

---

# The Routledge International Handbook of European Social Transformations

*Edited by Peeter Vihalemm,  
Anu Masso and Signe Opermann*

First published 2018

ISBN: 978-1-4724-7794-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-3678-2114-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-61294-2 (ebk)

7

## The development of political systems in post-communist countries

*Vello Pettai*

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781315612942-10

The funder for this chapter is Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

# The development of political systems in post-communist countries

*Vello Pettai*

---

It is a long acknowledged fact that almost all of the countries of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe have undergone a successful transition to democracy – at least in its minimalist form. Generally free and fair elections, respect for civil liberties, balanced constitutional institutions, unrestricted media and growing civil society activism have all become hallmarks of political development in the region. International indices like Freedom House’s Nations in Transit or the Bertelsman Transformation Index no longer tell a very differentiated story when they summarise levels of democratic development for these countries (Ekiert et al., 2007; Møller & Skaaning, 2010). To be sure, some differences exist, but in comparison to countless other countries of the world, democracy appears to have firmly taken root.

It is necessary therefore to turn our attention to a more fine-grained analysis of political development, encompassing more sophisticated indicators of democratic change. This chapter will profile one such emerging tool, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database, and what it can tell us about the development of political systems in Central and Eastern Europe. V-Dem has been created by a worldwide network of scholars and involves more than 400 measures of democracy for some 180 countries for the period 1900–2015 (Coppedge et al., 2011). This unprecedented breadth of coverage allows for very precise analyses of not only democratic change but also democratic substance. In particular, the database allows different indicators to be combined into sub-indices in order to look at patterns or types of democracy. This aspect is particularly important for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, since on the basis of these more developed tools we can systematically compare countries’ proximity to more specific variants of democracy, be it participatory, deliberative or egalitarian. In sum, using V-Dem as a tool for assessing democratic change, this chapter will provide a more refined portrait of political system development, both over the last 25 years, but also with a view to current and future trends.

Doing so affords us an opportunity to reflect on two important things. First, what do we mean by ‘political development’, especially in the post-communist context? If we assume that it is some measure of progress toward democracy, then what are the defining characteristics of democracy? What kind of institutional, procedural, behavioral or attitudinal dimensions should apply? Second, what analytical tools can we use to validly and reliably measure these dimensions? In reality, each of these dimensions requires its own set of methods including legal

interpretation, electoral data analysis, expert evaluation, public opinion surveys, perhaps even qualitative methods like focus groups.

This chapter cannot cover all of these domains. However, by reflecting on them in a first section, we can lay out the meta-theoretical context in which we can then see how one particular tool, the V-Dem dataset, can shed light on political development in post-communist Europe. Moreover, because V-Dem covers all of Europe, we can understand better the place of post-communist Europe in the broader societal transformation of the region.

## Understanding political development

Political development is a multifaceted concept, and depending on one's taste it can encompass institutional, procedural, behavioral, attitudinal and sometimes even performance-based dimensions (Munck, 2009; Møller & Skaaning, 2011; Norris, 2011; Coppedge, 2012). Indeed, the issue begins with the question, what constitutes a politically *developed* society? Does the notion of 'development' denote simply another word for 'history' such that development involves merely a recounting of what has happened in a country during a certain period of time (i.e. 'developments' in country X since year Y)? Or does it have a more teleological connotation, implying an evaluation of how far a country has come in relation to some set of normatively preferred or even prescribed objectives? Under this version, we would focus on not only recording a country's trajectory but also *comparing* countries based on their *level* of 'political development', and for this we would need to clarify and/or justify the basis on which we compare and judge (McCormick, 2012).

Furthermore, how closely should such a normative view of development be linked specifically to democracy as a preferred governing regime? If closely, then how should this democracy be understood and measured? Should it include merely institutional (constitutional) configurations (guarantees for human and civil rights) or also involve political practice? If the latter, then should it concentrate on elections as the key manifestation of democracy or should it involve more specific channels of representation such as parliamentary politics or party systems? Should democracy comprise alternative spheres of participation such as civil society organisations or even direct democracy (LeDuc et al., 2014)?

Thirdly, how far might an assessment of political development go in terms of evaluating the *performance* of democracy or the 'quality of government' as some researchers have begun to call it (Rothstein & Teorell, 2012)? Should the epitome of political development be seen as a democracy with a high level of 'governance' – often defined as involving a low degree of corruption, high administrative capacity and increasing human development (Kjaer, 2004)? Or should performance be taken to include also attitudinal dimensions of democratic political development, meaning popular support for democracy and trust in its institutions (Norris, 1999)? This dimension would echo the long tradition of political culture research that sets perhaps the highest bar for political development in terms of democracy truly sinking into the hearts and minds of both politicians and citizens (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

All of these questions bear asking as we attempt to give meaning to this very overarching point of departure. However, we must also take into consideration the context of the region in question. How much does the background of communism and post-communism influence our *expectations* in terms of the degree or speed of political development that we might anticipate (Møller & Skaaning, 2009)? The fact that four decades of Soviet domination has politically 'under-developed' Central and Eastern Europe is clear. However, by how much and in what ways? How do we factor in this impact or legacy (Kitschelt, 1995; Ekiert & Ziblatt, 2013; Ekiert, 2015)?

And lastly, Central and Eastern Europe features a flip-side to that contextual coin, which is the existence of a very supportive regional community in the form of European integration, trans-Atlantic security organisations and more generally an affiliation with the “Western world” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Vachudova, 2005; Petersheim, 2012). The analytical question therefore becomes, how much do we need to assess progress toward democratic political development as a factor of not only past detriment, but also available opportunity (Haughton, 2007, 2011)? Political development in this sense becomes weighted (as if in the statistical sense) by a proportion or fraction that is made up of a denominator that summarises past legacies and a numerator that encapsulates the degree of supportive circumstances (Bandelj et al., 2015).

This chapter clearly cannot answer all of these questions. But the questions do form a set of normative, epistemological and methodological parameters that need to be addressed when assessing political development in the CEE region. The approach taken here will treat the development of political systems as normatively linked to democracy. At the same time, given that we are talking about *systems*, the emphasis will be on institutional configurations. Arguably, institutions can also have both behavioral and attitudinal effects. Indeed, part of the overriding claim of institutionalism is that political systems and their rules serve to channel actors’ behavior in a desired direction and may even generate over time certain attitudinal understandings or even preferences (Laver, 1997; Clark, 1998; Parsons, 2005). To be sure, the reverse argument also exists, meaning attitudes and behaviors can create or at least affect certain rules and institutions; they may also explain why certain rules simply don’t take hold in certain contexts (Stueber, 2005). However, given the way in which the principles of 21st-century governance have come to rest very heavily on best-practice learning and cross-national policy transfer, one can make the case that institutionalist epistemology is on the rise (Gerring & Thacker, 2008; Norris, 2012). Build the right mouse trap, the perspective seems to be, and eventually politicians and citizens will follow whatever their past history or culture.

