

De LEGIBUS

9

Julho de 2025

HOW TO MEASURE A CRISIS? REMARKS ON THE PROBLEM OF MEASUREMENT IN THE SCIENCE ON DEMOCRACY

MATEUSZ KLINOWSKI
RAFAŁ SMOLEŃ

REVISTA DE DIREITO
LAW JOURNAL

EDIÇÃO ESPECIAL
DIREITO, ESTADO E DEMOCRACIA

Faculdade de Direito — Universidade Lusófona
<https://revistas.ulusofona.pt/index.php/delegibus>

HOW TO MEASURE A CRISIS? REMARKS ON THE PROBLEM OF MEASUREMENT IN THE SCIENCE ON DEMOCRACY*

MATEUSZ KLINOWSKI**

RAFAŁ SMOLEŃ***

SUMMARY: 1. The crisis of liberal democracy; 2. The problem of measurement in political sciences; 3. The composition of the concept of democracy; 4. Problems in measuring democracy; 5. Democracy rankings; 6. The crisis of Polish democracy vs the results of the rankings; 7. Conclusions.

ABSTRACT: In this paper we investigate the problem of a measurement of democratic backsliding through rankings. We indicate various theoretical and practical problems of measurement and conceptualisation of the phenomenon of democracy. We argue that democratic backsliding should be viewed as an opportunity to verify if rankings are an accurate method of measuring democracy. We are concerned particularly with the case of Poland, as the situation in that country in recent years has been universally described by experts and popular press as an example of the crisis of democracy. Having analysed popular democracy rankings (*Democracy Index* – The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Global State of Democracy* – International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Liberal Democracy Index* – Varieties of Democracy Institute, *Democracy Matrix* – University of Würzburg), we argue that they produce the expected results – consistently indicating the deterioration of Polish democracy in the period of 2015-2023.

KEYWORDS: crisis of democracy, democratic backsliding, measurement in political sciences, democracy rankings, progress in political sciences.

* This publication is part of the research project 2019/35/B/HS5/02887 financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.

** Adjunct professor at the Faculty of Law and Administration, Jagiellonian University in Kraków. ORCID: 0000-0003-4650-5234

*** PhD researcher at the Faculty of Law and Administration, University of Warsaw. ORCID: 0000-0003-0823-7195

1. THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The idea that liberal democracy is in crisis has been discussed in the scientific literature for a couple of years. At the beginning the problem seemed to be limited to the newcomers to the modern democratic family, i.e. countries like Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic or Slovakia¹, but nowadays it includes countries with long-lasting democratic traditions as well². The concept of liberal democracy has been a subject of ongoing discussions among scholars, but the general consensus is that a political system that reflects this concept is based on the restrictions of a political majority and represents in an appropriate form (respects) protection of human dignity and human rights, the rule of law, and the concept of political pluralism³. The crisis of democracy, often referred to as the democratic backsliding (or the democracy's backsliding), thus, could be defined as the process of departure of a political system from those practices (values). Democratic backsliding, often characterised as a transformation of a political system into autocracy, consists in decreasing quality of various vital institutions, collapsing effectiveness of constitutional protection of civic and human rights, and diminishing public control over political powers⁴.

1 E. Bakke, N. Sitter, "The EU's enfants terribles: Democratic backsliding in central Europe since 2010," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022): 22–37; A. Polyakova, T. Taussig, T. Reinert, K. Kirişci, A. Sloat, J. Kirchick, M. Hooper, N. Eisen, A. Kenealy, *The anatomy of illiberal states: Assessing and responding to democratic decline in Turkey and Central Europe* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-anatomy-of-illiberal-states>, accessed January 3, 2025.

2 S.D. Hyde, "Democracy's backsliding in the international environment," *Science* 369 (2020): 1192–1196, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb2434>.

3 For the explication of the concept of liberal democracy, see e.g. G. Sartori, *The theory of democracy revisited*, vol. 2: *The classical issues* (Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, 1987). The official catalogue of values characteristic for liberal democracies is given, e.g., in Art. 2 of the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon (Official Journal of the European Union, C 306, 17 December 2007): "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities".

4 W. Sadurski, "How Democracy Dies (in Poland): A Case Study of Anti-Constitutional Populist Backsliding," *Sydney Law School Research Paper* 18/01 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3103491>. The author accurately argues that the term of democratic backsliding describes process of reversal, not a "rapid, immediate rupture, as in a coup" (p. 16). It can be, therefore, seen as a synonym for erosion. However, according to other authors the term includes also revolutionary methods of breaks with the past; see, e.g., N. Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>. Apparently, the term of democratic backsliding, which is rather vague, is a subject of the ongoing scientific

Different socio-economic factors (e.g. globalization)⁵ as well as political (e.g. populism)⁶ and communication phenomena (e.g. social media)⁷ have been proposed by a number of authors as plausible explanations regarding the observed crisis of democracy. However, in this particular paper we are not concerned with the question which of those explanations fit the best the general perception of the prevailing political *Zeitgeist*⁸. On the contrary, our aim here is to understand how the crisis of democracy could be objectively identified. On what premises could one even realise that democracy is backsliding? In other words, how to measure that process? In the context of political science, a crisis should be understood primarily as a synonym for a calamity. Crisis means that some important factors are changing in an unintended and unwanted direction, and because of that such a change is considered problematic. Can we identify those factors and measure them to see a decrease that corresponds to the speak of democratic backsliding? Similarly to other areas of science, are there any variables that work as objective criteria for a said crisis? Since there are various rankings of democracy considered, both by experts and political practitioners, as a useful tool for probing, assessing and comparing various political regimes, all those questions could be reduced to a single one: are rankings of democracy a good measurement for a crisis and do they in fact indicate the backsliding?

debate. F. Wolkenstein notes that “much of the existing research either under- or overdetermines the concept” – see “What is democratic backsliding?,” *Constellations* 30 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12627>. For an overview of various theoretical positions on democratic backsliding see: D. Waldner, E. Lust, “Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 95.

5 I. Krastev, S. Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (Penguin Books, 2020).

6 P. Norris, R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

7 A. Kozłowski, K. Skelnik, “Disinformation as a Tool Aimed at Weakening Consolidated Democracies,” *Public Governance. Administration and Finances Law Review* 5, no. 1 (2020): 73–85, <https://doi.org/10.53116/pgaflr.2020.1.5>.

8 Although readers interested in that particular topic may check our other paper in which we contributed to the problem: M. Klinowski, R. Smoleń, “The march of the brutes. Remarks on agential causes of the crisis of liberal democracy in Poland,” *De Legibus – Revista de Direito da Universidade Lusófona Lisboa* 4 (2024): 119–140, <https://doi.org/10.60543/dlb.vi7.9680>.

2. THE PROBLEM OF MEASUREMENT IN POLITICAL SCIENCES

Measurement is the central concept in science, especially in those areas where a quantitative research is prominent. Measurement is defined as an activity leading to represent a certain part of reality by a set of abstract terms, usually numbers⁹. The ability to make measurements is seen as a mark of solid scientific endeavor, and measurement often works as a demarcation line between science and pseudo-science or ideology¹⁰. Measurement is not only the foundation for empirical research, but also for any theory development, as it helps theories to maintain their objectivity and predictive power. Improvements in measurements are usually perceived as hallmarks of scientific progress¹¹.

Measurement has been already discussed in political science, as it encounters specific problems reflecting the nature of political phenomena. Political science deals with constructs, like democracy or autocracy, which are more vaguely defined than terms used in theories in the domain of physics or chemistry. Unlike an electron, a hydrogen or a hydrocarbon, democracy is not a simple, quantifiable object or a class of such objects, but rather a combination of social conventions, institutional arrangements and political behaviours. An electron exists in the realm of particles studied by physics, while democracy is a complex mix of physical events, conventional facts and normative phenomena like legal rules, principles and values. It is then studied by psychology, sociology, political sciences, normative sciences and the list goes on and on, and each of the perspectives is important and cannot be simply dismissed as less significant or producing less meaningful picture of democracy. How to study political phenomena, in fact, depends on the perspective one is ready to adopt.

