Dwindling Democracy

A study of democratic backsliding in the European Union's Eastern bloc

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Abstract

Proposed democratic backsliding in some Eastern members of the European Union, has recently been raised as a new challenge for the EU. Because of this, this thesis aims to shine light on the extent of democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc and the factors that enable it. This is done through a two-step research design, consisting of a description of changes in Freedom House's Freedom Rating, and a comparative case study testing the three main strands of potential explanations for backsliding. A key finding is that that five of 11 Eastern EU members have seen negative developments during the past 15 years. Backsliding has been substantial in Hungary and Latvia, moderate in Poland and Bulgaria, and mild Lithuania. Furthermore, it is found that mainstream parties' commitment to democracy, as well as the extent to which Europe's recent economic crisis hit national finances and ordinary citizens, appear to be factors enabling backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc.

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1. Introduction

The European Union could be the greatest peace project of the 20th century. Binding together former arch enemies in a system of mutual interdependence has turned out to be a successful strategy for stability and prosperity in Europe. The EU has grown to be more than just the original coal and steel union. The EU's role as a diffuser of liberal norms has been well discussed in a research agenda focusing on the EU as a normative power led by Ian Manners (2002) who argues that since the EU was created on a foundation of peace, liberty, rule of law, human rights and democracy, these values shine through all EU actions. A primary example of this is the Copenhagen Criteria, where political demands on democratic institutions, respect for human rights and protection of minorities (European Commission 2016), were set up to ensure that European values were adopted by prospective members before joining. Much because of these demands, expansion to Eastern Europe since the early 2000's, has been seen as a success story of stability and democracy (Hlavac 2010). However, the role of the EU as a normative actor has also been criticised since third countries do not always perceive the EU this way (Bengtsson & Elgström 2012).

The European foundational values are now supposedly facing a new challenge from the very group it most recently won over. While much focus has been given to the EU's promotion of democracy outside its external borders, signs are now pointing at a democracy problem in the EU's own backyard. Poland, Hungary and Latvia are singled out to recently have experienced especially negative democratic developments. In Hungary limitations have been put on constitutional courts and the media (Müller 2015 p.142), In Poland judges have been removed from office and media laws have been changed (Schlippak & Treib 2017 p.352), leading to the activation of the first step in article 7, the most serious EU sanction against members, in late December 2017. Poland will be given a formal warning for putting fundamental democratic value at risk, but could eventually lose its voting rights in the EU (Boffrey & Davies 2017). In Latvia restrictions on popular democratic involvement are visible (Greskovits 2008). A process of so-called democratic backsliding is thus presented as a fact (Müller 2015, Schlippak and Treib 2017, Sedelmeier 2017). These are newer Eastern EU members being singled out as dismantling their democratic systems built after independence from the Soviet Union. Having shared a rocky democratic history one can wonder what is now happening within this group of

countries that so recently accepted the whole roster of EU values. Given this new-found attention, something seems to be going on in the EU's Eastern bloc.[1]

The claims of democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc raise a noteworthy puzzle. While Manners (2002) claims that the EU holds normative power, continuously influencing its members with norms of democracy, some member states seem to defy this proposed democratic influence. It seems like some members might be distancing themselves from EU core values while other do not. If this is the case, why is it so?

The issues arising from the proposed phenomenon of democratic backsliding in the EU's newer Eastern members, motivates the following research questions;

- ***RQ1****: To what extent has there been democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?*[2]
- ***RQ2****: What seems to be the factors enabling democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?*

The research questions are answered using a two-step design. The first step responds to the lack of wider studies of the extent of democratic backsliding in the Eastern bloc, using the Freedom House Freedom Rating. The relevance of the first research questions is seen in the divergence in quantitative studies on if democratic backsliding has even occurred in the Eastern bloc or not (Fish 2001, Levitz & Pop-Eleches 2010), and in the lack of a wider study on all Eastern EU members. The second part applies a qualitative comparative case study, a design that is missing in the backsliding literature. Larger quantitative studies and single case studies have, as proven by diverging results in previous research, been ineffective in explaining democratic backsliding either because of the many variables tested or a too narrow focus. Therefore, a comparative case study is needed, with few cases to enable a comparison, while still studying several different explanations in depth to assess their strength. The qualitative approach can also better handle the clear interconnections between the different strands of explanations. It aims to identify potential causes of backsliding, and the developed hypotheses are tested in two backsliding countries that are matched with two non-backsliding countries. This design produces a more detailed result with the possibility for a combination of explanations.

[1] The EU' Eastern bloc is hereon defined to include the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia.

[2] It should be noted that the first research question and theme of this thesis is a development of a final paper written by the author in the course European Integration at Uppsala University in the spring of 2017.

When it comes to democratic backsliding, there is little coherent knowledge. Because of this, there is no consensus on what democratic backsliding means or what the main explanations of it are. Existing explanations are diverse with the main strands much reflecting those of democratization research. This thesis interprets the main themes in backsliding literature to be institutional, political and economic. Institutional explanations focus much on electoral systems (Batory 2016, Reynolds 2011), democratic checks and balances (Diamond 2015, Kapstein & Converse 2008), and the meaning of democratic institutions (Ágh 2016). Political explanation mainly focus on populist parties (Palonen 2009), mainstream parties' adoption of populist rhetoric as a political strategy (Pappas 2013), and their consequent lack of democratic commitment (Herman 2016). The economic explanations are concerned with per capita income, development (Przeworski 2005, Przeworski et.al. 1996), and the impact of economic crisis (Krastev 2016). None of these explanations seem to dominate the others in the existing literature. This thesis will through the comparative design, be able to advance research on which explanatory factors are found in the Eastern bloc while not testing direct causality.

The purpose for doing this study is twofold. Firstly, democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc is one of the greater challenges in Europe today, with the potential to threaten the EU's credibility and core values. Thus, a need for a holistic grip on the phenomenon in the Eastern bloc is needed to find out how bad things have gotten and what has caused it. This in turn can help us better understand how democracy can be protected in EU member states. Secondly, research on democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe is young and show a great deal of divisiveness. By testing the most prominent strands of explanations, this thesis contributes by bringing clarity to this divided and burgeoning research field.

The thesis continues as follows; the second chapter presents prior research and theory regarding the EU as a normative power and democracy promoter, as well as democratic backsliding in the Eastern EU members. The third chapter follows with a presentation of the research design and motivations of measures and materials. The fourth chapter presents the results of the empirical study, which is followed by a concluding analytical discussion of the results in chapter five.

2. Prior research and theory

This chapter presents prior research and theory relevant to answer the research questions. To provide a context to democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc, relevant literature on Europe as a normative power and its actions to promote democracy is presented. This is followed by a discussion of theories of democratic backsliding and a definition of this concept. Taken together the existing literature contributes to an understanding of the complexity of seeing the EU as a normative actor but also shows a research gap on the EU's internal normative influence. The literature on democratic backsliding is split, but show patterns of division along a few themes. The main strands of explanation found are institutional, political, and economic. These diverge on what aspects are the most important but serve, together, as the stepping stone for the thesis' analytical framework.

2.1 Context: The EU as a normative power and democracy promoter

Two prominent debates within the field of European studies, regard what kind of actor the EU is and how it works to promote democracy. These two research fields primarily have a theoretical focus (Manners 2002, Sjursen 2006) and both show divisiveness on the consistency and bias of EU actions (Smith 2001, De Ridder and Kochenov 2011). A context of the EU as a normative power is relevant for the research questions asked in this thesis since the EU's normative influence in the Eastern bloc can be assumed to affect the possibilities for democratic backsliding. Research on the EU as a normative actor is heavily focused on EU influence in relation to third countries, thus creating a gap on the internal normative impact on countries already in the union. A research gap on the matter of the EU's internal normative power is relevant for both research questions, since the notion of the EU having normative influence internally matters for its impact on member states can drive developments opposing EU values of democracy. That there seems to be varying democratic developments in the Eastern bloc show the need to look at democracy inside the EU.

While the EU is not the only actor that could influence democracy in the Eastern bloc, the research covering the idea of Normative Power Europe (NPE) is of importance since strong claims are made regarding the specific EU impact of democratic norms (Manners 2002). This thesis does acknowledge the potential impact by for example Russia in the Eastern bloc given these countries historical ties to the East, but will not explore this further.

Duchêne argued in 1972, that the EU was a special kind of international actor, a civilian power primarily relying on economic and political means over military (Duchêne in Sjursen 2004 p.122). Thirty years later Manners reconceptualized this notion into the idea of Normative Power Europe, now one of the more debated positions in European studies. Manners (2002) presents the EU as a normative power. The argument is that the EU was born in a unique historical context, making it a unique organization built on the core values of peace, democracy, rule of law, liberty and respect for human rights. According to Manners (2002 p.240-252) these values are the foundation of the EU's relationship with member states and with the surrounding world. Manners (2002 p. 239, 244) defines normative power as the "ability to shape conceptions of normal", and thus claims that the EU's powers are derived from its ability to spread and reinforce its core values. The spread of norms can then achieve what military and economic powers would otherwise achieve.

The concept of Normative Power Europe has been met by bountiful critique. That the EU is a new type of actor on the international arena is not so much disputed, but rather why and how this plays out (Diez 2005 p.614). A strand of relevant critique regards the inconsistencies in how EU normative power translates to reality. Some argue that the normative in EU foreign policy is compromised by political, security and economic interests (Smith 2001 p.196, Youngs 2004). According to this view the EU's normative power can therefore not be the primary instrument for the EU since other interests weigh in on the relationship with external actors. Hill (1993), among others, has pointed out that the inconsistency between what the EU is and what it projects can damage relationships with third parties and pose serious challenges (Nicolaïdis & Howse 2002). Sjursen (2006 p.241), a main criticizer of Manners, is also skeptical of the inconsistency and bias of the EU calling itself a normative power and its assumption that EU actions constitute "a force for good". What the EU considers good may not be shared in other parts of the world.

Although empirical studies on the EU's normative influence are scarce, existing studies show opposing results. Some scholars find, through single case studies, that the EU has been able to have a normative influence in the institutionalization of the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto protocol (Scheipers & Sicurelli 2007), and abolition of the death penalty (Manners 2002). Others, find that strategic and economic interests have compromised the EU's normative power in, for example, the Eastern enlargement (Merlingen 2007, Raik 2004). This divergence

between existing empirical findings verify the critique of inconsistencies in EU external normative action since normative influence does not seem to be constant. Empirical studies give little attention to the EU's normative influence over existing members. The question remains if inconsistencies are also at play internally. This debate opens for the possibility of EU normative influence being effective to varying degrees in different member states, something that could contribute to member states having diverging democratic developments.

A related literature focuses on the EU's promotion of democracy outside its external borders. Democracy promotion may be defined as direct, peaceful actions aiming to encourage and support democracy in a third state (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2011 p.888). One strand of this literature presents varying views on the effectiveness of conditionality in external EU democracy promotion. Conditionality is widely seen as the EU's use of membership as an incentive for democratic reforms (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2004 p. 622). This is relevant for democratic backsliding since it analyzes how democracy was pushed by the EU in the Eastern bloc before membership, thus potentially creating preconditions for democratic backsliding or continued democracy. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2011 p.887,899) find that EU conditionality worked in the successful democratic developments in the Eastern bloc because of the attractiveness of membership, but that it has lost influence beyond these countries. Schimmelfennig & Scholtz (2008) further find that the offer of membership is the determinant of the success in EU democracy promotion. Others argue for more clear drawbacks of conditionality, like De Ridder and Kochenov (2011) whom find low thresholds to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria, vagueness in expectations and inconsistencies in demands on candidates. This research puts into question the efficiency of conditionality used by the EU for democracy promotion in the Eastern bloc.

These literatures give an insight to what the EU wants to be, but show divisiveness on the question of whether it succeeds or not. The theoretical debates dominate over empirical research, which in turn points out inconsistencies in the EU's role as a democracy promoter. Research on Normative Power Europe and EU democracy promotion shows a lack of focus on normative influence in the current member states. The question remains if the EU has normative influence once a state has joined the union and how this influence looks and affects democratic developments. We need to consider closer if we can expect EU's normative power to be internally and consistently at play in the Eastern bloc, now that some countries are claimed to experience democratic backsliding.

2.2 The concept of democratic backsliding

What is democratic backsliding?[3] This thesis uses a definition of backsliding by Lust and Waldner (2015 p.5). Democratic backsliding is; "changes that negatively affect competitive elections, liberties, and accountability". This definition is narrower than some others but allows for a return to what could be seen as the core of democracy. There is no consensus on a definition of democratic backsliding (Lust & Waldner 2015 p.2), but when democracy itself is an essentially contested concept, it follows that democratic backsliding also is contested. If there is no agreement on what a country is moving away from when backsliding, it is better to return to the core of the concept which most scholars can agree on. Many use Dahl's minimum criteria for democracy as being a system where elections are held with a realist chance for the opposition to win (Przeworski et.al 1996 p.39, Bernhard et.al 2001 p.783). Because of Dahl's criteria not presenting a clear idea of how backsliding can be measured, it has for this thesis been chosen to follow Lust and Waldner's (2015) definition focusing on changes with a negative effect on core democratic features of elections, liberties and accountability.

