there has been a decay of the rule of law in the country. For example, in 2013, an amendment was made to the Fundamental Law of Hungary. The new law stated that constitutional court members were to be increased from 11 to 15 members. Moreover, the parliamentary committee that chooses the judges used to be composed of members of all political parties, but with the new law, Fidesz could appoint the new judges. As a result, the majority of judges were political allies of Orbán, resulting in fewer checks and balances on the executive branch (HRW, 2013; NHC, 2022).

Secondly, changes to the constitution by Fidesz have led to a deterioration of the political discourse. This has especially been seen in new laws on media freedom. In 2018, the Central European Press and Media Foundation was formed, which controls the media outlets in Hungary. This foundation completely exists of allies of Fidesz, through which the party can have an indirect influence on public media. Another example of the curb to media freedom was seen in 2021, when the last big independent radio, Klubradio, was canceled by the government (International Press Institute, 2022). Moreover, Orbán has reduced academic freedom in the country. Changes in the constitution in 2011 and 2013 allowed the government to supervise the curriculum and management of universities. Researchers found themselves restrained to voice a critical opinion (NHC, 2022).

Finally, also fair and free participation by citizens during elections has deteriorated due to new laws such as gerrymandering and redistribution of electoral districts (Gomez & Leunig, 2021; OSCE, 2018).

To conclude, Hungary is a post-communist state which was known for its successful transition to democracy. However, there have been indicators of democratic backsliding due to constitutional changes by Fidesz on the rule of law, political discourse and the electoral rules. Figure 5 shows the average democratic backsliding in Hungary, based on the V-dem Indicators. Indeed, a clear pattern of backsliding can be seen since 2010. In what will follow, it will be investigated whether the top-down or bottom-up approach explains this backsliding.

**Figure 5***Combined V-dem democracy index Hungary*

*Note.* Data collected from the V-dem index (2022).

## 5.2. Top-down Model

### 5.2.1. Populist Rhetoric

Based on the previous literature, it is expected that an increasingly populist discourse of leaders would increase backsliding. The degree of populist rhetoric will be measured by looking at the speeches of the political leaders of Hungary since 2004. Table 2 shows an overview of the leader and the average populist grade for their term. In Appendix B a full overview of all speeches and their populist degree can be seen. A score of 0 means that there are few if any populist elements in a speech, while a score of 2 means that the speech is extremely populist (see table 1 in Chapter 4).

**Table 2***Populist Rhetoric of Leader Hungary (2004-2018)*

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Political party</b>	<b>Term of leader</b>	<b>Average populism grade leader-term</b>
Ferenc Gyurcsány	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	0
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	0,833

*Note.* Information retrieved from Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al. 2019)

The data shows an increase in populist rhetoric since the election of Viktor Orbán in 2010. While there was no populist rhetoric by Gyurcsány from 2004-2009, there were strong and clearly populist elements in Orbán's speeches. Moreover, the data shows that populist elements are especially high in campaign speeches and famous speeches. It could be argued that these types of speeches are especially popular among citizens and could possibly lead to more votes. In addition, there is a strong increase in populist elements in international speeches from 2014 to 2018 (see appendix B).

Thus, based on data from the Global Populism Database, it can be concluded that the populist rhetoric of leaders has increased since 2014 in Hungary. As can be seen in figure 5, this is during the same period when democratic backsliding increased in Hungary. Therefore, a correlation can be seen between democratic backsliding and populist rhetoric. Although it is not possible to establish a causal link derived from this information, there is a likelihood that the more populist rhetoric of political leaders has led to more democratic backsliding in Hungary. Therefore, the first proposition is tentatively supported in the case of Hungary.

### **5.2.2. Disproportionate electoral system**

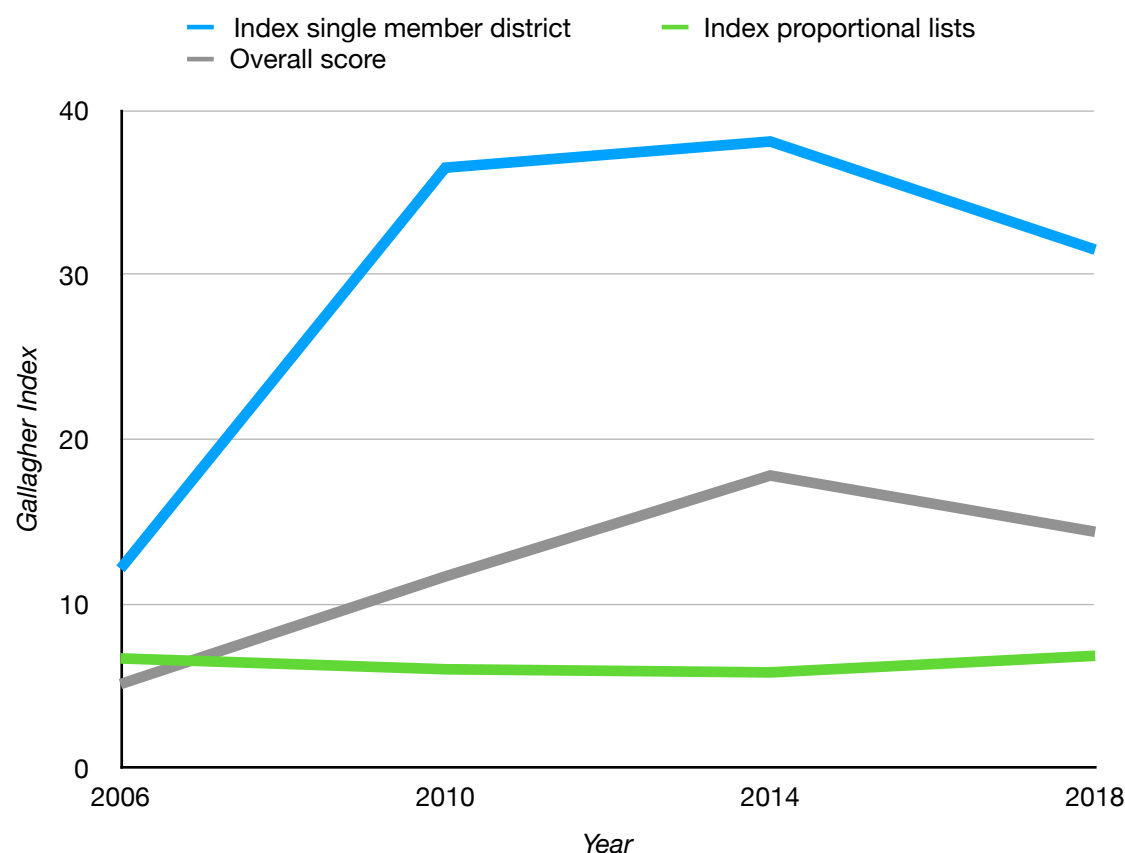
Besides the polarising discourse of political parties, the top-down model consists of the institutional factor that can cause democratic backsliding. Specifically, it is expected that a disproportional electoral system will result in more democratic backsliding. In Hungary, there has been more democratic backsliding

since 2015, thus it is expected that their electoral system would have become more disproportional around this year.

Hungary has a unicameral system, which means that there is one body that has to perform all legislative functions. Moreover, it is a mixed-member majoritarian system, meaning that part of the parliament members is directly elected by the voters, while another subset is indirectly elected through the party lists (Difford, 2022; Norris, 1997). The parliament is at the centre of the political system in Hungary. Every four years, 199 members of parliament are elected, who in turn choose the prime minister and the president (Bozóki & Simon, 2012). Before 2012, Hungary had one of the most complex electoral systems in Europe. The parliament used to have 386 seats, which were elected in two voting rounds (Benoit, 2005). However, this system was changed in 2012, as it was too complex and resulted in odd outcomes in the 1998 and 2002 elections. In the new system, the parliament consists of 199 members, who are elected in one round, but still through a two-ballot system. This means that 106 parliament members are elected via a first-past-the-post system in the single-member districts, while the other 93 are elected through a proportional list, for which there is a threshold of 5% (OSCE, 2018).

Whether this electoral system is disproportionate can be measured by the Gallagher index. The higher the index, the less the elections truly reflect what citizens have voted. Figure 6 shows the index for Hungary since 2002. The fact that there is a new electoral system since 2014 does not matter for the Gallagher index, as it is a relative measurement. The figure shows the indices for both the single-member districts and the proportional lists. The data shows that the proportional list elections have remained stable during the past years. However, the system of the single-member district has become substantially more disproportionate in the 2010 elections. This is also seen in the increase of the overall disproportionality in 2014. However, there is a relative decrease again in the 2018 elections.



**Figure 6***Disproportionality elections Hungary (2006-2018)*

*Note.* Data collected from the Gallagher index (2019).

The reports of the OSCE support these results (OSCE, 2014). The report of 2014 shows that there has been an uneven playing field due to changes in electoral laws. In the period from 2010 to 2014, Viktor Orbán amended the legislative electoral framework in favour of the incumbent government, despite a lack of public support. These changes have led to a more proportional system (OSCE, 2014). One of the most significant changes Orbán made to the electoral law was the change from 45% majority to a two-thirds majority. Looking at the results of the 2014 parliamentary elections, 45% of the electorate voted for Fidesz, who get two-thirds seats in parliament. 51% of the electorate voted for other parties, yet these parties only got 33% of the seats. Thus, the two-third majority that Fidesz holds, includes far less popular support than it initially seems.