The perspective used in political sciences is centered on the operationalisation of political phenomena by various techniques to translate the complex

9 E. Tal, "Measurement in science," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E.N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, fall 2020).

10 The idea of a demarcation line was discussed, for example, by Karl Popper, who proposed falsification through measurements as a procedure for distinguishing between science and pseudoscience – see K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

11 H. Chang, *Inventing temperature: Measurement and scientific progress* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

political 'objects' into measurable indicators. The creation of composite indices that aggregate multiple indicators into a single measure is one of the most widely used methods, and in fact the typical one in democracy rankings. The other are expert assessments, public opinion surveys, content analysis of relevant texts (e.g., political speeches, social media or news reports), network analysis to study political elites or parties, or even observation of political behaviours like turnout at the election day. All of those methods constitute a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches in different proportions.

The selection of the exact methods suitable for a measurement of a particular political phenomenon remains a matter of controversy and disputes due to the nature of such phenomena. Additionally, perception of those methods by experts changes in time and their selection is defeasible and subjective¹². The situation is even more complicated in the case of democracy, since this concept is politically charged, and the relation to democracy is often a hallmark of a membership to a particular side of the political scene. Additionally, the significance of the concept, the history of its adoption in different regimes, and its global proliferation are responsible for the fact that there are numerous different proposals regarding what democracy is and what it means.

The conceptual ambiguity regarding democracy is founded, though, on much more fundamental discrepancy than in cases of many other political entities. It follows from the fact that there is no universal agreement not only on the nature of democracy (its definition) but also even on the nature of the definition of democracy. Some scholars argue for a procedural definition emphasizing free elections¹³, while others propose a substantive approach where the aspects such as political equality, social inclusion, and economic justice are foundational¹⁴. Hence, since scholars frequently disagree even

12 K.A. Bollen, P. Paxton, "Subjective measures of liberal democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 1 (2000): 58–86.

13 R.A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 3. Later Dahl proposed a more complex definition, admitting also those civil liberties that are crucial for free elections: freedom of expression, right of association and the right to collect information. See R.A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 218–219.

14 M. Coppedge, J. Gerring, C.H. Knutsen, S.I. Lindberg, J. Teorell, D. Altman, M. Bernhard, "Conceptualizing and measuring democracy: A new approach," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2 (2011): 247–267.

on the approach to defining democracy, not mentioning the definition of the phenomenon itself, no wonder that they disagree also on the appropriate indicators that should be measured for the assessment of its quality. The contestability of the concept of a phenomenon leads to the contestability of its measurements. This problem is usually named as the challenge of conceptualisation¹⁵. But there are additional problems.

Validity refers to the question whether a measure accurately captures the concept, while consistency concerns the stability of measurement across different contexts and time periods. Validity of political measurements in general may be questioned on the fact that they often rely on expert judgments, survey respondents and subjective coding. Even expert-coded indices may be a subject to motivated reasoning and biases, which are a source of distortion and inconsistencies in measurement resembling systematic errors in experimental science¹⁶. To give a specific example, well-known Polity Project Database that serves as a useful tool for analysis of political systems worldwide, relies on assignment of numerical values to political attributes by researchers working in the project – the practice that has been already criticised as arbitrary¹⁷, as human coding will always be susceptible to ideological biases, inconsistencies and malpractices. Similar criticism considers also the ranking prepared by Freedom House¹⁸.

Alongside the problem of selecting adequate indicators for measurement, its consistency over time is another issue. Political phenomena are dynamic, so is also our understanding of them. Concepts are subject to ongoing debates, and political concepts are very intensively discussed. Actually, public debates on the meaning of key political concepts and socially important issues are universally seen as a characteristic for a healthy democratic political system. In that case, not only the measurement of political phenomena changes over time, but the same is true for their conceptualisation. That

15 G.L. Munck, J. Verkuilen, "Conceptualizing and measuring democracy: Evaluating alternative indices," *Comparative Political Studies*, 35, no. 1 (2002): 5–34.

16 R. Adcock, D. Collier, "Measurement validity: A shared standard for qualitative and quantitative research," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 529–546.

17 M.G. Marshall, T.R. Gurr, K. Jaggers, *Polity IV Project: Political regime characteristics and transitions, 1800-2018* (Center for Systemic Peace, 2019).

18 D. Giannone, "Political and ideological aspects in the measurement of democracy: The Freedom House case," *Democratization* 17, no. 1 (2010): 68–97.

seems to undermine, thus, usefulness of any historical comparisons, or makes them problematic.

But it is more to that. Political institutions and cultures vary significantly across countries, hence it is even questionable to apply the same measurement standards universally. In other words, in contrast to natural sciences, in political sciences there is no universal frame of reference that works for all periods of time, all territories and all cultures¹⁹. It looks as we could measure political phenomena, but that measurement is still not enough to make comparisons between different instantiations of them in space and time.

As we see, challenges in measurement of political phenomena to the certain extent parallel those in natural sciences, but at the same time are also specific. Although they are already discussed in scholarly literature, we hope that our paper will add some new points to that ongoing debate.

3. THE COMPOSITION OF THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

Let's take a closer look at the concept of democracy. What is the ontological status of democracy? On face value, democracy is an attribute assigned (or not) to a political system. A particular political system is democratic if it has an appropriate characteristic. Thus, if a political system may be only democratic or not democratic, democracy is a feature of binary character. Another question is the intensity of that feature, as it seems that states differ in respect of democracy – some are considered as more democratic than others. That language intuition could be modelled by simply assuming that some countries have more democracy than others. Yet, such an assumption requires a gradience of the feature called democracy. Something must be added to the country's characteristics to make it more democratic.

In political sciences that requirement is typically modelled through the concept of the different components of a democratic political system. Such

19 For some remarks on this issue in the context of studies of corruption, see: D. Treisman, "What have we learned about the causes of corruption from ten years of cross-national empirical research?", *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 211–244.

components are, for example, regular and free elections, human rights, independence of the judiciary, free media and so on. Which of the components are required to qualify a particular regime as a democracy depends on the adopted definition of that term. Minimalist definitions will reduce that number only to absolutely few, more specific components, like regular free elections, while maximalist definitions will add more components, which are at the same time usually more abstract, for example, equality or social justice²⁰.

However, practical realisation of those components is also a matter of degree. It is a fact that democratic states differ in their degree of respect for human rights, the independence of their judiciary, or their electoral systems. Even the idea of free elections, treated as the only necessary ingredient of democracy according to its minimalist formulation, is not binary, as it depends on various factors like technical details of casting and counting votes, financing of political parties, press and media freedom and so on. Countries differ from one another in respect to democracy by the number of democratic components adopted in their political systems and by the intensity of that adoption.

To reflect that idea, those components are often considered as ‘postulates’, i.e. hypothetical states of affairs considered as requisites of a democratic system. According to that view, to qualify a particular state as democratic means to assume it adopted certain components of a democratic regime to a degree that justifies the assumption in the light of critical examination. Which components are postulated as significant for that qualification is, in turn, a matter of definition adopted in the process.