While much has been written on democratization, democratic backsliding is causally different (Dresden & Howard 2016 p.1123). Democratic backsliding is simply not reversed democratization, since factors contributing to democratization do not have to, in their absence, cause democratic backsliding. Democratization focuses on the process towards democracy, and backsliding on the process away from democracy. Another problem with conceptualizing democratic backsliding is its possible extensiveness, as pointed out by Bermeo (2016). It covers many processes and possibly multiple agents. However, many can agree that democratic backsliding is a gradual process (Bermeo 2016 p.6, Lust & Waldner 2015 p.6). The limited debate on the meaning of democratic backsliding consequently does not provide much help in this regard. Many scholars leave it up to the democracy indexes they use to define democracy, and in turn see backsliding as a decline in whatever the indexes measures. This works if the index matches ones' intentions with measuring backsliding, but could be misleading when combining several different indexes, that often hold different definitions of democracy. This thesis uses an existing definition of backsliding and consequently makes methodological decisions matching this definition.

[3] Democratic backsliding is not the only term used for the phenomenon. Some other variants are; democratic erosion (Greskovits 2008), reversal (Kapstein & Converse (2008), and decline (Ágh 2016). These terms have all been deemed to concern the same thing, which hereon is called democratic backsliding, or just backsliding.

2.3 Explaining democratic backsliding

Research on democratic backsliding, also in the EU's Eastern bloc, has grown since the 2010's and is of most importance for the second research question; *What seems to be the factors enabling democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* What causes backsliding is the great debate within the field, where there is no consensus on a main explanation. Many studies use quantitative methods or single case studies to study the phenomenon (Kapstein & Converse 2008, Fish 2001, Ágh 2016). The lack of consensus on what causes backsliding shows the need for another type of in-depth study, like that carried out in this thesis, with chances of comparison and generalization. While results diverge greatly on what the main explanations of backsliding are, these can be found to generally follow certain themes. Institutional, political and economic explanations are interlinked and dominating in the existing literature, while others like ethnic, religious and international explanations are less developed. Much attention has been given to Hungary as a case of backsliding, but the possible wider extent of backsliding in the Eastern bloc remains unclear.

Before diving into explanations of democratic backsliding, it is worth mentioning the themes not further explored. An international influence on democratic outcomes is not further developed because Pevehouse (2002) suggests that countries that are members of democracy promoting international organizations do not experience democratic backsliding since these organizations serve as a commitment guarantor for a country to reform. Levitz and Pop-Eleches (2010) also find that EU conditionality of membership was the incentive driving democratization in the Eastern bloc and backsliding after accession has therefore not happened. However, because some EU countries are pointed out as democratic backsliders, these hypotheses fail. Other explanations like, religion (Fish & Wittenberg 2009), economic inequality (Przeworski et.al 1996), ethnic fragmentation (Fish & Wittenberg 2009), and an active civil society (Greskovits 2016) are also visible in the literature and have been considered. A closer look at these explanatory factors have been disregarded in this thesis because they have been found less prominent in the EU's Eastern bloc.

2.3.1 Institutional explanations

Institutional explanations are prevalent in research on democratic backsliding but also in democratization research. These explanations are structural since they argue that the structure in which politics is contained, causes democratic backsliding. The institutional explanations

mainly focus on electoral systems, checks and balances on the executive power and the strength of institutions. There is little agreement on which of these aspects are the main contributors to backsliding, although they are interlinked.

Electoral systems constitute a backbone of democracy and have consequently become an important factor in institutional explanations of backsliding. Palonen (2009), Buzogány (2017) and Enyedi (2016) all point out the disproportional elements in the Hungarian electoral system, giving advantages to large parties and coalitions, thus enabling landslide victories. Batory (2016) argues that the opportunity for the Hungarian Fidesz party to win a two-third majority in the national parliament in 2010, deprived the political opposition of any influence or control. Reynolds (2011 p.74-85) maintains that electoral system design is crucial for democratic stability because it determines the level of inclusion of parties and marginalized groups. He finds two overall negative electoral system designs for democratic stability. The first is the First Past the Post (FPTP) system, were the candidate with the most votes wins the whole constituency, not necessarily needing a majority to do so. The second design is block voting, a super majoritarian system that works like a FPTP system but for multiple seats in a single district (Reynolds 2011 p.74-85). Voters have as many votes as there are seats to be filled and the candidate with the most votes wins the seat irrespectively of whether the candidate won a majority or not. Because of the FPTP logic being applied to multiple seats, block voting further enables landslide victories and rewards coherent party voting (IDEA 2005 p.35,44). These systems both generate overrepresentation in the translation of votes into seats and diminishes minority voices, with block voting being especially bad. All proportional systems, where seats are distributed based on vote share, are found to be better in this respect (Reynolds 2011). According to this view, electoral systems that inflate election results not only threaten the legitimacy of representation, but also marginalize political opposition and minorities. Therefore, the design of the electoral system is of importance for democratic backsliding.

Batory (2016 p.297) also argues that the parliamentary two-third majority of the Fidesz party in Hungary limited the possibility for independent institutions to effectively audit and curb the executive power. Thus, she claims the electoral system allowed Fidesz to override democratic checks and balances and with its constitutional changing majority further weakened limitations on power. In such political system, Diamond (2015 p.107) argues that it becomes easier for democratically elected politicians to violate institutions and abuse their authority. Therefore, solid institutional checks and balances, like constitutional constraints and other branches of

government's ability to control the executive, are found by Kapstein and Converse (2008) to be vital for young democracies since it prohibits abuse of power. Consequently, checks and balances that prohibit rogue actions, are crucial for keeping democratic procedures going. Fish (2001) finds that in the postcommunist countries, a system that allows for concentration of power in the executive office is the primary contributor to democratic backsliding, conditional on a weak domestic and international opposition. A system like that lacks effective checks and balances to prevent any actor from gaining too much power.

Weak checks and balances indicate weak institutions. Weak institutions can generally not produce redistribution and other tasks expected by citizens (Fukuyama 2015 p.14p), something that Krastev (2016 p.36) argues has made the Eastern EU democracies vulnerable. Ágh (2016 p.277, 280) finds that institutions in Eastern Europe have been further weakened by the lack of participation and popular support, which is a result of democratic institutions being introduced without the same sociocultural context as in the West. This could contribute to a lack of popular belief in democracy, ultimately eroding the input of the people. If weak institutions make people lose belief in democracy this provides an opportunity for illiberal actors to gain ground. The importance of effective and trustworthy democratic institutions therefore become paramount for backsliding.

The EU played a role in institution building in the Eastern bloc. Democratic institutions are part of the Copenhagen criteria (European Commission 2016), and the process to fulfil this was overseen by the EU in the Eastern bloc before accession. This process has been found to have been elite-focused and incentive-driven, meaning that democratic institutions risks not being firmly anchored in societies (Dawson & Hanley 2016 p.22). The EU has thus had a hand in institutions building in the Eastern bloc which could matter for institutional explanations of backsliding.

2.3.2 Political explanations

Political explanations of democratic backsliding focus on the agents in politics. They motivate democratic change with political strategies and commitments. Research is emerging on the connection between populism and democratic backsliding in the Eastern bloc. There is little agreement on which aspects are the main contributor to democratic backsliding, although they are interlinked.

The phenomenon of populism is currently a hot topic where research has grown rapidly trying to explain its progression. Even if research has struggled to define it, a common definition is presented by Mudde (2004 p.543) that populism is "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people". Populism does not have to be either left or right-wing. Batory (2016 p.284) argues that a society that buys the arguments of populists fails the "attitude test" towards democracy since they accept opinions based on rejecting democratic institutions. Populists will do anything to stay in power "in the name of the people" and democratic foundational laws and institutions are an obstacle to that. It is also statistically found by Huber and Schimpf (2016) that in Latin America, populists in government have a negative effect on democracy since they are likely to try to override checks and balances, concentrate power in the executive and increase difficulty in finding compromises. Populism and democracy are therefore not compatible and strong populist parties could become a threat to democracy.

Palonen (2009) finds that populist parties contribute to political polarization and diminish deliberative politics since they create a new consensus on what the political dividing line is, eliminating any discussion questioning the political poles or debating policy. The popular control of political content is therefore eliminated. Enyedi (2016) also points out that the populist threat to democracy involves a lack of courtesy and collegiality among politicians, creating a winner-takes-all mentality. Palonen (2009 p.323) finds that populists in Hungary use polarization as a political strategy, using the political divide between the people and the establishment as a rhetorical tactic. This divide could be further fueled by political crisis.

This strategy has, according to Pappas (2013), proved effective enough for other mainstream parties in the Eastern bloc to adopt populist rhetoric, and populism can therefore spread, contributing to more anti-democratic views gaining ground and influence political decision-making. Franklin (2017) also finds that Eurosceptic populist parties' successes in elections to the European Parliament, spills over to increased success in national elections. This is because European elections are often considered secondary to national and therefore make voters more likely to vote for a non-mainstream party. Once someone has voted for a Eurosceptic party on the European level, they are more likely to vote for it on the national level. In this way, populism can also spread from the European arena to the national arena.

Because of the contagion factor, political elites' commitment to liberal democracy can be crucial in hindering democratic backsliding. If democratic commitments are taken lightly, politicians are more likely to consider successful populist rhetoric. Herman (2016) finds that mainstream political parties' commitment to democracy indicate that democratic norms are deeply integrated in society and democracy is therefore less likely to be abandoned as a political idea. She further argues that elite commitments have been given little empirical attention (Herman 2016 p.264). Rupnik (2007 p.22) establishes that without a genuine change in norms and political culture in newer democracies, the democracy that is founded may be hollow. There are accounts of this lack of genuine democratic change in the Eastern bloc. Dawson and Hanley (2016) argue that liberalism was never fully established and legacies of illiberalism were not completely eliminated. This means that illiberalism never went away, making people and elites more disposed to accept populist arguments.

The political explanations thus focus mainly on political ideologies opposing democracy and the danger of their spread for democratic backsliding.

2.3.3 Economic explanations

The economic explanations are, like the institutional, a main strand of the democratization literature, translating into democratic backsliding. These explanations are structural since the economy is beyond the control of individual actors. They focus mainly on per capita income, development and economic crisis, and there is little agreement on what matters the most.

The focus on per capita income and development has spilled over to democratic backsliding research from democratization theory. Przeworski (2005) is a main proponent of the economic explanation for democratization and has, among others, found that the probability of a democracy surviving increases with per capita income and the standard of living. Incomes above the threshold of $6000 proposedly makes democratic backsliding and collapse impossible (Przeworski 2005, Przeworski et.al. 1996 p.41). It is considered that one reason for this is less conflicts over redistribution in high income countries (Przeworski et. al 1996 p.41). However, Enyedi (2016 p.212) shows that the Eastern bloc has remained above the threshold that is supposed to guarantee continued democracy. The threshold value could therefore not be applicable in the Eastern bloc, or no Eastern European country should experience backsliding.

A more relevant factor for democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe appears to be economic crisis, because of the effects in Europe since 2008. Several scholars find that economic crisis is destabilizing and can undermine democracy (Przeworski 2005, Przeworksi et.al. 1996 p.42). However, Przeworski (2005) argues that crisis matters only if it, again, causes the income per capita to pass below the threshold of $6000. Economic crisis should therefore not influence democracy if the income levels remains above the threshold, which it, as Enyedi (2016) points out, has in the Eastern bloc. Instead, Krastev (2016 p.38) argues that liberal democratic policies' failure to deliver economic prosperity in times of crisis can contribute to democratic crisis. Ágh (2013) also argues that the socioeconomic impact and inequality resulting from consecutive economic crises in the Eastern bloc after democratization, opened the political field to illiberal political actors when the people felt let down by democracy. Since Bernhard et. al (2001) finds that growth and high development encourage the survival of democratic regimes by alleviating socioeconomic conflicts, economic performance therefore seems connected to popular satisfaction with democracy.

The economic explanations thus diverge somewhat on what economic developments matter for democratic backsliding and what the implications of them can be.

2.4 Analytical framework

The above notable themes, gives reason to believe that institutional, political, and economic factors could be the main explanations of democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc. They thereby lay ground for the hypotheses tested for the second research question; *What seems to be the factors enabling democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* The incoherence in the literature on main explanations of backsliding makes it feasible to include all three prominent themes in the theoretical framework. The empirical results can consequently give more weight to one or a combination of explanations. The framework aims to explain democratic backsliding in postcommunist EU member states that joined in the 2000's. It is further developed in section 3.2.

