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EASTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: CASTLES OF SAND AND STONE?

Bachelor's Thesis

Program INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Tallinn 2020

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the fate of democracy in post-communist Eastern Europe. Through indices that measure countries' quality of democracy, it establishes that EU member states in the region have made the most progress, while remaining states of the Western Balkans and former Soviet Union lag significantly behind. It then reviews the literature on democratization, identifying several reasons that could explain this differential performance. Case studies of extreme examples—Estonia, Belarus and Hungary—test for relevant hypotheses and show that multiple causes determine a country's outcome. A country is more likely to be democratic if it experienced statehood before communism, is closer to the EU, has a parliamentary political system, is wealthier or of Western Christian faith. A lower quality democracy is linked to a lack of past statehood, distance from the EU, presidentialism, lower economic development and Eastern Orthodoxy. Meanwhile, a democracy is more likely to deteriorate as a result of crises and demographic challenges. Decisions made by a country's elite remain key overall. Analyzing these factors is difficult however because the difference between causation and correlation is unclear, and also because each country's experience is unique. Thus, to grasp the complexities of democracy and democratization, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, one may have to carefully look at each country individually.

Keywords: Eastern Europe; post-communism; democratization; democratic backsliding

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INTRODUCTION

People have lived under tyrannical rule for nearly all of history. Democracy as we know it would only appear recently, in "waves" as Samuel Huntington (1991) described, first between the 1820s and 1920s, and then after the Allied victory in World War II. It would not be until the "third wave of democratization", beginning with the fall of dictatorship in Portugal and Spain during the 1970s, that democracy would take the world by storm, appearing in unprecedented numbers around the globe. As Huntington foresaw though, this last leap forward was eventually followed by a "reverse wave" in which democratic progress would roll back. One good example of this reversal is Eastern Europe. The region, which for forty years or more was a very different world than its Western counterpart, underwent a remarkable transformation after the end of communism, with several countries being considered success stories of democratization. But as time wears on that story has begun to change. The transformation of Eastern Europe has not been as profound or permanent as some would have hoped, as democracy has not thrived everywhere, and cases of democratic backsliding have been gaining more attention lately. It turns out that Eastern Europe has yet to see an "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989).

The research question that this paper seeks to answer is: why has democracy consolidated to different extents across Eastern Europe? In other words, why are some places fertile for democracy but others less so? The widely understood term 'Eastern Europe' is used here to avoid confusion with other contested subregions, e.g. East Central Europe, Central Eastern Europe, South Eastern Europe etc. Simply put, Eastern Europe refers to post-communist states of Europe's eastern half, the distinction of which remains useful. For the purposes of this paper it will exclude the border case of the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan), yet it will include Russia. Also, the paper won't discuss the democracy of territories with limited recognition, e.g. Kosovo, or evaluate historical entities such as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. While much research has focused on the smaller, individual

subregions, this paper provides a wider scope that hopefully will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of democracy in post-communist Europe.

The first section of the paper will provide an overview of democracy in the region. Drawing on data from leading democracy indices, it will sketch out how democracy has fared among twenty Eastern European countries. It will establish the dependent variable, being the region's (varying) quality of democracy. The second section will review the literature on democratization, taking a look at what may have shaped Eastern Europe's path toward democracy. Here it will establish potential independent variables. The final section meanwhile is dedicated to the case studies of extreme examples, one of democratic consolidation (Estonia), non-consolidation (Belarus) and backsliding (Hungary), that will test which of the independent variables from the literature are relevant.

In the end, this paper will conclude that the trajectory of Eastern European democracy is multicausal, as no single factor can ever explain it. A multivariate analysis will find that pre-communist statehood, proximity to the EU15, parliamentary political systems, higher levels of economic development and Western Christianity are conducive to democracy. A democracy may fail to develop for many of the opposite reasons—if a country lacks pre-communist statehood, has weaker ties to the EU, stronger presidentialism, is poorer or Eastern Orthodox. Democratic progress is likely to backslide due to crises and demographic decline, while elite decision-making is important across the board. In any case, this paper will argue that even the healthiest of Eastern European democracies have shortcomings, and in the worst-case scenario, democracy is all but a façade.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF EASTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Democracy en masse arrived late to Eastern Europe, a part of the continent which has endured some of its most tragic history. Following centuries of imperial rule, attempts at statehood and democracy during the interwar period would be short-lived in many countries. After World War II, totalitarian regimes were established in the vast area controlled by the Red Army, as the Soviet Union wished to create a buffer zone of peaceful collaborators. Similar regimes were also set up by communist partisans in Yugoslavia and Albania, who would later split with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, opposition to communist rule in Soviet satellite states was crushed. Unwilling to risk a domino effect (Marples 2002, 221), the Soviets led invasions to put down the 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Czechoslovakia's attempt at democratization in 1968. Significant change would not come until 1985 when Mikhail Gorbachev assumed office. Reform through *glasnost* and *perestroika* would ultimately spiral out of control, leading to the fall of the Soviet Union and its hegemony over Eastern Europe. From 1989 onward, revolutionary change swept over the region. In June 1989 Poland held parliamentary elections without a crackdown, which had a snowball effect on Hungary, East Germany and others (Robert 2018, 13). The communists' monopoly on power was over. The Berlin Wall fell, the Iron Curtain crumbled and a bloc of totalitarian regimes finally collapsed, ushering in a new era.

The newly independent countries of Eastern Europe began to democratize in earnest, but it has been neither simple nor evenly spread. Many embarked on their 'return to Europe' through the process of European integration, seeking to join Western institutions such as the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). But not all countries started off from the same place or were headed in the same direction. An obstacle that the region faced early on was the so-called "triple transition", or the rapid, simultaneous creation of a new political regime, market economy and nation-state (Offe 1991). According to Lewis, each of these processes on their own is troublesome, but when combined they can be disastrous. Examples include the violent breakup of Yugoslavia (2011, 14),

conflict over the constitution, separatism (e.g. Chechnya) and economic crisis in Russia, as well as separatism in Moldova (Transnistria). Additionally, economies across the region contracted after communism, negatively impacting its standard of living as a whole.

Some thirty years on, Eastern European democracy is a mixed bag. Many countries weathered the storm of the transition period, exceeded expectations and developed healthy democracies. But many others have fallen short. Authoritarian regimes have hardened in some countries while others seem to be stuck somewhere in between. The impact of pro-democratic 'color revolutions' meanwhile has been minimal. Even the region's frontrunners may not be out of the woods yet, as democratic backsliding (i.e. de-democratization or de-consolidation) has increasingly become a cause for concern. It was first noticed among some eastern EU member states post-accession, starting in 2004, when conditionality disappeared. By the mid-2000s, Krastev (2007) warned of how populism and illiberalism were gaining ground, fueled by those who had lost out during the elite-driven transition period. But democracy was not in danger, thanks to a booming economy. The story since then has changed, especially from the pressure caused by the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2015 migrant crisis. This is compounded by other issues that many in the region face, including depopulation, aging populations, brain drain, corruption and the failure to converge economically with Western Europe. Thus, it is less obvious today if democracy is still the 'only game in town' or if some form of Weimarization[1] is impossible. Recent reports of executive aggrandizement and a rise in right-wing populism, illiberalism and nationalism in certain countries have been worrisome.

1.1. Measuring Eastern European Democracy

Several organizations offer indices that try to measure the quality of countries' democracy. One dividing line that quickly becomes apparent in Eastern Europe runs along the EU's borders. According to US-based Freedom House, in its Freedom in the World report for 2020 (which assesses countries on their political rights and civil liberties), ten out of eleven eastern EU member states were considered "Free", i.e. democratic. The exception was Hungary, which recently acquired the status of "Partly

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[1] This refers to Germany's Weimar Republic (1919-1933), which, fraught with economic hardship, political instability and polarization, eventually gave way to extremism.

Free" after years of declining ratings (see Appendix 2 for a closer look at Freedom in the World scores). Remaining non-EU countries in the Western Balkans: Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia and Albania, as well as Ukraine and Moldova, were also classified as "Partly Free", while Russia and Belarus were "Not Free" (Freedom House 2020).

Nations in Transit (Appendix 1) is a separate report from Freedom House which judges Eastern European and Central Asian countries on their electoral processes, civil societies, independent media, national governance, judicial frameworks and independence, local governance and corruption. Its findings were slightly more negative. For 2018, Nations in Transit classified seven out of the eleven EU member states as consolidated democracies. Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria were classified as semi-consolidated democracies, along with Serbia and Montenegro, while the rest of the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova were transitional governments or hybrid regimes. Russia and Belarus, having made the least democratic progress, were considered consolidated authoritarian regimes (Freedom House 2018). Similar patterns are found in other indices.

The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) (Appendix 4), from the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Germany, bases its Democracy Status on "Stateness", political participation, rule of law, stability of democratic institutions, and political and social integration. Its report for 2018 classified ten out of eleven EU member states in Eastern Europe as democracies in consolidation. The exception was Hungary, which was considered a "defective democracy". Other defective democracies include remaining Western Balkan states, Ukraine and Moldova. Russia and Belarus meanwhile were classified as moderate autocracies (as opposed to hardline autocracies) (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020).