An institutionalist approach to studying political systems, however, should not involve merely the study of constitutional provisions (Carey, 2000). The effect of rules – when they are meant to have a normative, democratic influence – can be expected to obtain only if these rules are comprised of numerous interlocking and perhaps even mutually reinforcing postulates. Therefore, they often need to be studied as configurations and constellations more than as a single checklist (Lijphart, 1999; Fortin, 2008; Ganghof, 2012). Moreover, here we realise how the borderline between measuring democracy and the performance of democracy becomes increasingly blurred. For example, when does a 10- or 20-year streak of electoral democracy stop being merely an institutional framework and become instead a self-reinforcing result of that same framework? Clearly, arguments about the inertia or stickiness of institutions could apply here in order to explain the persistence of institutions. But there is equal reason to look into institutions simply working successfully or the way they were intended as an explanation for their continuity. As we begin our analysis of the development of political systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) over nearly 25 years, this temporal-causal issue will become more evident.

## Enhancing the existing narrative

The broadscale narrative of political development in post-communist Europe begins with the opening up of civil liberties, the institutionalisation of free elections, and the rebuilding of democratic state institutions in the early 1990s. Whether the states were newly re-independent, such as Croatia or the Baltic states, or countries that had simply thrown off their communist regimes, like Poland or Hungary, the process of erecting the new democracies was broadly similar. Nevertheless, the speed and success with which these goals were reached quickly began to differ.

Conventionally it is known that countries such as Poland and Hungary developed their democracies rapidly and without major perturbations. Another set of countries (the Czech Republic, Slovenia and the Baltic states) had first to go through a period of state formation or re-formation after which, however, they too soon embarked on a relatively efficacious democracy-building process (McFaul, 2005; Møller & Skaaning, 2010). In this analysis we will therefore call all of these countries the *democratic successes*. Two more of these newly-created states, Slovakia and Croatia, evinced difficulties in the beginning, after they became subject to semi-authoritarian leaders (Vladimir Mečiar and Franjo Tudjman, respectively). Nevertheless, once the countries were able to replace these rulers by 2000, a period of notable democratic consolidation began. These two countries could therefore be characterised as *reboublers*. Lastly, Bulgaria and Romania have been seen as changing less slowly in the 1990s, primarily because former communist elites retained considerable sway. At the same time, these countries did not exhibit anti-democratic tendencies as such. We will refer to these states as *slow-movers*.

Accession to the European Union was seen as a further milestone in these countries' democratic development, although it is important not to reify the importance of this EU imprimatur or threshold. How and when we determine the status of "democratic consolidation" or of any other milestone of democratic development should not be delegated or entrusted to the judgments of a particular international organisation (however thorough its regular reports or conditionality policies may be), for at the end of the day the organisation is still a political one and its decisions are likely to be driven by many more factors than simply analytical criteria. One obvious example of this fallacy is the fact that eight of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe joined the EU as a wave in 2004. This cannot in any way mean that all of these democracies matured exactly at that same moment. Rather, this was a coordination move on the EU's part. Therefore, we cannot say that democracy somehow changed at the moment of EU accession. Granted, the entries of Bulgaria and Romania into the EU (in 2007) and Croatia (in 2011) were more readily linked to tangible progress on democratic norms; however, given that accession entails the adoption of the entire economic and social system of the EU, many additional reform tasks outside of democracy building were clearly on the table.

In sum, the essential parameters of political development in post-communist Europe are known. To what extent can we then add anything to this conventional empirical narrative? For this analysis we will use the Varieties of Democracy dataset that encompasses more than 400 indicators of democratic institutions, practices and performance (Coppedge et al., 2011, 2016). The dataset is unique in that it provides not only composite measures of democracy but also scores for individual indicators that can be disaggregated separately. In so doing, we can pinpoint the precise elements of democracy that are either strong or weak in a country. Moreover, we can compare the *structure* of democracy (or non-democracy) across countries with much greater precision than previously possible.

To make comparison easiest, V-Dem offers a set of high-level indices that measure, firstly, a composite notion of electoral democracy, and thereafter four top-up types of democracy that build on this core phenomenon. These are liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian democracy (Coppedge et al., 2015). Given that each of these indices is comprised of anywhere between 5 and 40 individual indicators (variables), the high level of aggregation can often cause countries and their trajectories to overlap. This is particularly the case when we add confidence levels around the point estimates that the database's measurement model produces on the basis of the raw, expert-coded variables (Pemstein et al., 2015). Trend lines that appear consistently separate from each other (at levels of, say, 0.8 and 0.9 on a 1.0 scale) may not in fact be so unambiguously distinct, if the range of expert coding coincides. This is evident from Figure 7.1 that is drawn from the online analysis tool available on the V-Dem website. The graph displays levels

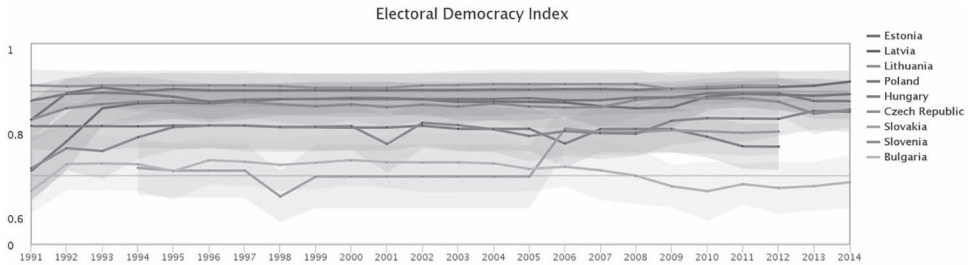


Figure 7.1 V-Dem electoral democracy index with confidence intervals

Source: Figure drawn by author.

of electoral democracy for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe during the 1991–2014 period and indicates that for most years the countries actually have statistically insignificant variations.

In this respect such high-level indices do not appear to be much better than the measurements provided by the Freedom in the World or Nations in Transit indices. Moreover, even if we remove the confidence bands (as in Figures 7.2–7.6) and display all five of the high-level V-Dem component indices, we end up seeing not much more than the cross-country differences that we know from the conventional narrative; for example, the generally high and consistent level of democratic development in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and the Baltic states. Likewise, across the electoral, liberal and deliberative democracy measures we see the spikes in democratic change known to have taken place in Slovakia and Croatia around 2000. And we see Bulgaria and particularly Romania generally trailing the first tier of CEE countries across most of the indices.

As an improvement on existing measures of political development, however, we do see, for example, that V-Dem’s egalitarian component index reveals a greater degree of consistency across the countries. This index measures the extent to which rights are protected equally across social groups and genders as well as whether members of the population have broadly equal access to power and resources such as education or healthcare. In other words, what it is possible to see via V-Dem’s high-level indices is that the deficiencies of democracy in some of the CEE countries relate primarily to electoral, liberal and deliberative democracy, and less so to socio-economic inequality (or a lack of egalitarian democracy).