If we have this right, we could assume that democracy is the feature of a political system defined by certain postulates, although different definitions of democracy indicate different postulates as leading (important), and the postulates themselves may be fulfilled to different degrees. Democracy may thus be perceived as a kind of a general idea (a principle), the realisation of which is assessed in the perspective of the fulfilment of a number

20 The minimalist/maximalist distinction in defining democracy is well-known in the science on democracy, see e.g. A. Kendall-Taylor, N. Lindstaedt, E. Frantz, *Democracies and Authoritarian Regimes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 15.

of more specific principles (postulates) given as crucial by a chosen definition of democracy. Those postulates constituting democracy, or democratic principles if one prefers, cannot be, of course, relativised indefinitely. Even if there is not one 'ideal form' for the realisation of a particular postulate, or a final and ultimate adoption of an principle, there are certain necessary (minimum) conditions assumed. Those conditions constitute the essence of a postulate or principle, and cannot be violated. In other words, we may not have an idea of what would it be to have free press or elections, but certainly we have an idea of what wouldn't. In fact, that particular property of the postulates constituting our concept of a democratic regime is what makes it possible to qualify those postulates as principles in a sense often used not only in political sciences but also in legal theory, where principles are viewed as an indispensable component of the system of law²¹. Actually, democracy itself is referred to as a principle in certain contexts²² intended to underline its characteristics as a certain ideal type that particular regimes may adhere only to a certain degree, depending on a range of social, political or economic circumstances. The possibility of better or worse realisation of these principles is, moreover, often explicitly assumed in the legal systems of individual states²³.

According to that view, democracy could be understood as a kind of 'umbrella' principle, consisting of few (in case of minimalist definitions) or many (in case of maximalist approaches) specific principles. Those specific principles (postulates) can be realised more or less, so can be democracy itself. But because the postulate of democracy is itself a principle, there is a certain threshold below which it can no longer be said that a particular political

21 We use here the notion of a principle probably close to Dworkin's definition formulated in his seminal paper – see: R.M. Dworkin, "The Model of Rules," *University of Chicago Law Review* 35, iss. 1, article 3 (1967).

22 See, e.g., K. Lenaerts, "The principle of democracy in the case law of the European Union Court of Justice," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2013): 271–315, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020589313000080>.

23 Even the requirement to strive for a better implementation of democratic principles can be considered a necessary defining element of democracy. For example, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal expressed a similar view in its judgement of 24 November 2010 on the compliance of the Lisbon Treaty with the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland (K 32/09), where it stated that one of the components of the constitutional identity of the Polish state is "the requirement to ensure a better realisation of constitutional values" (reasons for the judgement, point III.2.1).

regime is still democratic and the essence of democracy is preserved by it²⁴. Therefore, the decline of democracy could be indicated and measured even if its definitions are postulates founded upon another postulates – all having a form of principles which are to a large extent indeterminated in a described sense. Such measurement could consist simply in checking how many specific principles that make up the definition of democracy are fulfilled to a sufficient degree. A democratic backsliding that constitutes a crisis, thus, could be in turn understood as a drop in numbers of fulfilled principles below a certain threshold which constitutes the minimum of democracy.

Finally, it is worth to note that the idea of a threshold and its adoption in the process of measuring the crisis of democracy justifies the assumption that democracy is a discrete phenomenon. On the other hand, the concept of rankings seems to support rather continuous view of a measured phenomenon. Such an approach is seen in those rankings which adopt categories like full, deficient, illiberal, electoral, or hybrid democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes – we do not know where is the threshold of democracy situated within such categorisation. Additionally, that raises further specific theoretical and methodological problems, as proliferation of ‘democracy with adjectives’ may be viewed as a conceptual engineering²⁵ that sometimes, depending on the adjectives used, obscures the meaningful differences between democratic and non-democratic regimes and may “legitimate a system that should be denied the label of ‘democracy’”²⁶. We believe that particular issue to be indeed an adverse effect of rankings and a specific analytical perspective they offer, in which ranked countries seem to create an ordered continuum reflecting numerical continuum.

24 For a similar approach see M. Saward, *Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003). In his book Saward adopted the concepts of threshold and continuum of democracy. Defining a threshold norm allows us to understand what democracy is and what it is not – the threshold represents the boundary between democracy and non-democracy. The category of continuum, on the other hand, illustrates the extent to which democracy is present in the state.

25 See D. Collier, S. Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 430–451, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1997.0009>.

26 In that way with regard to the concept of illiberal democracy: T.G. Daly, “Illiberal Democracy: Time to Stop Using a Problematic Term?,” *Percorsi costituzionali*, no. 2: *Ossimoroni costituzionali. Constitutional Oxymorons* (Naples: Jovene editore, 2020): 295.

4. PROBLEMS IN MEASURING DEMOCRACY

Despite the issues mentioned above, there are further problems, both theoretical and practical, specific for measuring democracy. They all seem to stem from the illusive nature of the concept of democracy itself.

First, it is probable that none of the postulates constituting ingredients of democracy will ever be fully realised. As we already argued, those postulates should be considered as principles. And it is a nature of principles that they are more or less adopted in a particular legal system, but never fulfilled. Principles play their regulative role in the law because the question about their adoption is always an open one²⁷. In any political system democratic postulates are in constant conflict and need to be reconciled with one another. For instance, even the most basic (fundamental) rights of individuals must be constantly reconciled with the rights of others and with the collective interests of the whole society. Classic examples consist of conflicts between public security and privacy (state's invigilation) or public health and personal freedom (compulsory vaccinations). At the same time, some democratic principles are complementary for each other, supplementing each other with their meaning and significance. In that case, it is an oversimplification to assume that postulates constituting the meaning of democracy could be assessed in a separation. But it is exactly what is assumed in many rankings, where the final score is a combination of certain indices corresponding to those postulates (principles, standards).

Another challenge to be accounted for consists in the fact that democratic principles and their interplay are conditioned by different cultural, social or even economic factors, including political traditions or even details of state's constitutions. Thus, both principles and their relations are highly context-dependent and it is another oversimplification to assume their identical content in different countries. In other words, for each country each of the postulates means something different. As a result, the aforementioned problem of the objectivity (validity) and comparability of measurement appears.

²⁷ An open question is the question which could be reasonable to ask. The idea bears on the open question argument by G.E. Moore, *Principia ethica* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1903).

The other fundamental problem in measuring democracy, so far only signaled above, is the lack of general agreement among scholars about what democracy actually is. There are many definitions of democracy and experts disagree even which type of definition is the appropriate one. Hence, in the academic literature on the theory of democracy, we encounter many different definitions of democracy, some even reconstructed in psychological or sociological research²⁸.

Disagreement about the understanding of democracy among scholars as well as in popular discourse often takes place even within a single legal or political culture, and its source seems to be the sole nature of the concept, which is not only conventional, but also inherently vague. Additionally, definitions of democracy may evolve in relation to the political, social or cultural processes currently taking place in different parts of the world, while at the same time influencing the assessment of these processes and the understanding of democracy itself. Consequently, certain principles traditionally associated with democracy may no longer fit into its definition or may acquire new content. Further postulates defining the concept of democracy may also be added.

28 On the colloquial definitions of democracy see, e.g., J. Reykowski, *Rozczarowanie demokracją. Perspektywa psychologiczna* (Sopot: Smak Słowa, 2019), 227–232 (published originally in English: *Disenchantment with democracy*, Oxford University Press, 2020). The author, a social and political psychologist, cites the results of research on the mentality of Polish society that he conducted in 1988 (questions on, among other things, visions of a ‘good society’) and in 1992–1995 (research on the understanding of the term ‘democracy’), i.e. during the first period of work on the new comprehensive constitution. The results indicated that “a common core can be discerned in colloquial thinking about democracy: it is understood as a political mechanism defined by features such as free elections and equality before the law” (p. 231). However, important differences also emerged: “for some, democracy is mainly a system of institutions for the appointment of legitimate authority and rules for the exercise of power (institutional interpretation), while others expect democracy to pursue certain values or specific social goals” (ibid.); the research allowed the author to distinguish three types of these goals: moral-political (concern for individual rights – axiological interpretation), socio-economic (concern for good living conditions and security – social interpretation), patriotic (concern for national-religious values – ideological interpretation). Of the subsequent research on the public understanding of democracy, both in Poland and other European countries, see in particular the European Social Survey, carried out in two editions in 2012 and 2022 in nearly 30 European countries (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>). The results of a recent cross-sectional survey on the public’s understanding of democracy, based on the data collected from 14,000 British, French, German, and Italian respondents, indicate that by this term citizens often mean the norms and institutions that make up the minimum concepts (definitions) of democracy – L. Kaftan, “Lip service to liberal democracy in Western Europe?”, *European Political Science Review* 16, no. 4 (2024): 535, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773924000079>.