To actually win the election and obtain the two-third supermajority, Fidesz altered elements of the electoral system in his favour. This is seen in multiple amendments. Firstly, the electoral districts were gerrymandered in the favour of the

Fidesz party. Secondly, the surplus votes of a winning candidate in a constituency were now transferred to the winning party in the national parliament, which led to an additional six votes for the Fidesz party. In addition, a legislative change that led to a more disproportional system is the “over the border votes” In 2012, Fidesz passed a new law that allowed Hungarians that had never lived in Hungary to vote. 95% of these votes were for Fidesz in the elections of 2014. However, there were almost no integrity checks on these votes (OSCE, 2014; Krugman, 2014). This shows the disproportionality of the electoral system thanks to the legislative amendments from 2010-2014.

Similar trends were seen in the 2018 report of the OSCE. Again, the elections “were characterised by a pervasive overlap between state and ruling party resources, undermining contestants’ ability to compete on an equal basis” (OSCE, 2018, p. 1). However, the popular vote for Fidesz did increase to 49% in 2018 compared to 45% in 2014. This can be explained by the anti-migrant strategy by the Fidesz party to win votes after the 2015 migrant crisis (Bayer, 2018). This clarifies the relative decrease in disproportionality in the Gallagher index in 2018 (see figure 5).

The increasing disproportionality of the electoral system in the period 2010-2014 happened just before the increase of democratic backsliding in the country, as can be seen in figure 5. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a correlation between a disproportional electoral system and democratic backsliding in Hungary. Although it is difficult to establish a causal relation, there is a strong likelihood that the disproportionality has played a role in backsliding.

### **5.3. Bottom-up model**

#### ***5.3.2. Citizens’ Support of Democracy***

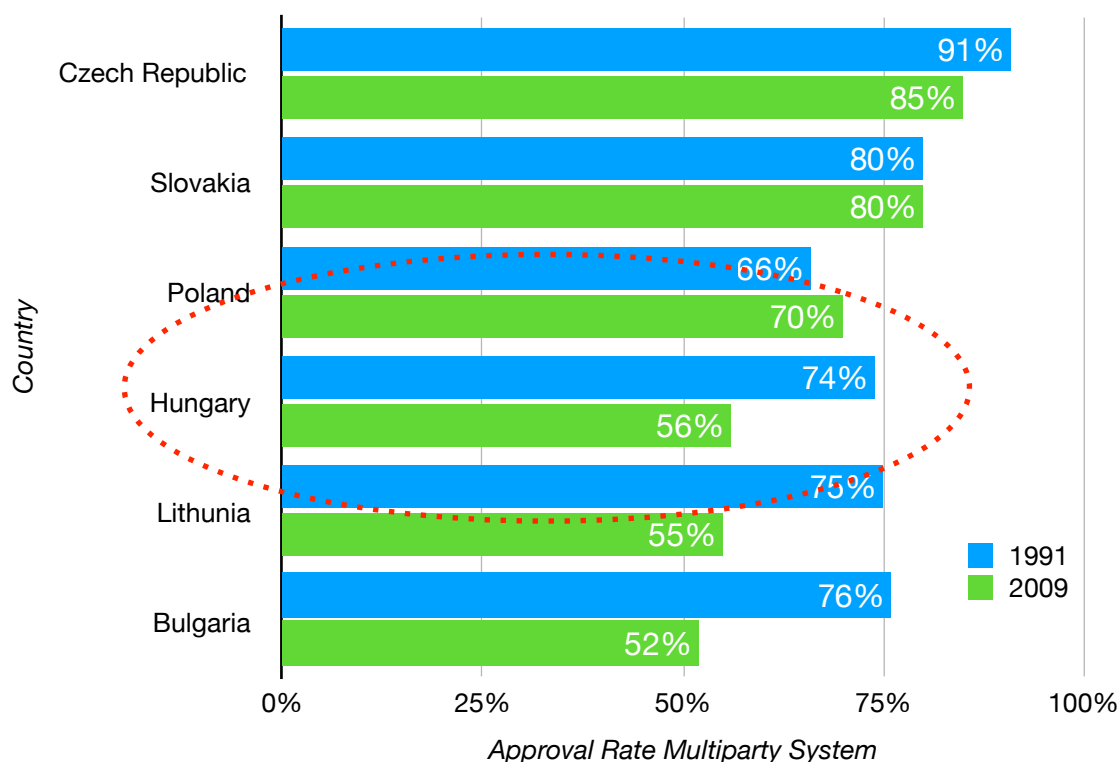
The first expectation of the bottom-up model is that citizens’ support of democracy has an influence on the extent of democratic backsliding in a country. It is expected that less commitment of citizens to a democratic regime will lead to more democratic backsliding. To measure citizens’ support of democracy in Hungary, data from the Pew Research Center is used, which has surveyed democratic support in countries in both 2009 and 2017.

A survey in 2009 shows that generally, people in CEE still approve of the collapse of communism, yet the enthusiasm for these changes has dimmed. Figure 7

shows the changes in approval rates of a multiparty system from 1991 to 2009 in former communist countries. During this period, there was little to no democratic backsliding in Hungary (V-dem, 2022). The data reveals that in Hungary, the approval rate of a multiparty system decreased from 74% to 56%.

### Figure 7

*Approval Rate Multiparty System (1991-2009)*

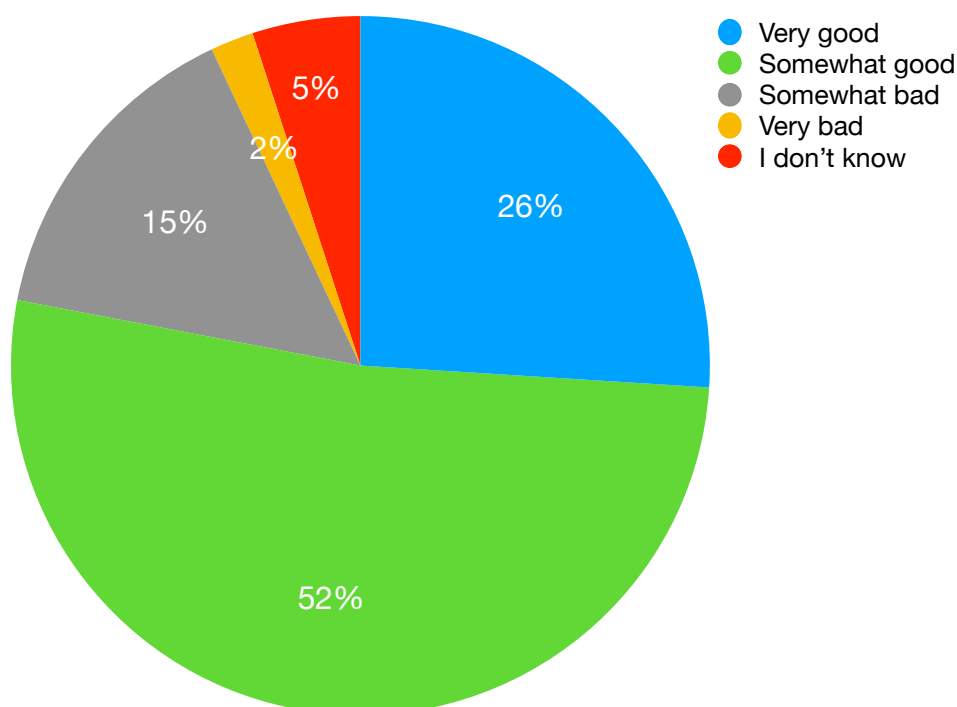


*Note.* Data collected from the Pew Research Centre (2009).

The disapproval rate is the highest among 65+ and the lowest among youngsters (18-29) (Pew Research Centre, 2009). The report of Pew Research Centre highlights that there is frustration with democracy in Hungary especially, despite the acceptance of the public to a multiparty system. More than 77% of the Hungarians report that they are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working. A possible reason for this disaffection could be the state of the country. 91% of the people thought the country was on the wrong track and 94% thought that the economy is in a bad shape (Pew Research Center, 2009). Moreover, there was specifically a negative attitude towards the political elite. Only 38% of the surveyed Hungarians believed they have had a say in politics.

Yet, a more positive picture is seen when looking at the acceptance rates of democratic values among citizens in former Communist countries. Hungary scores the highest compared to other Central Eastern European countries, with 66% of the people who support democratic principles. Hungarians especially value a fair judicial system and honest elections highly. Seven-in-ten Hungarians favour a system in which elections are regularly held and there is a choice of at least two political parties. Moreover, especially youngsters consider these democratic values important. Also, freedom of speech is considered highly important (Pew Research Center, 2009). Although democratic values were considered key in Hungary, a strong leader is still perceived positively. A majority of the citizens (49%) believe that a strong leader is still the best way to solve a country's problem.

In 2017, the Pew Research Center surveyed citizens worldwide again on their views on democracy. This survey was conducted due to concerns about the future of democracy. The data shows that public attitudes about political systems differ per country. In 2017, the majority of citizens in Hungary (53%) were still not satisfied with the way democracy was working. Although this initially seems negative, it is similar to the average in Europe, where 50% were dissatisfied with the way democracy is working. Moreover, the survey asked about the attitudes of citizens towards different regime types (see figure 8) The data shows that the majority of Hungarians view democracy as a good system to govern a country. When asked whether a system in which a strong leader could make decisions without interference from parliaments or courts, the majority of the Hungarians answered they do not support such a regime (Pew Research Center, 2017).