Another instance of bunching-up across countries is evident in the participatory component index that tracks, among other things, the level of civil society participation. Here, all of the countries rank in the range of 0.5 to 0.7 with the exception of Slovenia, which is much higher. In fact, Slovenia surpasses considerably even the scores for the Nordic countries. However, this is due mainly to the country’s high score on a sub-component of the index, the direct popular vote index, which measures the ease with which referendums and other elements of direct democracy are permitted in the system. Slovenia arguably has a more participatory democracy thanks to a greater openness to referendums.

This detail raises the question of how much a deeper look across more of V-Dem’s variables will help differentiate further the structure of political development in Central and Eastern Europe. Table 7.1 presents the next level of V-Dem detail in terms of the mid-level indices that go into aggregating the high-level indices.

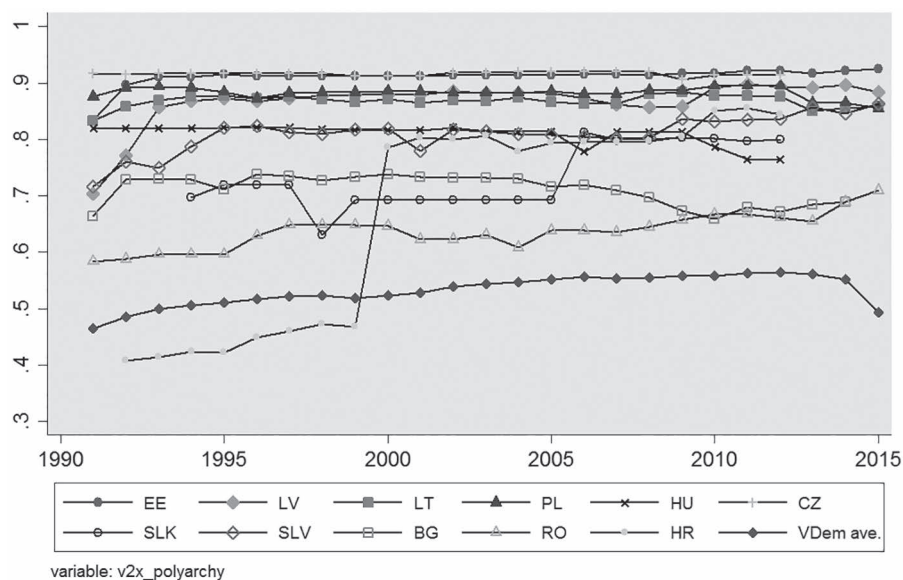


Figure 7.2 V-Dem electoral democracy index

Source: Figure drawn by author.

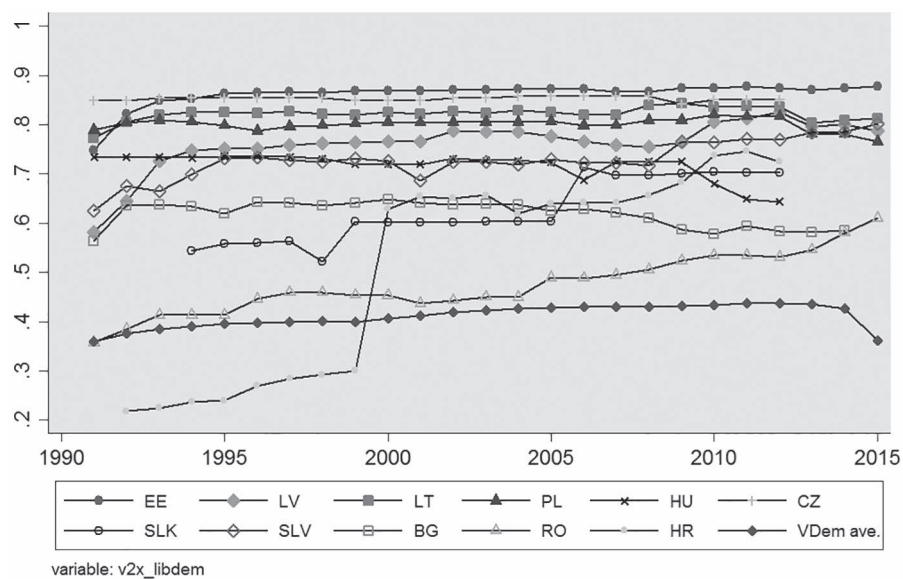


Figure 7.3 V-Dem liberal component index

Source: Figure drawn by author.

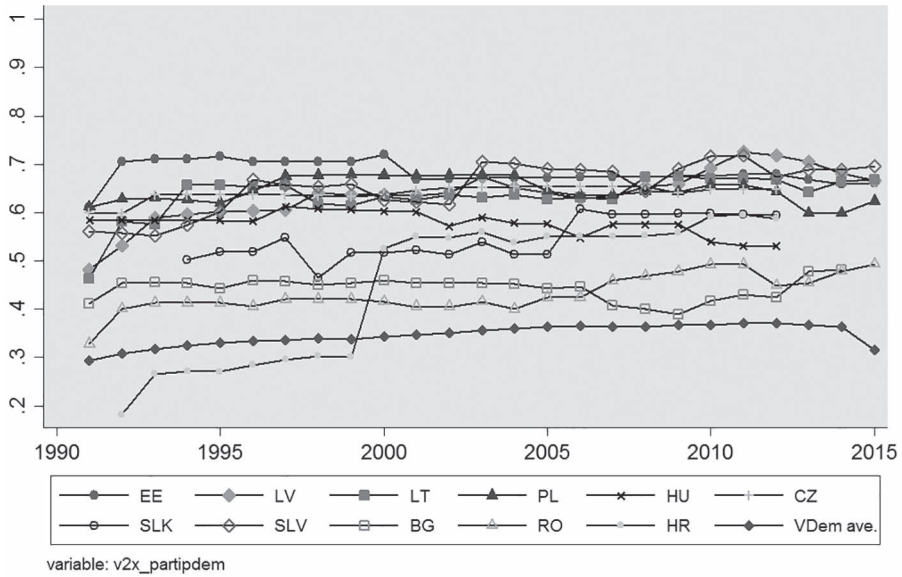


Figure 7.4 V-Dem participatory component index

Source: Figure drawn by author.