From the institutional strand of the literature a *disproportional electoral system* and the ability of the incumbent party to *override democratic checks and balances* on the executive power, can negatively affect accountability and political liberties. The former can also come to cause

the latter. Disproportional elements of electoral systems, in Hungary for example, give advantage to large parties and coalitions, and weaken opposition and auditing institutions (Reynolds 2011, Batory 2016). The conditions the electoral systems set for political parties is a determinant of who wins power and how much power winning entails. Electoral features, like that causing the two thirds-majority in Hungary, can allow the executive power to override democratic checks and balances. Therefore, a lack of checks and balances are also indicators of factors that may contribute to democratic backsliding. Consequently, the institutional hypotheses are;

- *H1a: A disproportional electoral system increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*
- *H1b: The possibility to override democratic checks and balances increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*

From the political strand of the backsliding literature, the first important factor is the *strength of populist parties,* which can negatively affect competitive elections, accountability and commitment to democracy. Populist parties contribute to political polarization, diminish deliberative politics, and limit popular control of political content (Palonen 2009). Because of party polarization, populists often take measures to protect and concentrate executive power. Populism therefore poses several threats to democracy which is why its strength is important to consider on the national and European level. The second political indicator to consider is *mainstream parties' commitment to democracy* since Herman (2015) argues that democratically committed mainstream parties are the only gatekeepers against democratic backsliding. They pose restraints on actors aiming to undermine democracy. Hence, the political hypotheses are;

- *H2a: The strength of populist parties increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*
- *H2b: A weak commitment to democracy by mainstream political parties increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*

From the economic strand of literature, the most relevant contributor to democratic backsliding is economic crisis (Greskovits 2015, Fish 2001, Przeworski et.al 1996), which can negatively affect belief in democracy and the nature of competitive elections. The dissatisfaction with democracy's ability to handle economic crisis and generate economic prosperity in the Eastern bloc is connected to the success of non-democratic political actors (Krastev 2016, Ágh 2016, Buzogány 2017). It is therefore important to look at the economic crisis to assess *the depth of*

the crisis and the *effects on ordinary people*. An economic crisis that hits hard enough to negatively affect the people and discredit an incumbent democratic government, can create social dissatisfaction which becomes a breeding ground for illiberal actors' support. Consequently, the economic hypotheses are;

- *H3a: A deep economic crisis increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*
- *H3b: Ordinary people taking a hard hit from an economic crisis increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*

3. A two-step research design

The empirical study follows a two-step research design with the first step aiming to find the extent of democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc, and the second to find possible explanations for it. The design allows the thesis to answer two characteristically different questions and study both the dependent variable of democratic backsliding, and its key explanations, the potential causes of backsliding. Through this a wider picture of democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe can be captured.

The set timeframe starts in 2002 and include as updated accounts as possible until 2017. This is an appropriate starting point since EU normative power and the effect of the Copenhagen criteria should be visible around accession. Therefore, it is reasonable to start somewhat before the Eastern states became EU members. The Eastern bloc had also been independent for approximately a decade in 2002, thus allowing time for democratization and a national political development. When appropriate, shorter timeframes have been used. For example, the presentation of change in democracy scores starts two years before EU accession, which for some countries are later than 2002.

3.1 The extent: Identifying backsliders and determining severity of backsliding

The first step of the empirical study aims to answer the first research question; *To what extent has there been democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* The extent of democratic backsliding includes two aspects; how many countries have experienced it, and how severe developments are. The answer to both aspects are found by looking at changes in Freedom House's index Freedom Rating. The Freedom Rating can point out which countries have experienced a decline in democracy and to what degree. This also forms the basis for the case selection for the second step of the empirical study.

Democracy indexes can be tricky to handle since a numerical scale of democracy values does not guarantee that each value lies at the same distance from each other. In other words, the scales should be seen more as ranking scales, ordinal scales, that tells us if there is more or less democracy in a country, but not how much more or less (Teorell & Svensson 2007 p.110). This makes it hard to engage in any calculation of the statistics and estimate the degree of decline or improvement. Therefore, we need something to compare to, which is why average scoring for all Eastern EU members is presented along the results. This is in accordance with the population

strategy of estimation where you compare a case with the population it belongs to (Nyman 2014).

Other democracy indexes than the Freedom Rating have been considered. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index has been rejected because of its definition of democracy includes an indicator of political culture (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2007). This largely corresponds with the hypothesized explanation for backsliding of mainstream parties' commitment to democracy. Explanatory factors of backsliding cannot also be a part of what they are trying to explain. The Polity IV index has been rejected because it has not been updated enough to generate fruitful answers. Freedom House's Nations in Transit index, which is specifically focused on the former Soviet countries, is also not suitable since it uses a wide set of indicators covering more than the definition of democratic backsliding used in this thesis. One should note that because of these indexes difference from the Freedom Rating, they could generate different results than the ones presented here.

3.1.1 Freedom House's Freedom Rating

The Freedom House Freedom Rating is used to look at all 11 Eastern EU members that have joined since 2004. It can show the extent of democratic backsliding. The results are presented in a table and a graph.

The Freedom Rating is a widely-used score in democracy research (Greskovits 2015, Dawson & Hanley 2016), because of its extensive data and coverage (Pop-Eleches 2007 p.912). Therefore, it is used to find the extent of both how many countries have seen backsliding and how severe backsliding is. The Freedom Rating measures political and civil rights, which has been criticized for being too simple and narrow to capture democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2007 p.2). However, considering that this thesis uses a simpler definition of democratic backsliding, it is better to use a narrow index that focuses on a few core processes of democracy rather than a wide. The chosen definition of backsliding focuses on competitive elections, liberties, and accountability. These core aspects of democracy are well-covered by the Freedom Rating. The Freedom Rating's political rights-measure focus heavily on competitive elections and accountability, while the civil rights-measure focus on liberties (Freedom House 2017a). The Freedom Rating is thus valid and compatible with the view taken on democratic backsliding in this thesis. This also makes it more likely that the index does not

capture anything not relevant, which could potentially skew the results. Based on these arguments the Freedom Rating is the most suitable for this study.

The rating is available for the relevant countries from 1999 to 2017, and is scored on a scale of 1-7. The lower the score the closer a country is to the greatest degree of freedom. All countries receive scores for political and civil rights based on a standardized set of categories and questions, resulting in the Freedom Rating score. The Freedom Rating categorizes countries' status as free, score 1-2,5, partly free, score 3-5, or not free, score 5.5-7. Freedom House states that scores are only changed if there is a considerable improvement or deterioration in political or civil rights (Freedom House 2017a). Considering this, all changes in the Freedom Rating are substantial. The rating has extensive operationalizations and scoring is put through a thorough reviewing process (Freedom House 2017a), thus making it a reliable measure.

Countries showing any negative developments in Freedom House Freedom Rating during the set timeframe will be considered as democratic backsliders. This means that also countries that fluctuate between negative and positive developments in scoring can come to be considered backsliders. This is reasonable since all negative developments indicate a significant change in the country, which is still of interest to understand why such negative developments take place. Fluctuating scores indicate instability and instability could indicate signs of backsliding. The degree of backsliding is determined the following way: One downturn that has later improved is considered mild. One downturn that has not improved is considered moderate. More than one downturn without improvement is considered substantial.

3.1.2 Case selection for the comparative case study

The results of the first step of the empirical study, motivates the case selection for the second step. The cases are selected based on the severity of backsliding and if a suitable matching non-backslider exist. Of the five countries that showed democratic backsliding, two have been matched with its most similar non-backslider. This is according to Mill's method of the most similar systems design. The backslider and non-backslider paired together are supposed to be as similar as possible except on the outcome. When this matching is ensured, factors that are found in backsliders and not in non-backsliders are more likely to be explanatory for the difference in outcome compared to factors that occur in both or none of the cases (Gerring 2007 p.131p). Since most countries in the Eastern bloc share historic and political traits, the

generalizability of this study also increases since more countries are similar. The two backsliders are not matched to each other, but this method presents a possibility to identify which explanatory factors that hold the most power in the Eastern bloc.

Out of the five cases showing backsliding, Poland, Bulgaria and Lithuania were excluded from further study because of them not matching well with any other Eastern EU member, thus not generating an optimal similar systems design. These were also the countries with the least degree of backsliding. Hungary and Latvia have been paired with matching non-backsliders. Hungary and Latvia are in different parts of Eastern Europe, possibly experiencing some differences in regional stimuli. If the same pattern is found in both backsliders, while being situated in different parts of Eastern Europe, more can be said about backsliding in the Eastern bloc. Because of the limited scope of this thesis only two pairs of countries are used. The wide attention given to Hungary in backsliding literature motivates the inclusion of another backslider, making this study able to provide a wider test of the proposed causes of backsliding and contribute to what explanation are valid for backsliding in the Eastern bloc.

Hungary is the first backslider studied because of its results in Freedom Ratings and prevalence in democratic backsliding literature (Greskovits 2015, Ágh 2016). Hungary has been paired with the Czech Republic, a non-backslider, because it is the most similar on several important factors previously proposed to matter for backsliding. These are income inequality, development, ethnic fragmentation, religion, and years since democratization. These factors are often brought up in democracy research and are therefore relevant (Przeworksi et.al. 1996, Bernhard et.al 2001, Fish 2001).

Latvia has been chosen as the second backslider because of the negative developments seen in the Freedom Rating and its mention in the backsliding literature (Greskovits 2015) as showing democratic reversal. Latvia has been matched with Estonia, a non-backslider, since they are most similar when matching on income inequality, development, ethnic fragmentation, religion, and years since democratization.

3.2 The explanations: A comparative case study

The second research question; *what seems to be the factors enabling democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* is answered through a qualitative comparative case study of the four

chosen countries. A design like this helps fill the gap of comparative qualitative research on democratic backsliding, by making a comparison that generates answers on the influence of different explanations. Table 1 summarizes the design for the comparative study.

3.2.1 Measures and material

The operational measures used in the second part of the empirical study are presented below along the hypotheses they will test.

Disproportionality of the electoral system: To measure the disproportionality of a country's election system, information on basic election system design is paired with the Gallagher Index, also known as the least squares index, that measures the disproportionality between a party's vote share and share of seats in parliament (Gallagher & Mitchell 2005 p.602pp). This index calculates disproportionality on a scale of 0-100. The larger the number the more disproportional the election system. The index also measures disproportionality per election and not per party, highlighting larger disproportionalities before smaller (Gallagher 1991 p.40). While perfect electoral proportionality does not exist, combining the characteristics of the electoral system with this index fortifies whether the system is proportional or not.

Checks and balances: Because all the cases under study are parliamentary democracies, the primary indicator of institutional checks and balances is if the legislative can terminate the executive's term of office. Since the power to oust the government from office lies at the core of parliamentarism (Shugart 2006 p.348, Lijphart 2012 p.106), it is important to look at the strength of this mechanism rather than how it has been used. Parliamentary systems generally restrict the executive more than presidential systems (Lijphart 2012 p.106,114), as long as the legislature has this institutional tool. This also relies on if the executive party has a majority or not in parliament. If the executive's party is united, the executive can become irrefutable (Shugart 2006 p.353). The legislature's ability to remove the head of government from office is assessed using Varieties of Democracy scoring on the legislatures' chance of success if attempting to remove the head of government. The measurement is qualitative but coded on a scale of 0-3, where a score of 0 indicate the legislature is under no circumstances likely to succeed and a score of 3 that they are most likely to succeed (Lindberg et.al 2017 p.171).

Strength of populist parties: To measure the electoral strength of populist parties and whether they have gained political influence, official election results are used. Vote shares of populist parties are assessed at both the national and European level. This is because it has been found that European election success can boost national election results (Franklin 2017). Election results can reveal a change over time and give a clear view of the developments of populist parties in the countries under study. Election data is gathered from the European Election database, the Parties and Elections in Europe database, and the European Parliament. Labelling a party as populist can also be a statement of opinion, and therefore decisions about which parties are considered populist have been based on several triangulated sources.

Mainstream parties' commitment to democracy: To measure mainstream parties' commitment to democracy, the populism literature is used. Democratic commitment is inherently hard to measure (Herman 2016 p.271), and therefore any exact data is not available. Using existing research can help find qualitative answers to this hypothesis through work exclusively focused on populism. If mainstream parties are found to have adopted more populist views or appeals, that would indicate a lessened commitment to democracy. This is since populist holds the view that democratic institutions, checks, balances, and civil rights hinders true rule of the people (Batory 2016 p.284). Research covering the extent and spread of populism in the four countries under study should therefore be a good indicator of how mainstream parties have reacted to populism. When research is lacking, reliable news articles are used to decipher mainstreams parties' attitude towards populists.

Depth of financial crisis: The financial crisis in Europe hit many countries hard and activated the help and economic monitoring of the larger international organizations, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), OECD and the EU. Because of this, measuring the depth of the crisis in the countries under study is best made through looking at country reports made during and after the economic crisis that mainly started in 2008. The IMF has been particularly constant in its monitoring, which means that its reporting serves well to examine and assess the overall depth to get a comprehensive view of the crisis in the different countries. Even if the IMF may not be politically neutral, and may express bias in how the crisis should be handled, the information drawn from the IMF material will only be of a diagnostic character. While there is always a risk that this economic depiction is also not neutral, all larger organizations presenting data of this nature can potentially be biased. The depth of the crisis will be judged on how the severity is described.

Effect of crisis on ordinary people: The data used to measure the impact of the economic crisis on the people is Eurostat's measure on the percentage of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This data calculates the share of people living on a disposable income under the risk-of-poverty-threshold which is set at 60 % of the national median equalized disposable income (Eurostat 2016). An increase in this percentage gives a good assessment of whether regular people were negatively affected by the economic crisis to a large degree. To determine this degree, a country's increase in at risk of poverty rate will be compared to the average increase for the Eastern bloc, and where the country was at first available data in 2005 will be considered. With further IMF and scholarly reporting on development on the labor market and unemployment, it can be determined how ordinary people were affected.