Importantly, democracy does not mean the same thing in different linguistic, cultural and political contexts²⁹. The measurements and definitions developed in Euro-Atlantic legal and political culture can be an easy target for criticism conducted from the perspective of postcolonial theory, as being an expression of the cultural hegemony of European systems of knowledge³⁰. Finally, the idea of democracy is often postulated as a certain ideal serving as a point of reference in discussions, without a commitment to specify its content in details. Frankly, often the postulate of democracy is put forward in order to stimulate further discussions what democracy really means.

Taking all of the above into consideration, the problem, as we believe, lies in the fact that until we specify certain postulates characteristic for democracy and the extent or degree to which they should be adopted in all political systems, an objective measurement of democracy and, as a result, its decline seems to be impossible. The issue is even more pressing, because the concept of democracy is usually not explicated in legal acts, although the term is used in them in a way which often deepens the confusion³¹. Partial definitions of the term, in turn, could be found in judicial decisions³².

All the difficulties in the conceptualisation of democracy obviously have a direct bearing on the issue of measurement of the phenomenon, leading again to the question of its validity and comparability. The methodology of rankings brings yet another set of challenges.

29 See S. Dahlberg, U. Mörkenstam, "Exploring popular conceptions of democracy through media discourse: analysing dimensions of democracy from online media data in 93 countries using a distributional semantic model," *Democratization* (2024): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2024.2342485>.

30 See, e.g., D. Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?," *Representations* 37, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928652>.

31 For example, Art. 2, Sentence 1, of the Lisbon Treaty lists democracy as one of the 'values', treating it as conceptually distinct from others, including those considered by some authors to be constituent parts of the concept of democracy.

32 For example, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, in its Grand Chamber judgment of 17 January 2023 in the case of *Fedotova and Others v. Russia*, stated that "democracy does not simply mean that the views of a majority must always prevail: a balance must be achieved which ensures the fair and proper treatment of people from minorities and avoids any abuse of a dominant position", adding that the exercise of (convention) rights by a minority group cannot be made conditional on acceptance by the majority (para. 216 of the judgment, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-222750>).

First is the risk of subjectivity. Subjectivity is a fundamental reason why, for example, A.T. Little and A. Meng question the pessimistic trends seen lately in democracy rankings, arguing that they are most likely due to the excessive subjectivity of the experts involved in the evaluation of individual countries. They claim that democratic backsliding could be a real phenomenon, but the adoption of so-called objective criteria does not provide evidence of the regression of democracy over the last decade³³. According to them subjective indicators are selected as criteria for measurement, because of the difficulties in collection of objective data, but that came at the cost of accuracy and replicability³⁴.

On the other hand, Knutsen and colleagues argue that the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' indicators is mistaken, since even coding objective indicators "typically requires multiple hidden judgments by human raters. Measures of contested concepts, such as democracy, are therefore not so much either 'objective' or 'subjective' but rather more or less judgment based (i.e., 'observer-invariant'). (...) indicators that require fewer judgments are not necessarily less biased than those that rely on substantial human judgment"³⁵. To answer that, numerous methods have been developed to avoid human errors of judgement, e.g. a sufficiently large and well-chosen group of experts, using of ordinal scales with set definitions for each item during expert-coding, empirical tests to identify experts' negativity bias (i.e. putting more importance to negative information), the possibility to correct previous assessments in subsequent years, omitting or treating as less

33 A.T. Little, A. Meng, "Measuring Democratic Backsliding," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57, no. 2 (2024): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300063X>. "Most existing studies of global backsliding are based largely if not entirely on subjective indicators that rely on expert coder judgment. Our study surveys objective indicators of democracy (e.g., incumbent performance in elections) and finds little evidence of global democratic decline during the past decade. (...) Although we cannot rule out the possibility that the world is becoming less democratic exclusively in ways that require subjective judgment to detect, this claim is not justified by existing evidence" (ibid., 149).

34 Little, Meng, "Measuring Democratic Backsliding," 160. In the context of our broader ongoing research on progress in jurisprudence it is interesting that the question of measuring regression of democracy discussed here is viewed by authors as a source of scientific progress in science on democracy – "Recognizing this uncertainty is important and should not be discouraging. Parsing what we do and do not know about a topic is a first step for making scientific progress" (ibid.).

35 C.H. Knutsen, K.L. Marquardt, B. Seim, M. Coppedge, A.B. Edgell, J. Medzihorsky, D. Pemstein, J. Teorell, J. Gerring, S.I. Lindberg, "Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57, no. 2 (2024): 162–163, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652300077X>.

important extreme assessments within a given set of assessments. Another problem with adopting purely 'objective' metrics, mentioned by the authors, is the potential for false positives (inflated results) in certain categories, due to the ability of many modern albeit autocratic leaders to mask their autocratic policies by giving them a misleading form³⁶. Frankly, democratic rhetoric is currently used by all types of regimes³⁷, as it has a legitimising function nationally and internationally, thanks to the good global image of democracy.

Another noteworthy difficulty in measuring democracy regards to the selection of time for an assessment. The nature and consequences of the phenomena and events that should be taken into account in the evaluation may not yet be fully known and still ongoing in the time when that evaluation is carried out. The classic example of such a problem is the question of how much time must pass for a particular regime to be qualified as an established democracy. Is that time the same for all regimes, no matter their historical context or political culture? Or is it context-specific? If the latter is true, how to specify it for each country? Another example is the question whether noticeably worse results in a single year can already allow us to state that democracy is backsliding. Or perhaps we can state it only when the noticeably worse results repeat every year and continuously, for example, during five-year period?³⁸ Additionally, one can ask what does it mean that the results should be noticeably worse. Even if we reduce all of those questions to the issue of how many times a particular country should appear high in a specific ranking of democracy, the problem remains.

Finally, the obvious problem in measuring democracy by rankings is to decide on the type and number of measures, their possible weights or the possible methods of correcting the results. All these and other detailed statistical assumptions and procedures will be, of course, the consequence of adopting a certain definition of democracy and inevitably will be burden

36 Knutsen et al., "Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding," 164, 166, 170

37 A. Przeworski, "Who Decides What Is Democratic," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2024): 7.

38 Similar questions are formulated by Knutsen et. al., 164.

with biases and subjectivity of researchers involved in a construction of a particular measure.

5. DEMOCRACY RANKINGS

Rankings are not only a descriptive measure used to have a better grasp (understanding) of a certain part of the reality³⁹, but also could have a performative function, promoting and creating certain points of reference, models, standards, ways of thinking and acting, as well as shaping the specific behaviour of public actors⁴⁰. Rankings of countries are often used as an argument in political disputes, since they could be presented as an impartial and objective evidence for a deterioration or improvement in a given area⁴¹.

In contemporary constitutional law, at least in the Western world, it is widely accepted that democracy, human rights and the rule of law are interrelated⁴². Later in the text we will examine those rankings of democracy which correspond to such non-minimal definitions of democracy. At the same time, however, there are rankings constructed to measure only a selected aspects (components) of democracy. Such limited rankings include e.g. the Rule of Law Index published since 2006 by the World Justice Project, the Press Freedom Index prepared since 2002 by Reporters Without Borders, and the Corruption Perceptions Index issued by Transparency International since 1995. In our opinion, such a limited ranking is also the Freedom in

39 In doing so, rankings represent the state of affairs in a certain moment in time, but some of them take the form of ongoing monitoring; see e.g. <https://www.iqair.com/world-air-quality-ranking>.