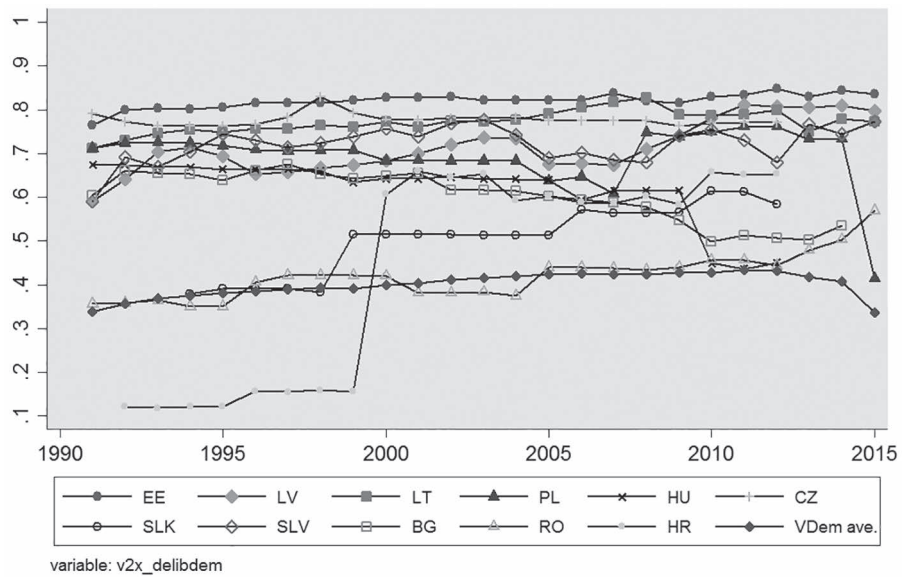


Figure 7.5 V-Dem deliberative component index

Source: Figure drawn by author.



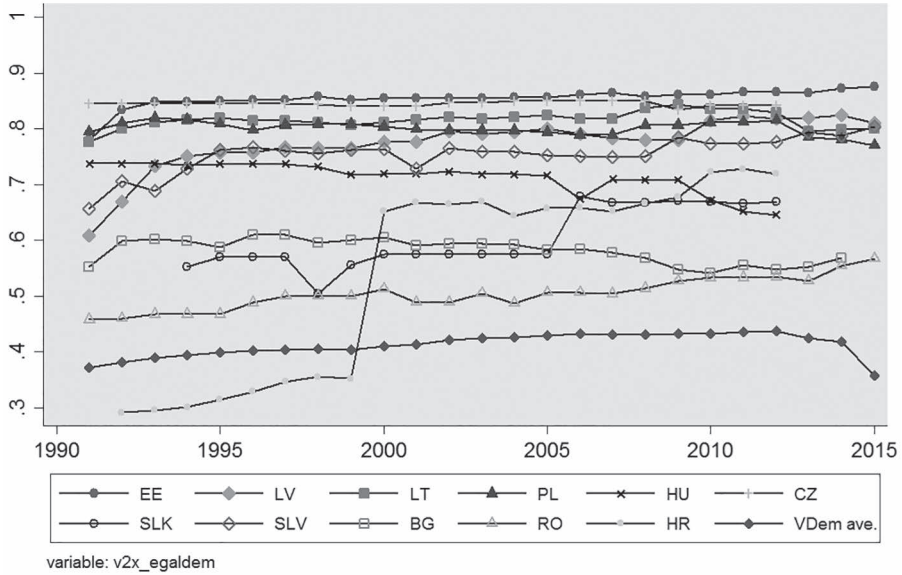


Figure 7.6 V-Dem egalitarian component index

Source: Figure drawn by author.

By examining these variables, we can get a step closer toward revealing the inner workings of democratic development in these countries. And although for many of these mid-level indices our rough grouping of countries into successes, rebounders and slow-movers retains its validity, we do see differences between countries across certain mid- and especially low-level (single) variables. These observations serve to fine-tune our analysis.

## V-dem indices, components and comparison

### Electoral democracy

Beginning with the domain of electoral democracy, three mid-level indices bear mentioning.<sup>1</sup> For the essence of electoral democracy is not only whether elections are free and fair but also whether there is respect for freedom of expression and freedom of association, both of which are equally necessary in order for electoral rights to be exercised meaningfully. Examining these more precise parameters we see firstly that Croatia’s rocky start in the 1990s was much more severe than that of Slovakia during the same period. Moreover, across these indices Croatia falls close to or below the world (V-Dem) average during these first years.

These results are in contrast to what we might infer from Freedom House data, where the countries are largely the same for this period, especially with regard to Freedom House’s civil liberties index. The key decline for Croatia comes not only from election-related variables capturing the low level of autonomy for the central electoral authority but also the greater degree to which elections during these years specifically featured voting irregularities as well as direct intimidation of opposition politicians by the government. By contrast, other elements of the index (such as the pervasiveness of vote-buying) remain relatively in check. Additionally, Croatia

Table 7.1 High-level and mid-level indices in the V-Dem database

<i>Electoral Democracy Component</i>	<i>v2x_freexp_thick</i>	<i>Expanded freedom of expression</i>
Liberal Component Index	v2x_frassoc_thick	Freedom of association
	v2xel_frefair	Clean elections index
	v2x_suffr	Percent of population with suffrage
	v2x_accex	Electoral executive index
	v2xcl_rol	Equality before the law and individual liberty
Deliberative Component Index	v2x_jucon	Judicial constraints on executive
	v2xlg_legcon	Legislative constraints on executive
	v2dlreason	Reasoned justification
Egalitarian Component Index	v2dlcommon	Common good
	v2dlcountr	Respect counterarguments
	v2dlconstl	Range of consultation
	v2dlengage	Engaged society
	v2xeg_eqprotec	Equal protection index
Participatory Component Index	v2xeg_eqdr	Equal distribution of resources
	v2x_cspart	Civil society participation index
	v2xdd_dd	Direct popular vote index
	v2xel_locelec	Local government index
	v2xel_regelec	Regional government index

Source: Table compiled by author based on Coppedge et al., 2016.

suffered in the 1990s under severe restrictions on freedom expression, including the press either being censored by the government or frequently censoring itself, as well as journalists being harassed and limitations being placed on academic and cultural expression. By contrast, freedom of association was comparatively favorable with opposition parties free from particular bans or harassment, although civil society organisations were severely controlled under the Tudjman regime. In sum, the portrait of Croatia's authoritarianism during the 1990s is therefore one of electoral and media control and less so in relation to political groups *per se*.

An equally more nuanced picture emerges in relation to our slow-movers Bulgaria and Romania. While the two countries frequently fall behind those in Central Europe or the Baltics across the different sub-components for electoral democracy, the V-Dem variables indicate that vote-buying and electoral irregularities have been particularly endemic and their effect stretches all the way to 2010. In other words, while Bulgaria and Romania have for the most part ensured freedom of association and freedom of expression, electoral democracy has been marred above all by indiscretions on election day.