**Figure 8***View Hungarians on representative democracy (2017)*

*Note.* Data collected from the Pew Research Centre (2017).

Thus, it can be concluded that Hungarians increasingly supported democracy as a regime. Although no longitudinal information is available on citizens' support of democracy, a positive trend can be seen when looking at the survey data in 1991, 2009 and 2017. In 2009, the majority of the citizens supported the key democratic principles, but still slightly favoured a strong leader. This has shifted in 2017, in which the data shows that non-democratic principles are condemned more strongly. This is in contrast with our proposition, which expected that democratic backsliding would decrease if citizens supported democracy more. Especially in 2017, democracy eroded substantially in Hungary. Therefore, the third proposition is rejected in the case of Hungary.

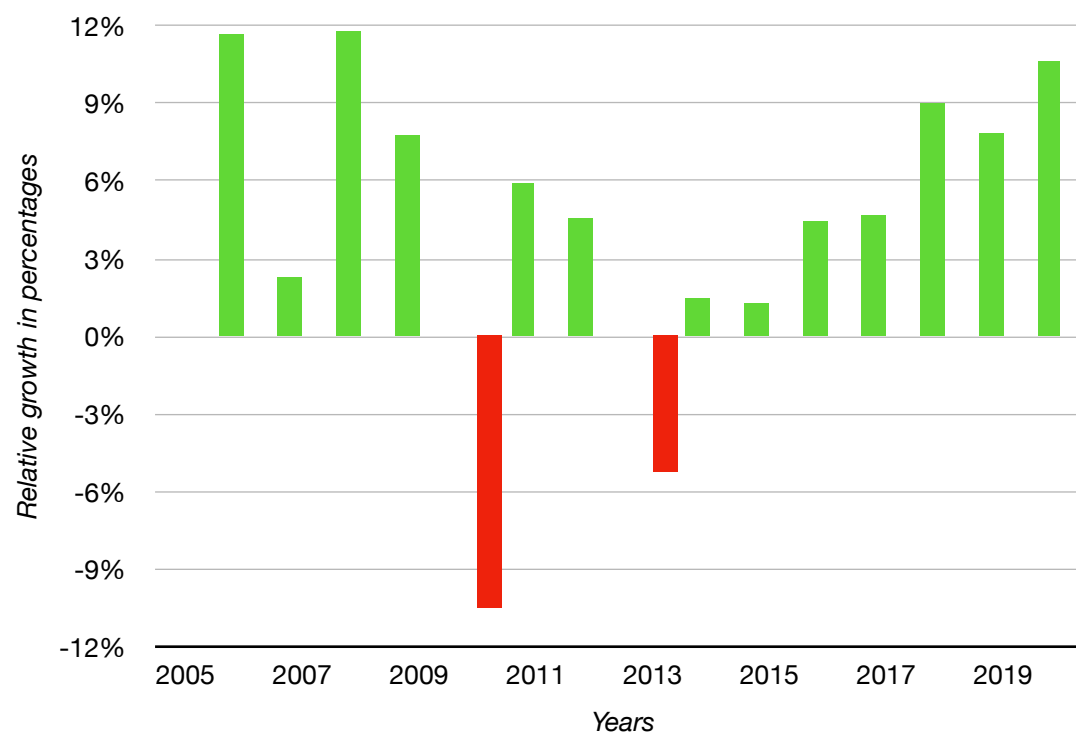
### **5.3.2. Economic Development**

Based on the previous literature, it is expected that decreasing economic development is a motivation for citizens to accept democratic backsliding, in the hope of more welfare. To analyse whether this is the case for Hungary, the equivalised disposable income and the Gini coefficient will be analysed using data from Eurostat and the OECD (Eurostat, 2022a; Eurostat, 2022b).

Figure 9 shows the relative growth of the equivalised disposable income of households from 2005 till 2020, adjusted to the purchasing power of Hungary. There was no data available for 2004 and 2021. As can be seen in the bar chart, there is a strong decrease in equivalised disposable income in 2010 and 2013.

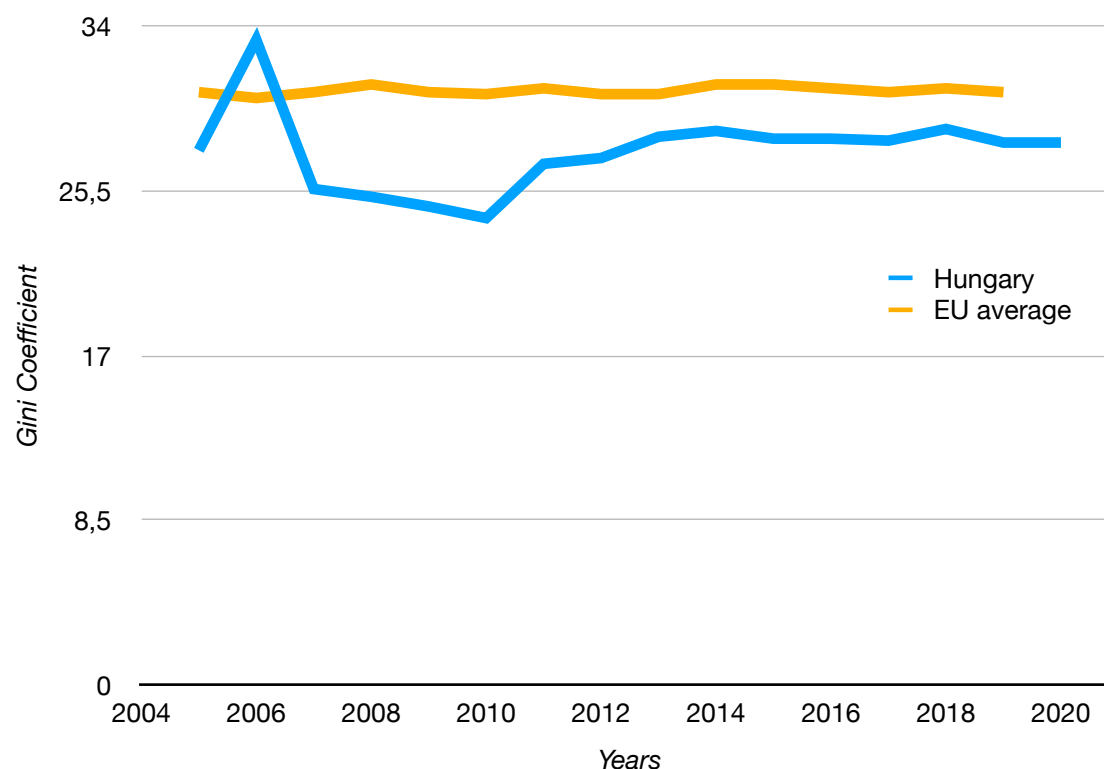
**Figure 9**

*Yearly growth in equivalised disposable income in Hungary ((2005-2019)*



*Note.* Data collected from the Eurostat (2022a).

Figure 10 shows the Gini coefficient based on the equivalised disposable income in Hungary. The average Gini coefficient in the EU is also added as a comparison point. The higher the Gini coefficient, the more inequality in a country. In 2005, there was a small peak in inequality in Hungary. However, in the period 2008-2010, there was less inequality. Inequality increased again around 2011, but has remained approximately stable since 2013.

**Figure 10***Income inequality in Hungary and the EU (2004-2020)*

*Note.* Data collected from Eurostat (2022b).

As stated in the country evaluation of the OECD, the decrease in the disposable income in Hungary in 2010 can be explained by the worldwide financial crisis of 2008, in which Hungary experienced one of the worst recessions compared to the other OECD countries (OECD, 2010). The effects of the financial crisis were felt deeply among the citizens of Hungary in the period from 2009 to 2012, as a result of rising unemployment and cuts in social benefits (OCED, 2014). However, as seen in figure 9, the economic growth has returned since 2015. Although income levels are still low compared to other OECD countries, the trend is looking positive. This positive line is also seen in the 2019 OECD report, which states that there were relatively high-income gains, wage increases and low inequality. Moreover, there was extremely low unemployment (OECD, 2019).

To conclude, Hungary has known some drops in economic development, especially during the financial crisis. However, still, positive development could be felt by citizens, as their incomes relatively increased and unemployment has been the lowest since the end of communism. Democracy started to erode around 2009,

just after the financial crisis. Therefore, it might be possible that citizens have accepted non-democratic actions by political leaders, in the return for more welfare. For example, citizens experienced, with the elections of Orbán in 2010, more economic growth and as a result accepted more non-democratic behaviour of the leader. However, it should then also be expected that, after a period of high economic development, the democratic scores improved. This has not been the case yet, as seen in figure 5. Therefore, it is difficult to say with certainty whether the fourth proposition is true for Hungary.

## **Poland**

### **5.4. Background**

Similar to Hungary, Poland was part of the Soviet Bloc and thus has a communist past. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the country also transitioned to a democratic regime and joined the EU in 2004. The democratic transition was seen as very successful; elections were free and fair, and social groups had freedom of assembly. Also, the economic transition went well. Poland was, for example, the first country in CEE with positive growth in GDP (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006).