3.2.2 Validity and reliability

Many of the concepts central to the explanations of backsliding can be seen to be disputed. For example, populism and the severity of crisis are not easily or straight forwardly measured. The disagreements surrounding some concepts makes the choices of materials in this thesis important to ensure validity. The measurements have been chosen to be as closely related to the concept they measure as possible. Since this is the criterion for validity (Powner 2015 p.168), the material should ensure that nothing else than the intended indicator is measured. However, this can never be perfect, and ideal materials might not exist. Any validity issues thereby stem from a discrepancy between indicator and measurement, mostly caused by disagreements on the underlying concept or a lack of exact materials. One can also never exclude subjective interpretations, and the reader should therefore be aware of judgments made by the author.

The sources chosen are selected because they are widely used and regarded as reliable. Prior research is peer reviewed and published in known journals. Data sources such as Eurostat and Election data bases, can be trusted because of the resources they have to make sure they measure coherently and correctly. Information from these materials should therefore be the same, should this study be replicated. The materials are therefore reliable.

Table 1. Summary design of comparative case study

	Hypotheses	Question	Operational measurements
Institutional features	*H1a: A disproportional electoral system increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*	Is the electoral system disproportional?	Characteristics of the electoral system and the Gallagher Index.
	H1b: The possibility to override democratic checks and balances increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.	Is the executive power effectively controlled?	Varieties of Democracy data on legislature's ability to remove the head of government.
Political developments	*H2a: The strength of populist parties increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*	Are populist parties strong at the national and European level?	Vote share of populist parties in national and European elections.
	H2b: A weak commitment to democracy by mainstream political parties increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.	Do mainstream parties have a weak commitment to democracy?	Expert assessment from literature on populism, news reports
Economic crisis	*H3a: A deep economic crisis increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.*	Was there a full-fledged economic crisis in the late 2000's?	IMF assessment in country reports
	H3b: Ordinary people taking a hard hit from an economic crisis increases the likelihood of democratic backsliding.	Was the population hit hard by the economic crisis?	Eurostat risk of poverty and social exclusion measures.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the extent and possible explanations for democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc. The analysis shows that five of 11 Eastern EU members have experienced negative democratic developments. Backsliding is substantial in Latvia and Hungary, moderate in Bulgaria and Poland, and mild in Lithuania. The study further finds that mainstream parties' weak commitment to democracy, a full-fledged economic crisis where ordinary people are largely affected seem to be contributing factors to democratic backsliding.

4.1 The extent of democratic backsliding

To find an answer to the first research question; *To what extent is there democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* All 11 member states joining the EU since 2004 have been studied using the Freedom Rating scores, starting two years before EU accession until 2017. The Freedom Rating has produced results both on the extent of how many countries have experienced backsliding and the degree of backsliding. All countries remain categorized as free, a score of 1-2,5 during the whole timeframe, but three distinct groups can be seen among them.

The Freedom rating is scaled 1-7, and the lower the score the greater the degree of democracy. One downturn that has improved is considered mild backsliding. One downturn that has not improved is considered moderate backsliding. More than one downturn without improvement is considered substantial backsliding. The overall results can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Freedom rating scores for the Eastern bloc, per country and year

20-	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Czech Republic	1,5	1,5	1,5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Latvia	1,5	1,5	1,5	1,5	1	1	1,5	1,5	1,5	2	2	2	2	2	2	1,5
Estonia	1,5	1,5	1,5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Lithuania	1,5	1,5	1,5	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Poland	1,5	1,5	1,5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1,5
Hungary	1,5	1,5	1,5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1,5	1,5	1,5	2	2	2,5
Slovenia	1,5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Slovakia	1,5	1,5	1,5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Romania				2,5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Bulgaria				1,5	1,5	1,5	1,5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Croatia										1,5	1,5	1,5	1,5	1,5	1,5	1,5
Average all 11	1,5	1,43	1,43	1,35	1,15	1,15	1,2	1,25	1,25	1,31	1,36	1,36	1,36	1,4	1,4	1,45

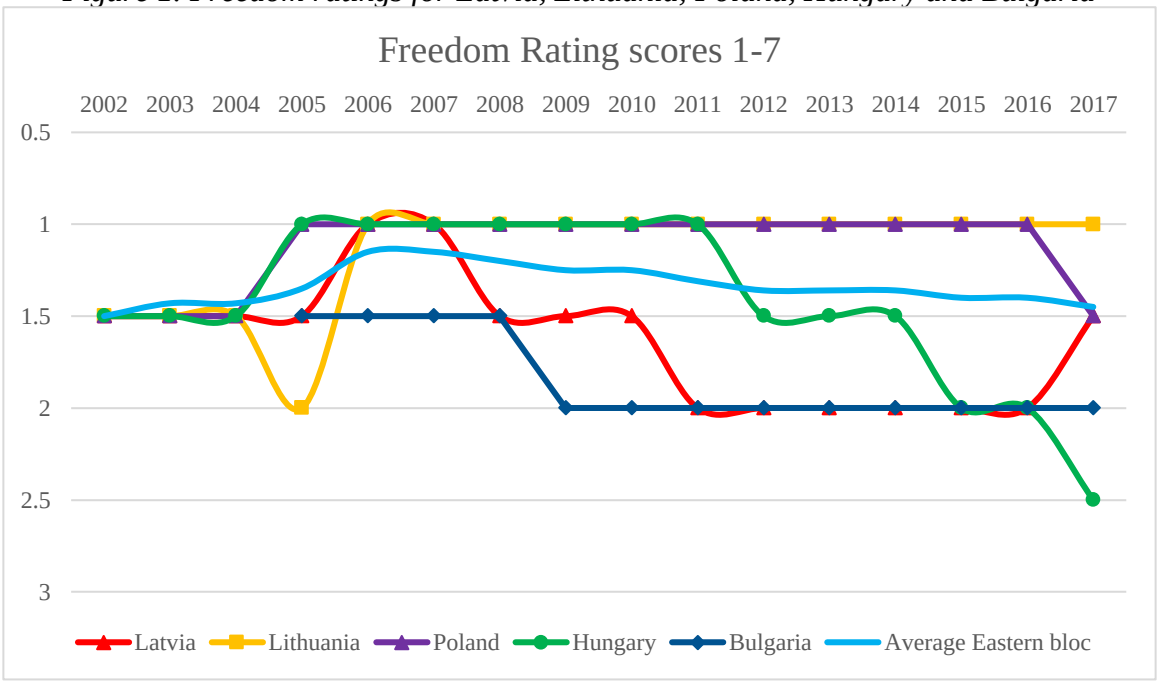
Freedom House 2017b

The first group, only contains one country that has seen no change in Freedom Rating. This is Croatia, who joined the EU in 2013 and has remained on a score of 1,5 from 2011 to 2017. Croatia has seemingly not experienced any boost in democracy from joining the EU or any negative developments since then.

The second group consist of the five countries that only recorded improved Freedom Ratings in the period 2002-2017. Estonia moved from a score of 1,5 to 1 in 2005, Slovenia from 1,5 to 1 in 2003, Slovakia from 1,5 to 1 in 2005, the Czech Republic from 1,5 to 1 in 2005 and Romania from 2,5 to 2 in 2006. These states saw improvements in the year before, or the first or second year after EU accession. These states have remained on the same scores after improvement and democratic developments seem to have stabilized since EU membership.

The third group consists of the five countries that experienced downturns in their democracy scoring at one time since 2002, or since 2005 for Romania and Bulgaria. Of the 2004 EU joiners, Latvia went from a score of 1,5 to 1 in 2006, from 1 to 1,5 in 2008, from 1,5 to 2 in 2011 and from 2 to 1,5 in 2017. Lithuania moved from 1,5 to 2 in 2005 and from 2 to 1 in 2006. Poland went from a score of 1,5 to 1 in 2005 and from 1 to 1,5 in 2017. Hungary went from 1,5 to 1 in 2005, from 1 to 1,5 in 2012, from 1,5 to 2 in 2015, and from 2 to 2,5 in 2017. Lastly, Bulgaria, that joined in 2007, went from a 1,5 to 2 in 2009. Figure 1 summarizes the results for this group. The values on the y-axis have been reversed for more clarity on what is a negative development.

Figure 1. Freedom ratings for Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria



Freedom House 2017b

This third group shows more fluctuation in scoring. Latvia, Poland and Hungary all saw improvements from 2004 to 2006, implying that joining the EU in 2004 had an impact. After that it took varying time for these three to develop negative trends, where Latvia was the first. Hungary has seen a decrease in democracy since 2011 and Poland since 2016. Lithuania and Bulgaria both first saw negative developments after joining the EU in 2004 and 2007. While Lithuania improved its score just the year after this drop, Bulgaria have not seen any improvements since. This group of countries also shows a wider spread in scoring today than for the first year of measurement when all started on a 1,5 score.

Comparing to the average democratic development for all 11 Eastern EU members, Latvia, Bulgaria and Hungary are the countries scoring most below the average and with clear negative developments. While Lithuania's 2005 drop was well below the average for that year, it has since then remained well above. Latvia and Hungary see a greater fluctuation and decline in democracy in scoring compared to the average that remains stable. The average value for all years remain between 1 and 1,5, making all countries varying around this range stand out.

4.1.1 Summary of extent of democratic backsliding

The above results provide an answer to the research question*; to what extent has there been democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* Based on the Freedom Ratings, five out of 11 countries have experienced downturns in democracy at one point during the period 2002-2017. Lithuania only saw one downturn in 2005 which only makes it a mild backslider because of its subsequent improvement. Poland and Bulgaria have seen one downturn but not improved after, making backsliding moderate in these countries. Having more than one downturn without improvement, the degree of backsliding in Latvia and Hungary is substantial.

4.2 Explanations of democratic backsliding

The answer to the second research question; *What seems to be the factors enabling democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* is found by testing the six hypotheses for potential explanations of backsliding. This is done for the backsliding countries Hungary and Latvia, and non-backsliders Czech Republic and Estonia.

4.2.1 Hungary

Hungary is the most researched European country regarding democratic backsliding and in accordance showed substantial backsliding in its Freedom Rating. Having been part of the Soviet Union's sphere of interest, Hungary joined the EU in 2004. It is since 2010 ruled by a coalition government consisting of the Christian conservative party The Hungarian Civic Union Fidesz and the smaller conservative Christian Democratic People's party KDNP, often seen as a faction of Fidesz (Batory 2016).

Electoral system

Hungary has a mixed proportional electoral system where 106 members of the National Assembly are elected in individual constituencies after a first past the post design, where the candidate with the most votes wins the whole constituency. The other 93 members of the National Assembly are elected by proportional representation from national lists, where seats are allocated based on vote share. Parties surpassing 5% of the votes are represented in the parliament (The Electoral Knowledge Network 2017, Euronews 2014).

The electoral system was changed in 2011 with the passing of a new electoral law, reducing the number of seats in the National Assembly from 386 to 199, instilling one round of voting instead of two, removing the criterion that voter turnout must be above 50% for the results to be valid, and somewhat reducing the number of constituencies (Euronews 2014). This change is seen to benefit the incumbent party (Greskovits 2015 p.34). Hungary's Gallagher index scores of elections disproportionality are visible in Table 3. The higher the score the more disproportionality.

Table 3. Gallagher index scores for elections to the Hungarian parliament

	Gallagher Index Single member districts	Gallagher Index Proportional lists	Overall Gallagher index score 0-100
2002	12,15	-	8,2
2006	12,13	6,69	5,13
2010	36,50	6,03	11,67
2014	38,09	5,84	17,8

Gallagher 2017

The disproportionality of Hungarian national elections has increased from 8,2 to 17,8 since 2002. The overall index is driven up because of increased disproportionality in the election of representatives in first past the post constituencies. This confirms that first past the post systems

are more disproportional than representative systems. The average index for all 11 Eastern EU members during the timeframe is 6,46[4]. The Hungarian electoral system has thus become increasingly disproportional and seen changes to its electoral system during the time studied, greatly surpassing the average for the population. The electoral system must therefore be seen as disproportional.

Checks and balances

Varieties of Democracy's variable "HOG removal by legislator in practice", shows the parliaments actual likelihood to succeed in removing the head of government from office if attempted (Lindberg et.al 2017 p.171). The results for Hungary are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Legislature's ability to remove the head of government in Hungary

	Varieties of Democracy's "HOG removal by legislator in practice" score 1-3
2002	1,28
2003	1,25
2004	1,75
2005-2007	1,63
2008-2009	1,95
2010-2012	1,97
2013	1,67

Varieties of Democracy 2017

Hungary remains on a score between 1 and 2. A score of 1 means that the legislature is not likely to succeed in removing the head of government but there is a chance. A score of 2 means that it is likely to succeed but there is a chance it will fail (Lindberg et.al. 2017 p.171). This means that the Hungarian National Assembly balances on a fine line on whether their potential attempts at ousting the head of government would succeed or not.

As pointed out by Shugart (2006 p.353), the power of the legislature's check on the government depends on if the government holds a majority in the parliament. The governing party Fidesz, has since 2010 held a so-called supermajority in the Hungarian parliament. Because of the electoral system, they have held more than two thirds of the seats despite only winning 52% of votes in 2010 and 44% in 2014. The supermajority has given them the right to change the constitution. Before Fidesz came into power, the Hungarian Socialist Party MSZP, held 46% of seats in 2002-2006, and 49% of seats 2006-2010. The Socialists had the support of the liberal

[4] Author's calculation based on results in Gallagher Index for all countries in the Eastern bloc (Gallagher 2017).

