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# **The importance of free media for liberal democracy as demonstrated by selected European countries**

## **An analysis of fundamental indexes of democracy**

“Media pluralism and diversity of opinions  
are what strong democracies welcome, not fight against.”

*Věra Jourová*

### **Introduction**

The words above, part of a post on the social media portal Twitter on 12 August 2021 by the Vice-President for Values and Transparency at the EU Commission directly and unambiguously point to the necessity of assuring media pluralism in member states of the European Union (EU). This is an indispensable condition for democracy to exist within their borders. Jourová, who directs the work of the Commission in the area of values and transparency, with the rule of law, openness and the defence of democratic systems from external interference (European Commission n.d.) as one of her tasks, in the same post, she also directly referred to the projected amendments to the Broadcasting Act in Poland. Using the hashtag #lexTVN she wrote: “The draft Polish broadcasting law sends a negative signal. We need #MediaFreedomAct in the whole EU to uphold media freedom and support the rule of law.” (Jourová 2021).

It is worth recalling that the duties of this Commissioner include chairing the group of commissioners for “A New Push for European Democracy”, coordinating the European Democracy and Action Plan and supporting work on counteracting disinformation and the propagation of false information (fake news), supporting activities that help ensure the preservation of freedom of

expression, press freedom and media pluralism, identifying threats to media pluralism and initiating cross-border projects to support independent and diverse journalism (European Commission n.d.).

The quoted words, although originally referring directly to a specific situation in Poland, take on a broader meaning when attention is paid to the clear crisis of liberal democracies across the world, including Europe. Its manifestations are visible in EU Member States (when talk turns to the situation in Poland, Hungary or Italy), but above all among its eastern and southern neighbours (as illustrated by events in Belarus, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine, and in particular Turkey). It is also worth noting that the situation is clearly deteriorating in some EU candidate countries such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey, which is particularly important for the EU, (European Union n.d.).

### **Aim and research problem**

This article draws attention to an important research problem faced by contemporary media experts and political scientists. In recent years, clear and open attempts to limit media freedom by the governments of many democratic countries have become increasingly common. This has resulted in a crisis of liberal democracies, which is most often manifested in assessments of the functioning of governments, the scope of individual civil liberties, the level of corruption in the society, local government, the independence of the judiciary, the course of the electoral process as well as freedom and independence of media. The most visible and documented indicator of this crisis seems to be the results of research on the quality of democracy and media freedom (referred to as media freedom and democracy indexes), published by world-renowned organisations that assess the democratic character of political systems and the extent of media freedom in individual countries.

Publications dealing primarily with issues of the democratic (and undemocratic) nature of selected political systems are regularly published by such organisations as Freedom House, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Bertelsmann Stiftung, the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute, as well as an organisation specialising in the issue of press freedom, Reporters Without Borders. The reports and analyses published by these institutions, including the most famous and widely distributed democracy indexes in the world, indicate the importance of media freedom in the assessment of the democratic character of the entire political system of a given country. Each study and the resulting

reports and country rankings are created based on specific criteria. Knowledge of these criteria makes it possible to assess the reliability of the analysis and explain the reasons for formulating conclusions. S. Rus-Mohl emphasises that many researchers (such as Lee Becker and Tudor Vlad from the University of Georgia) rated the press freedom rankings surprisingly well, pointing to the existence of significant correlations between the results of individual reports (such as those of Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House), evaluating them as highly reliable. He also points out that “these indicators are largely based on a very Western, even American, understanding of the concept of freedom of the press”, recalling the opinions of researchers that “Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders pay attention primarily to the freedom and independence of the media in relation to government scrutiny, paying less attention to the influence of commercial and corporate interests” (Russ-Mohl 2013).

The aim of this article is to present (describe) the assessment of the state of democracy in selected European countries, based on the conclusions drawn from the most widely known indexes of democracy and freedom of the press (media), with particular emphasis on the assessment of the level of media freedom and the impact this has on the overall assessment of the political system. In this way, the author would like to prove the thesis, admittedly quite obvious but too often overlooked in public discourse, that without legal guarantees of freedom of the press (media) and respect for these principles in practice by governments, not only can no state be counted as having a liberal-democratic political system, but countries where the government actions weaken the independence of the media, occupy more and more places in these rankings every year. The fact of EU membership, which in itself seems to guarantee the existence of media freedom in the Member States, is not enough, as evidenced by the situation and changes in public and non-public (commercial) media in Hungary and Poland.