Next is the Liberal Democracy Index from Varieties of Democracy (Appendix 6) in Sweden. This index tries to capture "electoral aspects, as well as freedom of expression and the media, civil society, rule of law, and strength of checks on the executive" (Varieties of Democracy 2019). For 2018, it classified Estonia, Albania, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovenia as liberal democracies, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, BiH, Hungary and Moldova as electoral democracies, and Belarus, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine as electoral autocracies (Varieties of Democracy 2019).

Another index is called the Democracy Index (Appendix 5), from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in the United Kingdom. This index focuses on countries' electoral processes, pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties. Its report for 2019 found all eastern EU member states, as well as Serbia, to be flawed democracies (as opposed to full democracies). It classified North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, BiH, Ukraine and Moldova as hybrid regimes, while Russia and Belarus scored the lowest as authoritarian regimes (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2019).

Finally, there is the Polity IV index (Appendix 3) from the Center for Systemic Peace in the United States. The criteria its measurements are based upon include how the executive comes to power, executive constraints, electoral processes and political competition and opposition. In 2018 it classified Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia as full democracies, Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia as democracies, Russia and Ukraine as open anocracies (a mixture of democracy and autocracy), and Belarus as a closed autocracy. Bosnia and Herzegovina was treated as a case of "foreign interruption" or "system missing", the equivalent of which is a closed anocracy (Center for Systemic Peace 2019; Marshall, Gurr, Jaggers 2018). Polity IV's more positive assessment is somewhat inconsistent with the other indices included in this paper, as it awards higher scores to most countries and does not observe all of the same backslides.

A clear pattern that emerges in these indices is the strong performance of EU member states. Countries outside of the Union, in the rest of the Western Balkans and former Soviet Union, tend to score lower if not the lowest. The quality of their democracy may fluctuate, but it seems that they have been unable to make a lasting breakthrough. Also, the indices indicate that backsliding is commonplace in Eastern Europe. Poland and Hungary have registered sharp declines in recent years (Freedom House 2018; Varieties of Democracy 2019), but backsliding goes beyond these "paradigmatic cases" (Cianetti, Dawson & Hanley 2018). Russia's scores for instance have also sunken dramatically. Many countries may show signs of backsliding on at least one index, but those who appear on several include BiH, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine. Rarely though is a change so great that the country's classification will change. The Baltic states on the other hand stand out with high, stable scores. Interestingly, the EIU's Democracy Index

(Appendix 5) rated all of Eastern Europe worse in 2019 than in 2006 (year of its first publication) except for the Baltic states (The Economic Intelligence Unit 2019). It should be noted however that democracy indexes are not without criticism. Duvold cautions that they may be misleading because of their questionable methodology and the opaque way in which conclusions and numeric values are reached (2014, 45). This paper tries to remedy that with a mixed method design, including multiple indices and case studies, to provide as much clarity as possible.

When boiling down Eastern European countries into broad categories, EU member states can generally be considered consolidated democracies and non-EU countries non-consolidated democracies. Since it is not exactly clear where democracy begins or ends, the border of these groups blurs, making for edge cases that include Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania and Bulgaria. A third category that this paper is concerned with is democratic backsliding. Although this could span the former two groups (e.g. both Poland and Russia's scores have worsened), this paper is most interested in countries that had previously reached high levels of consolidation but whose progress has slid back. Comparing extreme examples of these three groups through case studies (section 3) may shed more light on why democratization in Eastern Europe goes right or wrong.

2. THEORIES OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC BACKLASH

Prospects for democracy in Eastern Europe were not promising during the communist era, or as Huntington put it, they were "virtually nil" (1984). But the transformation of the region since 1989 has shown that it is far from being a closed case (not to the discredit of political scientists). As Kitschelt points out, a greater diversity of outcomes emerged there than anywhere else in the world, which communist rule alone could not explain (2003, 49). To better understand what is happening, the literature on democratization offers numerous explanations of why democracies consolidate, fail to consolidate or backslide. Combining this with findings on Eastern Europe's unique context may help to untangle the complex developments that have taken place there.

2.1. Consolidation

One factor that is claimed to affect democratic consolidation is economic development, i.e. richer countries are more likely to be democratic. Lipset's (1959) seminal work argues that modernization, along with the greater industrialization, urbanization, education and wealth that it brings, facilitates democracy. Important is the appearance of the middle class, which acts as a buffer between the upper and lower classes. Although his approach differs, Moore's famous remark on an independent urban class was, "No bourgeois, no democracy" (1966, 418). Przeworski *et al.* however find that economic development does not necessarily lead to democracy, rather wealthier countries are more likely to stay democratic (2000). Despite their peculiar, forced industrialization under communism, Eastern Europe's richer, more developed countries do happen to be more democratic (see Appendix 7 for a comparison of GDP (PPP) per capita).

Political culture may have consequences on consolidation. According to Inglehart and Welzel, significant cultural changes take place as countries develop. People then start to prioritize different values and demand freedoms that are intertwined with democracy (2005, 1-4). Alternatively, Huntington argues that there is a “clash of civilization” in which one’s cultural grouping is a driving force. Countries of Western Christianity (e.g. Catholicism, Protestantism), having been impacted most by European history (e.g. the Renaissance, Enlightenment, French Revolution, Industrial Revolution), value things such as democracy, liberalism, human rights, rule of law and a separation of church and state. This puts them at odds with Eastern Orthodox and Islamic countries which hold different, sometimes opposing views (1993). At first glance, an argument of religion seems to fit Eastern Europe, where most consolidated democracies are predominately of Western Christian faith. Orthodox Romania and Bulgaria are exceptions, which nevertheless have some serious problems.

Some scholars have emphasized the importance of agency. Here, democracy hinges on the choices made by people, rather than deep-seated structural factors (e.g. modernization). Rustow writes that lasting democracy is the result of different phases. It takes a sense of community, followed by political struggle and compromise to reach a stage of “habituation” in which democracy is accepted. Political leaders, who handle the negotiating and compromising, are key actors in the process. Rustow also argues that neither economics, social circumstances nor geography are prerequisites for democracy (1970), meaning that it could take hold anywhere. In another top-down model, O’Donnell & Schimitter add that “pacts” between competing elite can facilitate democracy (1986, 37-39). Though vague and more focused on the short-term, elite decision-making looks to be variable in Eastern Europe’s democratic equation.

Political systems might have an impact on democratization. According to Linz, parliamentarism has advantages over presidentialism that make it more conducive to consolidation. While the latter is burdened by fixed terms, zero-sum game contests, dual legitimacy and the personalization of power, the former enjoys greater cooperation and power sharing, which tends to provide more stability (1990). Sedelius & Åberg’s findings on semi-presidential regimes in the region support this. Semi-presidentialism, Eastern Europe’s most common political system, includes different hybrids of parliamentarism and presidentialism. The authors find that Eastern European political systems which allot more power to presidents also tend to have worse records of democratization (2018, 67-79).

Other scholars have pointed to economic inequality. Boix argues that a transition to democracy is most likely when income inequality is low or when the mobility of capital abroad is high. This is because it will diminish or provide an escape from the redistributive effects that a democracy would have on the wealthy (2003, 3). In a similar model, Acemoglu & Robinson argue that the sweet spot is middle levels of inequality, as citizens will have enough incentive to challenge the system, but the elite won't lean too heavy on repression or coups later. The authors emphasize the source of the elite's income as well, claiming that democracy fares best in industrialized societies where the elite invest in (easily damaged) capital. In addition, they recognize the importance of a strong civil society and a larger middle class for consolidation (2006, 31-38).

International forces have ways of influencing democratization. In Eastern Europe, the EU especially seems to have played an important role in consolidation. Kopstein & Reilly for instance find that the proximity and interaction of post-communist states with Western Europe has an impact. Bordering non-communist, democratic and economically powerful neighbors facilitates consolidation, whereas "geographic isolation in the East" hinders it (2000). According to Shleifer & Treisman, post-communist countries are becoming more like the non-communist countries that are nearest to them, e.g. the Baltic states move toward Finland, 'Central' Europe towards Germany and Austria. Belarus though is an exception (2014). Kurtz and Barnes meanwhile stress that it was the possibility of joining the EU, and its strict conditionality on democratic progress for membership and benefits, that was key in democratizing post-communist Europe (2002).