Yet, scholars and international organisations have recognised a downward trend in the past decades. Specifically, there have been signs of strong democratic backsliding in Poland. The signs already appeared in 2005, when the Law and Justice party (PiS) came into power for the first time. They promised a better life for the lower and middle classes and to clean up Poland's politics. However, the party overreached and used excessive power. They installed allies into important positions and threatened the rights of minorities (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008). In 2008 the PiS party lost the elections and the centre-right party Civic Platform (PO) won. The party managed to book both economic success and democratic progress. For example, in 2011, President Donald Tusk pushed to modernise rural areas and legalise same-sex marriage (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012). Then, in 2015, PiS won both the presidential elections and parliamentary elections again. Andrzej Duda became president and Beata Szydło prime minister. The next elections in 2018 were also won by the Law and Justice party, making Mateusz Morawiecki the current prime minister. PiS implemented a lot of redistributive measures with the aim to increase social welfare.



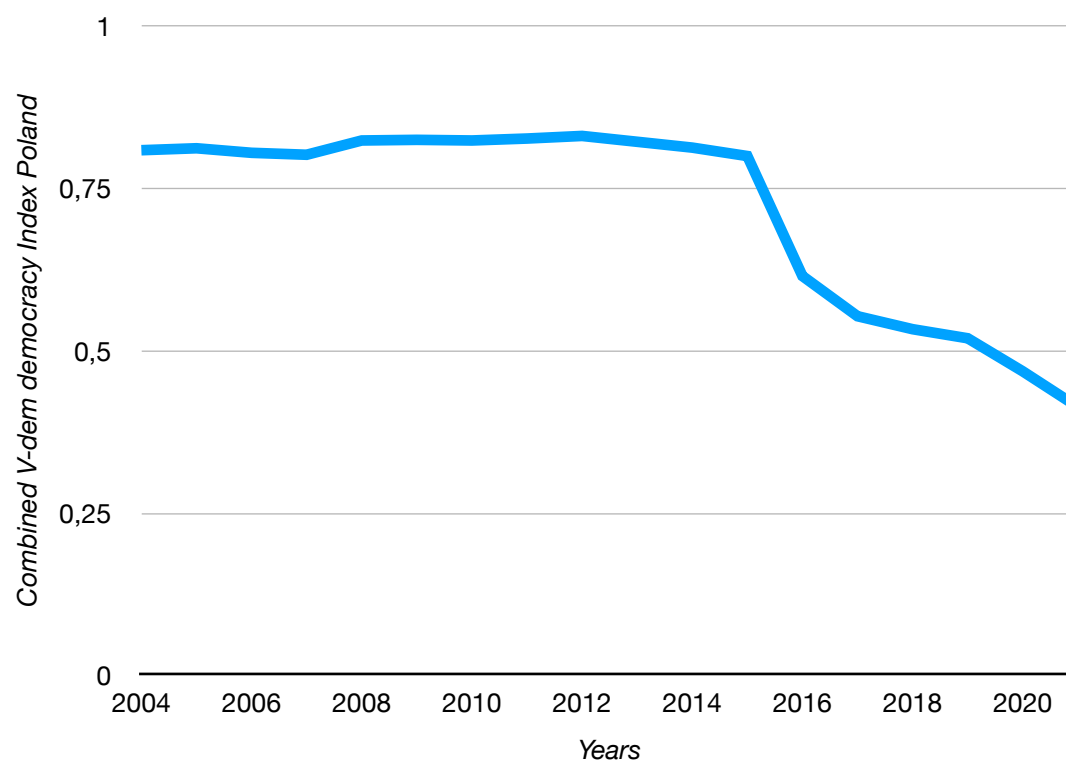
However, the party, like the Fidesz party in Hungary, also implemented a lot of new measures that would lead to democratic backsliding (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

Firstly, looking at the rule of law, the separation of power is limited. Since 2016, the judicial system has come under political control. For example, in 2020, a new president for the Supreme Court was selected, who is a close ally of the PiS party. Moreover, the government engages in actions that do not respect the rights of all citizens. Especially LGBTQ+ people face discrimination (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

Secondly, citizens freedom of expression has been reduced by amendments to the constitution. Although the right to assemble is constitutionally established, protests are met with disproportionate police violence. In addition, public radio and tv are completely under government control. In the ranking of the World Press Freedom Index, Poland has dropped from rank 18 in 2015 to 62 in 2020 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

Finally, regarding the participatory element of democracy, elections fell short of standards. For example, the 2019 European Parliament and 2020 national elections were technically free, but due to the government's influence on the media, campaigning has not always been fair (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

As a result, the country received a lot of criticism from the EU. The Court of Justice of the EU has condemned these amendments to the constitution and the EU Commission has initiated infringement procedures. Yet, the country has still failed to follow the rule of law and the democracy keeps on eroding. Figure 11 shows the democratic backsliding in Poland, measured by the average of the different V-dem indicators (V-dem, 2022). In what will follow, it will be investigated whether the top-down or bottom-up approach explains this backsliding.

**Figure 11***Combined V-dem democracy index Poland*

*Note.* Data collected from the V-dem index (2022).

## 5.5. Top-down model

### 5.5.1. Populist Rhetoric

As Poland has a semi-presidential system, both the president and the prime minister are elected and have an influence on the citizens. Therefore, the rhetoric of both is analysed. Table 3 shows the average scores on the populist rhetoric, based on the Global Populist Dataset. A score of 0 means that there are few if any populist elements in a speech, while a score of 2 means that the speech is extremely populist (see table 1 in chapter 4).

**Table 3***Populist Rhetoric of Leader Poland (2004-2018)*

	<b>President or Prime Minister</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Term of leader</b>	<b>Average populism grade leader- term</b>
Lech Kaczynski	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	0,75
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	0,163
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	0,375
Jarosław Kaczynski	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	0,25
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	0
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	0,863

*Note.* Information retrieved from Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al. 2019)

Following figure 11, democratic backsliding increased drastically since 2015. Therefore, it is expected that there should be more populist rhetoric in the speeches of the president and prime ministers just before 2015. Some data is lacking about the speeches of the prime ministers in 2004-2006 and 2018-2021. In addition, the prime ministers were often only shortly in office, due to political circumstances. As a result, the average score of speeches is often based on a short period of time and on only two speeches per category. Yet, it does give a general idea of the populist speech in the rhetoric of the leaders and whether there is a relationship with democratic backsliding.

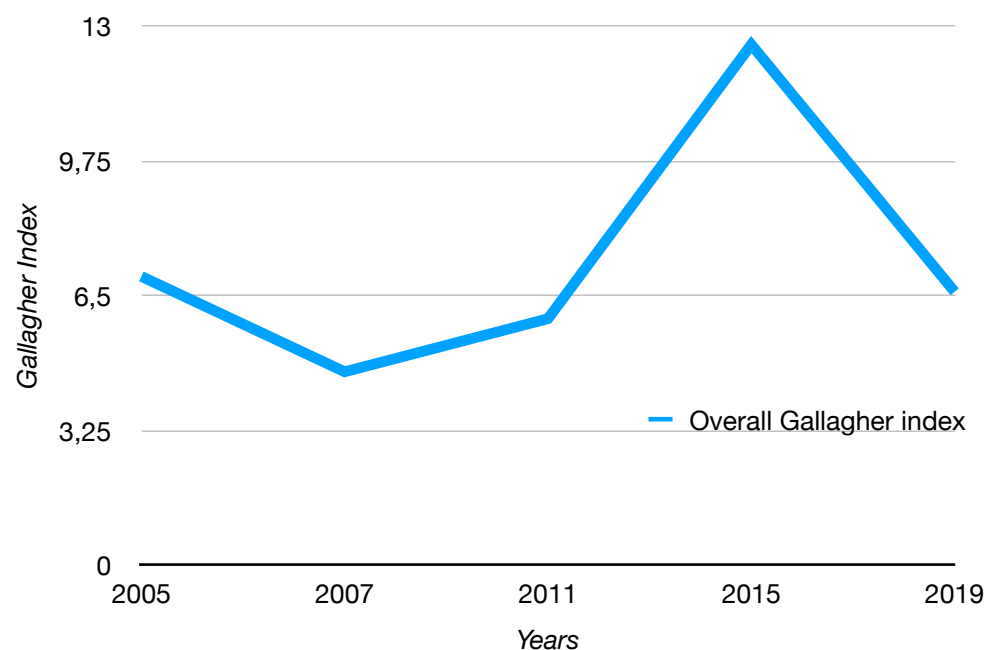
Looking at the speeches of the presidents, the populist rhetoric slightly increased in 2015 compared to the term before. However, a score of 0,375 still means that there were only a few populist elements in the speech. Regarding the speeches of the prime ministers, the populist elements did increase significantly in 2015 relative to the previous terms; from 0 to almost 1. Moreover, when a leader is head of the Law and Justice party, there are relatively more populist elements in the speeches.

Thus, although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions due to the limited data, there was a spark in 2015 in populist elements in the prime ministers' speeches, during which there was also more democratic backsliding. This could be a possible sign that there is a connection between the two variables. Although a causal relationship could not be established, a correlation between a populist rhetoric of the leaders and democratic backsliding is found.

### ***5.5.2. Proportionality of Electoral System***

Poland has a representative democracy with a multi-party system. The legislature exists out of two chambers. Every four-year, Polish citizens vote for the members of the Parliament, which consists of 460 seats. In addition, they vote for the 100 members of the Senate, who are elected via a first-past-the-post system. Moreover, the president, which is the head of state, is elected by a popular vote for a five-year term. The president has the power to start a legislative process and veto bills. The veto can be overruled by three-third of the parliament. Poland also has a prime minister, who is the head of government and the leader of the winning party during the parliamentary elections (González et al., 2015; OSCE, 2011).