### **Freedom of media**

It is true that, as Jacek Sobczak stresses: “the system of the Council of Europe is of the greatest importance for defining the standards of press freedom, due to the instructive nature of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights” (Sobczak 2018: 141). But EU institutions also stand guard as the guarantor of this freedom, which is explicitly stated in Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, devoted to freedom of expression and information. According to point 1 of this article: “Everyone has the right

to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers". However, point 2 states that the freedom and pluralism of the media is to be respected (European Union 2012a).

Therefore, when writing about the guarantees of media freedom, it is also necessary to refer to the provisions of the treaties and the criteria for EU membership. It is worth recalling that, according to Protocol 29 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union concerning the system of public broadcasting in the Member States, this system is "directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society and the need to maintain media pluralism" (European Union 2012).

An extremely important aspect of research on media and the process of social communication is the issue of relations between the media and the political system, and especially the place and role of the media in a democratic political system. There is no doubt that in the democratic world today free media are an essential element of democracy, and the underlying "freedom of speech is considered today to be the basic principle of organising the life of a democratic society" (Waławczyk 2009: 7). It is not without reason that among the procedural criteria of the "minimum" of democracy, there is an alternative source of information, or the right to alternative information (Antoszewski 1998: 14). In turn, according to R. Dahl, the system he called "polyarchic" democracy introduces six distinctive institutions, including freedom of speech (Tilly 2008: 21).

Freedom of speech is then regarded by theoreticians of democracy as one of several basic criteria that distinguish democratic and authoritarian regimes. W. Pisarek writes that "freedom of belief and freedom of speech, freedom of journalists and freedom of the media are different faces of freedom of information. All these slogans have been intertwined in different ways and with different levels of intensity in the socio-political discourse in both Europe and America since the eighteenth century" (Pisarek 2002: 9). J. Sobczak emphasises: "freedom of the press is a derivative of freedom of thought, which results in freedom of belief (...) freedom of the press is possible only when freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed" (Sobczak 2008: 31). He adds that "freedom of the press and freedom of expression are not only civil rights, but also human rights" (ibid.: 36).

Freedom of the press and the media as derived from freedom of speech are therefore rightly regarded as a *sine qua non* for the existence of democracy. At the theoretical and axiomatic level, everything seems relatively clear. Problems arise when it is necessary to descend to the level of empirical research and make a diagnosis regarding the functioning of the media in the actual political

system of a particular country. Thus, the key question is how to examine and draw conclusions regarding the impact of the state of the media system on the assessment of the democratic nature of a country's political system. In other words, how does the degree of media freedom translate into assessments of the state of democracy? Z. Oniszczyk points out that the media system affects the political system primarily through a process called the mediatisation of politics, and the political system affects the media system through the politicisation of the media. There are also symbiotic relations between both systems (Oniszczyk 2011: 13).

In empirical studies, these complicated mutual relations seem to be accurately reflected in reports and analyses published regularly by the world's leading organisations that examine the quality of democracy in modern countries. Reading them leaves no doubt that the assessment of the degree of freedom in the media system of a given state correlates with the assessment of the democratic nature of its political system. In order to prove the thesis, put forward at the beginning, it is necessary to obtain the results of empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative. Otherwise, there may be accusations of the journalistic (and even politically or ideologically motivated) nature of such "opinions". This is especially true since the research problem of the relationship between the media and democracy is very "political", so that any attempt to assess the impact of the functioning of the media on the quality of democracy, in particular criticism of the current state of affairs, is met with accusations of biased and unscientific approaches, based on the author's political views. Therefore, the key to defence against accusation of unscientific diagnoses of the state of the media system in a given country and its impact on the assessment of the functioning of democracy in that country is to find intersubjectively verifiable criteria that will make it possible to defend the scientific nature of these deliberations.