Alliance of Free Democrats SZDSZ, which was enough to give them a majority (Batory 2016). Individual parties in government have thus held stable majorities or close to a majority in the National Assembly since 2002, not having had to greatly rely on coalition partners. Thus, the parliamentary democratic checks have been weak and possible to override.

Strength of populist parties

To establish the strength of populist parties, it must first be established which parties can be considered populist in Hungary. The one party consistently being labeled populist is the nationalist extreme-right Movement for a Better Hungary, Jobbik (Batory 2016 p.296). There is greater disagreement on if the governing party Fidesz should be considered populist. However, enough scholars see Fidesz as using populist appeals for it to be included in this study (Batory 2016 p.285, Ágh 2013 p.27, Greskovits 2015 p.34). The vote share for Jobbik and Fidesz in national and European election can be found in Tables 5 and 6. Note that in some elections these parties have been elected on a joint ticket with other parties and results are therefore only available for the joint vote share.

Table 5. National election results for populist parties in Hungary

	Jobbik	Fidesz
2002	-	41,07% (Coalition with center-right Hungarian Democratic Forum, MDF)
2006	2,02% (Coalition with nationalist Hungarian Justice and Life Party, MIÉP)	42,03%
2010	16,67%	52,73% (Coalition with conservative Christian Democratic People's party, KDNP)
2014	20,2%	44,9% (Coalition with KDNP)

European Election Database 2017a, Nordsieck 2014

Table 6. European election results for populist parties in Hungary

	Jobbik	Fidesz
2004	-	47,4 %
2009	14,77%	56,36% (Coalition with KDNP)
2014	14,67%	51,48% (Coalition with KDNP)

European Election Database 2017b, European Parliament 2017a

European elections results may have boosted national results for Fidesz, but not for Jobbik. Fidesz saw increased support in elections until 2014 when the vote share decreased somewhat in both national and European elections. Jobbik has seen a steady increase of support on the national level but has remained steady on the European level. The combined vote share of

Jobbik and Fidesz lands well beyond 50% in all elections since 2009. Because of this and Fidesz having been the governing party since 2010, populist parties must be seen a strong in Hungary.

Mainstream parties' commitment to democracy

There are several accounts of mainstream parties adopting populist appeals since Fidesz and Jobbik entered the political stage. The ex-communist, and main opponent to Fidesz, Hungarian Socialist Party MSZP, was seen already in the election in 2002 to engage in the political polarization started by Fidesz. They, along with Fidesz, continued to politicize "the nation" and "the people" (Pappas 2013 p.17, Rajacic 2007 p.647). Around the election in 2006, the socialist Prime Minister was found to deliberately speak in the name of "the people" and have an anti-elitist leadership style (Rajacic 2007 p.647, 652). MSZP also started to replace state secretaries and heads of different development projects (Pappas 2013 p.17), proposedly to fit their anti-establishment rhetoric. Leading up to the 2010 elections, the green liberal party LMP was the only party that held a consistent stance against the more authoritarian so called penal populism, where severe criminal punishments are proposed to please the people. All other parties engaged in rhetoric appealing to penal populism (Boda et.al 2014 p.881, 871). However, for the 2014 elections, MSZP and their allies the Democratic Coalition, and Together 2014, campaigned of the message of ousting Fidesz from power and defending democracy (Batory 2016 p.295). Although mainstream democratic commitment might have improved in 2014, it seemed weak for most of the time studied. Hungarian mainstream parties have consequently had a weak commitment to democracy.

Depth of economic crisis

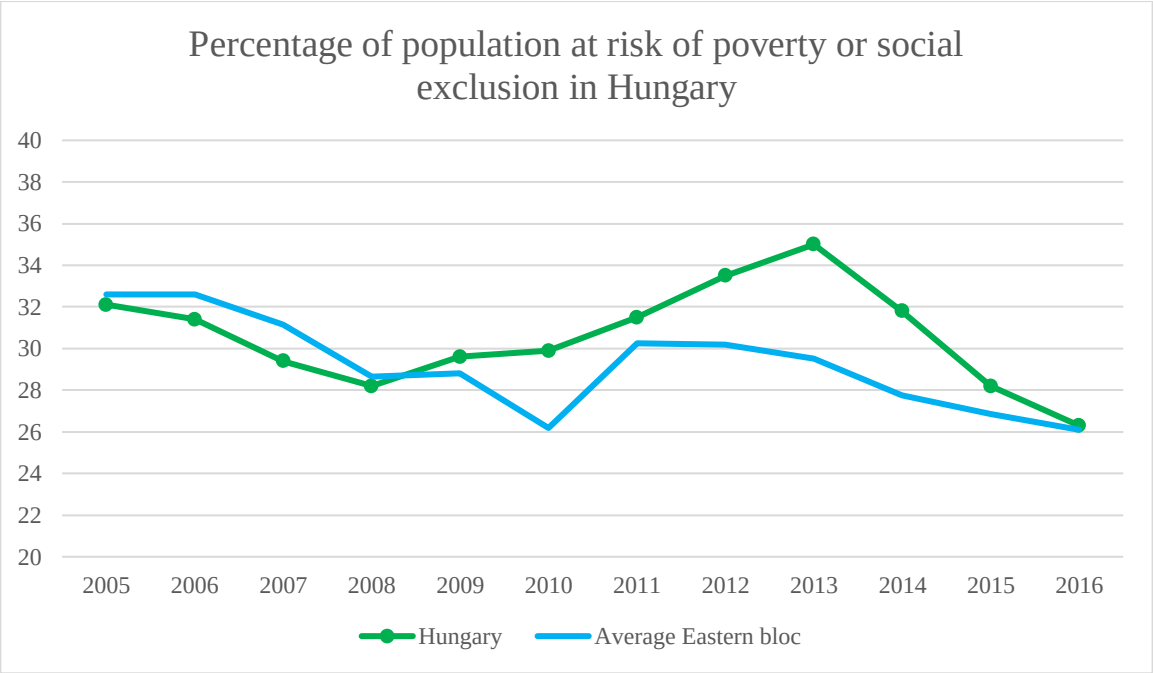
In the wake of the global financial crisis, Hungary received joint emergency financial assistance from the IMF, The World Bank, and the EU in October 2008 (European Commission 2017a). Consequently, the IMF and the EU closely monitored Hungary's economic developments. Hungary's financial situation worsened sharply in the middle of October 2008, prompting the emergency assistance. This was much due to large government debt and public spending that tended to increase before parliamentary elections (IMF 2008a). This continued in the first half of 2009 when the economic outlook worsened even more. GDP fell drastically, unemployment continued to rise, and there were intense strains on financial markets. Both public and private debt was high and increasing as the situation got worse than the IMF projected (IMF 2009a). In the second half of 2009 the pace of economic contraction slowed down and financial markets were less strained. However, GDP continued to fall and unemployment to rise (IMF 2009b). In

2011, Hungary was emerging from a severe economic crisis followed by a sharp recession as a direct result of the global crisis and economic vulnerabilities remained (IMF 2011a). Considering the reporting done by the IMF during the economic crisis, and the language used to describe it, Hungary must be seen to have experienced a far reaching economic crisis.

The effect of economic crisis on ordinary people

Eurostat data on people at risk of poverty and social exclusion tells us how ordinary people were hit by the economic crisis in Hungary. The results can be found in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Percentage of Hungarian population at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Eurostat 2016

Hungary saw a steady rise in people at risk of poverty from 2008 until 2013. During these five years, the percentage of the Hungarian population at risk of poverty rose with around 6,5 percentage points. The average rise in the 11 countries in the Eastern bloc was around 4 percentage points. Compared to the average, Hungary saw a larger increase, a greater percentage of people at risk of poverty and a more drawn out effect. The percentage also surpassed levels before the crisis.

The crisis affected the poor, the young, and the middle class the hardest. This is because of the retrenchments in welfare and rapid rise in unemployment. Surveys also detected a decline in life satisfaction and the financial and economic crisis was thus accompanied by a social crisis

(Ágh 2013 p.40-42). All of this indicate that Hungary's population was hit hard by the economic crisis.

4.2.2 Czech Republic

The Czech Republic showed no results of democratic backsliding in its Freedom Rating but an improvement. Having been part of the Soviet Union's sphere of interests and communist ruled, Czechoslovakia broke up into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. The Czech Republic joined the EU in 2004, and had from 2014 a coalition government consisting of the Social Democratic Party ČSSD, Christian Democratic Union – Czecholsovak People's Party KDU-ČSL, and center populist Action of Dissatisfied Citizens ANO. This collaboration was tense and in the spring of 2017, billionaire and leader of ANO, Andrej Babiš, was forced to leave his post as Finance Minister due to accusations of fraud. In the election in October 2017, ANO won and are currently negotiating to form a government (Landguiden 2016a, Landguiden 2017a).

Electoral system

The Czech Republic has a list proportional electoral system to elect its parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, that has the largest legislative power. The Chamber has 200 members whom are elected on four-year terms. Parties must win 5% of the votes to receive representation. Since 2013 there are also separate direct proportional presidential elections (The Electoral Knowledge Network 2017, IDEA 2017). The Senate consist of 81 senators elected through majority single constituency voting, where candidates must win a majority in a first round, or the two top candidates move on to a second (Election Guide 2017a). The Gallagher index results for the Czech parliamentary elections are found in Table 7. There are no results for the 2017 election.

Table 7. Gallagher index scores for elections to the Czech parliament

	Gallagher index score 0-100
2002	5,73
2006	5,72
2010	8,76
2013 early election because of resignation of government following a scandal (Election Guide 2017a).	6,12

Gallagher 2017

The disproportionality of Czech elections has remained relatively stable. Comparing to the average of the Eastern bloc of 6,46, the Czech Republic scores below this in all elections except in 2010. This could be due to that elections to the Chamber of Deputies are proportional, which

Reynolds (2011) finds to not inflate results as much as majoritarian systems. Although not scored, one could suspect the majoritarian Czech Senate elections that are held every two years, to be more disproportional. However, considering the results given by the available Gallagher Index, the Czech electoral system cannot be considered disproportional.

Checks and balances

The Czech Republic's Varieties of Democracy scores for the parliaments likelihood to succeed in removing the head of government from office if attempted (Lindberg et.al 2017 p.171), are visible in Table 8.

Table 8. Legislature's ability to remove the head of government in the Czech Republic

	Varieties of Democracy's "HOG removal by legislator in practice" score 1-3
2002-2012	2,66
2013-2016	2,53

Varieties of Democracy 2017

The Czech Republic has remained steady on a score slightly above 2,5. A score of 2 means that the legislature is likely to succeed in ousting the head of government but there is a chance it would fail. A score of 3 means that the legislature is likely to succeed.

There have only been coalition governments in the Czech Republic since 2002. These coalitions have varied and seemingly been weak considering the various scandals and tensions among parties. Governments have held smaller majorities, except the 2006-2010 government whom only held 100 seats in the 200-seat parliament (BBC 2017a, Election Guide 2017a, Landguiden 2016b). The contentious relations between parties could cause conflicts within governing coalitions and split a majority. Consequently, Czech governments have not been able to escape the accountability mechanism of the parliament.

The Czech President, Miloš Zeman, a former Social Democrat now praised by his previous opponents (Mortkowitz 2017a), attempted to concentrate presidential power in 2013. In the wake of a government corruption scandal in June 2013, he appointed a so-called "caretaker government of experts" instead of letting the outgoing government try its vote of confidence or let the parliament vote to dissolve itself. No parties supported the creation of the caretaker government. Since there is no constitutional time limit on when the President must appoint a new Prime Minister, the technocratic caretaker government could have been in place for a long

time (Hanley 2013). However, parties in parliament voted to dissolve the parliament and call for early elections in August 2013 (BBC 2013). This shows that the parliament could limit the president's attempt to appoint a de-facto presidential government.

Strength of populist parties

Havlík (2015) argues that the Czech Republic have seen a lack of populist parties until recently. Before the economic crisis there was a political crisis caused by decreasing popular trust in politicians and political institutions, much due to continuous corruption scandals. That is when The Public Affairs Party VV, Action of Dissatisfied Citizens ANO, and the Dawn for Direct Democracy, entered the political stage on platforms of anti-establishment and people-centrism. VV and The Dawn also proposed direct democracy (Havlík 2015). The Dawn split in 2015 into Dawn-National Coalition and Freedom and Direct Democracy SPD (Just 2016 p.96). The vote share for VV, ANO, The Dawn, and after 2015 SPD, in national and European election can be found in Tables 9 and 10.

Table 9. National election results for populist parties in the Czech Republic

	VV	ANO	The Dawn -2015	SPD 2015-
2002	-	-	-	-
2006	-	-	-	-
2010	10,88%	-	-	-
2013	-	18,17%	6,9%	-
2017	-	29,6%	-	10,6%

European Election Database 2017a, Nordsieck 2017

Table 10. European election results for populist parties in the Czech Republic

	VV	ANO	The Dawn -2015
2004	-	-	-
2009	2,4%	-	-
2014	0,45%	16,13%	3,12%

European Election Database 2017b, European Parliament 2017b

The smaller populist parties VV and the Dawn seem to have come and gone, when winning a significant part of the electorate one election, only to disappear in the next. ANO, having only run in two national elections, may be the exception winning two substantial vote shares. ANO was the largest party in the 2017 elections, winning more than double the votes share of the second largest party the Civic Democratic Party ODS. European election results do not seem to have boosted national results. ANO had already achieved better national results when winning 16% in the European elections 2014. (Nordsieck 2017). Given the emergence of several

populist parties during the time under study, their significant vote shares, and that a populist party won the 2017 election, populist parties in the Czech Republic must be considered strong.