Whether this electoral system is disproportionate can be measured by the Gallagher index. A high index means that the parliament of a government does not proportionally reflect what citizens have voted. Figure 12 shows the Gallagher index during the parliamentary elections in Poland since 2005. The Gallagher index shows a large increase in disproportionality during the elections in 2015. However, disproportionality relatively decreases again in the elections of 2019.

**Figure 12***Disproportionality elections Poland (2005-2019)*

*Note.* Data collected from the Gallagher index (2019).

Looking at qualitative data about the proportionality of the electoral system, interesting results can be seen. The evaluation of the elections in 2011 by the OSCE shows a positive view. The legal framework was a good basis for fair and proportional democratic elections. The evaluation of the 2015 elections by the OSCE remains positive, contradictory to the Gallagher index. The report states that the elections have been fair and improved legally compared to the 2011 elections.

However, when looking at the academic literature on the elections of 2015, interesting observations can be seen. The turnout was very low, just around 51% of the electorate voted. The elections were won with a majority by PiS. In total, 5.1 million people voted for PiS, which represents only 19% of the electorate (Markowski, 2016). Yet, for the first time in history, they could form a government without needing to vote for coalition partners. As a result, the government formed by PiS could mandate without any restraints from other parties. Already after three months, the party initiated legislation that would lead to harm democratic progress in a country. For example, it controlled public media and controlled the appointment of civil servants (Markowski, 2016). Public opinion polls showed that there was no direct desire and dissatisfaction among citizens that would result in such constitutional

changes. Thus, although the elections themselves were fair in the view of the OSCE, the election and plans of PiS in 2015 do not proportionally reflect the demands of the citizens (Markowski, 2016).

The 2019 elections had the highest turnout in history with 62%. The elections were again won by the PiS party, who obtained a majority of 51% in parliament but lost its majority in the senate. This means that the party could form the government, but was more limited in its powers (Cienski & Wanat, 2019). Also, the report of the OSCE shows that the elections were proportional (OSCE, 2019).

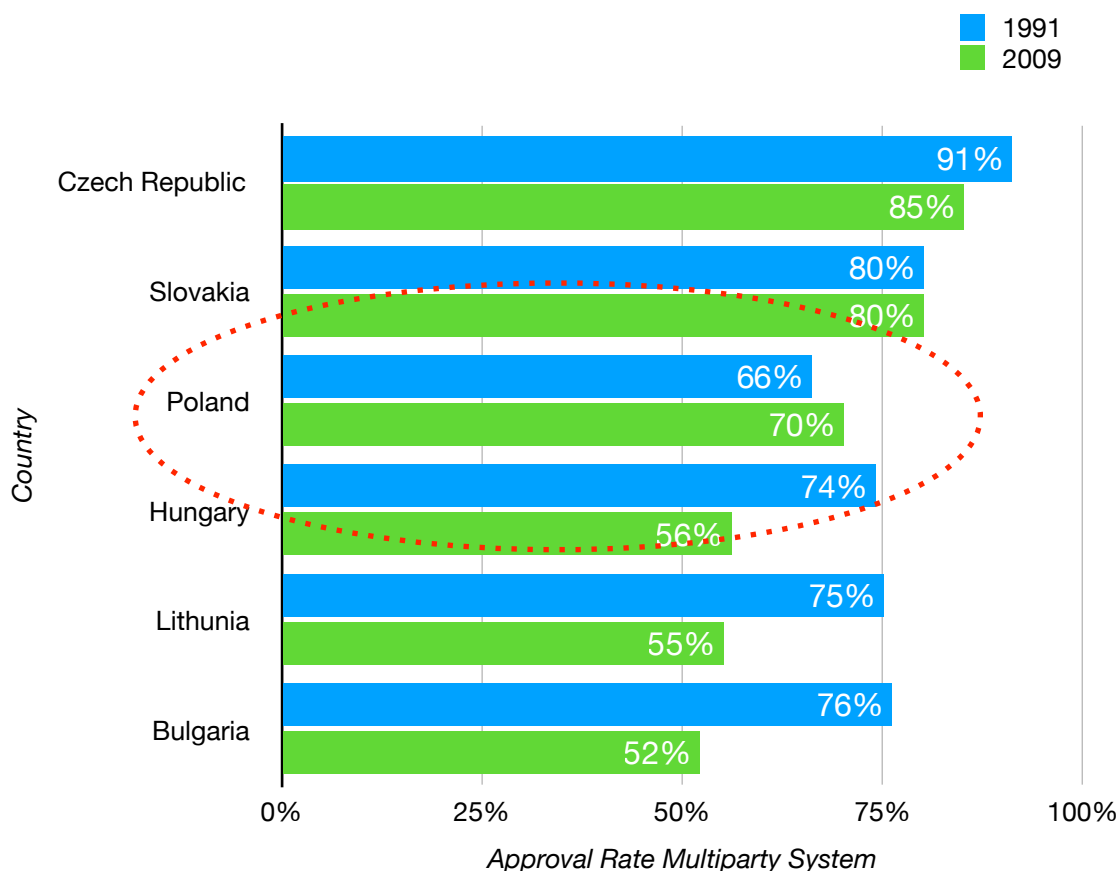
To conclude, it was expected that an increasingly disproportional electoral system would lead to more democratic backsliding in Poland. As seen in figure 11 there was a significant increase in democratic backsliding in 2015. During this time, there was indeed a more disproportionate system in 2015. Yet, in 2019, the system became more proportional, but democracy kept eroding. Therefore, the proposition is tentatively supported.

## **5.6. Bottom-up Model**

### ***5.6.1. Citizen's Support of Democracy***

This thesis hypothesised that less commitment of citizens to a democratic regime will lead to more democratic backsliding. To measure citizens' support of democracy in Poland, data from the Pew Research Center is used, which has surveyed democratic support in countries in both 2009 and 2017.

To begin, the 2009 survey questioned the view of Polish citizens on democracy since the collapse of the communist regime. Figure 13 shows the changes in approval rates of a multiparty system from 1991 to 2009 in former communist countries.

**Figure 13***Approval Rate Multiparty System (1991-2009)*

*Note.* Data collected from the Pew Research Centre (2009).

During this period, there was little to no democratic backsliding in Poland (V-dem, 2022). The approval rate in Poland slightly increased from 66% to 70%. In this respect, Poland is doing well compared to other former communist countries.

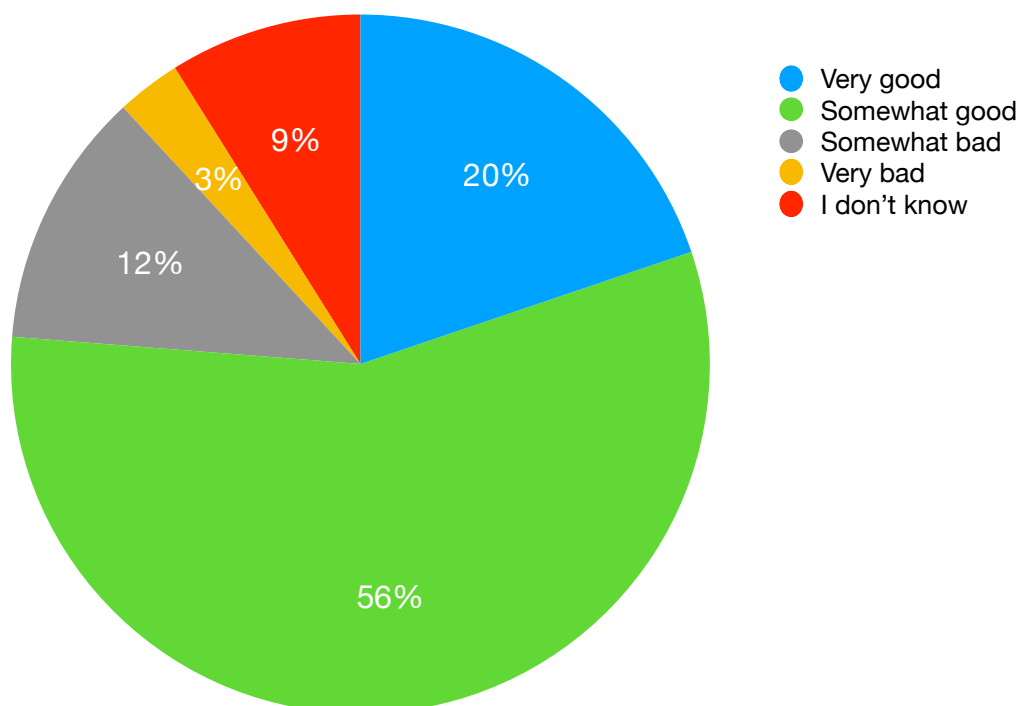
In 2009, it was also surveyed whether Polish citizens support democratic values. Poland scores average compared to other CEE countries, with 52% of the citizens supporting democratic values. Poles especially value a fair judicial system and freedom of religion. In addition, Poland is one of the few countries in which there was a little appeal of a strong leader over a democratic form of government. When asked the question on whether a strong leader would be more capable to fix problems in a country, only 35% agreed. 56% of the citizens believed it was better to have a democratic government.

The 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center again questioned the support of democracy in Poland. The survey showed that a small majority (51%) of the Poles are satisfied with the way democracy is working. This is slightly above the average in

Europe (48%). Moreover, the survey asked about the attitudes of citizens towards different regime types (see figure 14) The results show that the majority of Poles view democracy as a good system to govern a country. Moreover, when asked whether an autocracy would be preferred, a strong majority answered that they do not support such a regime.