### ***Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières)***

When looking for data that show the close relationship between media freedom and the quality of democracy, it is worth looking at the organisation Reporters Without Borders (*Reporters sans frontières* – RSF), which publishes an annual report called the World Press Freedom Index. In the 2021 edition, the authors define journalism as the main "vaccine" against disinformation, which, as they point out, has been fully or partially blocked in 73% of the 180 countries assessed in the ranking. For the fifth year in a row, Norway is ranked

first and the Nordic countries are in the top four, demonstrating the highest level of press freedom. Europe continues to be the continent most favourable to press freedom, although there has also been a significant deterioration in the rate of abuse, and acts of violence against journalists have more than doubled, both in the EU and in the Balkans (Reporters Without Borders 2021).

The authors of the report stress that even if some EU Member States are world leaders in terms of respect for media freedom (in particular, the Scandinavian countries in places 1-4, and the Netherlands (5) while Portugal (9), Belgium (11), Germany (13) and Estonia (15) are also high in the ranking), the EU, compared to other European countries, is becoming more and more heterogeneous. The report emphasises that the challenges are illiberal democracies, the struggle against terrorism and the economic crisis, and this catastrophic situation prevails in the east and south of the continent (Reporters Without Borders 2021). In turn, the mechanisms established by the EU to protect fundamental freedoms did not lead to a change in Viktor Orbán's policy towards the Hungarian media, which created a model leading to the complete abandonment of press freedom. Neither did it stop similar processes from taking place in other Central European countries (Reporters Without Borders 2021a).

The report underlines that both in the east and in the west of the continent, regulations limiting the right to information introduced by national governments under the guise of the Covid-19 pandemic made it easier to arrest and detain journalists. In Serbia, ranked 93rd in the report, a reporter for a news site, Ana Lalić, was arrested in her home late at night after reporting on the measures taken in a hospital to fight Covid-19, and in Kosovo, which fell to 78th place, the editor of the KoSsev news site, Tatjana Lazarević, was arrested on the street while covering the effects of the pandemic (Reporters Without Borders 2021a).

The report no longer even mentions public media, but instead uses the term state media, which, according to the authors of the report, have become the principal victims of politics in many countries. As an example, they mention the situation of public media in Poland, which are directly described as having been turned into government propaganda agencies, such as TVP (Polish Television, a public broadcaster). It is worth recalling at this point that in 2021 Poland was ranked 64th (down by two places compared to the previous year). Poland is in fact the country with the largest drop in recent years, in 2015 Poland had its highest ranking in 18th place and a year later it had fallen to the 47th position. The reason for further decline was the "repolonisation" of the media, defined directly as censorship (Reporters Without Borders 2021b). It is emphasised that private media were coming increasingly under tax, commer-

cial and legislative pressure, the best example of which is the aforementioned “repolonisation” of the media. In this context, RSF writes on a proposed tax on advertising income, the acquisition of local media by a state-controlled company (the purchase of Polska Press by PKN Orlen) and a proposed regulation on social media (Reporters Without Borders 2021a). However, the RSF limits its interest to freedom of media, without evaluating the entire political system.

The trend, which is negative not only for Poland, has not changed in the latest report for 2022. Poland dropped by two places to 66<sup>th</sup> position, and fell by a total of seven places from 85 to 92. Interestingly, Estonia was in 4<sup>th</sup> place, registering an advancement from an already high 15<sup>th</sup> place a year earlier (Reporters Without Borders 2022). From the latest information about Poland, the reader learns that “the Polish ruling party resumes political and regulatory pressure on independent media.” There we find sharp criticism of the so-called project. the “remote control law”, which, among other things, obliges providers of pay TV decoders to reserve the first five channels for public television. Moreover, the authors of the publication emphasise the Polish government’s reaction to the TVN station’s report on John Paul II and paedophilia in the Church (Reporters Without Borders 2023).