Mainstream parties' commitment to democracy

Mainstream parties' tendency to adopt populist appeals, were limited in the Czech European elections in 2004 (Pitrová 2007). There is scarce information to be gathered on the Czech mainstream parties' commitment to democracy after this. After the governmental crisis in the spring of 2017, the former coalition partners ANO and the Social Democrats were the main rivals leading up to the election (Mortkowitz 2017b). Having been part of the political establishment for a long time, the Social Democrats were the recipient of populist attacks. Yet, the party was split, with some prominent members more willing to cooperate with ANO than others (Mortkowitz 2017c), although the party later officially pledged not to serve in an ANO government (Tait 2017). The Social Democratic Party manifesto contained references to ANO's proposal of running the country like a company, by stating that the Czech Republic is not to be controlled in an authoritarian manner. The Social Democratic campaign leader, Zaorálek, also expressed that social democrats believe in policies for fixing problems, and not in "magic" personalities, like that of ANO's Trump-like Andrej Babiš (Mortkowitz 2017b).

Most mainstream parties stated before the 2017 election that they would not take place in a government led by Babiš personally (Mortkowitz 2017d). The parties on the right also engaged in anti-populist rhetoric's and made the dividing political line between populists and democrats. The Civic Democratic Party ODS, made ANO their main opponent instead of the Social Democrats and Communists (Kim 2017). The vote to call for early elections instead of accepting President Zeman's attempt to concentrate power in the care taker government also showed mainstream parties' care for the importance of a democratically elected government. There is no or little evidence that Czech mainstream parties have adopted populist appeals, and consequently, they cannot be deemed to have abandoned their commitment to democracy.

Depth of economic crisis

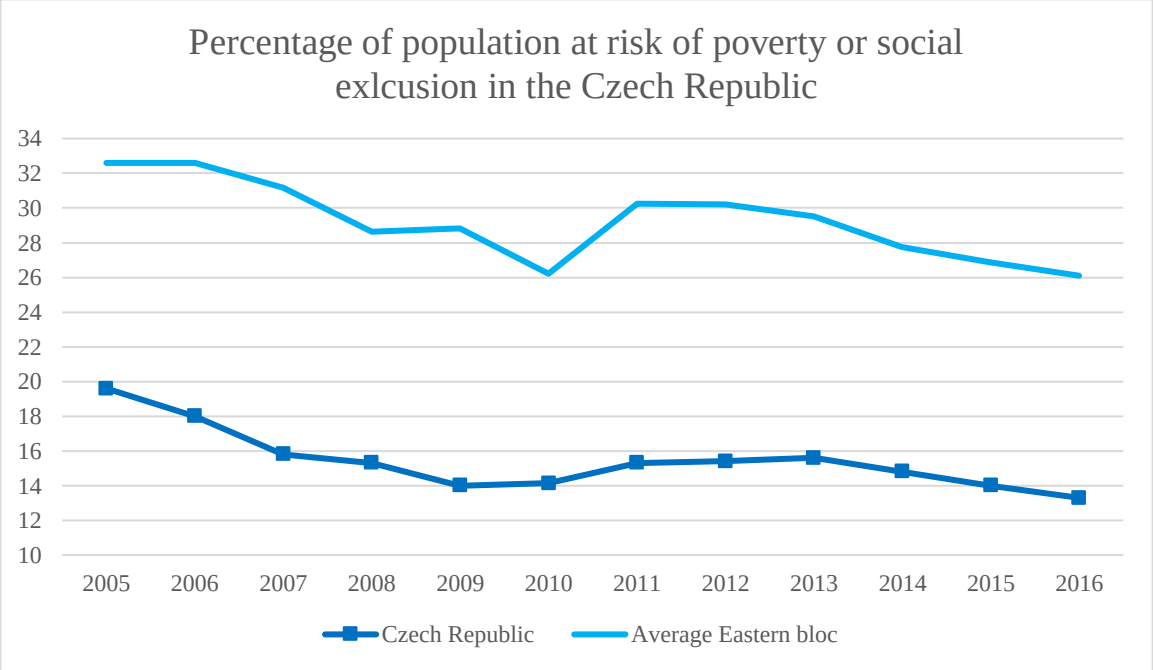
The Czech Republic did not have to receive any emergency assistance during the global economic crisis, but nevertheless received consultation from the IMF. In November 2008, the IMF reported that the Czech economy's strong basis, served well to handle the global financial crisis. The Czech koruna and the economy's standings against the rest of Europe remained

strong. The crisis affected the Czech Republic by putting pressure on financial markets and institutions, and increase unemployment. These negative effects were largely due to the economic integration with the rest of the EU (IMF 2008b). IMF reports continuously credit the fast Czech economic recovery to a strong macroeconomic position before the crisis. The low public debt, lack of pre-existing economic bubbles, and stability in the financial sector contributed to only a slight decline in output in 2009 and a fast rebound. (IMF 2010a, IMF 2011b). Based in these reports, the problems that did occur mainly seem to have stemmed from crisis in other EU countries and the Czech Republic could withstand these impacts rather well. Considering this, the Czech Republic cannot be considered to have experienced a full-fledged economic crisis.

The effect of economic crisis on ordinary people

Data on people at risk of poverty or social exclusion tells us how ordinary people were hit by the economic crisis in the Czech Republic. The results can be found in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Percentage of Czech population at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Eurostat 2016

The Czech Republic did not see any significant rise in people at risk of poverty around the economic crisis in 2008. The percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion remained relatively stable since 2005 (first available data). The average rise in the Eastern bloc was around 4 percentage points. The Czech Republic did not see a rise of this magnitude since

the percentage remained within a 2-percentage point interval and overall levels remained well below average.

The main factor affecting ordinary people directly during the crisis was unemployment, which did rise during the first crisis years (IMF 2008b, 2010a). However, unemployment was expected to decline fast (IMF 2011b), which could explain why this did not come to largely affect the percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The country's population was seemingly thus not hit hard by the economic crisis.

4.2.3 Latvia

Latvia showed negative developments in its Freedom Ratings. It was part of the Soviet Union, and subjected to harsh political oppression. When this lightened somewhat in the 1980's a popular front rose, declaring Latvia independent in 1991. Latvia later joined both the EU and NATO in 2004, and the Euro zone in 2014 (Landguiden 2017b). Latvia is since 2014 governed by liberal conservative Unity party, Union of Greens and Farmers ZZS, and right wing National Alliance NA (Landguiden 2017c).

Electoral system

Latvia has a list proportional electoral system for electing the 100 members of parliament, the Saeima, where representatives sit for four-year terms (Elections Guide 2017c). Parties must win at least 5% of the votes to receive representation (Landguiden 2017c). Gallagher index scores of election proportionality in Latvia are found in Table 11.

Table 11. Gallagher index scores for elections to the Latvian parliament

	Gallagher index score 0-100
2002	7,28
2006	4,77
2010	2,8
2011 early election following a political crisis (Landguiden 2017b)	2,76
2014	2,3

Gallagher 2017

The disproportionality of Latvian parliamentary elections has remained low during the time under study. It has even improved, and now remain on the same low level as in some well-established western democracies (Gallagher 2017), and well-below the average 6,46 for the

Eastern bloc. Low disproportionality could also be expected because of the proportional electoral design. The Latvian electoral system can therefore not be seen as disproportional.

Checks and balances

The Latvian Varieties of Democracy scores for the parliaments likelihood to succeed in removing the head of government from office if attempted, are visible in Table 12.

Table 12. Legislature's ability to remove the head of government in Latvia

	Varieties of Democracy's "HOG removal by legislator in practice" score 1-3
2002-2012	2,59
2013-2015	2,54
2016	2,53

Varieties of Democracy 2017

The Latvian parliament's chances of ousting a head of government has remained stable since 2002. It stayed on a constant scoring just above 2,5. A score of 2 indicate that the legislature is likely to succeed in ousting the head of government but there is a chance it would fail and a score of 3 means that the legislature is most likely to succeed.

Latvian governments have taken many forms since 2002. The governmental coalitions have changed more times than there have been elections, indicating that the executive has not always been united. This is mostly because of various tensions in coalitions (Landguiden 2017b). Latvian governments have held majorities of various sizes in the parliament since 2002 except for one minority government formed in March 2004 consisting of a coalition of the Union of Greens and Farmers ZZS, the People's Party TP, and Latvia's First Party LPP. This government only lasted until December 2004 when the New Era Party JL was added to form a majority (Landguiden 2017b, Election Guide 2017b, The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia 2010). Governments have thereby held majorities, but the parliament has still held a real chance of ousting the head of government during this time. The Latvian governments have therefore not been able to override this democratic check.

Strength of populist parties

Latvian party formations have not been stable over time and many parties have changed form or merged with others. There are primarily two parties that are pointed out as populist in Latvia in research. The first and most prominently mentioned as populist is the far right National

Alliance NA (Auers & Kasekamp 2013). NA was formed in 2010 after the parties For Fatherland and Freedom VA-TB/LNNK and the smaller All for Latvia merged. The other party mentioned as populist is the centrist New Era Party JL (Auers & Kasekamp 2013). It existed from 2002 to 2011 (Landguiden 2017c) The election results for the National Alliance and New Era are found in Tables 13 and 14.

Table 13. National election results for populist parties in Latvia

	National Alliance NA	New Era Party JL
2002	-	23,98%
2006	-	16,48%
2010	7,67%	-
2011	13,88%	-
2014	16,61%	-

European Election Database 2017a, Election Guide 2017b

Table 14. European election results for populist parties in Latvia

	National Alliance NA	New Era Party JL
2004	-	19,88%
2009	-	6,97%
2014	14,25%	-

European Election Database 2017b, European Parliament 2017c

European elections results do not seem to have boosted national results for New Era since they performed worse in the national elections in 2006 than previously. However, a small boosting effect might have benefitted NA since they performed better in the national election in 2014 that was held the same year as the NA's first European elections. Both parties have taken place in governments. New Era was the largest party in 2002 and sat in a coalition government until 2006 (Landguiden 2017b). National Alliance has been in government since 2011 (Landguiden 2017c). Considering their positions in governments and vote share, Latvian populist parties must be considered strong.

Mainstream parties' commitment to democracy

According to Auers and Kasekamp (2013), using populist appeals is common for most parties in Latvia. Populist rhetoric's have been part of the political mainstream for a long time and radical-right populism has therefore been normalized. This could have contributed to the National Alliance being accepted as a credible party. Because of Latvian parties lacking strong ideological bases and the long history of political corruption, corruption is one of the main political divisions in Latvia rather than the classic left-right. This leaves anti-corruption parties

to easier turn anti-elitist and in turn populist. All parties hold a nationalist undertone and most of them target the large minority of Russian speakers (Auers & Kasekamp 2013). Populist parties' appeals and political strategies therefore seem to have spread to most mainstream parties. This can also be seen in studying electoral manifestos. Balcere (2014) finds that that since 2002, populist appeals, like anti-elitism and people-centrism, has steadily increased in Latvian party manifestos. Populism also increased in the elections following the economic crisis. In 2011, almost 70% of all parties had populist messages in their election campaigns. Populism is also found to be contagious between coalition parties (Balcere 2014 p.484-487). At the same time, a few parties have been found to distance themselves from populism in their manifestos. These are the Unions of Greens and Farmers ZZS, the People's Party TP, and Latvia's Way LC. Parties' use of populism does vary and the ones with the highest degree are often smaller unsuccessful parties (Balcere 2014 p.484-487). Nevertheless, these results show that populism as a political strategy is prominent in Latvia. The amount of mainstream parties adopting populist messages, and the normalization of populism, shows the mainstream parties' lack of democratic commitment.