**Figure 14**

*View Poles on representative democracy (2017)*



*Note.* Data collected from the Pew Research Centre (2017).

Thus, it can be concluded that Poles have increasingly supported democracy as a regime. Although no longitudinal information is available on citizens' support of democracy, a positive trend can be seen when looking at the survey data in 1991, 2009 and 2017. In 2009 and 2017, democracy was strongly preferred by all citizens. It was expected that less support from citizens of a democracy, would lead to more democratic backsliding. Figure 11 demonstrates that there has been more democratic backsliding since 2015 in Poland, while data shows that there has been more support for democratic principles since 2007. Therefore, this proposition can be rejected.

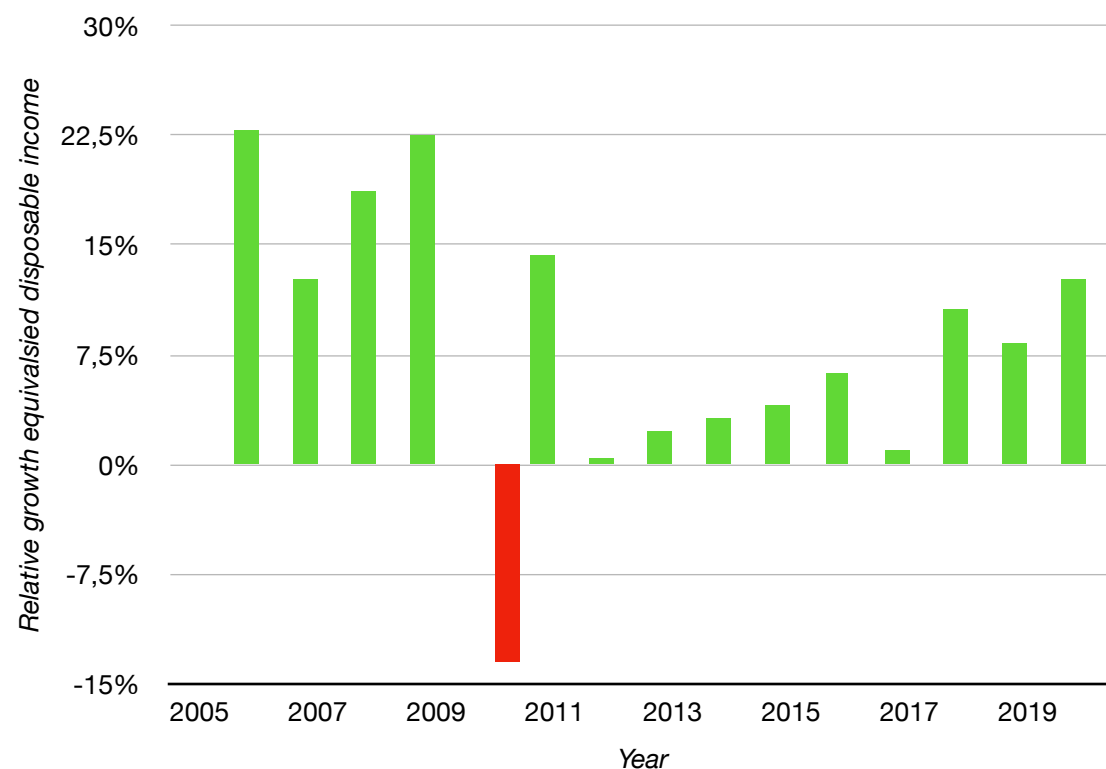


### 5.6.2. Economic Development

Figure 15 shows the relative growth of the equivalised disposable income of households from 2005 till 2020, adjusted to the purchasing power of Poland.

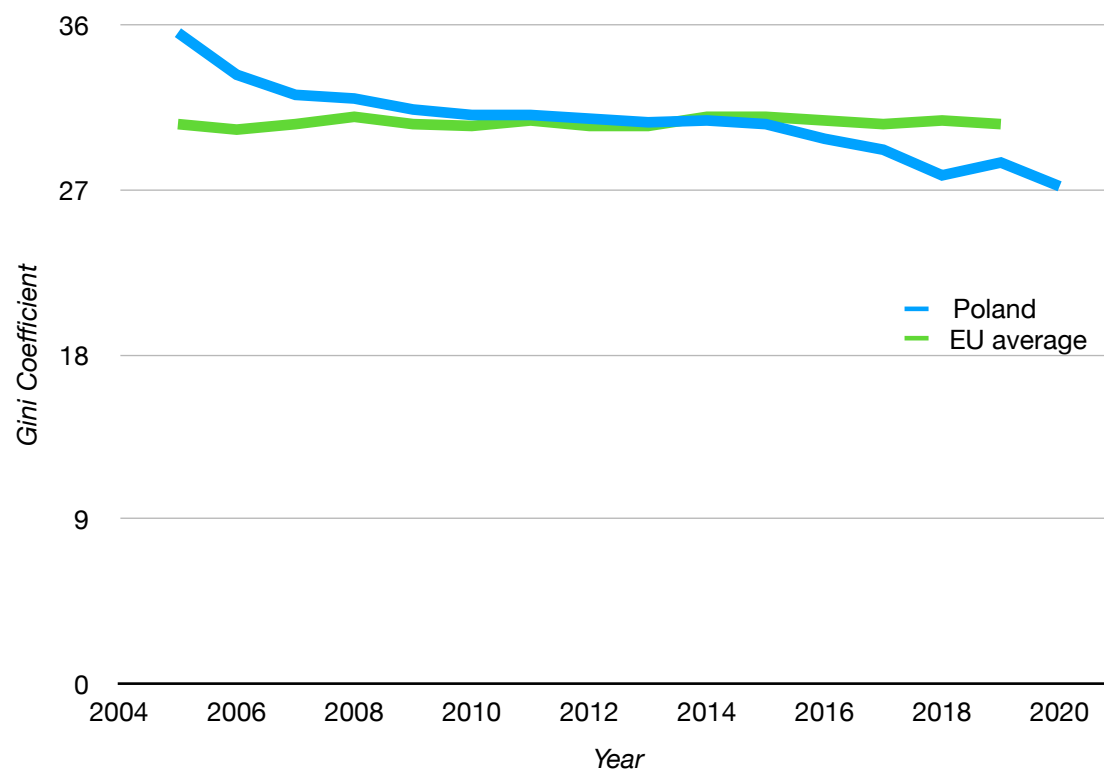
**Figure 15**

*Yearly growth in equivalised disposable income in Poland (2005-2019)*



*Note.* Data collected from the Eurostat (2022a).

Similar to Hungary, there was no data available of 2004 and 2021. As can be seen in the bar chart, there was a strong decrease in equivalised disposable income in 2010. Figure 16 shows the Gini coefficient based on the equivalised disposable income in Poland.

**Figure 16***Income inequality in Poland and the EU (2004-2020)*

*Note.* Data collected from Eurostat (2022b).

The average Gini coefficient of the EU is also added to the figure, as a reference of what is standard. The higher the Gini coefficient, the more inequality in a country. The data shows that there was relatively more income inequality in Poland at the beginning of accession. However, income inequality has steadily decreased since 2005. Starting from 2015, there is even less income inequality in Poland compared to the rest of Europe (Eurostat, 2022a; Eurostat, 2022b).

The OECD country evaluations are even more positive about the development of the Polish economy. The accession to the EU has been very beneficial for the economy. Although the GDP per head was still 45% under the average of the EU, a lot of factors indicated strong convergence. One significant problem with the Polish economy was the unemployment rate, which was, in 2005, one of the worst of all OECD countries (OECD, 2006). Even the damage due to the economic crisis of 2008 was limited. As the OECD report states: “Poland has been the best growth performer within the OECD through the global economic crisis.” (OECD, 2012, p. 8). Low labour costs and higher labour market flexibility made the country attractive to foreign

investors and helped maintain export and import. This trend of economic growth continued after the crisis. In 2016, the unemployment rate has dropped to a record low level and new public benefits helped to decrease inequality (OECD, 2018).

Thus, it can be concluded that the economic development in Poland has been positive since its accession to the EU. It was expected that more economic development will lead to less democratic backsliding. However, in Poland, a reverse effect can be identified. There has been strong democratic backsliding around 2015 (see figure 11), while there has been strong economic development during this period. Therefore, the proposition of economic development and backsliding can be rejected in the case of Poland.

## 6. Discussion

This thesis aims to examine whether the top-down model or bottom-up model better explains democratic backsliding in EU Central Eastern European countries. In the previous chapter, data is collected on the two selected cases, Hungary and Poland, and the propositions have been tested to investigate which approach might better explain backsliding. A summary of the findings can be seen in table 4. In this chapter, the findings will be discussed, and the cases will be compared to evaluate the relative strength of both models.

**Table 4**

*Summary Findings*

<b>Model</b>	<b>Proposition</b>	<b>Hungary</b>	<b>Poland</b>
Top-down Model	An increasingly populist discourse of political elites, increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.	Yes, tentatively	Yes, tentatively
	An increasingly disproportional electoral system, increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.	Yes	Yes, tentatively
Bottom-up Model	Decreasing support of democracy by citizens increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.	No	No
	Decreasing economic development, increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.	No, tentatively	No

### **6.1. Top-down Model**

The top-down model expects that both populist rhetoric and a disproportional electoral system could cause backsliding in CEE countries. The theory that populist rhetoric would cause democratic backsliding is strongly supported in previous literature. This agency-based approach has, among others, been taken by Dawson and Hanley (2019), Herman (2016) and Vachudova (2020). All studies have argued that the populist rhetoric of political leaders is a trigger for democratic backsliding in countries. This thesis has empirically tested these theories. Although no causal relationship has been established by this study, there was a correlation. Especially in Hungary, a correlation can be found between the rhetoric of leaders and backsliding. Yet, in Poland, this relationship was less clear and no increasing trend of populist rhetoric has been seen. A possible reason for this was lacking data, due to a lack of speeches in the Global Populist Dataset. Future research should analyse more speeches of political leaders in Poland.