### *Freedom House*

In a broader context, however, the correlation between media freedom and the democratic nature of political systems is shown above all by the reports of Freedom House, which publishes three types of reports: *Freedom in the World* (the most important and best-known report of the organisation, published regularly since 1972), *Nations in Transit* (the most recent, since 1995) and the most important for considerations concerning the importance and role of the media in assessing the condition of democracy *Freedom of the Press and Freedom and the Media* (first issued in 1979). It is worth analysing selected reports from the last few years, which clearly confirm the tendency of an ongoing crisis of democracy in the world, including Europe.

As Wiktor Szewczak rightly points out: “one of the best-known and most frequently cited programs for measuring democracy is the annual report prepared by the American NGO Freedom House” (Szewczak 2011: 123). The reports of this organisation have been cited by, among others, Benjamin Barber, Charles Tilly, Ronald Inglehart and Samuel Huntington. Although the issue of media freedom is not the main subject of their analyses, the use of their data should be regarded as confirmation of the credibility of the reports published

by Freedom House and the appropriateness of the methodology used by this organisation (including the criteria used for their comparative analyses of political systems of different countries).

The Freedom in the World 2017 report, entitled *Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy*, pointed out that after years of growth, the share of countries described as free among all countries had fallen from 47% in 2006 to 45% in 2016 (compared to 41% in 1996), and the percentage of countries described as not free has increased. According to the report, the country that registered the greatest fall in the assessment of the state of political rights and civil liberties in the index over the last year is Turkey (now described as partly free). Its rating declined by 15 points compared to the previous year. For comparison, Poland, which is still in the group of free countries, lost four points in this ranking. The authors of the report accused Poland, apart from neutralising the Constitutional Tribunal and introducing a law restricting the freedom of assembly, of politicising public media. In addition, Poland was listed among the ten countries that set negative trends in the world, and the government's influence on the media was cited as one of the reasons (Freedom House 2017). The above trends were confirmed in the next edition of the report, *Freedom in the World 2018*, under the telling subtitle *Democracy in Crisis*. Poland once more received attention, with a comparison of the changes taking place there to the situation in Hungary and clearly rating both quite negatively (Freedom House 2018: 6-17). Further, according to the report *Freedom in the World 2020*, the percentage of countries classified as free dropped again, this time to 42.6%. Emphasis was given to the negative situation in Poland and the takeover, by the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, of state media, which, although financed by taxpayers, openly supported PiS before the elections, using "partisan propaganda" (Freedom House 2020: 24).

The next report, (Freedom House 2021), lists Poland (with a loss of 11 points) as one of the countries alongside Hungary and Turkey that experienced the greatest regression over the last 10 years although it is still included in the group of free countries. It should be emphasised that in their recommendations regarding suggested policy changes aimed at strengthening liberal democracy, the authors of the report mention support for independent media and protecting access to information. It is difficult to disagree with the statement that providing the public with access to fact-based information about current events is one of the best ways to fight authoritarian power (ibid.: 28).

The second group consists of *Nations in Transit* reports. In the 2017 report (Freedom House 2017a), a decrease in the number of countries described as



consolidated democracies is indicated along with a significant increase in the number of countries classified as consolidated authoritarian regimes. At the same time, Poland was again negatively assessed (and compared to Hungary), due to, among other reasons, changes in the media (ibid.: 4). More attention was also paid to the media situation in Poland than in the previous report. Examples include a homophobic cover of the weekly *Do Rzeczy* and a photo of opposition deputies blocking the rostrum with the slogans “free media”. It should be noted that these are the most visible illustrations in the entire report, which most likely intensified the already negative tone of the entire report for Poland. The report describes the situation of the media in Poland as a takeover of public media through the replacement of management and changes in editorial policy (ibid.: 9-10). It should be remembered that one of the seven criteria for evaluating the democracy of a given country in *Nations in Transit* includes independent media, which is primarily understood as the current state of press freedom, a lack of government harassment of journalists, guarantees of editorial independence and access to the Internet for private citizens. In this category, Poland also recorded a lowered score of 3.00 (in a system in which 1.00 is the freest and 7.00 the least free) in the category of independent media. This placed Poland between Lithuania (2.25) and Hungary (4.25), with 3.00 being a semi-consolidated democracy (ibid.: 22-24). The 2020 *Nations in transit* report (Freedom House 2020a) indicates a further regression in the evaluation of the democratic nature of the above-mentioned countries in the region. Poland fell to the group of partially consolidated democracies, and Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro were classified as hybrid regimes (ibid.: 9-10).