Historical legacies reflect Eastern Europe's success at democratization. Kitschelt writes that pre-communist politics are in some ways reintroduced post-communism. In his words, "Countries that were democratic or semi-authoritarian in the interwar period […] tend to become full-fledged democracies with civic and political rights immediately after 1989". Kitschelt points out that people from the pre-communist era who survived communism brought with them "cognitive capital" that rejuvenated the new political system (2003, 61-62). Darden & Grzymała-Busse interestingly find a relationship between democracy and pre-communist, nationalist schooling. They argue that it delegitimized communist rule and made it more difficult to accept, thus supporting an opposition that eventually replaced it. Consequently, countries where communists left power after the communist era ended more easily reformed and were the more successful at consolidation (2006). Similarly, Kurtz

and Barnes find that the victory of the opposition in the first post-communist elections is a positive sign for democratization (2002). Finally, Pop-Eleches argues that legacies affect democracy in different ways. Democratic institutions were worse "in *Muslim* countries with no *prior statehood* experience, *energy intensive economies* and low *urbanization*." Political and civil rights were "affected by *Western Christianity*, *prewar Soviet Union membership*, and *ethnic fragmentation*", while closing the gap between "formal rights and democratic quality [...] was easier for ethnically homogenous and predominantly Western Christian countries" (2007). It is worth noting that Poland and Hungary had already taken significant steps towards democracy during communist times, presumably helped along by their past. But, these countries are also among the worst backsliders.

2.2. Non-Consolidation

Certain characteristics of countries are found to correlate with the non-consolidation of democracy. One of these is wealth in natural resources, particularly oil (Ross 2001; Fish 2002; Dunning 2008). Blame is placed on the "rentier state", an economy where the generation of "rent" involves few people, relies on the outside world, and is accrued by the government (Beblawi 1987). An abundance of oil for example, which does not require labor intensive production and is sold abroad, may lead to such a situation. Ross argues that this can have pernicious effects on democracy. The "rentier effect" explains how governments use oil revenue to prevent democratic change, e.g. lower taxes dampen demands for accountability. Under the "repression effect", governments build up their security and military forces to protect their authoritarian rule. Finally, a "modernization effect" leads to a lopsided form of development, in which social change that would promote democracy is largely missing (2001). Countries that are rich in natural resources are said to suffer from a paradoxical "resource curse" or "resource trap". According to Ross, evidence shows that they have greater difficulty developing than countries with less resources and are more prone to civil wars (2001). Dunning emphasizes the difference between being *rich* in natural resources and being *dependent* upon them, pointing out that there have been cases in which natural resources actually promoted democracy (2008, 1-5). Natural resources may be a stumbling block in Russia for example, which relies on oil and natural gas exports.

Ethnic diversity may be an obstacle to democracy (Dahl 1971; Horowitz 1993; Fish 2001). The problem here is that divisions within a country (i.e. the lack of a unified *demos*) can make cooperation and compromise more difficult, and in the worst case scenario, lead to violence (e.g. Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Transnistria). Minorities have been accommodated more smoothly in other countries, e.g. Russians in Estonia and Latvia; Hungarians in Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine, but even in these cases integration has been less than ideal. None for instance qualify as a "consociational democracy" which has managed to overcome its divisions and provide greater cohesion, cooperation and a balance of power (Lijphart 1969), as is the case with Switzerland. Instead, minorities still face exclusion which affects their countries' democracy to some extent.

Another factor that may hinder consolidation is Islam. As Fish points out, Islam negatively correlates with democracy, but it is not the cause *per se*. The main culprit seems to be the subordination of women (2002). This for example may be connected to non-consolidation in the Western Balkans. Another factor is agriculture. According to Kurtz and Barnes, large agrarian sectors in Eastern Europe are detrimental to democracy. Because of the legacy of collectivization under communism, rural elites are more accustomed to authoritarian behavior. An exception is Poland, the only Soviet bloc country that managed to abolish collectivization (2002). Returning to economic inequality, Boix argues that high inequality and immobile capital will lead to authoritarianism (2003, 3). For Acemoglu & Robinson, high inequality may result in continued resistance and repression by the elites, hence no democracy. Alternatively, in equal societies where people are generally well off, or the economy is experiencing growth, citizens' demand for more democracy will be low (2006, 29-37).

2.3. Backsliding

The transition from authoritarianism to democracy and then back again is perhaps the trickiest transition to explain. According to Bochsler & Juon, "prominent explanations" given for backsliding in Eastern Europe "include the rise of populist-authoritarian parties that dominate the national governments", and "the inability of the European Union to enforce democratic standards after countries have been granted membership". The authors point out that such "populist-authoritarian parties" are accused of attacking the rule of law, freedom of press and checks and balances, while the EU has greater difficulty reigning in authoritarianism post-accession, as conditionality disappears.

Sanctions (under Article 7 TEU) are ineffective, especially since any two countries can work together to block the unanimity required to implement them (2019). Additionally, Bochsler & Juon write that backsliding could be contagious. After it has begun in one country, it could be seen as a "green light" for authoritarian governments elsewhere to make their move (2019). This however does not get to the root of the problem. These things might explain how backsliding is a slippery slope, but not why some countries tilt towards authoritarianism in the first place. A closer look at other factors are needed to get a handle on what is going on.

One potential cause of backsliding is economic inequality. Acemoglu & Robinson suggest that when economic inequality is high, citizens can overcome their collective-action problem and produce a threat of revolution. But instead of choosing repression, the elite might concede democracy. If redistribution is too great though, the elite will be more likely to stage a coup and reverse democratic changes. In a different scenario, if the elite and military are concerned about the survivability of democracy or capitalism, they might preemptively carry out a coup (2006, 22-37).

Crises could trigger backsliding. Acemoglu & Robinson find that a shift away (or towards) democracy becomes more likely during an economic or political crisis, thanks to the transitional period that it provides (2006, 31-32). This seems to fit Eastern Europe where, according to Bochsler & Juon, "the economic and political consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008" is a "often-cited driver" of change. Incidentally, the EU has not only been too occupied to address democracy within the Union since then, but with "enlargement fatigue", democracy in potential member states is also of less concern (2019). Backsliding does coincide with the 2015 migrant crisis, along with the friction it has caused between Brussels and some eastern EU member states, and the nationalist movements it has fueled.

Other factors include demographic challenges. Krastev argues that Eastern Europe, whose demographic problems are pronounced, is more likely to turn against democracy. The population of the region is dwindling due to low fertility rates and high emigration, while it simultaneously faces increasing immigration, which will inevitably be needed to replenish the labor force. An influx of foreigners however, particularly from outside of Europe, is a source of tension. As a result, a shrinking and aging ethnic majority may view democracy as dangerous and exclude certain people to protect its

interests (2020). In addition, backsliding might be encouraged by the influence of authoritarian powers, e.g. Russia, China, Turkey, who do not demand the same kind of conditionality as the EU. Huntington wrote that a revival of authoritarianism in Russia especially would not bode well for the region (1991).

Backsliding in Eastern Europe may also be facilitated by how the region is a weak foundation for democracy in general. Pop-Eleches & Tucker find that people in post-communist countries are less supportive of democracy (2014). If democratic government fails to deliver prosperity and stability, alternatives might then become more attractive. Thin civil societies, low political participation, corruption, and the way in which democracy was transplanted from the outside could mean that it is all the more precarious. Some go as far to say that backsliding itself in Eastern Europe should be reconsidered. Cianetti, Dawson & Hanley write that it is "problematic as a concept because it assumes a prior period of successful democratisation that is very much open to debate." As such, backsliding could be understood as "a partial and flawed system of democratic measurement prone to inflating the democratic credentials of states whose political elites are willing to undertake superficial institutional reforms without any broader societal process to validate and embed the values implied by those institutions" (2018).

In sum, consolidated democracy is more likely in a country that is richer, industrialized, Western Christian, has a strong middle class, less presidential power, low inequality, is closer to the EU15, homogeneous, or experienced statehood before communism. A non-consolidated democracy on the other hand is more likely in a country that is in many ways the opposite, in one that is poorer, agrarian, Islamic or Eastern Orthodox, with a weaker middle class, stronger presidency, high inequality, is distant from the EU15, ethnically diverse, did not experience pre-communist independence, or is rich in natural resources. Meanwhile, democratic backsliding is more likely a country with higher inequality, instability, is facing economic or political crises, or demographic issues. Incidentally, these are not exhaustive lists of explanations. While it may be tempting to jump to conclusions, it is useful to know that there is not a universal theory of democratization that can explain the phenomenon across all times and places. Also, many characteristics of Eastern European countries could be mere correlations, which do not pinpoint the exact causes of their (non-)consolidation or backsliding.

3. UPS AND DOWNS: EXTREMES OF EASTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Certain countries can represent the highs and lows, as well as the breakdown of democracy in Eastern Europe. To represent consolidated democracies, the best country is arguably Estonia. Of the indices included in this paper, it holds the highest score in five out of six of their latest reports. In the one index where it is not the very best (Polity IV), it still has a near perfect score (note that Estonia ties with Slovenia in Freedom in the World). Having such high, stable index ratings for over a decade makes Estonia a good example of democratic consolidation. Other candidates include Slovenia and the Czech Republic.