40 This can be seen in the economic health ratings of states, which can significantly and directly influence the economic situation of a state by shaping investors' behaviour accordingly. The ratings issued by private rating agencies such as Fitch or Moody's could play a particularly important role in determining economic future of nations, and are, incidentally, used as proofs of how much power global private corporations can wield over democratic states.

41 See e.g. *Interpellation No 15878 to the Minister for Development on the decrease of Poland's place in the World Economic Forum ranking*, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/InterpelacjaTresc.xsp?key=509908BF>, accessed March 7, 2025. The author of the interpellation pointed out that the downgrading of Poland's place in the Global Competitiveness Index may provoke reasonable concerns of the business community and potential investors.

42 See e.g. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Further measures to promote and consolidate democracy*, Commission on Human Rights resolution 2002/46, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-democracy-and-human-rights>, accessed March 8, 2025.

the World index prepared by Freedom House since 1973, as it focuses on the issues of political and personal rights and freedoms, which are of course fundamental for maintaining a democracy, but not identical with it. We will not include such subject-limited rankings in our review, though, and focus only on the rankings measuring democracy in its entirety.

Now, let's take a look at a number of well-known rankings of the state of democracy in individual countries and see how they do their measurement and to what extent they demonstrate progress or decline in democracy. We start with the Democracy Index issued since 2006 by The Economist Intelligence Unit, part of The Economist Group, a publisher of the British conservative-liberal weekly "The Economist". The authors do not explicitly formulate the definition of democracy they use, however, the ranking takes into account 60 indicators grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. Based on them, state regimes are classified as full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes⁴³.

Another ranking – Global State of Democracy – is prepared by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), a Stockholm-based intergovernmental organisation of 34 countries from all continents. Its authors adopt a certain definition of democracy⁴⁴, and the ranking is based on 165 individual indicators, devised using expert surveys, standards-based coding by research groups and analysts, observational data and composite measures. It uses data from 24 sources, however, the V-Dem Institute project (see below) is the source of almost half of the indicators. The indicators are grouped ultimately into four categories: representation, rights, rule of law, and participation, and the ranking presents four indicators

43 The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024. What's wrong with representative democracy?*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024>, 86–87 (ranking's results and discussion).

44 "Popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and equality of respect and voice between citizens in the exercise of that control" – see: IDEA, *About the GSoD Indices*, <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices>; details of the methodology: IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy Indices Methodology: Conceptualization and Measurement Framework, Version 7 (2023)*, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/GSOD/global-state-of-democracy-indices-methodology-v7-2023.pdf>; both websites accessed March 8, 2025.

corresponding to these categories. Unlike the previous ranking, it does not provide a single index of democracy calculated from the mentioned sub-categories. In this sense it could be regarded not so much as a comprehensive ranking of democracy, but as a set of four specific rankings, depicting the state of affairs in specific areas of democracy. The ranking do not classify studied regimes into ranks.

Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) is the best known index produced by Varieties of Democracy Institute, a non-governmental organisation founded in 2014 and based at the University of Gothenburg. According to its authors, LDI “combines the ‘core’ institutions of electoral democracy with the liberal dimension: constraints on the executive by the legislature and the judiciary, and the rule of law ensuring respect for civil liberties”⁴⁵. The measurement is based on the world’s largest database on democracy – 30 million data points for 202 countries and the period from 1789 to 2023. It is prepared by 3,700 researchers and experts, using over 60 indices and 500 indicators. LDI has gained recognition of numerous scientists⁴⁶. It is also the basis for the Liberal Democracy ranking prepared by Change Data Lab, a UK-based NGO, in partnership with the University of Oxford⁴⁷. In addition to LDI, the V-Dem Institute is also preparing *circa* 60 other indexes, including Electoral Democracy, Deliberative Democracy, Egalitarian Democracy, and Participatory Democracy Indexes.

In turn, Democracy Matrix (DM) is a ranking developed by the University of Würzburg, based on a targeted selection of data from the V-Dem project. The authors of DM adopt, by their own admission, a mid-range definition of democracy (i.e. neither maximalist nor minimalist)⁴⁸. Their

45 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot*, ed. S.I. Lindberg, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf, 9 (ranking’s results and discussion).

46 E.g. J. Teorell, M. Coppedge, S. Lindberg, S.-E. Skaaning, “Measuring Polyarchy Across the Globe, 1900–2017,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 54, no. 1 (2019): 71–95; Knutsen et al., “Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Assessing Democratic Backsliding,” 174.

47 See *Liberal democracy index, 2023*, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/liberal-democracy-index>, accessed March 8, 2025.

48 “‘A legal form of rule,’ which makes possible self-determination for all citizens, in the sense of popular sovereignty, by securing their significant participation in filling political decision-making positions (and/or in the decision itself) in free, competitive and fair processes (e.g. elections) and securing opportunities for continuously influencing the political process, and by, in general, guaranteeing

procedure has three stages. The first one – the core measurement – regards to the functioning of key democratic institutions and hence the quality of endogenous characteristics of democracy. The authors distinguished five key democratic institutions (procedures of decision, regulation of the intermediate sphere, public communication, guarantees of rights, rules settlement and implementation) and three dimensions of democracy (freedom, equality, control), creating thus a ‘democracy matrix’. The second stage – contextual measurement – is intended to be more comprehensive, but also more realistic. Exogenous (contextual) factors are also included, like, in particular, levels of corruption and violence as well as education inequality, however, only if they either qualitatively change the functioning of formal institutions or necessarily give rise to political inequality (e.g. elementary education, which determines the extent to which citizens know and can exercise their rights, but not upper levels of education). The third stage of the measurement – the trade-off level – is based on the assumption that there is a contradictory relationship between dimensions of democracy (freedom, equality, control). On one hand they reciprocally support one another in the form of complementary effects – the fact that is measured at the stages of core and context levels – and on the other they can come into conflict. Consequently, nine ‘trade-offs’ were identified and measured, which allow for the identification of three profiles of democracies: libertarian, egalitarian and control-focused democracies. That phase of the analysis is not reflected as scores on any chart, as according to the authors the adoption of any of those institutional designs does not suppose higher quality of measured democracy.

It is worth mentioning that the V-Dem’s LDI (conducted since 2017) or DM rankings also assign points to individual countries with reference to the period before the ranking started (unless the countries themselves were created later). This is certainly a major methodological challenge, with a significant risk of ahistoricity both in terms of the results and the criteria adopted⁴⁹.

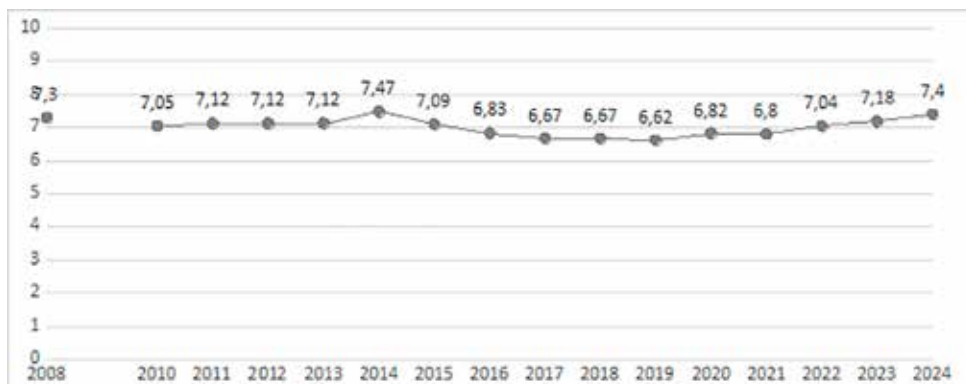
political rule is subject to oversight. Democratic participation in political rule thus gets expressed in the dimensions of political freedom, political equality and political and legal control” – see: Democracy Matrix Research Project, *The Democracy Definition of the Democracy Matrix*, <https://www.democracymatrix.com/conception/democracy-matrix>, accessed March 8, 2025. Conception and methodology details available on other subpages of the project.