### ***Liberal democracy***

Turning to a disaggregation of V-Dem's liberal democracy index, another interesting facet of post-communist political development emerges. With allowances made again for Croatia in

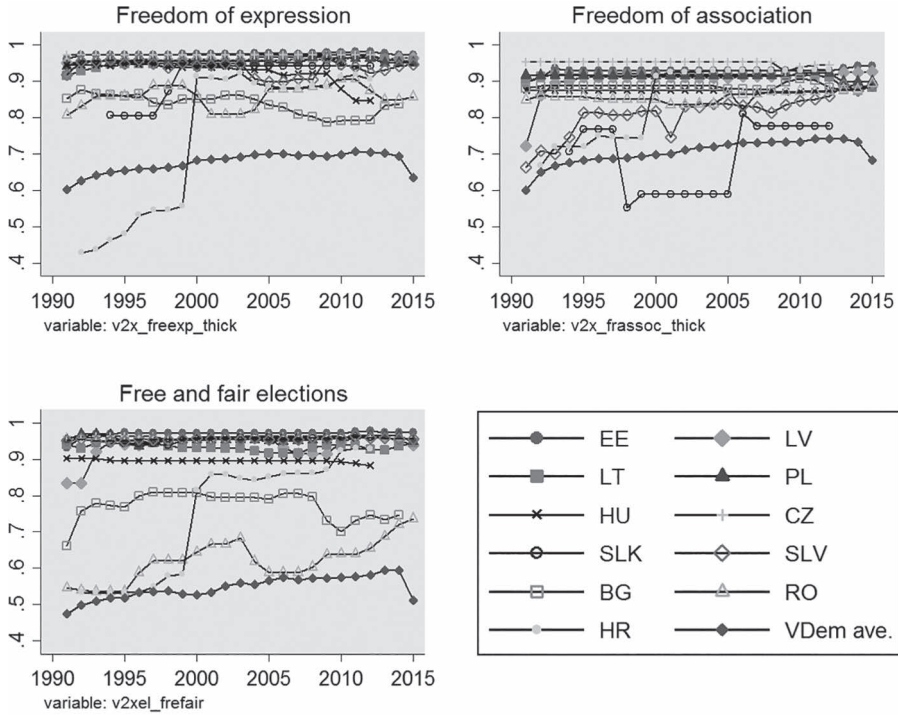


Figure 7.7 Electoral democracy sub-components, 1991–2015

Source: Figure drawn by author.

the 1990s and Romania up until 2004, the picture across the rest of the region appears almost uniform. Moreover, this homogeneity is particularly evident across the sub-index measuring equality before the law and individual liberty. However, this is also not a surprise given that a key dimension of contemporary democratisation – and of EU accession in particular – has been the speedy institutionalisation of such rule of law. The rights that are featured in this particular index include freedom of movement, freedom of religion, property rights and access to justice. Likewise, the index encompasses a measure of rigorous and impartial public administration as well as transparent laws with predictable enforcement. It is here that Romania fares worse, helping to explain the country’s overall lower score for this mid-range index.

Yet, liberal democracy is not only about protecting rights; it is also about keeping in check that branch of government, which is most likely to threaten those rights: the executive. Moreover, both of the remaining two branches of government, the legislature and the judiciary, need to demonstrate their capacity for effective oversight. It is across these two latter domains that we see post-communist liberal democracy is no longer so uniform. A low degree of independence for regular courts (and even for the high court) serves to distinguish Romania from the other CEE countries, while Bulgaria appears also to be partially affected by these woes. Meanwhile, legislative constraints on the executive vary even more across countries with a critical variable being whether a legislature investigates executive actions in practice. Here, Latvia is on a par Bulgaria and Romania for the entire 1990–2015 period, and Hungary also slides after 2010. Hence, our initial success-story

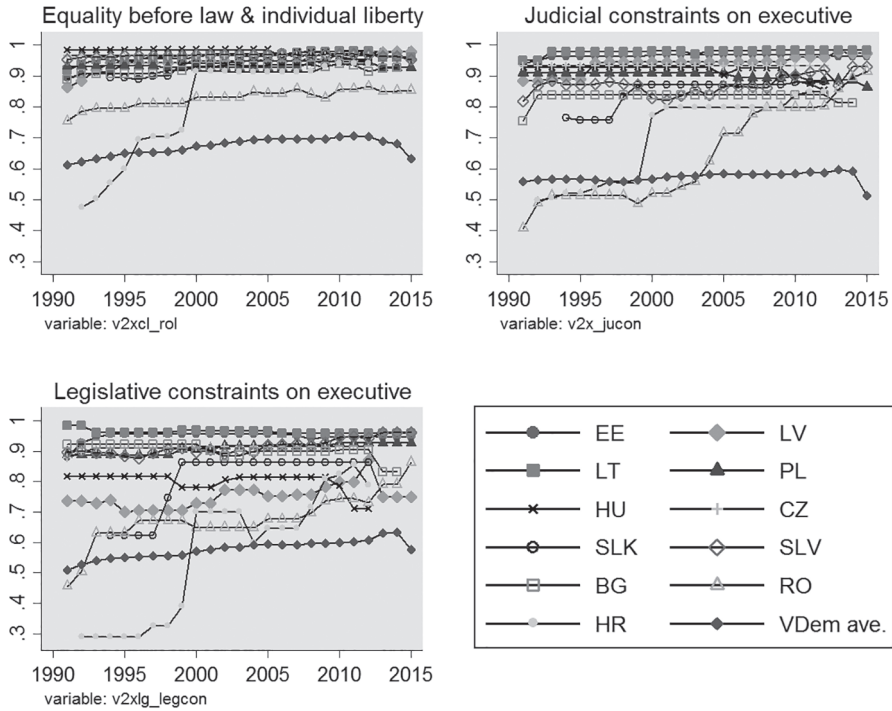


Figure 7.8 Liberal democracy sub-components, 1991–2015

Source: Figure drawn by author.

countries are not strong across all indicators. Croatia also does not recoup much after its democratisation after 2000. In this respect, the development of liberal democracy in post-communist Europe has been rather mixed: essential safeguards for rule of law are in place, but more substantive practices of judicial and legislative oversight are still limited. In Northern and Western Europe, the values for all three of these mid-level indices are higher; in Southern Europe they are about the same as in the post-communist countries. This fact seems to underscore again the point that while EU accession, and specifically its Copenhagen criteria, helped to ensure implementation of basic democratic principles, it had a hard time reaching all of them.

### Participatory democracy

A further principle of democracy concerns participation. V-Dem operationalises the notion of participation in three ways. First, it can be measured in terms of the permissiveness of institutional rules for direct citizen participation in political decision-making. What are the opportunities for citizens to influence the political process outside of elections? Second, participation can be characterised in terms of the strength of local and regional government. Here stress is put on a subsidiarity principle for democratic government, i.e. political decisions should be taken at the lowest administrative level possible. Lastly, participation can relate to the vibrancy of civil society. In this case, attention is focused on the degree of citizen activism or the strength of social bonds that undergird a democratic community.