On the other end of the spectrum is Belarus, the best non-consolidation example. Quite the opposite of Estonia, Belarus has the lowest scores on all of the attached indices' latest reports. Russia, which ties with Belarus once (Nations in Transit), is the only country that comes close. Russia at one point at least had healthier ratings under more of a hybrid regime, but almost every single score of Belarus has been far from democratic. The third type of country that this paper is concerned with is one whose previously high level of consolidation has slid back. Hungary here is the best example. Once a leader of democracy in the region, Hungary has undergone changes that now put its democracy in doubt. This is reflected by all of the included indices (except Polity IV), which show declines, sometimes dramatic, over the past decade. Poland is the only country that really compares, but its backsliding is not as severe.

Methodologically, this paper uses a mixed method research design that combines the quantitative ratings of several democracy indices with qualitative case studies. Given the large body of work on democratization and the difficulty of creating a universal theory about it, case studies are helpful in gaining a fuller understanding of the process. They are a way to test and flesh out ideas in a real-world

setting and are especially important because every country's experience with democratization is different. A focus on Eastern Europe though, where countries similarly underwent communism, might uncover some sort of regional pattern. The method of picking extreme cases, which maximizes variance on the dependent variable, is meant to narrow countries down to those that best resemble ideal types, which hopefully will tell us the most about democratization in the region. This design was chosen as the best strategy because doing in-depth case studies on each country was infeasible due to space and time constraints.

3.1. Estonia

Estonia has emerged as one of Eastern Europe's democratic frontrunners, but it has been a long road. Like its southern neighbors, Estonia has a long history of foreign domination. It would not be until the end of World War I, after centuries of German, Swedish and Russian rule, that it would have a say over its own fate. During Estonia's brief era of interwar independence however, democracy would internally collapse. And then history interrupted again. Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II, taken by Nazi Germany, and retaken by the Soviet Union, where it would remain for almost another half century. After the fall of communism, a newly independent Estonia quickly turned westward, joining the EU and NATO in 2004. Considered the least corrupt country in Eastern Europe (Transparency International 2019), with national institutions and authorities that its people trust (Duvold 2014, 54), Estonia has put the past behind it and tried "to rebrand itself as a more attractive 'Nordic' country." (Kasekamp 2010, 189) Having secured a means of prosperity and security, Estonia in the meantime has crafted one of the region's highest quality democracies. The following will take a look at potential causes behind it, including pre-communist statehood, neighboring countries, ethnic homogeneity, parliamentarism, Western Christian faith, higher economic development, higher industrialization and low income inequality.

An experience with statehood during the interwar period might have influenced Estonia's later consolidation. During the country's independence from 1918 to 1940, democracy would not survive under Konstantin Päts, but a national reference point seems to have importantly been instilled. Schooling for instance may have given a generation of Estonians "values and ideas of legitimacy at odds with communism", making it "appear as a step backward, an alien and anti-modern imposition."

(Robert 2018, 17) This carried on after Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union, which according to Taagepera, was unable to digest the Baltic states. Instead of becoming more autonomous 'satellite' states, they were made outright Soviet republics, remaining as "a pocket of deep national discontent" that actually helped to unravel the Soviet Union (2013). The Baltic states were incidentally known as the 'Soviet West' during this period for their more liberal, European flavor (Kasekamp 2010, 150). It seems that an era of independence, however brief, followed by a weaker Soviet grip, paved the way for Estonia after communism, which was quickly replaced. Unlike all other ex-Soviet republics today, Estonia and the previously independent Baltic states are alone in consolidating democracies. Most ex-Yugoslav republics have had trouble with their transitions as well, while the countries that experienced independence have generally done better.

Estonia's neighbors have arguably contributed to its consolidation. Finland and Sweden in particular, which were non-communist during the Cold War and quickly joined the EU after it, appear to have had a positive effect. They have helped keep Estonia out of isolation as early as the Soviet period. Kasekamp writes that a ferry link to and television broadcasts from Finland provided Soviet Estonia with a window to the outside world, while Stockholm was home to an active émigré community (2010, 150-151). Since the last days of the Soviet Union, the Nordic countries with their good governance and higher quality of life have been role models for the Baltic states (Duvold 2014, 70). The Nordics were an escape hatch for Estonians during rough economic times, which could have lessened dissatisfaction with the new regime. They even had a hand in the Baltic states' early economic success, in the form of a "housing construction boom driven by cheap credit provided by the Nordic banks which dominated the banking sector." (Kasekamp 2010, 184) Of the many Estonians who have gone abroad in search of a better life, Finland and Sweden have continued to be popular destinations and their much higher salaries a source of remittances. As the Baltic state closest to the Nordic countries, Estonia has been the most successful at emulating them. The influence of neighboring Russia meanwhile has been minimal. Parenthetically, geography might not always be a precondition. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, one exception is post-communist Kyrgyzstan, which moved in a democratic direction regardless of its distance from the West (Kitscheldt 2003, 67).

Ethnic diversity has not been a major obstacle for Estonia, at least not yet. In 2019, Estonia's population was a little over 1.3 million people, of which about 68% were ethnic Estonian, and 24%

ethnic Russian, while a remainder included Ukrainians, Belarusians and smaller minorities (Eesti Statistika 2019). In spite of its large Russian minority, Estonia has been spared much of the ethnic tension and instability that one might expect. According to Duvold, this is because Estonia opted for a one-nation model (i.e. marginalization), controversially restricting the citizenship of Soviet-era immigrants. To do otherwise, Estonia would be accepting what it considers Soviet occupation. A more inclusive approach that would have given Russians a louder voice was also avoided because it could have put Estonia's national survival and transition to the West at risk (2014, 39-51). According to Cianetti, this situation has entrenched an ethnocentric elite that has pursued a technocratic approach at dealing with minority issues, but instead of solving them it has strengthened them (2018). Since assimilation is unlikely, ethnicity could still become a problem as Russians become more politically active (Duvold 2014, 49). The price that Estonia pays for its current stability is sacrificing an even higher level of democracy (Cianetti, Dawson & Hanley 2018), apparently a necessary evil.

Estonia's political system matches the argument that less presidential power facilitates democracy. Having one of Eastern Europe's few purely parliamentarian systems (Sedelius & Åberg 2018, 68-71), political power in Estonia is placed in its unicameral, 101-seat *Riigikogu*, while the position of president is largely ceremonial. This presumably has lent itself to more consensus-based rule, contributing to Estonia's more robust democracy. Duvold points out that Estonia's political system has indeed reached a point of stability that others in the region lack (2014, 63). Parliamentarism alone though does not always guarantee consolidation (e.g. Albania, Macedonia, Moldova), nor do semi-presidential systems with less presidential power (e.g. Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine). Still though, weaker presidencies do generally point to healthier democracies.

Although it is not widespread today, Western Christianity may have had an influence on Estonian democracy. In 2011, one survey estimated that 9.9% of Estonia's population affiliated with Lutheranism, 16.1% affiliated with Orthodoxy, while 54.1% did not feel an affiliation to any religion (Eesti Statistika 2011). Not Western, but Eastern Christianity is now the largest traditional religion in the country, yet Orthodoxy is connected to Russians who are not fully integrated, thus diminishing how much influence their faith might have. Estonia's religious landscape however was remarkably different in the past. Remmel & Uibu point out that for centuries, from the Reformation into its era of independence, Estonia was a predominately Lutheran country (2015). This in turn may have swayed

Estonians towards democracy, in spite of how Lutheranism was not later revived. Additionally, Estonia is now considered one of the least religious countries in the region, but only in a conventional sense, as "Estonians hold the highest level of belief in a spirit or life force" (Remmel & Uibu 2015). This is perhaps unsurprising considering that the Baltic littoral was the last pagan corner of Europe. In short, a history of Western Christianity cannot be ruled out as a cause for Estonia's democracy. A less dogmatic form of spirituality could have had a similar affect, or at least not inhibited democracy.

It is plausible that economic development has played a role in Estonia's democratic consolidation. In 2018, its gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita, a reflection of its wealth, was approximately $35,973. While it does lag behind the developed West (e.g. Germany's was $53,074), Estonia is still among the richest Eastern European countries (World Bank 2018c). Huntington for one believes that countries who make it to this middle stage of economic development, especially "its upper reaches", are more likely to democratize (1991). Estonia's greater wealth may indeed have facilitated its democracy or at least made it more durable. This could also have had a pacifying effect on the country's Russian minority, which was originally drawn to the Baltic for its much higher standard of living (Kasekamp 2010, 141). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, with prospects looking worse in Russia, greater wealth might have been compensation that quelled separatism (unlike in Moldova, Eastern Europe's poorest country). Incidentally, Estonia is unlikely to become much wealthier. As rapid as the Baltic states' growth was during the 2000s, it was highly volatile and not telling of future potential (Staehr 2015). Economic development may not always matter (e.g. India is a poor country that did democratize, while Singapore is a rich country that did not), but it strongly correlates with the region's democracy.