⁴⁹ The methodology for constructing the historical part of the LDI is presented at: V-Dem Institute, *Historical V-Dem*, <https://www.v-dem.net/about/historical-v-dem>, accessed March 26, 2025.

6. THE CRISIS OF POLISH DEMOCRACY VS THE RESULTS OF THE RANKINGS

Differences in the concepts of democracy, its criteria (a set postulates) and the methodology of their assessment adopted in each particular ranking could lead to significantly different results of measurements. Yet, even if the measurement of democracy is a rather tricky task, a decline of democracy seems to be easier to indicate. In principle, if democracy is backsliding, at least in most of the rankings we should see a significant downward trend in at least some indices.

In the last 8 years, due to the two 4-years terms of the far-right populist, largely authoritarian, Law and Justice party (in Polish: *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS), Poland became a good example of the phenomenon of democratic backsliding into authoritarianism and deterioration of democratic values, standards and institutions. It is important to note that erosion of democracy in Poland was announced, signaled, described and explained independently by members of democratic parties, their supporters, press, academic experts, non-governmental organisations and large cohorts of ordinary citizens organizing spontaneous civic resistance and street protests. And it was a matter of personal experience and perception, prior to any rankings and data trends, which were largely unknown to most of the public in Poland. The significance of that lies in the fact that we can assume that democracy in Poland was backsliding and that assumption does not depend on any democratic ranking. Therefore, the example of Poland (as any other country where the opinion about the deterioration of democracy was similarly prevalent) could serve as a point of reference for the assessment of the possibility of the measurement of democracy's decline by the most popular rankings. Let's see, then, what democracy rankings are telling us about the change of quality (or rather quantity?) of democracy in Poland. Is the process of democracy slipping into authoritarianism in that country reflected in the rankings?



Graph 1. Poland's position in the Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit), 2010–2024.

Scale from 0 (not democratic at all) to 10 (fully democratic) points. Initially, the ranking was prepared every two years, but since 2010 it has been annual. A score between 6 and 8 indicates flawed democracy (8–9 – full democracy, 4–6 – hybrid regimes, 0–4 – authoritarian regimes). The score ranges have not changed over the years, but the name of the type of a regime in the 4–6 point range changed (initially hybrid regimes, then hybrid democracies, from 2022 onwards again hybrid regimes).

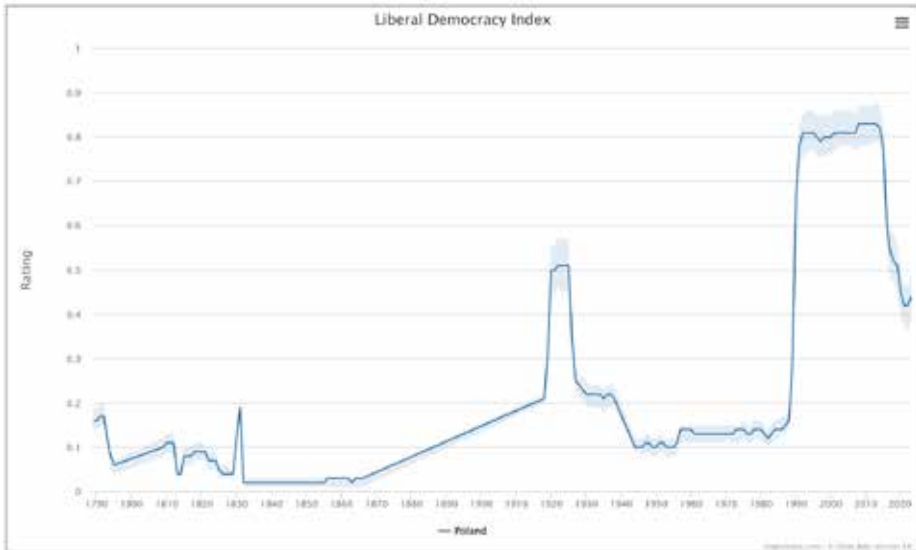
Source of data: The Economist Intelligence Unit's reports for: 2024 (*Democracy Index 2024. What's wrong with representative democracy?*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024>, p. 16 – data covering 2024, scoring and typology); 2023 (*Democracy Index 2023: Age of conflict*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023>, p. 18 – data covering 2006–2023, scoring and typology); 2008 (<https://graphics.eiu.com/pdf/democracy%20index%202008.pdf>, p. 5 – typology in 2008).



Graph 2. Poland's position in the Global State of Democracy ranking (IDEA), 1975–2023.

Scale from 0 (not democratic at all) to 1 (fully democratic) point.

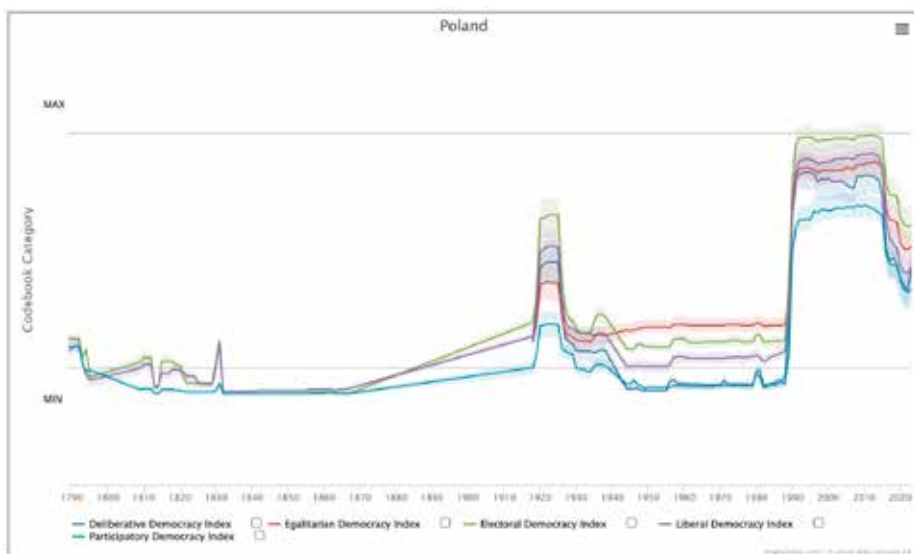
Source: IDEA, *Global State of Democracy Indices* (items selected: graph view, Poland, all four aspects of democracy, 1975–2023), <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/gsod-indices?country=Poland&index=Representation%2CRights%2CRule+of+Law%2CParticipation&years=1975-2023>, accessed March 17, 2025.



Graph 3. Poland's position in the Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem), 1789–2023.