When looking at both Hungary and Poland, a correlation was found between a disproportionate electoral system and democratic backsliding. In both countries, the electoral system was likely to make it easier for parties to get into power and pass non-democratic amendments. The disproportionality was higher in Hungary than in Poland, as the Fidesz party was able to pass the law which allowed the winning party to have a supermajority in parliament. Fidesz played an important role in increasing this disproportionality, while in Poland, the PiS party did less. These findings are in line with the previous work of Batory (2015), who has argued that CEE countries have disproportional electoral systems, which makes it easier for non-democratic leaders to have a majority in parliament. It should be noted that both Poland and Hungary have totally different electoral systems. For example, in Poland, the president is elected and has an official role, while in Hungary the president only has a ceremonial role. Although this is taken into account with the operationalisation of disproportionality, future research should look into whether this could make a difference.

### **6.2. Bottom-up Model**

The bottom-up model expects that dissatisfaction with a democratic regime and little economic development would lead to an increased likelihood of democratic backsliding. Regarding dissatisfaction with a democratic regime, in both Poland and

Hungary, the majority of the citizens support democratic values. Thus, it is not the case that citizens do not care about democracy and elect non-democratic leaders because they prefer an authoritarian regime more. These findings oppose previous literature on democratic backsliding in CEE, which looks at political-cultural factors. Specifically, Wunsch et al. (2022) and Ágh (2016) both argue that democracy is insufficiently consolidated among citizens in CEE, due to its post-communist past. While this literature shows that democracy is widely accepted. The discrepancy between previous research and this study could be due to a difference in the measurement of commitment to democracy. The data used in this paper is based on surveys and thus used second-hand quantitative data. However, for example, Wunsch et al. (2022) performed an experiment with Polish citizens. This could deliver more in-depth results on the attitudes towards democracy. However, such an approach was impossible in this paper due to time and resource constraints.

Regarding economic development, the results are more divided between Poland and Hungary. In Poland, economic development has improved since the accession to the EU and therefore is not considered to impact backsliding. In Hungary, the relationship is more uncertain. There has been a positive correlation between democratic backsliding and economic development after the financial crisis of 2008. However, in the past decade, Hungary has only seen strong economic development, while the democracy has kept dwindling over the past years. In general, the results are not in line with previous literature on economic factors and democracy. Szente (2017) and Karolewski and Benedikter (2017) have both argued that bad economic performances and inequality cause backsliding in CEE. A possible reason for the disparity could be due to a different research design. This study has analysed economic development by looking at multiple countries and used actual economic data of well-established institutions. Previous literature has performed little empirical research and based their arguments more on reasoning (Karolewski & Benedikter, 2017; Szente, 2017).

### **6.3. Comparison Models**

In both cases, propositions on the bottom-up model were clearly rejected. Although it was more difficult to find causal relationships in the top-down model, due to a lack of information, the propositions were more likely to be confirmed in the

bottom-up model. Therefore, this thesis argued that the top-down model better explains democratic backsliding than the bottom-up model.

Especially in Poland, the top-down model is clearly dominant in explaining backsliding. The decline in democratic backsliding coincided with the election of the PiS party in 2015. Meanwhile, there has been strong economic development and support for democracy among citizens. Therefore, the bottom-up model is unlikely to explain the phenomenon. In Hungary, there is more uncertainty concerning the influence of economic development. The lack of democratic support by citizens is evidently not a reason for democratic backsliding. Therefore, in general, the effect of the rhetoric of the Fidesz party and how the party created a more disproportionate electoral system in Hungary seems to be more likely to explain backsliding.

As already mentioned in the methodology (chapter 4), this congruence analysis takes a complementary approach. Therefore, it should be highlighted that the two models in this thesis can complement each other. For example, even if the top-down model is most likely to explain democratic backsliding, it could be that poor economic development also contributes to the problem. There is a chance that this has been the case in Hungary, where there were economic problems after the financial crisis. Yet, this thesis still made a clear distinction between the two models, with the aim to find a coherent model that explains backsliding.

## 7. Conclusion

In the past decade, politicians, scholars and international organisations have warned against the erosion of democratic institutions in the world. This phenomenon has also been seen in EU member states in Central Eastern Europe. These post-communist states all had well-consolidated democratic regimes after the accession to the EU. Yet, there are now signals that democracy is slowly eroding, a process which is referred to as democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2021; Freedom House, 2021).

This thesis has aimed to explain why this democratic backsliding has been happening in Central Eastern Europe. If a better understanding is acquainted with what has caused this process, it will be easier for the EU to tackle this problem. As there is not a coherent model that explains backsliding in the current literature, this study has combined theories in the previous literature on backsliding in CEE into two new models: the top-down model and the bottom-up model. On the one hand, the top-down model explains backsliding by looking at the organisation of the state, such as the electoral system and the behaviour of the leader. On the other hand, the bottom-up model explain backsliding by looking at factors in society, such as economic development and citizen commitment to democracy.

In this thesis, it is tested which of the two models explains democratic backsliding in CEE the best. Therefore, the following research question was formulated: “Does the top-down model or the bottom-up model better explains democratic backsliding in EU Central Eastern European Countries?”

To find an answer to this research question, a congruence analysis is performed. The two countries that have seen the most democratic backsliding according to the V-dem index (2022) are selected; Hungary and Poland. For each country, the top-down model is tested by looking at the populist rhetoric of the political leader and the proportionality of the electoral system. The bottom-up model is tested by analysing the commitment of citizens to a democratic regime and economic development.

The results of the analysis in both countries showed that the top-down model better explains democratic backsliding in EU Central Eastern European countries. Although it was difficult to find a causal relationship between the different



independent variables and democratic backsliding, a correlation was found between the independent variables of the top-down model and democratic backsliding. On the other hand, no causal relationship could be found between economic development and citizen support of democracy and backsliding. Thus, it is argued that the top-down model is most likely to explain backsliding.

### **7.1. Limitations**

The results of this study are limited in multiple ways. To begin, it should be highlighted that this study lacks its internal validity. For each proposition, it is tested whether the independent variable causes democratic backsliding. However, there are a lot of other variables that could have had an influence on the extent of backsliding. A correlation found between the independent and dependent variable does not immediately mean that there is a causal relationship. Yet it is extremely difficult for cases such as countries to completely control for other factors. Thus, it must be kept in mind that this study has only tested which model is more likely to explain backsliding and it was not always able to establish causal relationships.

It should also be acknowledged that different factors complement each other and therefore, although the top-down model explains backsliding in CEE the best, there is a possibility that elements of the bottom-up model have reinforced the top-down model. This study has still aimed to increase the internal validity as much as possible by relying on previous literature and creating as coherent models as possible.

Besides that, this study is limited in its generalisability. Hungary and Poland both have a high degree of democratic backsliding, which is useful to analyse which model explains it better. However, each country in Central Eastern Europe is different and the models are thus context-dependent. Therefore, the results must be carefully generalised to other countries.

Finally, this study has not taken into account the possible effects that COVID-19 has had on democratic backsliding in CEE. Since the pandemic has been a chaotic period, with decreasing economic development and more dissatisfaction with the government, this could have had an influence on democratic backsliding.

## **7.2. Future Research**

Based on the findings of this thesis, multiple recommendations can be drawn for future research. To begin, future research should test both models in other CEE countries where backsliding is seen. By testing the models on multiple cases, there is more certainty whether the top-down model indeed best explains democratic backsliding. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine whether the two approaches could also be used outside CEE.

Furthermore, the measurement of the propositions has relied mainly on quantitative data and reports from international organisations. It would be interesting to also qualitative test these concepts by interviewing citizens. For example, interviewing Hungarians and Poles whether they have experienced populist rhetoric of leaders, if they felt like their economic development has been decreasing or whether they are committed to a democratic regime. Unfortunately, due to time constraints and language barriers, this study has not been able to test this qualitatively. Therefore, future research is advised to test both models qualitatively by interviewing citizens.

Finally, future research is advised to look into the effects of the pandemic on democratic backsliding and whether this would affect the two models.

## **7.3. Theoretical and Societal Contributions**

To begin, this study has contributed to the current literature on democratic backsliding. It has empirically tested previous theories on the causes of backsliding, by combining them into two different models. Although previous academics have created also models, none of these models were applicable to Central Eastern Europe. It is academically relevant to look at this region, as the countries are an exception to the rule. Countries such as Hungary and Poland were once the hallmark of a successful democratic transition after the communist regime. Now, both countries have seen the worst democratic scores in the European Union.