In a subsequent *Nations in Transit* report (Freedom House 2021a), eloquently entitled *The Antidemocratic Turn*, it is written that attacks on democratic institutions are spreading faster than ever in Europe and Eurasia, posing a challenge to democracy itself. The authors of the report even write about the establishment of anti-democratic norms in Central Europe. According to its ranking, two countries, Poland and Hungary, are distinguished, rather notoriously, by the greatest collapse of democracy in the last decade. Hungary underwent the most precipitous decline ever recorded for a country in transition, crossing two borders and ultimately transforming itself from a consolidated democracy into a transitional (hybrid) regime. Poland is still classified as a semi-consolidated democracy, but its collapse over the past five years has been more rapid than that of Hungary (ibid: 1-2).

The key importance of media freedom for the functioning of democracy is confirmed by the fact that Freedom House publishes separate reports

devoted entirely to issues of press and media freedom. Looking at the 2017 *Freedom of the Press* report (Freedom House 2017b) the title itself, *Press Freedom's Dark Horizon*, leaves no doubt as to the assessment of the changes that have been taking place in recent years. Poland lost six points in the ranking. The authors of the report note that the PiS government is imitating the strategy of Fidesz in undermining the credibility of media critical of the government, quoting Jarosław Kaczyński's own words "*Gazeta Wyborcza* is 'against the very notion of the nation'". It was also pointed out that the party, through the changes in the law, secured control over public media, and over 200 employees of these media had lost their jobs (ibid: 5-10). It should be emphasised that Poland for the first time was included in the group of partially free countries in terms of freedom of the press. The report also recalls the words of other European leaders that are testimony to their negative attitude towards free media. Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić said: "I don't think I should answer for something that someone says in private media." Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico spoke in a similar vein, assessing journalists as follows: "Some of you [journalists] are dirty, anti-Slovak prostitutes." It is therefore not surprising that according to the report, officials in some EU Member States prevented journalists from accessing elected representatives and the government. The Austrian chancellor stopped holding weekly press conferences, and the Polish and Hungarian authorities sought to ban reporters from parliament. When mentioning EU candidate countries, it is noted that officials in Montenegro prevented photographers and camera operators from showing discussions in parliament (ibid.: 22).

Moreover, when describing the situation in Poland, the report draws attention to the government's distaste regarding critical assessments, its excessive interference in public media and the way it presents Polish history, all of which contribute to an increase in self-censorship and polarisation (ibid.: 11, 23). Poland was ranked 66th in the world ranking of press freedom, and among European countries it was ranked 30th, between Italy and Romania (both also included in the group of partially free), with a clearly recorded downward trend in the ranking (ibid.: 27).

A later report on freedom of the media, entitled *A Downward Spiral* (Freedom House 2019), is a continuation of the above analyses. It points out that populist leaders present themselves as defenders of the disadvantaged majority against liberals, elites and ethnic minorities whose loyalty they question. The dominant argument here is that the interests of the nation, as they define them, should take precedence over democratic principles such as freedom of the press, transparency and open debate (ibid.: 2). It is emphasised that the

government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the administration of Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia have been very successful because their destruction of critical journalism has paved the way for populist forces elsewhere. In Hungary, it is noted that the ruling Fidesz party has consolidated its control over the media and has created a kind of alternative reality in which government messages and disinformation reinforce each other. In Serbia, the co-option process has not yet been fully successful, but there is an atmosphere of intimidation and harassment that hampers the daily work of journalists. Yet a free and independent media sector that can control and hold leaders accountable is as important to strong and sustainable democracy as are free and fair elections (ibid.: 16).