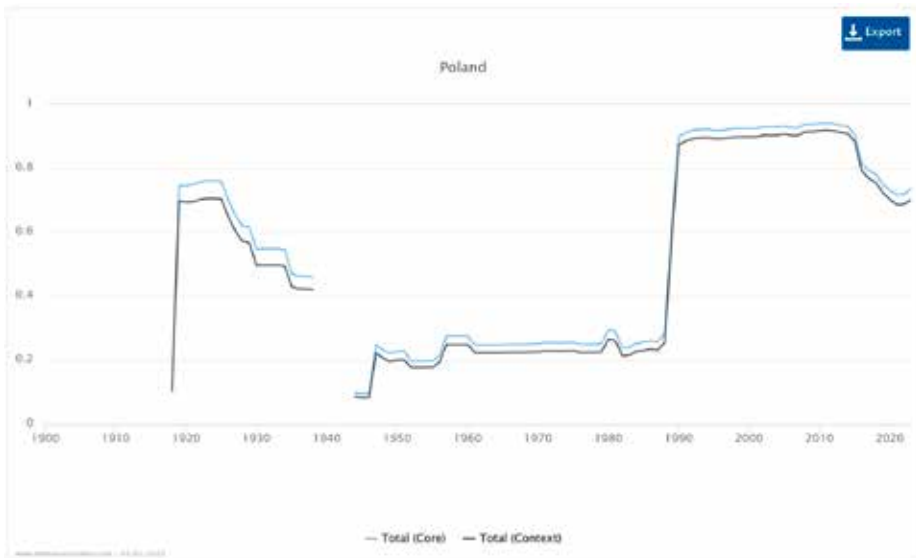
Scale from 0 (not democratic at all) to 1 (fully democratic) point.

Source: V-Dem, *Variable Graph*, https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph, accessed February 3, 2025. Items selected: Liberal Democracy Index (indicator), Poland, 1789–2023, Model Estimates, Confidence Rating, Mouseover.



Graph 4. Poland's position in Democracy Indexes: Deliberative, Egalitarian, Electoral, Liberal, and Participatory (V-Dem), 1789–2023.

Source: V-Dem, *Country Graph*, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/Country-Graph, accessed February 3, 2025. Items selected: Poland, Deliberative Democracy Index, Egalitarian Democracy Index, Electoral Democracy Index, Liberal Democracy Index, Participatory Democracy Index (V-Dem indices), 1789–2023, Model Estimates, Confidence Rating, Mouseover.



Graph 5. Poland's position in the *Democracy Matrix* ranking (University of Würzburg).

Scale from 0 (not democratic at all) to 1 (fully democratic) point.

Source: Democracy Matrix Research Project, *Country Graph*, https://www.democracymatrix.com/online-analysis/country#/Poland/total_index_core, accessed February 3, 2025.

In the IDEA, V-Dem (LDI) and DM rankings, the state of democracy in Poland was stable from the early 1990s until 2014, even improving slightly over the years. A trend of stability and slight improvement is also visible in The Economist Intelligence Unit's ranking, which, however, only covers the period from 2008 onwards⁵⁰. The results presented in all these four rankings show the numerical decline between 2016 and 2022, when the mentioned Law and Justice party was in power.

Poland's performance started to deteriorate rapidly after 2015. According to V-Dem (LDI), while in 2014 it was 0.82 points and in 2015 – 0.78 points, in 2016 it was already only 0.6 points, a drop of about 23 per cent in one year. At the same time, that was the second largest annual decline in Poland's history (after 33 per cent in 1926, when the military coup replaced parliamentary democracy). In 2021 and 2022 additional drops in performance were indicated – each year 0.42 points, some 37 per cent lower than in 2015⁵¹. In the IDEA and DM rankings, partly based on V-Dem's data, the scale of the decrease between 2015 and 2022 was smaller, although still large compared to the history of Poland's performance. What is rally striking, Poland's scores for the period of 2020-2022 are worse than even for the period of 1920-1925, in which Polish democracy was surely in a serious crisis, finished in an armed coup.

The decrease for the period 2015-2022 was also visible in The Economist Intelligence Unit's ranking, as mentioned, although it was much smaller and distributed in a distinctly different manner than in other three rankings. While in the V-Dem (LDI), DM and, in principle, in the IDEA rankings the decline was rather permanent⁵², in The Economist Intelligence Unit's index it was only seen in 2015-2019 (no change in 2018), i.e. during PiS's first parliamentary term. Interestingly, in 2020 and 2022 the increase was

50 It is worth noting, however, that none of the first three rankings shows any significant change following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, even though this landmark event in the country's history significantly increased the protection of individual freedoms and rights through the adoption of EU standards. This fact may reveal the significant problem of subjectivity of rankings which we mentioned in the previous sections of our paper.

51 The years 2016–2022 are all full years with PiS in power. The caesuras of the party's rule were the parliamentary elections held in October 2015 and October 2023. The rankings for 2015 and 2023 therefore also took into account the months when democratic parties ruled.

52 None of the four indicators in the IDEA's ranking showed an increase of more than 0.1 points between 2016 and 2022, most often there was a decrease, less often no change.

noted⁵³. Finally, all rankings show a slight but noticeable increase in Poland's position in 2023, i.e. year of the parliamentary elections won by the democratic opposition. Additionally, it is worth noting that democratic backsliding in Poland, observed in the V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index as well as in the DM and IDEA rankings, coincide with the results achieved in other three rankings produced by the V-Dem Institute: Deliberative, Egalitarian, Electoral, and Participatory Democracy Indexes (graph 4). It may indicate that democratic backsliding in Poland had a broad basis, affecting numerous and various elements of democracy, not limited to those that are characteristic for liberal democracy only.

The score changes in democracy rankings have been so large in recent years that resulted in change of the position of Poland in the classification of political regimes. In the V-Dem (LDI) ranking Poland was classified as a liberal democracy from 1990 to 2015, but from 2016 onwards already as mere an electoral democracy⁵⁴. In the DM ranking between 1990 and 2018 Poland was classified as working democracy, but from 2019 as a deficient

53 The authors of the Democracy Index for 2020 explain that "The country's score improved [in 2020] as support for democracy and readiness to participate in lawful demonstrations increased, as illustrated by a wave of anti-government protests in the second half of the year, while support for strong leaders decreased" – The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020. In sickness and in health?*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020>, accessed March 10, 2025, p. 34. However, the anti-government protests were a response to the significant tightening of the abortion law by the government-dependent Constitutional Tribunal, *de facto* forcing women to give birth to stillborn or lethally defective children and thus considerably limiting the scope of exercising individual rights. Besides, earlier in 2020 the presidential election was won again by Andrzej Duda, who faithfully supported the government's antidemocratic and anti-EU policy during his first term (the same attitude he showed in the following five years). Improvement in 2022 is explained by the authors of the ranking not in relation to Poland but to all EU countries generally; it was the result of the relaxation of the anti-COVID restrictions, leading to improvements in the functioning of government, political culture and the civil liberties scoring categories, as well as the result of "improvements in levels of trust in government, according to World Values Survey, Eurobarometer and Balkanbarometer data, and in perceptions of the extent to which people had free choice and control over their lives" – The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2023. Frontline democracy and the battle for Ukraine*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023>, accessed March 26, 2025, p. 53.

54 In the ranking for 2021 Poland was ranked 80th in the world and second from the bottom among EU countries. Only Hungary was ranked worse (place 91 and 0.36 points), while being classified – as the only EU country – not as an 'electoral democracy', but as an 'electoral autocracy'. According to the 2021 ranking Poland was the country in the world where the situation deteriorated the most during the decade 2010–2020 – see: N. Alizada, R. Cole, L. Gastaldi, S. Grah, S. Hellmeier, P. Kolvani, J. Lachapelle, A. Lührmann, S.F. Maerz, S. Pillai, S.I. Lindberg, *Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021*, Gothenburg 2021, https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2021.pdf, accessed March 17, 2025, p. 19.

democracy⁵⁵. In the Economist Intelligence Unit's ranking, however, Poland from the first measured year (2008) until today is consistently included in the category of flawed regimes/flawed democracies.