Industrialization is thought to be conducive to democracy, but Estonia is not among the most heavily industrialized countries in Eastern Europe[2]. According to the World Bank's Industrialization intensity index, it ranks as a mid-range country for the region (2014). What Estonia does produce and export tends to be more low-tech goods, while it mostly only assembles high-tech ones (Staehr 2015). Its economy is not very sophisticated, although that is not uncommon for the region. Moreover, a few

[2] The older literature on democratization, i.e. Lipset (1959), generally finds industrialization synonymous with economic development. Showing that a country democratized without heavy industrialization, or vice versa, could however prove later views, i.e. Acemoglu & Robinson (2006), wrong about democracy in Eastern Europe.

exceptions exist that seem to make industrialization a weak argument for Eastern European democracy. Belarus for instance is very industrialized yet undemocratic, while Latvia is the opposite.

Income inequality might explain Estonia's democratic consolidation. In 2017 the country had a Gini coefficient of 0.309 (0 being most equal, 1 most unequal) which is somewhat high for Europe, but not drastic compared to other countries worldwide (OECD 2019). As such, the Estonian elite seemingly has less to lose from democracy, hence less of a problem granting it. Wealth is spread around enough to suggest that the country's middle class is substantial, meaning that protects against polarization and also facilitates democracy. A problem with this approach however is that people may not prioritize wealth redistribution in the first place. Knutsen & Wegmann show that it is not one of the main characteristics that people look for in a democracy, especially among those who previously lived under communism (2016).

Estonia's democratic success seems to be the product of its pre-communist statehood, good neighbors, weak presidentialism and greater wealth. It is missing enough ingredients however, such as homogeneity, Western Christianity (at least today) and industrialization, to make its climb to the top of democracy indices slightly puzzling. Democracy in Slovenia or the Czech Republic would be more understandable, as they are more in line theoretically with consolidation. To explain Estonia's somewhat unusual case, one could point to certain aspects of the country that might make up for what it lacks. Interwar independence for example could have had a particularly profound effect on the country, strengthening its national unity and planting the seeds of future democracy. Or, the Nordic countries could be exceptionally good neighbors. Estonia being smaller and more easily governable could make democracy more likely. The end of communism meanwhile meant a replacement of the elites, who, pushed by fear of Russia, strove to integrate Estonia with the West. This required democracy but also excluding a potentially disruptive Russian minority from political participation. After joining the EU and NATO, Russian influence on the country was then minimized. At most, Estonia's case may show which ingredients of consolidation are most important.

3.2. Belarus

Belarus is arguably the least democratic country in Eastern Europe and among the least democratic countries in the world. Like many others in the region, its history is one of foreign rule. Having formerly been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Russian Empire, Belarus was occupied at the end of World War I by Germany and divided between Poland and the Soviet Union during the interwar period. In World War II it was occupied again by Germany and reclaimed by the Soviet Union afterwards. Belarus finally gained independence in 1991, joining the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that year and the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. In the meantime however, democracy has failed to take root. Under the long-term presidency of Lukashenko, the country instead has earned the label 'Europe's last dictatorship'. To explain Belarus' extreme non-consolidation, this part will explore several possible causes. Much the opposite of consolidation, they include a lack of pre-communist statehood, the influence of neighbors, ethnic diversity, presidentialism, Eastern Orthodoxy, lower economic development, lower industrialization, high income inequality as well as a dependence on natural resources.

An absence of statehood before communism might explain Belarus' non-consolidation. As Marples points out, a "national consciousness came late to Belarus", whose people and language in the early twentieth century were not considered separate from that of the Russians. Belarusians also lived in rural areas, while Russians, Poles and Jews lived in cities (2002, 57-58). According to Wilson, an independent Belarus was declared under German occupation during World War I, but it was unpopular, largely unrecognized and would not achieve so much as quasi-independence (2011, 91-95). The creation of a state seems to have failed due to a weak Belarusian identity that was then further diluted. By the end of the Soviet Union, Belarus was "one of the most loyal Soviet republics" (Wilson 2011, 117), which declared independence simply because there were no alternatives (Marples 2002, 307-308). In brief, non-consolidation here could be traced back to how a counterweight to communism was missing. Also, Belarus did not see a clean cut with the past, as its Soviet era elite carried over after independence, presumably hampering democratic reform.

Belarus' authoritarian regime can be understood through its relations with neighboring countries. Lebanidze writes that since winning Belarus' only democratic election in 1994, president Lukashenko

has dismantled checks and balances and silenced opposition. At almost every step of the way, Russia, whose own democracy would devolve, has played a role. Russia for instance gave Lukashenko the help he needed to outmaneuver opponents, has shielded him from Western criticism, and provided his regime with financial, political and diplomatic support. In return, Belarus has acted as a "bulwark against Western expansion" (2020, 153-155). Minsk though is not a perfect ally of Moscow. In spite of them both belonging to a "Union State", Belarus has been reluctant to fully commit itself to Russian-led integration projects. Incidentally, it did not recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea. On Belarus' western flank meanwhile, the democratizing effect of the EU has been marginal. According to Lebanidze, EU sanctions against the regime have been superficial, inconsistent and ineffective. The situation is exacerbated by Belarus' lack of pro-EU elites and pro-democratic mobilization (2020, 156-159). Belarus' non-consolidation seems to have taken place between a zealous neighbor in Russia and an underwhelming EU.

The strong presidential power of Belarus' political system matches the argument for non-consolidation. According to Sedelius & Åberg, Belarus on paper has a type of semi-presidentialism called a president-parliamentary system, in which a popularly elected president appoints a prime minister and cabinet, but can remove them as well. Thus, the prime minister depends on the confidence of both the parliament *and* president, strengthening the latter. The Belarusian presidency though is considered especially powerful, comparable to a purely presidential system (2018, 68-71). Such an arrangement could have set democracy up to fail in Belarus, where one person has ultimately run away with power. Lukashenko, having "falsified every election since 1999" (Lebanidze 2020, 154), has returned elections to a Soviet-esque pageantry in which the results are determined beforehand. He has allowed himself to remain in office for over a quarter century, making him extraordinary even among presidents.

Belarus' non-consolidation does not seem due to ethnic diversity. According to the 2009 census, about 83% of the country's 9.5 million population identified as Belarusian, and 8% as Russian, while a remainder included Poles and Ukrainians. Interestingly however, when asked which language they usually spoke at home, a staggering 70% of respondents answered Russian, while only 23% answered Belarusian (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus 2009). Belarusians make up the vast majority of their country but few speak the titular language. According to Zeller & Sitchinava,

the dominance of Russian began from the 1930s onward, as it was needed to advance one's career during Soviet times. After gaining independence, Russian became the second official language of Belarus, following a controversial 1995 referendum, and has continued to gain ground ever since (2020, 108-110). Rather than ethnic diversity, an affinity for Russia through language could be an obstacle for Belarusian democracy.

Eastern Orthodoxy could explain Belarus' non-consolidation. One 2015-2016 survey found that about 73% of Belarusians identified with Orthodox Christianity, 12% with Catholicism, while the rest were unaffiliated or belonged to different faiths (Pew Research Center 2017). Laying for the most part outside of Western Christendom, Belarus missed several historical developments that might have engrained favorable attitudes toward democracy. This supports the argument of how a "Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology as the most significant diving line in Europe" (Huntington 1993). Another possible cause of Belarus' non-consolidation is its lower economic development. In 2018, the country had a GDP (PPP) per capita of approximately $19,994 (World Bank 2018c), among the lowest in the region. Countries with similar levels of economic development have also struggled consolidating democracy.

As mentioned earlier, there does not seem to be a clear connection between industrialization and democracy in Eastern Europe. According to the World Bank's Industrialization intensity index, Belarus is considered one of the region's most industrialized countries, contrary to what one may assume. Latvia on the other hand is less industrialized (2014) yet far more democratic. The region's industrialization may simply reflect where the communists decided to invest, at a time when democracy was out of the question. It does not speak of the quality of industry either. Incidentally, Belarus is considered to have the largest urban population in Eastern Europe (World Bank 2018), which casts doubt on whether urbanization is linked to democracy there. Similar to industrialization, it may only be a sign of the communists' top-down planning.

Arguments about income inequality do not make complete sense for Belarus. According to the World Bank, the country in 2018 had a Gini coefficient of about 0.252 (2018b). Assuming that people are very concerned about wealth redistribution, Belarus' low inequality does not explain why the elite

would hold democracy back, as they would seemingly have little to lose[3]. Following Acemoglu & Robinson's argument (2006, 37) though, Belarusian citizens could be apathetic about democracy because it would not bring about much more prosperity. Finally, natural resource wealth is considered a cause of non-consolidation, but this does not seem to fit Belarus well either. In 2017, some 20-25% of Belarusian exports were made up of minerals (mostly petroleum products) or metals (Harvard University 2017). This however is reasonably below a level of dependency, which means that the effects of a possible "rentier state" or "resource curse" would be minimal. A place where this is more likely is Russia, whose exports rely far more on natural resources.