Depth of economic crisis

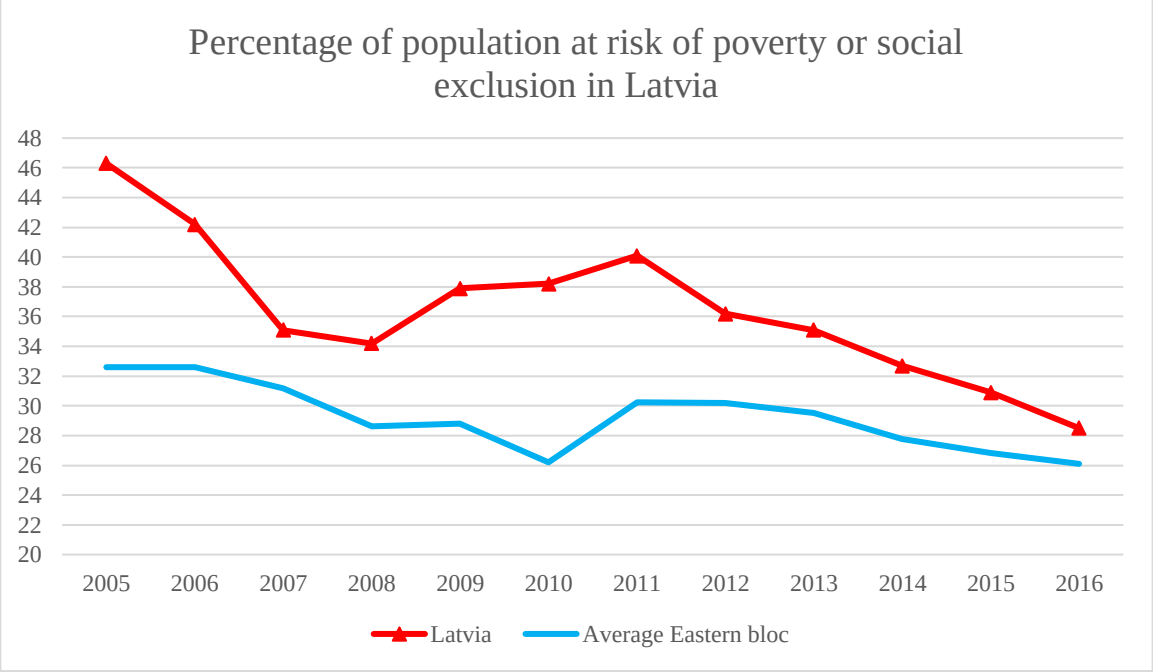
In the wake of the global financial crisis, Latvia received joint emergency financial assistance from the IMF, the EU, the World Bank, and five Nordic neighboring countries in December 2008 (European Commission 2017b). As part of the assistance program, the IMF continuously reported on Latvian developments. Since 2000 Latvia's economy had grown extremely fast leading it to be overheated in mid-2006. The global crisis in 2008 consequently made the economy slow down rapidly. Because of slowed economic activity, tax revenues, consumption and investments fell. The national deficit grew quickly and Latvia's was deemed substantially vulnerable to external developments (IMF 2009c). The Latvian economy suffered a significantly deeper economic contraction than initially thought, and the situation deteriorated in 2009. The economic outlook was deemed extremely difficult with GDP expected to fall with 18% in 2009. The worsening international economic environment was a large contributor to the developments in Latvia, where fiscal deficits kept rising and tax revenues kept falling (IMF 2009d). In 2010, the acute crisis had passed and the economy was contracting slower leading to some improvements. However, unemployment kept rising and the economy was still deemed to be overall weak (IMF 2010b). The IMF saw several liabilities remaining while the economy continued to recover in 2011. External factors could negatively affect the economy again and the labor market remained weak (IMF 2012). The IMF reporting on Latvia's situation during

the economic crisis describes a dramatic turn in the previously blossoming economy. Developments are described as sharp and the situation extremely difficult. Considering this and the developments that took place, the economic crisis in Latvia must be considered full-fledged.

The effect on ordinary people by the economic crisis

The percentage of the Latvian population at risk of poverty and social exclusion from 2005 to 2016 can be found in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Percentage of Latvian population at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Eurostat 2016

The percentage of the Latvian population at risk of poverty and social exclusion has remained above the average for the Eastern bloc. Having seen rapid improvements 2005 to 2008, the percentage of population at risk of poverty increased from 34,2% to 40,1% between 2008 and its peak in 2011. While the average increase was around four percentage points, Latvia saw an increase of around six.

The labor market was largely affected by the crisis. Unemployment rose fast and wages fell. The IMF even expressed a concern over public unrest over cuts in spending and unemployment benefits (IMF 2009d). Unemployment hit the young and middle-aged the worse, leaving 56% of Latvian household feeling they had experienced anguish because of the economic crisis

(Austers 2014 p.234pp). Considering this, ordinary people seem to have been hit hard by economic crisis in Latvia.

4.2.4 Estonia

Estonia showed no results of democratic backsliding in its Freedom Rating but an improvement. Estonia was, like Latvia, heavily oppressed under Soviet rule and when this lightened in the 1980's, a national movement was born eventually leading to independence in 1991. Estonia joined the EU and NATO in 2004, and the Euro zone in 2011. Estonia is since November 2016 governed by The Social Democratic Party SDE, national conservative Union of Pro Patria and Res Republic IRL, and the leftist Estonian Centre Party EKe (Landguiden 2016c).

Electoral system

Estonia has a list proportional electoral system to the national parliament, Riigikogu. There are three rounds of vote counting for distributing the 101 seats in parliament, where candidates are elected on four-year terms (Election Guide 2017c). In the first round, a so-called simple quota is calculated in all districts, where all cast votes are divided by the number of parliamentary seats allocated to the district. Candidates that pass this quota are elected (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011). In the second round, parliamentary seats are rewarded to candidates on national party lists whose parties surpass the 5% threshold. This is done proportionally and parties are awarded seats based on vote share. In the third round the remaining seats are filled from the national lists (Election Guide 2017c). The Gallagher index for Estonian national elections can be found in Table 15.

Table 15. Gallagher index scores for elections to the Estonian parliament

	Gallagher index score 0-100
2003	3,5
2007	3,43
2011	5,09
2015	2,34

Gallagher 2017

Estonian parliamentary elections have had low levels of disproportionality since 2003. The highest score in 2011 was still close to the same low level as in established western democracies (Gallagher 2017), and below the Eastern bloc average of 6,46. The proportional electoral design also predict low levels of disproportionality. The Estonian electoral system can therefore not be considered disproportional.

Checks and balances

The Estonian Varieties of Democracy scores for the parliaments likelihood to succeed in removing the head of government from office if attempted, are visible in Table 16.

Table 16. Legislature's ability to remove the head of government in Estonia

	Varieties of Democracy's "HOG removal by legislator in practice" score 1-3
2002-2005	2,72
2006-2009	2,71
2010	2,72
2011-2012	2,61
2013-2015	2,73
2016	2,64

Varieties of Democracy 2017

The Estonian parliament's chances of ousting a head of government has remained relatively unchanged since 2002. It stayed on a constant scoring between 2,5 and 3. A score of 2 indicates that the legislature is likely to succeed in ousting the head of government but there is a chance it would fail. A score of 3 means that the legislature will most likely succeed. Since the scores remain closer to 3, the parliament is likely to succeed in removing a head of government.

Estonian governments have held majorities in parliament since 2002, except in 2009-2011, when the Social Democratic Party SDE, left the government when failing to convince the coalition partners of raising taxes during the global economic crisis. The remaining parties, liberal Reform Party ER and conservative Pro Patria and Res Republic Union IRL, consequently governed in minority until the elections in 2011, when they won a majority. Governments have consisted of two or three parties, and coalitions have changed some between elections (Election Guide 2017c, Landguiden 2016c, BBC 2017b). Changing coalitions could indicate that the executive is not completely united. Governments have held majorities, but parliament has nevertheless held a real chance of ousting the head of government. Estonian governments have therefore not been able to override this democratic check.

Strength of populist parties

According to Auers and Kasekamp (2013), Estonia lacks any clear populist parties. Smaller movements, like the Estonian National Movement, have existed but not engaged in party politics. Other parties that have been considered populist have been small but have not managed to surpass the 5% required to enter parliament. The Estonian Independence Party EIP, is the

most prominent of these groups (Auers & Kasekamp 2013). Before the election in 2011, EIP was the most radical in its proposals to drastically reform the political systems (Jakobson et.al 2012 p.70). Apart from EIP, Estonia is unique in having had a populist independent candidate be successful in the European Parliament elections. The independent Indrek Tarand ran for the European Parliament on an anti-party platform in 2009. Tarand's support comes from groups otherwise voting for center-right parties in national elections (Auers & Kasekamp 2013). The vote share for the Estonian Independence Party and Indrek Tarand can be found in Tables 17 and 18.

Table 17. National election results for populist parties in Estonia

	Estonian Independence Party (Eesti Iseseisvuspartei)
2003	0,55%
2007	0,23%
2011	0,45%
2015	0,2%

European Election Database 2017a, Vabariigi Valimiskomisjon (Estonian National Election Committee) 2017

Table 18. European election results for populist parties in Estonia

	Estonian Independence Party	Indrek Tarand
2004	-	-
2009	-	25,81%
2014	1,3%	13,2%

European Election Database 2017b, European Parliament 2017d

The Estonian Independence Party never made in into the national or European parliaments since the threshold for both is 5%. EIP has therefore never won any real political influence. Indrek Tarand however, won almost as much votes in the 2011 European elections as the well-established Reform Party. Yet, European elections are often seen as secondary to national and thus allowing voters to protest vote on Tarand only to return to mainstream parties in national elections (Auers & Kasekamp 2013). Tarand lost almost half of his votes in 2014. Populist appeals therefore seem to have been limited in Estonia. The lack of stronger full-fledged populist parties, and the dwindling support for Tarand, makes populist parties in Estonia weak.

Mainstream parties' commitment to democracy

The Estonian party system is stable and consolidated, with lower degrees of fragmentation and populist drive than in its Baltic neighbors (Jakobson et.al. 2012 p.26). Estonia has lower levels

of corruption, than for example Latvia, and Estonians are thus more optimist and satisfied with their political system. Populist rhetoric's has therefore had low impact in Estonian politics (Auers & Kasekamp 2013). A study of the 2011 electoral campaign shows that mainstream Estonian parties used less populist arguments than the smaller parties that did not reach 5%. However, all parties expressed less populism than parties in Latvia. Most parties talked about "the people" but a victimization or loaded language surrounding this discussion was not prominent. The construction of "the people" was overall inclusionary and no parties showed hostility towards intellectual or economic elites. Criticism was mostly pointed towards "irresponsible" opposing parties, Russia and immigrants. (Jakobson et.al. 2012 p.59-65). Although immigration was a hot topic, there was no real discussion of a so-called heartland, an idealized image of a country's past that draws on peoples' emotions. Overall, in the 2011 campaign, populism was modest and those that did express populist appeals did it without questioning liberal democracy (Jakobson et.al. 2012 p.64, 16, 72). These findings point towards Estonian mainstream parties not adopting populist appeals and consequently having stayed committed to democracy.

Depth of economic crisis

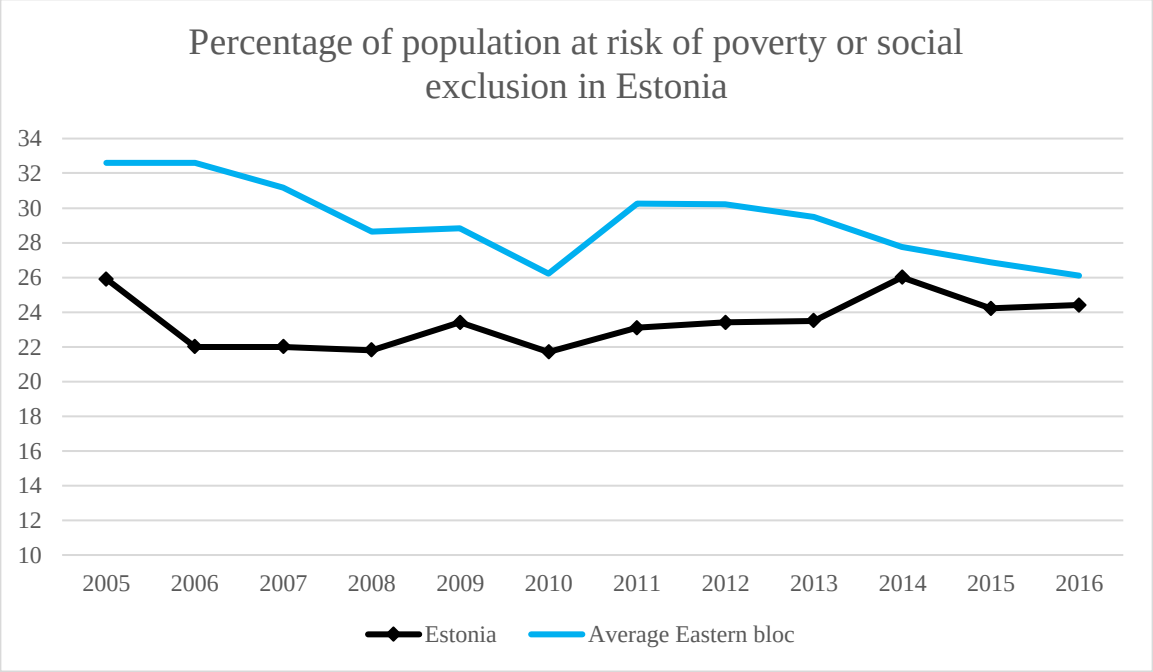
Estonia did not apply for emergency assistance during the global financial crisis but received consultations from the IMF. Economic troubles started in 2007 with a decreased domestic demand, the bursting of a property bubble (IMF 2009e), and declining investments (IMF 2009f). A national crisis gained momentum following the global financial crisis, with increasing budget deficits. The banking sector was seen to handle the crisis well, much because of it mostly being owned by larger Nordic banking groups. Strains on the labor market were seen to ease already in the end of 2008 (IMF 2009f). In 2009, economic activity had declined sharply but imbalances were corrected quickly. The reporting on the economic situation in Estonia does point out that the recession was severe in 2009 (IMF 2009e). However, it is repeatedly mentioned that the crisis was not full-fledged. This is because of the existing buffers in the Estonian economy thanks to the previous economic boom, low public debt, flexible adjustment mechanisms, a flexible labor market, and a swift and effective reaction from the private and public sector (IMF 2009e, IMF 2010c). Because of this, Estonia remained on track to fulfill the criteria to join the euro zone in 2011, despite the challenging economic situation (IMF 2009e, IMF 2011c). Estonia was also, together with Sweden, the only EU country able to keep the fiscal deficits under the allowed EU limit (IMF 2011c). This would indicate that the economy was not severely negatively affected. Economic growth strengthened already in 2010

and the banking system remained stable. Estonia was served well by the near-term goal of adopting the euro (IMF 2011c). This made them more prepared to handle the downturn. Estonia was even one of the lenders in the Latvian assistance package (European Commission 2017b). So, although facing hard economic times, the crisis was not as severe as in other EU countries and is not considered full-fledged.