In addition to democracy rankings presented above, there is also the Democracy Perception Index (DPI), developed by Latana company in collaboration with the Alliance of Democracies, a Copenhagen-based NGO. It is the largest annual survey of how people perceive democracy and therefore it is based on a different methodological concept than the described rankings. In surveys conducted since 2018, their authors ask respondents whether they think democracy is important (to have) and if their country is democratic. The difference between the percentage of positive answers to both questions represents the quantity called Perceived Democratic Deficit. Albeit at the first glance that indicator may seem to be promising, its weaknesses are easy to spot. Suffice to say that in 2024 it amounts to a mere 13 points in the case of the People's Democratic Republic of China (answers of 92 per cent and 79 per cent, respectively) and, at the same time, 11 points in the case of Switzerland (answers of 89 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively). No doubt China is an authoritarian country, while Switzerland is widely recognised as indeed democratic state. These results draw our attention to the fact that assessments of the state of democracy in a particular country depend on the concept of democracy that is popular there, the level of satisfaction with politicians currently in power, and in the case of authoritarian states, those assessments may be also highly influenced by the fear of expressing opinions unfavorable to the government⁵⁶.

Having those reservations in mind, it is nevertheless worth mentioning that Poland's low performance in the democracy rankings analysed above corresponds to its high Perceived Democratic Deficit index in the DPI,

55 Determined by cut-off point of 0.75 in core or context measurement results. Other categories are: for 0,25–0,5 point – moderate autocracy, for 0–0,25 point – hard autocracy. See: Democracy Matrix Research Project, *Levels of Measurement and Regime Typology of the Democracy Matrix*, <https://www.democracymatrix.com/conception/measurement-levels-regime-typology>, accessed March 5, 2025.

56 Latana, Alliance of Democracies, *Democracy Perception Index 2022*, <https://staging.latana.com/democracy-perception-index-report-2022>, accessed March 26, 2025, p. 10. Results for 2024: Latana, Alliance of Democracies, *Democracy Perception Index 2024*, <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/DPI-2024.pdf>, accessed March 26, 2025, pp. 9–10.

which ranged from 46 to 48 percentage points in 2019-2020 and 2022-2023 (87 per cent and 39 per cent in 2019, 86 per cent and 38 per cent in 2020, 86 per cent and 40 per cent in 2023⁵⁷) and was among the highest in the world. The most recent ranking for 2024 shows a significant drop in the Perceived Democratic Deficit index, to 37 percentage points, which corresponds to the PiS's loss of power⁵⁸.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Rankings are universally in use in political science to assess democracy because they resemble the procedure of measurement from the toolkit of natural sciences. By assigning a certain numeric value to various postulates (principles) that constitute a definition of democracy, rankings offer an imperfect but practical way of operationalising the concept of quality or quantity of democracy. Rankings not only make it possible to compare different political regimes and observe their transformations in time, thus enriching the methodology of political studies. The construction of rankings legitimates political sciences, as measurement is a hallmark of a proper scientific endeavour.

Objectivity, validity, and consistency of measurement are issues discussed in natural sciences, and they are also related to democracy rankings. In this paper our major concern was the question of whether rankings of democracy indicate the phenomenon of democracy's deterioration (crisis), quite universally reported by experts and perceived by the public, and how that phenomenon is reflected in the methodology of those rankings. Although the problem of measurement of a democratic backsliding has been discussed in the literature already⁵⁹, we hope that our paper will add some interesting thoughts to the subject.

57 The ranking for 2021 is missing on the DPI's website.

58 Since the first published DPI is for 2019, it is not possible to compare current results with earlier years.

59 E.g. S.-E. Skaaning, "Waves of autocratization and democratization: a critical note on conceptualization and measurement," *Democratization* 27, no. 8 (2020): 1533–1542, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1799194>.

In the paper, we were concerned particularly with the case of Poland, as the specifics of the situation in this country fit our goals perfectly, because:

- [**Consensus in the rankings before the crisis.**] Poland was universally seen as a young albeit healthy democracy in years before 2015.
- [**Consensus about the crisis.**] Since 2015 the situation in Poland has been universally described as an example of the crisis of democracy.
- [**Sharp boundaries of the crisis.**] The crisis happened in a well-defined time period of 2015-2023, corresponding to the rule of the Law and Justice party, which openly had in its political agenda the dismantlement of liberal democracy.

That could be viewed as we frame the situation in Poland like a kind of a natural experiment for making the assessments of validity of different rankings and consistency between them⁶⁰.

Numerous terms, such as ‘democratic backsliding’⁶¹, ‘democratic recession’⁶², ‘de-democratisation’⁶³ or ‘third wave of autocratism’⁶⁴, have been coined in the literature to describe the observed process of democracy’s deterioration. The use of those particular words clearly suggests that the crisis of democracy is viewed as a process, and that aspect should also be reflected in the rankings, if only one wants to consider them as a valid measurement of the crisis.

60 A natural experiment is a type of study design in which to test hypotheses, researchers observe the effects of naturally occurring events without actively manipulating them. Natural experiments are valuable in a variety of fields, including public policy and political sciences – see: P. Craig, S.V. Katikireddi, A. Leyland, F. Popham, “Natural experiments: An overview of methods, approaches, and contributions to public health intervention research,” *Annual Review of Public Health* 38 (2017): 39–56.

61 N. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 5–19.

62 L. Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–155.

63 Ch. Tilly, “Inequality, Democratization, and De-Democratization,” *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 1 (2003): 37–43.

64 A. Lührmann, S.I. Lindberg, “A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?,” *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–1113. However, as R. Markowski notes, “The crisis of contemporary democracy has been continuously addressed by serious journalism and the social sciences since the mid-1970s”, starting with a book by M. Crozier, S. Huntington and J. Watanuki entitled *The Crisis of Democracy: report on the governability of Democracies to the trilateral Commission* (1975), which summarised the state of democracy in the late 1960s and early 1970s – R. Markowski, *Demokracja i demokratyczne innowacje. Z teorii w praktykę* (Warszawa: Instytut Obywatelski, 2014), https://instytutobywatelski.pl/pliki/pdf/demokracja_calosc_www.pdf, 5–6.

In the previous sections we argue that the methodology of popular rankings is rich enough to express the process of deterioration of democracy simply by decreasing values of the particular indices or the final scores, which aggregate those indices. The ontological category of the crisis (a process rather than an event) will be, in turn, reflected in the fact that the values are decreasing continuously year by year in the expected period. Subsequently, we noted that our expectations regarding the measurement of the crisis are confirmed by the rankings of democracy described in this article, as they almost univocally demonstrate in their terms the deterioration of Polish democracy in the said period.

Consistency between those rankings is also an important reason for believing in their validity, as validity in science is typically confirmed by the repetition of measurements by different methods. In natural sciences, comparisons between the results achieved by different research groups play an important role in establishing the validity of a particular measurement. Similarly, if numerous rankings, using different concepts of democracy and methodology of measurement, show the decline in democracy in Poland in the same specific period, and that particular period coincides with the rule of a particular party that despises the rule of law, it is reasonable to assume that the decline is indeed a real fact.

Although consistency of measurement results speaks also for the objectivity of a measurement, the question of the objectivity of the measurement of democratic backsliding is more complicated. We have already signaled some of the surrounding problems, like the subjective nature of coding. An important role for the perception of the state of democracy in a given country could also be played by the direction in which that state is changing (increase or decrease) as well as the scale (the number of indices changing in the same direction) and speed of that change. Therefore, to strengthen the assumption that a particular ranking accurately reflects the state of democracy in a given country, a number of factors should be considered, for example, the adoption of a specific definition of democracy and the selection of corresponding metrics, the selection of a sufficiently large group of experts, and the adoption of various tests to identify their biases. The use of various 'correction' procedures in a ranking's

methodology can definitely help to control different sources of subjectivity in the rankings; however, it doesn't seem reasonable to expect to remove it entirely. As previously mentioned, subjectivity is an indispensable factor in any measurement of political phenomena.

Data de submissão: março de 2025 Data de aceitação: outubro de 2025 DOI: https://doi.org/10.60543/dlb.vi9.10401
--