Belarus' lack of a pre-communist state, a bad neighbor, strong presidency, Eastern Orthodoxy and lower economic development seem to be the nails in the coffin of its democracy. Like Estonia, this shows that an extreme case does not entirely have to match theory. Russia for instance checks nearly all of the boxes but still is not the worst performer. An important factor in Belarus' non-consolidation seems to be the deeply rooted ties that the country has with Russia. Belarus was long the province of a Russian land and blended with it in a way that other subjects did not. By the time it appeared on a map, Belarus was perhaps the most Russified of ex-Soviet republics and to this day has difficulty shaking its powerful, undemocratic neighbor. Russia is connected to elite-decision making in Belarus, which is also relevant. In absence of a democratic opposition, Lukashenko found support for his power grabs through constitutional changes and manipulating elections, which steered Belarus down an authoritarian route (Lebanidze 2020, 153-155). Again, a handful of ingredients stand out, possibly those which are crucial to a country's outcome.

3.3. Hungary

Hungary was an early democratic success that fell from grace. Its case thus differs from the previous two in that it had made it to one extreme only to change course for the other. The country's historical background differs as well, since it had once enjoyed a stronger position in region. The Kingdom of Hungary had been a medieval great power (Nyyssönen 2018), later ruled over by the Austrian Empire

[3] There is however reasonable doubt about data on Belarus. The elite's income could very well be hidden away, meaning that inequality is in fact higher and they *would* have something to lose.

with whom it would share a dual-monarchy. After the defeat of the Central Powers in World War I however, Hungary lost "more than two-thirds of its territory and one-half of its population" (Krastev 2018). Following an independent interwar period, the country fought alongside the Axis during World War II, subsequently being overrun by the Red Army and turned into a Soviet satellite state. By 1989 Hungary regained its independence and integrated with the West, joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. Since 2010 however, under the Fidesz party of current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary has undergone some alarming changes, eroding away its once healthy democracy. After discussing why the country may have democratized in the first place, this part will look at possible reasons behind its backsliding, such as crises, the influence of outside authoritarian powers, weak popular support for democracy and demographic challenges. It will also discuss why the limitations of the EU can make backsliding difficult to control once it has begun.

Hungary's initial democratization seems to make sense. It had a pre-, if not anti-communist state during the interwar period, presumably making communist rule more difficult to install[4]. The country showed its defiance with the uprising of 1956, which was then followed by a more lenient 'goulash communism'. In the late 1980s Hungary went on to lead the reform movement with Poland (Lewis 2011, 13) and was incidentally the first Eastern European country to become a republic (Nyyssönen 2018). Hungary shows many of the other positive signs for democracy as well, including a good neighbor in Austria, a purely parliamentarian political system (Sedelius & Åberg 2018, 68-71), a homogenous population (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2018) and a Catholic majority (Pew Research Center 2017). The country is also heavily industrialized (World Bank 2014) and has a low level of income inequality (OECD 2019), assuming that these factors are important. With a GDP (PPP) per capita of roughly $31,102 (World Bank 2018c), it is far from being the poorest country in the region. With so many of the right pieces in place, it begs the question of why Hungarian democracy has suffered.

A series of crises has arguably undermined Hungary's democracy. Starting in 2006, a scandal involving then Prime Minister Gyurcsány led to a political crisis, the eventual downfall of the MSZP

[4] Some would argue that interwar Hungary was fascist, which would hardly be a democratic legacy. But the main point here is that it was independent. This arguably fueled an opposition that would eventually replace communism, support reform and democratize.

party and the end of the country's polarized, two-party system (Becker 2010). The 2008 global financial crisis soon thereafter was harsh on Hungary, which according to Andor, was the most financially vulnerable country in the region. Being the first new EU member state to ask for loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was also considered the "sign of a massive government failure" (2009). This paved the way for the "right-wing conservative, or right-wing populist" Fidesz party to win in a landslide victory, as well as the appearance of the extreme right-wing Jobbik party in power (Becker 2010). According to Ágh, the Fidesz party of Prime Minister Orbán misused its supermajority in parliament to overhaul the political system, making constitutional changes that destroyed the system of checks and balances. The party also infiltrated Hungarian society, including its economy, civil society and media, appointing loyalists to privileged positions. The 2015 migrant crisis presented Fidesz with another opportunity, which it used to gain support and strengthen feelings of xenophobia (2016). Events in early 2020 look to be yet another turning point. As of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic has ground much of the world to a halt. Amid the emergency, the Hungarian parliament controversially granted Orbán the right to rule by decree, indefinitely (Bayer 2020).

Hungary has opened up to outside authoritarian powers, but they do not appear to drive its backsliding. Buzogány argues that while Orbán has "praised 'illiberal democracy'" and "cited the authoritarian regimes of Russia, China, Turkey, and Singapore" as models to follow, strengthening ties with such countries is out of pragmatism, not exactly because of "authoritarian diffusion". What the Orbán regime seeks is "economic benefits" abroad and ways to balance its worsening relations with the West. With Russia for instance, Hungary will lend its "rhetorical support" where their interests coincide, e.g. energy (2017). In return, Russia gets a "Trojan horse" within the EU (Orenstein & Kelemen 2016). While outside authoritarian powers may threaten Eastern Europe's democracy, they do not seem to be coaching Hungary's regime, rather, they look more like convenient partners.

Democracy does not seem to have deteriorated in Hungary because it lacks popular support. At least one survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center, shows that most Hungarians hold favorable views towards democracy, just not the one that they have. The majority of people answered that they approve of the shift to a multi-party system and that they value free speech, free press, internet freedom and a fair judicial system. The survey shows however that many are dissatisfied with how democracy is functioning in Hungary. Hungarians seem skeptical about their ruling elite; most believe for instance

that politicians and businesspeople have benefited more than ordinary people since communism and that their leaders do not care about what they think. Incidentally, most Hungarians view the EU positively (2019).

Hungarians though may find it difficult to get what they want because the elite that they democratically voted into office has entrenched its power. Orbán for instance has "heavily gerrymandered voting districts" and introduced "voting rights for Hungarians living abroad", almost all of which vote for Fidesz (Buzogány 2017). In 2018, Hungary's parliamentary elections saw "intimidating and xenophobic rhetoric, media bias and opaque campaign financing [that] constricted the space for genuine political debate, hindering voters' ability to make a fully-informed choice." (OSCE 2018) The results of the elections showed a discrepancy between percentages of votes and parliamentary seats won as well. According to the OSCE, the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition garnered 49% of votes and won 66% of seats (enough to reach the supermajority), while other parties gained smaller shares of power. Jobbik with 19% of votes won only 13% of seats, MSZP-Dialogue with 11% of votes won 10%, and the Democratic Coalition with 5% of votes won 4% (2018). Bozóki & Hegedűs write that Hungary's now "uneven political playing field" makes a "democratic self-adjustment" far less likely (2018).

Hungary's backsliding could be explained by the country's demographic challenges, one of which is population decline. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Hungary's population in 1990 was about 10.3 million. In 2016, it was down to about 9.8 million. Older age groups also made up an increasing proportion of the population (2018). Moreover, Hungary has seen a steady trickle of emigration to the West. According to Krastev, this has included many liberal minded people, impatient for change in their own country, but whose support its democracy needs (2018). The youth, who are too few to affect politics, instead choose to "vote with their feet" (Krastev 2020). Meanwhile, immigration to Hungary has been framed as an invasion by the Orbán government, which intends to protect the country (Ágh 2016) and its Christian identity. Though its situation is not entirely unique for Eastern Europe, Hungary's native population is shrinking and aging, apparently drained of those who support a more liberal democracy, while at the same time confronted by immigration. As Krastev argues (2020), it may thus be willing to strip democracy down to preserve its status.

The EU in its relations with Hungary is not a cause for backsliding in and of itself, but the Union does have trouble preventing regression and could even accelerate it. Before accession for instance, the EU has leverage over aspiring member states with political conditionality, requiring that they provide democratic institutions and human rights. After accession however that conditionality disappears, making it difficult for the EU to maintain their democratic progress. So far, the EU has generally been non-confrontational, showing (perhaps too much) respect for member states' sovereignty (Ágh 2016). Bozóki & Hegedűs point out that it also lacks the "political and legal tools" to deal with "norm-breaking member states" like Hungary, who are without precedent. Sanctions are ineffective because "the Polish and Hungarian governments strategically safeguard each other" (2018). This has led to an 'illiberal bloc' within the Union, capable of challenging Brussels (Nyyssönen 2018). Bozóki & Hegedűs write that the EU even supports Hungary's authoritarian shift, albeit indirectly, as its "cohesion fund has contributed to the stability and modest growth of the economy, and thus the political stability of the regime". The EU helps to legitimize it as well, due to the "lack of sanctions and open criticism" (2018). Although, authoritarianism is itself limited in Hungary. According to Bozóki & Hegedűs, as long as the country belongs to a pro-democratic union, the Orbán regime will be constrained in some ways, such as with ignoring human rights. However serious the attempt, trying to reinstate the death penalty for example was a bridge too far (2018).