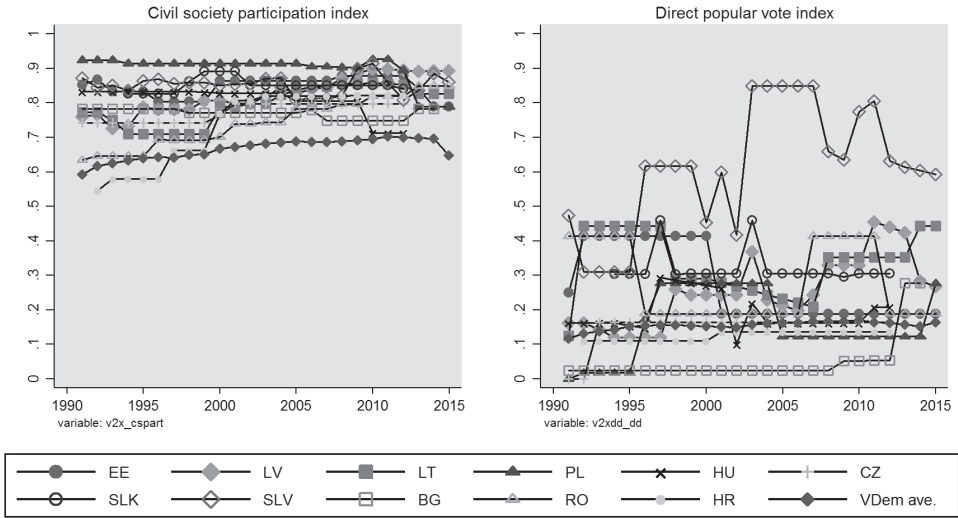


Figure 7.9 Participatory democracy sub-components, 1991–2015

Source: Figure drawn by author.

Examining these dimensions across post-communist Central and Eastern Europe puts us into an analytical situation that is somewhat opposite from the previous ones. Namely, on the overall participatory component index, all of the countries of the region essentially overlap. Only Slovenia sticks out with a particularly high and statistically significant difference. We are therefore confronted with the question of how to explain Slovenia’s particularly strong success in building a participatory democracy. By far the most important impact on Slovenia’s score in this regard comes from V-Dem’s direct democracy index. This index measures the place that different forms of direct popular decision-making have in a political system. Not only does it cover the degree to which referendums, plebiscites or citizen initiatives can be launched but also the conditions under which such measures can pass. In order for the score to be high, provisions for both introducing and approving such votes have to be low. This result is further tweaked by the actual number of such votes during certain years.

A close examination of these particular direct democracy variables reveals that Slovenia not only allows all three of these popular decision-making means (plebiscites, citizen initiatives and referendums) but also that they can be started and passed with greater ease, and that they have been used with considerable frequency over the last 25 years (more than 20 times). As a consequence, Slovenia bests even Switzerland on this index, often by more than 0.1 points.

Still, given that referendums and other such dichotomous votes can be very simplistic as decision-making methods, a more embedded sense of participatory democracy can be gleaned from the degree of civil society activism in a country. As with many of the indicators for electoral democracy, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe do score above the world average on V-Dem’s civil society participation index. Poland and Slovenia receive higher points through the 1990s for the extent to which government is seen as consulting with civil society organisations. Meanwhile, Lithuania gains given its use of a single-member district system to elect half of its parliament. This means that on the index’s component measuring the degree to which electoral candidate selection is centralised or localised, Lithuanians are seen as having more opportunities to participate in politics since the single-member district system prompts

candidate selection to be done more often at the local level. These slight differences aside, however, we can generally see a confluence of country scores toward the 2010s.

Opportunities for citizens to participate in local and regional government vary depending on both geographic and historical circumstances. Smaller countries, needless to say, will be less likely to develop extensive regional government. However, local government is ubiquitous and can in theory offer important avenues for political participation. Unfortunately, V-Dem's local and regional government indices do not measure the strength of these administrative levels vis-à-vis central government; rather, they focus on whether these sub-units are elected or appointed by a higher level of government. Hence, the indices do not help us much in differentiating participatory democracy among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

**Deliberative democracy**

Deliberative democracy is often seen as a more advanced form of democratic rule, where the principles of rational and open debate are brought to bear on decision-making beyond the basic safeguarding of freedom of speech. As such, one could expect that in post-communist Europe these values may be less rooted given the previous decades of command-style rule. And indeed, the low scores for Croatia and Slovakia up until around 2000 show how authoritarian governments are anything but deliberative. At the same time, deliberative norms did appear to take

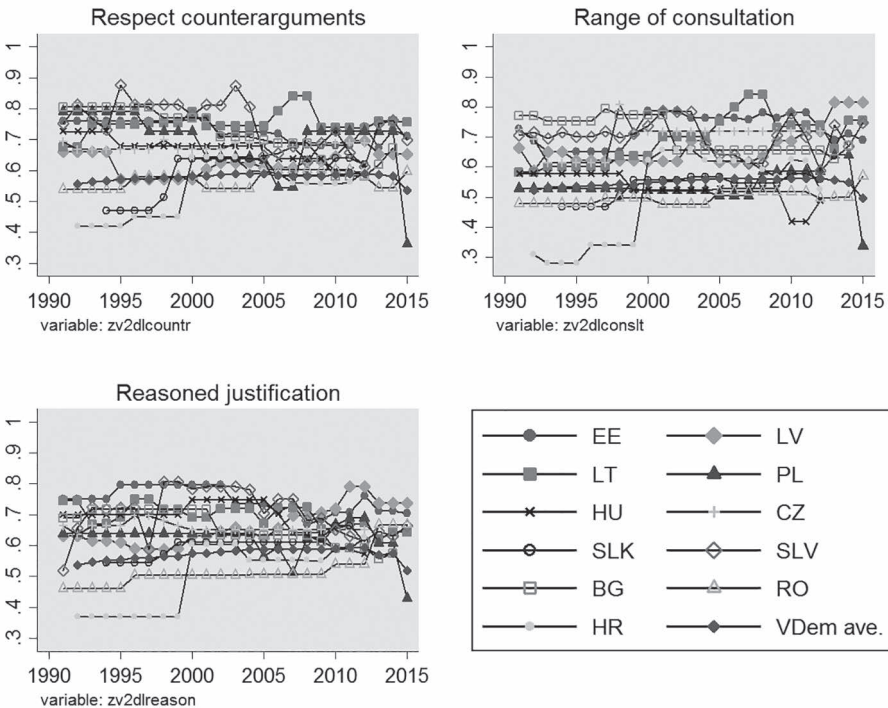


Figure 7.10 Deliberative democracy sub-components, 1991–2015

Source: Figure drawn by author.

hold in other countries, particularly during the early 1990s. In this regard, V-Dem's deliberative component index shows how the spirit of freedom and the dawning of a new future after 1990 prompted a high degree of reasoned discussion and public deliberation in many of these countries. Only later do some political systems become more closed with Hungary epitomising this trend as of 2010 along with Poland in 2014.