It is not possible to ignore the Freedom House report entirely devoted to the situation in the Polish media given the trenchant title *Pluralism Under Attack: The Assault on Press Freedom in Poland*. The author of the report, Annabelle Chapman, first draws attention to the similarities between the changes introduced by PiS in public media and the situation in Hungary, directly stating that the example of Hungary has been a guideline for Poland. According to the author, perhaps the most important message of the report (again it is worth emphasising that this is an official report of Freedom House, the oldest and an extremely prestigious institution publishing the oldest and best-known index of democracy since the 1970s and not the opinion of a single independent author) is that, as she writes, the fight for press freedom in Poland is the same as the fight for Polish democracy (Chapman 2017). In her opinion, this fight has not been resolved, and in Poland, unlike countries where authoritarian institutions have taken root, the current political leaders have not yet succeeded in transforming the media landscape and introducing effective control over it. And, in her opinion, Poland still has time to change course, as the restriction of media freedom does not happen overnight, pointing out that for many years Hugo Chávez, Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan violated the independence of the media in Venezuela, Hungary and Turkey. According to Chapman, the fate of media freedom in Poland is a powerful message that is part of the current visible march of populist authoritarianism around the world, or the turn of this wave and a new period of democratic development (ibid.).

The latest report, (Freedom House 2023), clearly states that among the many rights under attack around the world over the past 17 years, Freedom House data show that freedom of expression, both for media and for individuals, has declined more than any other civil right, and the violation of freedom of speech is one of the greatest factors causing the global decline of democracy. According to the report's authors, democratic countries should increase efforts to support independent media (ibid.: 34). Moreover, the report lists specific

types of attacks on media freedom, which include the criminal prosecution and/or extrajudicial repression of journalists, the adoption of laws that limit media independence along with censorship and media blackouts of critical opinions (ibid.: 15).

### *The Economist Intelligence Unit*

In the context of the influence of the media situation on the evaluation of the level of democracy in a given political system, it is worth mentioning the *Democracy Index* created by *The Economist Intelligence Unit*. The 2016 report (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2016) clearly stated that its authors' attention was drawn to the poor performance of Hungary and Poland, and in the case of Poland, the authors of the report emphasised the massive replacement of management in public media (ibid.: 38). It should be noted that Poland was ranked 52nd with a score of 6.83 points out of 167 countries, which was its worst result since the creation of this index, that is since 2006. Poland had its highest rating in 2014, obtaining 7.83 points (ibid.: 26). In the 2019 report, Poland was ranked 57<sup>th</sup>, its worst ever result although it is still counted as a flawed democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2019). In it some Eastern and Southern European countries were classified as hybrid regimes, North Macedonia, Ukraine, Albania (77-79 positions), Moldova, Montenegro (83-84 positions) and Turkey (110 positions), which was only three places above the last group of countries, authoritarian regimes. In the report, a separate section was revealingly entitled "Flawed democracies: Poland slips behind Hungary". In fact, Poland for the first time fell below Hungary in the ranking, which its authors explain by the fact that the ruling conservative-nationalist party PiS continued its efforts to transform the country into an "illiberal democracy", clearly emphasising the desire to consolidate media ownership "in Polish hands" (ibid.: 31).

It is worth noting that The Economist Intelligence Unit, defining countries described as full democracies, emphasises that the media are independent and diverse. In flawed democracies, governments violate media freedom. In systems referred to as hybrid regimes, journalists are persecuted and pressured, and in authoritarian regimes, the media are usually either owned by the state or controlled by groups associated with the ruling regime. There are also repressions against criticism of the government and ubiquitous censorship (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2020: 57). As for the Eastern European region, there are still no full democracies there, only Albania has changed category,

moving up from a hybrid regime to a flawed democracy. Thirteen countries are currently classified as flawed democracies, including 11 EU Member States plus Serbia and Albania, while eight are classified as hybrid regimes, the rest of the Western Balkan countries plus Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and the Kyrgyz Republic. The rest, including Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, are “authoritarian regimes” (ibid.: 33-34).