Hungary, which had the makings of a consolidated democracy, seems to have been hit by a perfect storm. Its backsliding could be explained by how disappointment in its first democratically elected governments undermined trust in democracy as such. An authoritarian party then came out on top of crises, wielding enough power to rig the political system in its favor. An increasingly small and old native population faced with immigration may also see democracy more as a threat. Meanwhile, the EU, likely an original source of Hungary's democratization, has had its hands tied since the country's accession in that it could no longer keep its democracy on track. Hungary's Achilles' heel could even have been its weaker economic performance, which left it less protected through trying times. Also, an elite representing change was apparently not as committed to democracy as supposed. Another interpretation, according to Nyyssönen, is that Orbán's Hungary is "in search of prestige". With a more glorious past lingering in the background, the country is trying to distinguish itself from the EU and establish itself as a 'middle power', even at the cost of democracy (2018). Whether Hungary will continue to devolve or emerge as an example of "re-democratization" (Ágh 2016) only time will tell.

What its case does show us is that even the healthiest democracies are at risk, and given the right circumstances, a crack can turn into a fissure.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to understand the fate of democracy in Eastern Europe. Using many of the available democracy indices, it has shown that the EU is a significant border in the region, as countries that fall within it are generally consolidated democracies, while those outside of it are not. A handful of countries do however straddle the two categories. Also, the indices indicate that backsliding is indeed rife. Democracy appears to have worsened in many places over the years, often slightly, but sometimes greatly, even among those once heralded as success stories. To help explain countries' varying performance, the paper delved into the literature on democratization, which offers a myriad of potential causes. Extreme cases were then chosen from across the indices, Estonia to represent consolidation, Belarus non-consolidation and Hungary backsliding. Assuming that these cases contained the most important ingredients for their outcomes, several hypotheses were tested against them to hopefully shed light on what is happening in Eastern Europe.

The case studies confirmed some but not all the hypotheses. For instance, they supported that if a country had pre-communist statehood it would be more likely to democratize after communism. They also supported that having neighbors from and closer ties with the EU15, in contrast to say Russia, is most beneficial for democracy, as is a political system with less presidential power (i.e. more parliamentarianism). A strong correlation between democracy and economic development is present as well in Eastern Europe, as the region's richest countries do all happen to be the most democratic, while poorer ones generally face more problems. Meanwhile, Western Christianity seems linked to democracy, whereas Eastern Orthodoxy does not. Arguments of income inequality, industrialization or even urbanization seem weak, as their relationship to the region's democracy is not obvious. Ethnic diversity and natural resource wealth pose potential obstacles, yet as Estonia's case shows, the former at least can be a manageable issue. A higher quality democracy may eventually slide back as result of crises, mismanagement and changing demographics. Since that country will be an EU member state,

the Union's limited influence after accession could act as a catalyst. In addition, the elite play an important role with the direction they chose to take the country.

With so many moving parts, exceptions and no overarching theory, the democratization of a country, let alone an entire region is difficult to pin down. One may predict the outcome of an Eastern European country based upon its history, neighbors, political system, wealth and religion, but even this information will not tell you everything, because causation and correlation are not easily distinguishable. It is not clear for example if a country is democratic because it is rich or vice versa. One could argue that pre-communist statehood and neighboring countries are the most probable causal links in the region, yet this is still debatable. Future research could take a closer at certain factors, e.g. industrialization and urbanization, or explore new ones, such as the effects of atheism/irreligion or fascism on democracy. Ultimately though, so much specificity might mean that lessons learned from one case, even an extreme one, are not necessarily applicable to others. Thus, to truly understand democracy in Eastern Europe one would have to investigate each country separately, which would call for a greater number of detailed case studies.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Freedom House, Nations in Transit, Democracy Scores 1999-2018

(1 = most democratic, 7 = least democratic)

	1999-2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Albania	4.75	4.25	4.13	3.79	3.82	3.93	4.14	4.18	4.14	4.11
Belarus	6.25	6.38	6.54	6.71	6.71	6.50	6.68	6.71	6.64	6.61
Bosnia-Herzegovina	5.42	4.83	4.29	4.07	4.11	4.25	4.36	4.43	4.50	4.64
Bulgaria	3.58	3.33	3.25	2.93	2.86	3.04	3.14	3.25	3.25	3.39
Croatia	4.46	3.54	3.83	3.71	3.64	3.71	3.61	3.68	3.68	3.75
Czech Republic	2.08	2.46	2.33	2.25	2.14	2.21	2.18	2.25	2.21	2.29
Estonia	2.25	2.00	1.92	1.96	1.93	1.96	1.93	1.96	1.93	1.82
Hungary	1.88	2.13	1.96	2.00	2.14	2.39	2.86	2.96	3.29	3.71
Latvia	2.29	2.25	2.17	2.07	2.07	2.18	2.11	2.07	2.07	2.07
Lithuania	2.29	2.21	2.13	2.21	2.25	2.25	2.29	2.36	2.32	2.36
Macedonia	3.83	4.46	4.00	3.82	3.86	3.79	3.89	4.00	4.29	4.36
Moldova	4.25	4.50	4.88	4.96	5.00	5.14	4.89	4.86	4.89	4.93
Montenegro	–	–	3.83	3.89	3.79	3.79	3.82	3.86	3.93	3.93
Poland	1.58	1.63	1.75	2.14	2.39	2.32	2.14	2.18	2.32	2.89
Romania	3.54	3.71	3.58	3.39	3.36	3.46	3.43	3.46	3.46	3.46
Russia	4.58	5.00	5.25	5.75	5.96	6.14	6.18	6.29	6.50	6.61
Serbia	–	–	3.83	3.71	3.79	3.71	3.64	3.64	3.75	3.96
Slovakia	2.71	2.17	2.08	1.96	2.29	2.68	2.50	2.61	2.61	2.61
Slovenia	1.88	1.83	1.75	1.75	1.86	1.93	1.89	1.93	2.00	2.07
Ukraine	4.63	4.92	4.88	4.21	4.25	4.39	4.82	4.93	4.68	4.64

Source: Freedom House (2009); Freedom House (2018)

Appendix 2. Freedom House, Freedom in the World, Aggregate Scores 2003-2020

(100 = most free, 0 = least free)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Albania	68	68	66	63	64	65	66	65	66	63	63	67	67	67	68	68	68	67
Belarus	24	21	19	15	14	13	15	15	15	14	14	14	14	17	20	21	19	19
Bosnia-Herzegovina	50	56	59	62	64	62	61	61	60	60	62	61	60	57	55	55	53	53
Bulgaria	86	86	87	87	86	85	82	82	82	81	81	78	79	80	80	80	80	80
Croatia	80	79	82	84	85	85	84	86	86	86	86	86	86	87	87	86	85	85
Czech Republic	84	89	93	92	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	94	95	95	94	93	91	91
Estonia	87	89	93	95	95	94	95	95	95	95	95	95	95	94	94	94	94	94
Hungary	89	89	92	93	92	92	92	91	90	88	88	88	82	79	76	72	70	70
Latvia	86	86	87	89	89	88	87	86	85	84	84	84	85	86	87	87	87	89
Lithuania	89	90	87	90	90	90	91	90	90	90	90	90	91	91	91	91	91	91
North Macedonia	64	65	63	61	60	60	60	63	66	65	64	64	60	57	57	58	59	63
Moldova	60	60	57	57	57	57	55	58	63	65	65	64	63	60	62	61	58	60
Montenegro	–	–	–	–	65	65	66	69	72	72	72	72	71	70	69	67	65	62
Poland	88	89	92	92	91	93	93	93	93	93	93	93	93	93	89	85	84	84
Romania	78	79	72	75	81	81	83	83	83	83	81	84	83	83	84	84	81	83
Russia	42	41	35	35	34	32	31	27	27	28	27	26	23	22	20	20	20	20
Serbia	–	–	–	–	76	76	76	78	78	78	78	78	80	78	76	73	67	66
Slovakia	83	87	90	91	91	91	91	90	90	92	92	91	90	89	89	89	88	88
Slovenia	92	92	91	92	91	91	91	91	91	91	91	91	91	92	92	93	94	94
Ukraine	52	50	55	72	73	73	73	73	67	60	57	55	62	61	61	62	60	62

Source: Freedom House (2020)

Appendix 3. Polity IV, Combined Polity Scores 1990-2018

(10 = Full Democracy, 9 – 6 = Democracy, 5 – 1 = Open Anocracy, 0 – -5 = Closed Anocracy, -6 – 10 = Autocracy, -66 = interruption, -77 = interregnum)

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Albania	1	5	5	0	5	5	7	7	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Belarus	–	7	7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7	-7
Bosnia	–	-77	-77	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66	-66
Bulgaria	8	8	8	8	8	8	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Croatia	–	-3	-3	-5	-5	8	8	8	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Czech Republic	–	–	10	10	10	10	10	10	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Estonia	–	6	6	6	6	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Hungary	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Latvia	–	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Lithuania	–	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Macedonia	6	6	6	6	6	6	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Moldova	–	5	7	7	7	7	8	8	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Montenegro	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Poland	5	8	8	9	9	9	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Romania	5	5	5	8	8	8	8	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Russia	–	5	3	3	3	6	6	6	6	4	4	4	4	4	4
Serbia	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Slovakia	–	–	7	7	9	9	9	9	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Slovenia	–	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Ukraine	–	6	7	7	7	6	6	6	7	7	6	6	4	4	4