At the same time, some of the sub-components of the index indicate that certain elements of this phenomenon (that are perhaps even at the core of the concept) are less uniform cross-nationally. For not only should elites be expected to put forth reasoned arguments for their decisions as well as engage in public discussion, but they should also (under ideal deliberative conditions) seek broad consultation among other elites and respect counter-arguments, both of which would show that elites are ready to change their views or seek compromises when confronted with differing perspectives. In other words, there should be a process of reaching new understandings in the process of decision-making and not just openness as such. The two V-Dem variables that seek to tap into these phenomena (top row of Figure 7.10) show considerable variation across the countries and different years. These are variables that are also very likely to shift with changes in government and prime ministers, since different leaders may exhibit different styles of leadership.

### Egalitarian democracy

Another dimension of democratic political development that exhibits legacies from the communist past relates to levels of egalitarian democracy. Are rights and liberties in a democracy shared more or less equally irrespective of socio-economic status, gender or ethnicity, or do inequalities undermine the ability of people to be a part of the political system? Given that communism promoted a flattening out of societal differences, it is not surprising that V-Dem's aggregate egalitarian component index is relatively invariant across Europe's post-communist

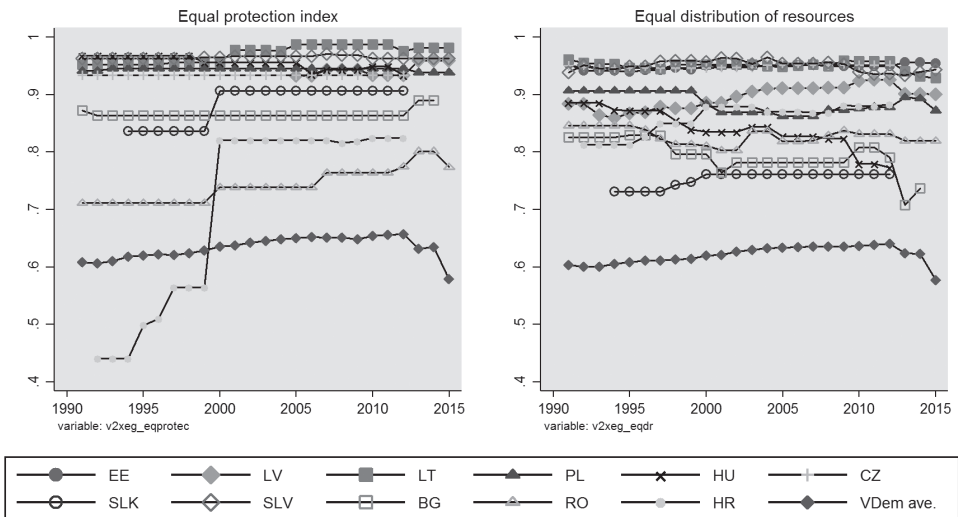


Figure 7.11 Egalitarian democracy sub-components, 1991–2015

Source: Figure drawn by author.

region. Indeed, countries like Belarus and Moldova show comparable levels of egalitarianism, not only in the 1990s, but also later.

At the same time, given that socio-economic disparities have still grown in the region (as measured by the Gini index or other human development indicators), it would appear that this aspect of social transformation has not carried itself over into the political world. Countries are largely overlapping across all of the sub-components of this index with only occasionally countries like the Czech Republic or Slovenia showing statistically significant variation.

Our final comparative sub-component – in terms of whether civil liberties are protected equally across different social groups – reveals a picture similar to the one with which we began our analysis. Namely, our rebounders Croatia and (to a lesser degree) Slovakia feature lower scores in the 1990s (due to the precariousness caused by authoritarian tendencies in those countries), but they gain considerably after 2000; meanwhile the slow-movers Romania and (partially) Bulgaria show weakness throughout the 1990–2015 period, indicating that egalitarianism has still some way to go in those countries, although on the whole the trend is upwards.

## Concluding remarks

This chapter has examined the evolution of political systems in post-communist Europe through a normative lens of democratic political development and an empirical source base involving the Varieties of Democracy dataset. The transformation we can observe using these two analytical tools indicates that democracy has taken root across its many different dimensions, although with differing degrees of depth and rapidity in the different countries. The V-Dem data confirm our generally held impressions about the more successful vs the more slowly-moving countries in the region. But they also reveal a number of nuances, such as what plagues the slow-moving countries more precisely or which aspects of deliberative democracy appear to be particularly strong in some of the successful countries. Moreover, even under conditions of semi-authoritarianism (such as in Slovakia or Croatia in the 1990s) we can determine more systematically what democratic components were missing and to what degree. For example, our observations about the weakness of the electoral process or low levels of consultation.

Conceptually and normatively, we can see that democracy branches out with not only more specific forms that go beyond democracy's core electoral component, but also with sub-elements that often need to be given greater attention. A case in point is the degree to which liberal democracy encompasses not only rule of law but also constraints on the executive. It is the latter that has often proven a more undermining factor in post-communist Europe than simply the protection of civil liberties or rigorous public administration.

Likewise we have seen how rather varied aspects of participatory democracy come to bear in evaluating political development, ranging from civil society activism to regional government openness. Moreover, for some people it may remain a normative question as to how much the active use of different elements of direct democracy (referendums, citizen initiatives, etc.) should constitute a particularly positive indicator of participatory democracy (McManus-Czubinska et al., 2004). Indeed, with this question we might even open a reverse perspective in terms of our conceptual and normative assumptions: can there in certain cases be too much of a certain type of democracy? Might or should the scales of some of the dimensions of democracy be capped as perhaps being too harmful over the longer term?

The fact that democratic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe can never be guaranteed is evident in some of the final, most recent data points on our different V-Dem graphs. (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007; Greskovits, 2015) Namely, backsliding in countries such as Hungary and Poland has begun to reverberate not only across measures relating to the democratic climate in



these countries (deliberation, respect for other opinions and broad-scale consultation) but also more institutional variables such as maintaining a free media or safeguarding equal protection under the law. Again, it is interesting to note that across variables such as free and fair elections, the countries remain highly ranked. But underneath this surface important developments are afoot.

These worrisome trends bring us back to a final reflection on how we understand democracy in its entirety. For, if many of the institutions and practices of not only electoral democracy but also its more specific dimensions appeared to have been in place in post-communist Europe, then why do we now see certain reversals taking place? Needless to say, there are well-known circumstantial factors at work here such as the strain the world financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009 has put on democratic governments and how this has caused some people to lose faith in democratic structures and principles. As is well known, democratic governance faces tremendous challenges in our new globalised economic and social world. (Pianta, 2013; Drezner, 2014) Likewise, very specific international problems such as stagnation within European integration or the outbreak of a migration crisis (and how one exacerbates the other!) only add to democratic disillusionment.