Furthermore, this study has aimed to contribute to society, as it gives an insight into the causes of democratic backsliding. Consequently, the results of this thesis can be used by EU policymakers in order to address the current backsliding problems in CEE. The EU has already tried to tackle democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland by implementing sanctions and initiating infringement procedures. Yet, so far, these measures have been unsuccessful. The results of this

study show that democratic backsliding in CEE is mostly caused by the organisation of the state and does not come necessarily from discontent from citizens. The EU should take this into account when creating measures to fight the erosion of democratic institutions. For example, the EU currently has initiated the European Democracy Action Plan, which is a plan designed to empower citizens. Although the democratic action plan is likely to enhance democracy in general, it is focused too much on society and less on the organisation of the state. According to the results of this thesis, they should focus more on targeting the behaviour of political leaders and prevent leaders from making changes to the electoral system of states. Hopefully, that could be the first step in combatting the anti-democratic practices in the member states.

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## Appendix A

**Table A**

*Overview Previous Literature Explaining Democratic Backsliding in CEE*

<b>Explaining theory</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Argument</b>	<b>Possible limitation study</b>
<b>Political economic factors</b>	Szente, Z. (2017). Challenging the basic values – Problems in the rule of law in Hungary and the failure of the EU to tackle them.	Backsliding is caused by widespread disappointment about economic benefits (short-term)	Only studied the case of Hungary.
	Karolewski, I., & Benedikter, R. (2017). Poland's conservative turn and the role of the European Union.	Backsliding is caused by poor long-term economic governance, which has resulted in income inequality	
	Bochsler, D., & Juon, A. (2019). Authoritarian footprints in Central and Eastern Europe.	The financial crisis did not have an influence on democratic backsliding	
	Arató, K., & Benedek, I. (2021). Are democratic backsliding and staying out of the Eurozone interconnected?	Countries that are part of the Eurozone are less likely to have democratic backsliding	Correlation does not mean causation
<b>Political institutional factors</b>	Batory, A. (2015). Populist in government? "Hungary's system of national cooperation".	CEE countries have disproportional electoral systems, which makes it easier for non-democratic leaders to have a majority in parliament.	Only looks at the case of Hungary
<b>Political cultural factors</b>	Wunsch, N., Jacob, M.S., & Derksen, L. (2022). The demand side of democratic backsliding: How divergent understandings of democracy shape political choice.	Countries in CEE have a negative view towards democracy due to a post-communist legacy	
	Ágh, A. (2016) How divergent understandings of democracy shape political choice.	Institutions in CEE are not consolidated in the culture of citizens, causing them to opt for authoritarian leaders	

Explaining theory	Study	Argument	Possible limitation study
<b>Agency-based factors</b>	Dawson, J., & Hanley, S. (2019). Foreground liberalism, background nationalism: A discursive-institutionalist account of EU leverage and 'democratic backsliding' in East Central Europe.	Democratic backsliding is caused by political leaders, that drive illiberal sentiments based on a polarizing discourse.	
	Herman, L.E. (2016). Re-evaluating the post-communist success story: party elite loyalty, citizen mobilization and the erosion of Hungarian democracy.	Democratic backsliding happens because mainstream parties adopt the populist rhetoric of extreme populist parties, making it easier to continue illiberal measures.	
	Vachudova, M.A. (2020). Ethnopolitism and democratic backsliding in Central Europe.	Democratic backsliding is caused by an ethnopolitist discourse of leaders. By framing assaults of so-called 'enemies', they can legitimize illiberal actions	

## Appendix B

**Table B**

*Indices democratic backsliding*

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Measurement Democratic Backsliding</b>	<b>Categorization Countries</b>
Economist Intelligence Unit Index	165 countries in 2021	Rates a country based on: 1. Electoral processes and pluralism 2. Functioning of the government 3. Political participation 4. Political culture 5. Civil liberties	1. Full democracy 2. Flawed democracy 3. Hybrid regime 4. Authoritarian regime
Freedom House Index	29 countries in Europe and Eurasia	Rates a country on: 1. National democratic governance 2. Electoral process 3. Civil society 4. Independent media 5. Local democratic governance 6. Judicial framework and independence 7. Corruption	Ratings are based on a scale of 1-7 democracy score  1. Consolidated democracies (5.01-7.00) 2. Semi-consolidated democracies (4.01-5.00) 3. Transitional / hybrid regimes (3.01-4.00) 4. Semi-consolidated authoritarian regime (2.01-3.00) 5. Consolidated authoritarian regime (1.00-2.00)
Polity Project	167 countries in 2018	Rates a country on: 1. Key qualities of executive recruitment 2. Constraints on executive authority 3. Political competition 4. Changes in institutionalized qualities of governing authority	21-point scale ranging from -10 to +10:  1. Autocracy (-10 - -6) 2. Anocracies (-5 - +5) 3. Democracy (+6 - +10)
V-dem	202 countries in 2022	Rates a country on 5 indices: 1. Electoral democracy index 2. Liberal democracy index 3. Participatory democracy index 4. Deliberative democracy index 5. Egalitarian democracy index	

## Appendix C

Raw data Global Populism Dataset

**Table C1**

*Populist Rhetoric Leaders Hungary*

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Campaign	0	0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Campaign	0	0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Campaign		0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Campaign		0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Ribbon Cutting		0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Ribbon Cutting		0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	International	0	0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	International	0	0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	International		0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	International		0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsancy	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Famous	0	0	0



<b>Leader</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Ferenc Gyurcsány	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Famous	0	0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsány	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Famous		0	0
Ferenc Gyurcsány	Hungarian Socialist Party	2004-2009	Famous		0	0
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Campaign	1	1,5	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Campaign	2	1,5	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Campaign		1,5	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Campaign		1,5	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Ribbon Cutting		0	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Ribbon Cutting		0	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	International	0	0	0,875

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	International	0	0	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	International		0	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	International		0	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Famous	2	2	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Famous	2	2	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Famous		2	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2010-2014	Famous		2	0,875
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Campaign	1,5	1,53	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Campaign	1,5	1,53	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Campaign	1,6	1,53	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Campaign		1,53	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Ribbon Cutting	0,1	0,3	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Ribbon Cutting	0,4	0,3	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Ribbon Cutting	0,4	0,3	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Ribbon Cutting		0,3	0,833

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	International	0,8	0,9	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	International	0,8	0,9	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	International	1,1	0,9	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	International		0,9	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Famous	0,3	0,6	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Famous	0,8	0,6	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Famous	0,7	0,6	0,833
Viktor Orbán	The Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance	2014-2018	Famous		0,6	0,833

**Table C2***Populist Rhetoric Leaders Poland*

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Prime Minister Or President</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Campaign	1	1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Campaign		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Campaign		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Campaign		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Ribbon Cutting	1	1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Ribbon Cutting		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Ribbon Cutting		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Ribbon Cutting		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	International	0	0	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	International		0	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	International		0	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	International		0	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Famous	1	1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Famous		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Famous		1	0,75
Lech Kaczyński	President	Law and Justice	2005-2010	Famous		1	0,75
Jarosław Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Campaign	1	1	0,25
Jarosław Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Campaign		1	0,25
Jarosław Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Campaign		1	0,25
Jarosław Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Campaign		1	0,25
Jarosław Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0,25

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Prime Minister Or President</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Ribbon Cutting		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Ribbon Cutting		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Ribbon Cutting		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	International	0	0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	International		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	International		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	International		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Famous	0	0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Famous		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Famous		0	0,25
Jaroslaw Kaczyński	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2006-2007	Famous		0	0,25
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Campaign	0	0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Campaign		0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Campaign		0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Campaign		0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Ribbon Cutting		0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Ribbon Cutting		0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Ribbon Cutting		0	0
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	International	0	0	0,833
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	International		0	0,833
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	International		0	0,833
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	International		0	0,833

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Prime Minister Or President</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Famous	0	0	0,833
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Famous		0	0,833
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Famous		0	0,833
Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	Civic Platform	2011-2014	Famous		0	0,833
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Campaign	0,3	0,15	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Campaign	0	0,15	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Campaign		0,15	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Campaign		0,15	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Ribbon Cutting	0,6	0,3	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Ribbon Cutting	0	0,3	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Ribbon Cutting		0,3	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Ribbon Cutting		0,3	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	International	0,2	0,1	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	International	0	0,1	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	International		0,1	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	International		0,1	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Famous	0,2	0,1	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Famous	0	0,1	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Famous		0,1	0,1625
Bronisław Komorowski	President	Civic Platform	2010-2015	Famous		0,1	0,1625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Campaign	1	1	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Campaign	1	1	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Campaign		1	0,8625

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Prime Minister Or President</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Campaign		1	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Ribbon Cutting	0,5	0,6	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Ribbon Cutting	0,7	0,6	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Ribbon Cutting		0,6	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Ribbon Cutting		0,6	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	International	0,4	0,4	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	International	0,4	0,4	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	International		0,4	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	International		0,4	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Famous	1,5	1,45	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Famous	1,4	1,45	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Famous		1,45	0,8625
Beate Szydło	Prime Minister	Law and Justice	2015-2017	Famous		1,45	0,8625
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Campaign	1	0,75	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Campaign	0,5	0,75	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Campaign		0,75	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Campaign		0,75	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Ribbon Cutting	0	0	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Ribbon Cutting		0	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Ribbon Cutting		0	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	International	0	0	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	International	0	0	0,375

<b>Leader</b>	<b>Prime Minister Or President</b>	<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Term of Leader</b>	<b>Speech Type</b>	<b>Populist score of speech</b>	<b>Average Populist Score Speech</b>	<b>Average Populism Grade Leader-Term</b>
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	International		0	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	International		0	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Famous	0,5	0,75	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Famous	1	0,75	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Famous		0,75	0,375
Andrzej Duda	President	Law and Justice	2015-2018	Famous		0,75	0,375