Source: Center for Systemic Peace (2019)

Appendix 4. Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Democracy Status 2006-2018

(0 = least democratic, 10 = most democratic)

	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Albania	7.25	7.50	7.55	7.25	6.70	6.95	7.05
Belarus	3.97	3.93	4.08	3.93	3.93	3.93	4.33
Bosnia-Herzegovina	6.80	6.70	6.50	6.40	6.35	6.30	6.10
Bulgaria	8.45	8.70	8.75	8.65	8.35	7.15	8.10
Croatia	9.10	8.85	8.50	8.40	8.45	8.40	8.35
Czech Republic	9.45	9.55	9.80	9.65	9.60	9.45	9.40
Estonia	9.40	9.55	9.60	9.55	9.70	9.70	9.75
Hungary	9.40	9.35	9.25	8.35	7.95	7.60	7.15
Latvia	8.30	8.70	8.85	8.80	8.75	8.75	8.75
Lithuania	9.25	9.35	9.30	9.35	9.25	9.30	9.45
Macedonia	7.55	7.75	7.95	7.60	7.20	6.65	6.45
Moldova	5.40	6.85	6.65	7.05	7.15	6.70	6.20
Montenegro	–	7.85	7.80	7.60	7.90	7.85	7.55
Poland	9.20	8.80	9.00	9.20	9.35	9.50	8.55
Romania	8.20	8.55	8.50	8.55	7.90	8.15	8.15
Russia	5.70	5.35	5.25	5.35	4.40	4.40	4.55
Serbia	7.40	7.55	8.00	8.05	7.95	7.85	7.70
Slovakia	9.20	9.20	9.35	9.00	9.05	8.85	8.60
Slovenia	9.55	9.70	9.75	9.65	9.30	9.20	9.25
Ukraine	7.10	7.35	7.00	6.10	6.10	6.75	6.90

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018)

Appendix 5. The Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2006-2019

(10.0-8.0 = Full democracy, 8.0-6.0 = Flawed democracy, 6.0-4.0 = Hybrid regime, 4.0-0 = Authoritarian regime)

	2006	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Albania	5.91	5.91	5.86	5.81	5.67	5.67	5.67	5.91	5.91	5.98	5.98	5.89
Belarus	3.34	3.34	3.34	3.16	3.04	3.04	3.69	3.62	3.54	3.13	3.13	2.88
Bosnia-Herzegovina	5.78	5.70	5.32	5.24	5.11	5.02	4.78	4.83	4.87	4.87	4.98	4.86
Bulgaria	7.10	7.02	6.84	6.78	6.72	6.83	6.73	6.73	6.73	6.73	6.73	7.03
Croatia	7.04	7.04	6.81	6.73	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.93	6.75	6.63	6.57	6.57
Czech Republic	8.17	8.19	8.19	8.19	8.19	8.06	7.94	7.94	7.82	7.62	7.69	7.69
Estonia	7.74	7.68	7.68	7.61	7.61	7.61	7.74	7.85	7.85	7.79	7.97	7.90
Hungary	7.53	7.44	7.21	7.04	6.96	6.96	6.90	6.84	6.72	6.64	6.63	6.63
Latvia	7.37	7.23	7.05	7.05	7.05	7.05	7.48	7.37	7.31	7.25	7.38	7.49
Lithuania	7.43	7.36	7.24	7.24	7.24	7.54	7.54	7.54	7.47	7.41	7.50	7.50
Moldova	6.50	6.50	6.33	6.32	6.32	6.32	6.32	6.35	6.01	5.94	5.85	5.75
Montenegro	6.57	6.43	6.27	6.15	6.05	5.94	5.94	6.01	5.72	5.96	5.74	5.65
North Macedonia	6.33	6.21	6.16	6.16	6.16	6.16	6.25	6.02	5.23	5.57	5.87	5.97
Poland	7.30	7.30	7.05	7.12	7.12	7.12	7.47	7.09	6.83	6.67	6.67	6.62
Romania	7.06	7.06	6.60	6.54	6.54	6.54	6.68	6.68	6.62	6.44	6.38	6.49
Russia	5.02	4.48	4.26	3.92	3.74	3.59	3.39	3.31	3.24	3.17	2.94	3.11
Serbia	6.62	6.49	6.33	6.33	6.33	6.67	6.71	6.71	6.57	6.41	6.41	6.41
Slovakia	7.40	7.33	7.35	7.35	7.35	7.35	7.35	7.29	7.29	7.16	7.10	7.17
Slovenia	7.96	7.96	7.69	7.76	7.88	7.88	7.57	7.57	7.51	7.50	7.50	7.50
Ukraine	6.94	6.94	6.30	5.94	5.91	5.84	5.42	5.70	5.70	5.69	5.69	5.90

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit (2019)

Appendix 6. Varieties of Democracy, Liberal Democracy Index 1990-2018

(1 = most democratic, 0 = least democratic)

	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Albania	0.077	0.346	0.361	0.345	0.343	0.369	0.425	0.440	0.448	0.473	0.477	0.476	0.465	0.463	0.429
Belarus	–	0.457	0.453	0.243	0.148	0.124	0.096	0.097	0.092	0.097	0.090	0.092	0.105	0.107	0.122
Bosnia-Herzegovina	–	0.088	0.061	0.130	0.225	0.258	0.269	0.277	0.280	0.275	0.279	0.283	0.261	0.260	0.369
Bulgaria	0.316	0.631	0.631	0.641	0.640	0.653	0.644	0.643	0.637	0.651	0.596	0.594	0.601	0.639	0.499
Croatia	–	0.156	0.239	0.260	0.284	0.553	0.656	0.616	0.639	0.655	0.719	0.736	0.682	0.601	0.573
Czech Republic	–	–	0.817	0.827	0.824	0.811	0.818	0.822	0.833	0.838	0.816	0.808	0.775	0.773	0.702
Estonia	–	0.385	0.820	0.848	0.849	0.823	0.823	0.841	0.842	0.826	0.827	0.846	0.845	0.863	0.843
Hungary	0.552	0.719	0.717	0.710	0.720	0.723	0.726	0.727	0.709	0.729	0.660	0.603	0.593	0.549	0.441
Latvia	–	0.612	0.724	0.719	0.721	0.723	0.736	0.745	0.731	0.716	0.734	0.783	0.767	0.750	0.763
Lithuania	–	0.732	0.785	0.778	0.774	0.771	0.767	0.779	0.760	0.772	0.800	0.796	0.770	0.761	0.730
Macedonia	–	–	0.348	0.380	0.416	0.377	0.430	0.522	0.495	0.449	0.414	0.339	0.269	0.278	0.360
Moldova	–	0.374	0.409	0.424	0.453	0.455	0.351	0.351	0.364	0.376	0.492	0.543	0.526	0.438	0.432
Montenegro	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.385	0.390	0.386	0.387	0.398	0.382	0.349
Poland	0.446	0.801	0.803	0.789	0.802	0.808	0.811	0.811	0.789	0.820	0.816	0.841	0.795	0.687	0.548
Romania	0.159	0.367	0.409	0.420	0.452	0.451	0.447	0.457	0.460	0.496	0.547	0.536	0.576	0.613	0.408
Russia	–	0.324	0.322	0.320	0.319	0.426	0.190	0.169	0.152	0.156	0.161	0.162	0.137	0.128	0.124
Serbia	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.517	0.529	0.502	0.490	0.353	0.337	0.280
Slovakia	–	–	0.385	0.566	0.616	0.770	0.766	0.763	0.766	0.756	0.774	0.784	0.727	0.736	0.711
Slovenia	–	0.766	0.762	0.757	0.756	0.763	0.750	0.754	0.748	0.762	0.811	0.768	0.803	0.798	0.773
Ukraine	–	0.345	0.384	0.374	0.289	0.269	0.262	0.286	0.409	0.454	0.350	0.299	0.268	0.229	0.223

Source: Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, *et al.* (2018); Varieties of Democracy (2019)

Appendix 7. Eastern European Countries by GDP (PPP) per capita (in international dollars), 2018

Czech Republic	$39,743
Slovenia	$38,048
Estonia	$35,973
Lithuania	$35,461
Slovakia	$33,736
Poland	$31,336
Hungary	$31,102
Latvia	$30,304
Romania	$28,206
Croatia	$27,579
Russia	$27,147
Bulgaria	$21,960
Montenegro	$20,689
Belarus	$19,994
Serbia	$17,434
Macedonia	$16,358
Bosnia and Herzegovina	$14,623
Albania	$13,364
Ukraine	$9,233
Moldova	$7,271

Source: World Bank (2018c)

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