The effect of economic crisis on ordinary people

The percentage of the Estonian population at risk of poverty and social exclusion from 2005 to 2016 can be found in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Percentage of Estonian population at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Eurostat 2016

The share of Estonians at risk of poverty remain below the average for the EU's Eastern bloc. There seem to be no significant peak around the economic crisis in 2008 but a small but uneven increase between 2008 and 2015. Estonia thereby saw a rise in people at risk of poverty around 4 percentage points, which also was the average for the Eastern bloc. However, unlike the average, Estonia seem to have experienced a more drawn out effect. The smaller peak in 2009 was only an increase of 1,6 percentage points.

Strains on the Estonian labor market started to ease and unemployment declined already at the end of 2008 (IMF 2009f). This would imply that the effect on ordinary people never had time to become widespread. Although unemployment declined in the years after the crisis, long-term

unemployment became somewhat more common. The process of reducing this was estimated to be slow (IMF 2011c). This could explain the drawn-out effect. Considering the overall development in people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Estonia, no sizeable spike or increase can be detected surrounding the economic crisis.

4.2.5 Summary of explanations of democratic backsliding

Table 19 summarizes the results of the comparative case study. It shows which explanatory factors have been found in which cases. The answer to the second research question; *What seems to be the factors enabling democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* is that a weak commitment to democracy by mainstream parties', a full-fledged economic crisis, and ordinary people being hit hard by an economic crisis, are factors seemingly facilitating democratic backsliding in the studied countries. This would confirm hypotheses H2b, H3a, and H3b since they can be found present in Hungary and Latvia, but not in the Czech Republic or Estonia. A further discussion of how these findings can be interpreted is found in chapter five.

Table 19. Summary of explanations of democratic backsliding

		Hungary	Czech Republic	Latvia	Estonia
Institutional explanations	*H1a: A disproportional electoral system*	Yes	No	No	No
	H1b: The possibility to override democratic checks and balances	Yes	No	No	No
Political explanations	*H2a: Strong populist parties*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	H2b: A weak commitment to democracy by mainstream political parties	Yes	No	Yes	No
Economic explanations	*H3a: A full-fledged economic crisis*	Yes	No	Yes	No
	H3b: Ordinary people taking a hard hit from an economic crisis	Yes	No	Yes	No

5. Concluding discussion

Considering recently raised concerns of democratic backsliding in some newer Eastern EU member states, this thesis has aimed to answer the following questions; *To what extent has there been democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* and *What seems to be the factors enabling democratic backsliding in the EU's Eastern bloc?* The analysis presented in the first part of the empirical study shows that five of 11 Eastern EU members have at some point experienced downturns in democratic developments during the past 15 years. Hungary and Latvia have seen substantial backsliding, Poland and Bulgaria moderate backsliding, and Lithuania mild backsliding. The second key finding of this thesis is that out of the six hypothesized explanations for backsliding, three seem to enable backsliding in the Eastern bloc; mainstream parties' lack of commitment to democracy, a full-fledged economic crisis, and ordinary people being largely affected by an economic crisis. Because of the limited number of cases, it cannot be assessed here if all the found factors are required to appear together for backsliding to occur. A study including more cases, further examining the explanations found here, is relevant for future research.

This thesis has made three main contributions. Theoretically, it has developed an analytical framework based on the still quite underdeveloped research field on democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe. Methodologically it has applied a method not previously prominent in backsliding research which made it possible to seek explanatory factors in depth. Empirically, this thesis has, based in existing data, identified democratic backsliders in the EU's Eastern bloc and assessed six prominent explanatory factors.

5.1 The explanations

Before discussing the three supported explanatory factors, a few words will be said about the three hypotheses not found in the two backsliding countries. The institutional strand is a prominent one in the backsliding and democratization literature but institutional factors lack importance in the results because they were not found in Latvia. Institutional features usually do not vary over a short time period like the one studied here. It is hard to claim that a constant institutional feature would cause a change in democracy. However, in Hungary institutional changes have taken place fast (Batory 2016), and this strand of explanations is therefore not explored in vain. The institutional hypotheses stated that a disproportional electoral system weakens oppositions and auditing institutions, and the ability to override democratic checks

and balances limits control on the executive power. They only found support in Hungary. Hungary was also the only case where all six hypotheses were confirmed, possibly indicating the severity of the state of democracy there. The results suggest that institutional changes are secondary in importance to the political and economic factors found in both Hungary and Latvia. One reason for this could be the possible time order of when different factors are "activated". It is possible that institutional changes weakening democracy take place after economic crisis and spread of populism. However, economic crisis and populism are themselves enough to cause backsliding. The hypothesis of strong populist parties being a threat to democracy because of populists seeing democratic institutions as standing in the way for the true rule of the people, was also not confirmed. This is since it was found in the Czech Republic.

The following discussion will focus on the confirmed factors of mainstream parties' commitment to democracy, severe economic crisis, and ordinary people being affected by an economic crisis. The first explanatory factor confirmed was mainstream parties' commitment to democracy. Populism therefore seem to matter for democratic backsliding since if mainstream parties adopts populist appeals, they abandon a commitment to democracy. The theoretically proposed causal mechanism is primarily that mainstream parties find that instead of constraining populists, a populist rhetoric can be strategically and electorally advantageous (Pappas 2013). As Pappas (2013) found, populism can spread, and with it anti-democratic views spread as the ground for political decision-making. If populist appeals are spreading, it appears reasonable to conclude that the democratic commitment of mainstream parties is weak. Democracy is therefore under greater threat. This causal mechanism can be found in Hungary and Latvia in the normalization of populist rhetoric and the wide adoption of populist appeals (Pappas 2013, Auers & Kasekamp 2013). While this can be closely connected to the electoral success of populist parties, it is the mainstream parties' abandonment of democratic principles that poses the greatest threat to democracy. The EU is also ill-equipped to handle populists and political parties in its member states (Batory 2016 p.283), further indicating that this explanatory factor is beyond the reach of EU control.

Given the results, the lack of democratic commitment by mainstream parties could be connected to the second and third confirmed explanations, the presence of a full-fledged economic crisis and ordinary people being severely affected by economic crisis. A suggested causal mechanism for both economic explanations is that people lose belief in the democratic system if it cannot deliver prosperity (Ágh 2013, Krastev 2016). Economic performance seems connected to

popular satisfaction with democracy in Eastern Europe. Consecutive crises can open the field to other type of political actors when the people became disappointed and lost belief in democracy's ability to care for them (Ágh 2013). Latvia saw concerns of public unrest (IMF 2009d), clearly showing the public discontent with the situation during the crisis, and in Hungary the social crisis following the economic crisis (Ágh 2013 p.40-42) could be a further reason to distrust the political system. When people lose hope in mainstream politics ability to improve lives through a democratic political system, alternative political agendas, often populist, may be more appealing. Batory (2016 p.292) suggests that a nostalgia over the past Soviet era, where the state took care of people from cradle to grave, may become more prominent in hard times. In this way, the economic explanations are also interlinked with the political explanations.

This leads us back to the notion presented by Dawson and Hanley (2016), that East and Central Europe never saw a true and total establishment of liberal democracy as "the only game in town". Illiberalism was therefore always informally accepted among political elites. As Herman (2016) argues, if democratic norms were truly integrated in society, mainstream parties would remain committed to democracy. Based in the results of this thesis, Dawson and Hanley's (2016) argument may be more nuanced. While their statement may be true for the backsliding countries, we have also seen that the non-backsliders, Estonia and the Czech Republic, seemingly has a commitment to democracy. Given Dawson and Hanley's (2016) statement, the illiberal heritage would be the same in all studied countries given the history they share. However, in Estonia illiberalism and populism has not been successful electorally despite some economic hardship (Auers and Kasekamp 2013), and in the Czech Republic parties in parliament stopped the President from diverging from democratic election results and concentrating power (Hanley 2016). Illiberalism may therefore only be informally accepted in some, not all, Eastern European countries. The results suggest there is a difference in the consolidation of democratic norms between backsliders and non-backsliders.

What could the observed pattern mean for the generalization of the results? When the consolidation of democratic norm seems to differ in the Eastern bloc, the commitment to democracy might vary significantly among these countries. What can be said is that in countries where mainstream parties show a weak commitment to democracy, there is a greater risk of backsliding in the future, especially if this factor is combined with an economic crisis that in turn negatively affected ordinary people. The results from the first part of the empirical study

shows that three other countries are possibly at risk of a future development like this. Lithuania, Poland and Bulgaria all have shown signs of backsliding. The findings could, because of similarities with the studied countries, therefore be generalized also to these three. That would mean that the explanations hold for the entire Eastern bloc since the rest of the countries were non-backsliders. The dividing line could potentially lay in the degree of integration of democratic norms. Because of the shared history of the Eastern bloc, and the unique situation of being EU members, this thesis does not generalize explanations of backsliding to other parts of the world. Furthermore, treating the Eastern bloc as one unit may be misleading since there are signs of two main trajectories in this group, one towards and one away from democracy.

5.2 What about the EU's normative power?

Since much of the problem of democratic backsliding in Europe has been framed as an issue of EU power and compliance, it is also worth coming back to the discussion on Normative Power Europe. What does the results found in this study say about the EU as a normative actor? As can be seen, the backsliders have all, except Bulgaria, seen improvements in the year surrounding EU accession. This would imply that the EU has indeed had a normative impact on democracy but failed to keep the influence going. There are many reasons why this could have happened, one being that the core values are enforced more continuously and distinctly before and in the beginning of EU membership. As time pass, the everyday formation and implementation of EU policy could take over, assuming that core norms are upheld in the background. This would entail that the EU's normative influence is not constant, and Manners (2002) is faulty in arguing that the EU is enforcing core values through everything it does.

So how could the EU handle democratic backsliding in the Eastern bloc? The use of existing tools seems to be limited since suspending voting rights for member states in the Council is not seen as a viable option, and the impeachment process is without real teeth because EU law does not cover democracy (Müller 2015 p.147). The theoretical debate on what the EU should do disagree on what tools to use. Blauberger and Keleman (2017) call for more work through existing EU tools in the judicial systems, while Sedelmeier (2017) invoke applying more constant social pressure through regular monitoring. The more skeptical Müller (2015) calls for the creation of a 'Copenhagen Commission' to safeguard the democratic values of the Copenhagen Criteria. There can be reasons for caution regarding EU intervention since material sanction could prove less effective the more serious the case of backsliding (Sedelmeier 2017

p.341), and may instead increase public support for the domestic government driving backsliding (Schlippak & Treib 2017). None of the scholars call for a status quo in EU actions.

Based in the results found in this study, the EU may primarily have more impact activating tools and measures aiming to continuously influence and convince politicians and citizens that democracy is the best political system to handle, for example, an economic crisis. The current activation of article 7 against Poland, will most likely not lead to a suspension of voting rights since it requires unanimity among the other EU members. Hungary has stated they will veto such a decision (Boffrey & Davies 2017). The existing stricter measures will therefore not likely lead to any real enforcement of democratic norms and does not target disbelief in democracy.

This seeming EU paralysis could potentially harm the EU's image. By not acting continuously to ensure democracy, the EU risks undermining its core norms when continued popular dissatisfaction leads the way for more populists. The EU itself can then be a breeding ground for populists whom can paint the EU as a supranational elite to blame for the misfortunes of ordinary citizens. The attention given to the member states now moving away from democracy risks damaging the EU's international reputation as an organization of democracy and freedom, while it also risks other member states losing faith in the EU's ability to handle rouge members. What good are the Copenhagen Criteria if they are not enforced? As can be seen from the focus of this thesis, we tend to be drawn to the cases that stand out negatively. However, this is needed since the exceptions are what really test the power of the EU as a normative actor. The five countries with negative democratic developments show that the original version of Manners' (2002) Normative Power Europe cannot be fully correct. If member states can depart from EU core values, leaving the EU bewildered, the EU cannot be an unwavering normative power.

There is no denying that democratic backsliding within the European Union can come to be the greatest challenge the union has faced so far. That member states abandon the very core of the European cooperation, could shake its foundation and curb further collaboration. The results found in this study can hopefully shine light on some of the drivers of democratic backsliding. Future research should delve deeper into the connection between the three explanations found here. The next step is to fully understand the causal links between economy and populism, and the importance of belief in democracy. This is important to understand why we see deterioration in some EU countries, and what could be done to prevent and hinder democracy from dwindling even further.

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