In this respect, we are forced to return to one of our earlier conceptual notions about the degree to which democracy involves not only building the right rules and institutions but also an anchoring of attitudes and beliefs that would allow periodic economic or international crosswinds to be weathered by these institutions more securely. While political culture research has examined popular support for democracy for more than five decades (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2013), we still know precious little about how democratic mindsets are actually formed or become embedded. V-Dem and other institutional measures of democracy cannot help us in this regard. Rather, the ups and *downs* of democratic political development in post-communist Europe that we have seen by 2016 indicate that future research on democracy should seek to better integrate both institutional and attitudinal measures of this phenomenon as well as elaborate the causal connections between the two (Doorenspleet, 2015). Only then can we be sure that the different humanistic values for which we venerate democracy will actually be achieved.

## Acknowledgements

Support for this research came from Personal Research Grant nr 717 sponsored by the Estonian Research Council, and the V-Dem Regional Center for Eastern Europe and Russia. The author would also like to thank Martin Mölder for research assistance.

## Note

1 The other two components of the high-level electoral democracy index – universal suffrage and the existence of an elective executive – are left out of this narrower analysis, since their values are essentially the same for all of the countries in the region.

## Bibliography

- Bandelj, N., Finley, K., & Radu, B. (2015). Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Test of early impact. *East European Politics*, 31(2), 129–148.
- Carey, J. M. (2000). Parchment, equilibria, and institutions. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(6–7), 735–761.
- Clark, W. R. (1998). Agents and structures: Two views of preferences, two views of institutions. *International Studies Quarterly*, 42(2), 245–270.
- Coppedge, M. (2012). *Democratization and research methods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Lindberg, S., Skaaning, S.-E., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., Fish, S., Glynn, A., Hicken, A., Knutsen, C. H., McMann, K., Paxton, P., Pemstein, D., Staton, J., Zimmerman, B., Sigman, R., Andersson, F., Mechkova, V., & Miri, F. (2016). *V-Dem codebook V6*. Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy (VDEM) Project.
- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., Fish, S., Hicken, A., Kroenig, M., Lindberg, S., McMann, K., & Paxton, P. (2011). Conceptualizing and measuring democracy: A new approach. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9(2), 247–267.
- Coppedge, M., Lindberg, S., Skaaning, S.-E., & Teorell, J. (2015). *Measuring high level democratic principles using the V-Dem data*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, The Varieties of Democracy Institute.
- Doorenspleet, R. (2015). Where are the people? A call for people-centred concepts and measurements of democracy. *Government and Opposition*, 50(3), 469–494.
- Drezner, D.W. (2014). The system worked: Global economic governance during the great recession. *World Politics*, 66(1), 123–164.
- Ekiert, G. (2015). Three generations of research on post communist politics – a sketch. *East European Politics & Societies*, 29(2), 323–337.
- Ekiert, G., Kubik, J., & Vachudova, M. A. (2007). Democracy in the post-communist world: An unending quest? *East European Politics & Societies*, 21(1), 7–30.
- Ekiert, G., & Ziblatt, D. (2013). Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe one hundred years on. *East European Politics & Societies*, 27(1), 90–107.
- Fortin, J. (2008). Patterns of democracy? *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 2(2), 198–220.
- Ganghof, S. (2012). Resilient patterns of democracy: A comparative analysis. *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 6(1), 103–124.
- Gerring, J., & Thacker, S. C. (2008). *A centripetal theory of democratic governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greskovits, B. (2015). The hollowing and backsliding of democracy in East Central Europe. *Global Policy*, 6(1), 28–37.
- Haughton, T. (2007). When does the EU make a difference? Conditionality and the accession process in Central and Eastern Europe. *Political Studies Review*, 5(2), 233–246.
- Haughton, T. (2011). Half full but also half empty: Conditionality, compliance and the quality of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. *Political Studies Review*, 9(3), 323–333.
- Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, cultural change and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kitschelt, H. (1995). Formation of party cleavages in post-communist democracies. *Party Politics*, 1(4), 447–472.
- Kjaer, A. M. (2004). *Governance: Key concepts*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Laver, M. (1997). *Private desires, political action: An invitation to the politics of rational choice*. London: Sage.
- LeDuc, L., Niemi, R. G., & Norris, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Comparing democracies: Elections and voting in a changing world*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lijphart, A. (1999). *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Linz, J., & Stepan, A. (1996). Toward consolidated democracies. *Journal of Democracy*, 7(1), 14–33.
- McCormick, J. (2012). *Comparative politics in transition*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- McFaul, M. (2005). Transitions from post-communism. *Journal of Democracy*, 16(1), 5–19.
- McManus-Czubinska, C., Miller, W. L., Markowski, R., & Wasilewski, J. (2004). The misuse of referendums in post-communist Europe. *Journal of Communist and Transition Politics*, 20(1), 56–80.
- Møller, J., & Skaaning, S.-E. (2010). Post-communist regime types: Hierarchies across attributes and space. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 43(1), 51–71.
- Møller, J., & Skaaning, S.-E. (2009). The three worlds of post-communism: Revisiting deep and proximate explanations. *Democratization*, 16(2), 298–322.
- Møller, J., & Skaaning, S.-E. (2011). *Requisites of democracy: Conceptualization, measurement, and explanation*. London: Routledge.

- Munck, G. L. (2009). *Measuring democracy: A bridge between scholarship and politics*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mungiu-Pippidi, A. (2007). EU accession is no “End of History”. *Journal of Democracy*, 18(1), 8–16.
- Norris, P. (2011). Measuring governance. In M. Bevir (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of governance* (pp. 179–199). Londong: Sage.
- Norris, P. (2012). *Making democratic governance work: How regimes shape prosperity, welfare, and peace*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, P. (Ed.). (1999). *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parsons, S. (2005). *Rational choice and politics*. London: Continuum.
- Pemstein, D., Tzelgov, E., & Wang, Y-T. (2015). Evaluating and improving item response theory models for cross-national expert surveys. *Varieties of Democracy Institute: Working Paper No. 1*. Gothenburg: Gothenburg University.
- Petersheim, M-J. (2012). The European Union and consolidating democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Integration*, 34(1), 75–91.
- Pianta, M. (2013). Democracy lost: The financial crisis in Europe and the role of civil society. *Journal of Civil Society*, 9(2), 148–161.
- Rothstein, B., & Teorell, J. (2012). Defining and measuring quality of government. In S. Holmberg & B. Rothstein (Eds.), *Good government: The relevance of political science* (pp. 6–26). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2004). Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 661–679.
- Stueber, K. R. (2005). How to think about rules and rule following. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 35(3), 307–323.
- Vachudova, M. A. (2005). *Europe undivided: Democracy, deverage, and integration after communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Welzel, C. (2013). *Freedom rising*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.