### **V-Dem Institute and Die Bertelsmann Stiftung**

In the context of this discussion, it is also worth looking at a report put out by the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute – *Autocratization Turns Viral Democracy Report 2021*. The authors of the report, published since 2017 by the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, emphasise that the process of transition from democracy to autocracy usually follows a similar pattern. Ruling parties first attack the media and civil society institutions, then polarise society by publicly disrespecting opponents and spreading false information in order to undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Alizada, Cole, Gastaldi et al. 2021: 7). In addition, the report notes that the number of countries meeting the criteria of liberal democracies has decreased over the last decade from 41 countries to 32, with a population share of only 14%. Regression has been visible for at least the last 10 years. During this period, in Western and Eastern Europe, no country improved the state of its democracy. The greatest decline in the quality of democracy among European countries is visible in Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey. Considering the scale of changes, Poland has a dubious position of leader here, the country that has deteriorated the most over the last decade and has transformed from a liberal democracy into an electoral democracy. Such a position still puts Poland in a good light, given that according to these analyses both Hungary, Turkey and Serbia have all become electoral autocracies (ibid.: 18-19).

Finally, it is worth mentioning *The Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index*, which analyses and assesses the state of democracy in developing countries and those that have undergone a transformation towards democracy and a market economy. In assessing political participation, it is important to ensure fair and equal access to the media for all candidates and parties, as well as freedom of expression by the media. It is important for the media system to ensure the existence of a plurality of opinions and to guarantee free access to information by the media (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020: 18).

## Conclusions

All the examples cited above are much more than the unfavourable opinion of foreign media, journalists or politicians aimed at the governments of countries fighting for their national interests, which can be observed, for example, in the reactions of the Polish or Hungarian authorities. However, the opinions of politicians, journalists and columnists cannot be characterised as science. On the other hand, reports issued by Freedom House, The Economist Intelligence Unit and other organisations are based on well-designed and proven methodology, both in quantitative and qualitative research. These data clearly confirm that freedom of speech, the press and media are among the key criteria for ensuring the functioning of a democratic political order. When there are disturbing changes in the media system that limit these freedoms, the situation automatically translates into a general assessment of the entire political system of a given country. In these reports, the cases of Hungary, Poland, Turkey and Serbia turned out to be a perfect example of this trend. Therefore, it should be unequivocally stated that the more freedom in the media, the more democracy in the country. On the other hand, when media freedom is limited, democracy is automatically affected by a crisis, as confirmed by numerous studies, primarily democracy indexes, analysed above.

The conclusions presented above from analyses of democracy and media freedom rankings from recent years seem to prove the thesis that without legal guarantees of freedom of the press (media) and, perhaps more importantly, respect for these principles in practice by governments, no country can be included in the group of countries with a liberal-democratic political system. In addition, countries in which governmental actions weaken the independence of the media are taking up more and more places in these rankings every year.

The analysis of the reports shows that, first of all, there is a crisis of liberal democracy in the world, including in Europe. Secondly, the greatest regression is visible in European countries, which a decade ago were often either models of old, Western liberal democracies or young democracies born after the systemic transformations that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the post-Soviet space. Thirdly, one of the main reasons for these negative assessments are various attempts by governments to limit media freedom in these countries by taking over public and commercial media or trying to subordinate them and use them as tools of government propaganda. Fourthly, according to the authors of these reports, these trends either already are meeting, or should meet in the future, with a strong reaction from EU institutions, which should

ensure media freedom among its members and prevent the integration into the EU of countries that openly violate this freedom and thusly break one of the fundamental values of a united, liberal-democratic Europe.

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ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to present the state of democracy in selected European countries, both European Union member states and neighbours (including candidate countries). This is carried out on the basis of the best-known indexes of democracy and press (media) freedom, published by the organisations that have developed democracy indexes such as Freedom House (Freedom in the World, Nation in Transit, Freedom of the Press), The Economist Intelligence Unit (Democracy Index), Bertelsmann Stiftung (The Bertelsmann Transformation Index), V-Dem Institute (Democracy Report), and Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom Index), an organisation specialising in press freedom. The importance of assessing the level of media freedom in European countries is emphasised as is its impact on overall evaluations of their political systems. In this way, the author attempts to prove the thesis that without legal guarantees of press (media) freedom and governments respecting these principles in practice, no country can be classified as a democracy (much less as a liberal democracy).*

