

THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY AND PARLIAMENTS IN EASTERN CENTRAL EUROPE: A CASE STUDY ON POLAND

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ABSTRACT

The parliamentary system in Eastern Central Europe has been known for its authoritarianism, with parliaments being subordinated to communist leadership and parties, as seen in Poland. The decline of democracy in Poland reached its peak when the conservative party was in power, controlling the legislative and judiciary in this former communist country. Corruption and social inequality threatened modern democracy, leading to protests and criticism from the people. The ruling party mainly focused on economic and political power in the name of citizens, leading to criticism even from the media. The study aims to examine the decline of democracy and parliaments in eastern central Europe in Poland. The study uses a case study and qualitative approach to identify the factors behind the decline of democracy in Poland. The main issues were the credibility of state institutions and the lack of media freedom, in addition to corruption. The political change in Poland and increasing populism led to the decline of democracy, which continued to receive criticism even from the media.

KEYWORDS

Parliamentary system; democracy; populism; authoritarianism; Eastern Central Europe



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INTRODUCTION

Modern democracies cannot exist without parliaments because they provide the institutional platform for the interaction of intermediary agencies, such as political parties, interest groups, and social movements. Additionally, Parliament connects society to other democratic institutions (executive, state bureaucracy, or

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judiciary). In other words, the legislature is the most important structure of representation. In every political system, the parliament comprises a vast array of institutions, rules, and procedures, making it the epicenter of legitimacy and democratic accountability. Parliament is also where political elites are trained and socialized, as well as where society's interests are articulated. In communist East-Central Europe, parliaments were essentially rubber-stamping bodies. Although no Eastern-Central European nation abandoned its parliament, it was subservient to the communist party until the communist leadership lost control over society (Nelson & White, 1982). In the 1990s, the wave of political change that swept across Eastern-Central Europe made parliament one of the key political players in each nation. First, parliaments were tasked with drafting and ratifying the new democratic institutions, and second, parliaments were granted significant powers at the outset of the transition, both of which contributed to parliaments' pivotal position. However, parliaments have undergone numerous changes and are no longer the same institutions they were during the initial period of democratic transition.

These alterations precipitated the decline of democracy in East-Central Europe (ECE). The democratic form of authoritarianism promotes the rise of populism in the region. This paper examines the decline of the parliamentary system in Eastern-Central Europe as a result of the rise of populism. The paper will use Poland as a case study to illustrate the reversibility of consolidated democracy and the causes of democratic regression. Poland is a prime example of the decline of the legislature in a former communist nation. In the different party system, extreme right-wing parties have emerged and won more elections than the mainstream party. This populist party in power provides the key insight into the decline of parliament in East-Central Europe. In an increasing number of nations, rulers are strategically undermining control mechanisms to maintain power, patronage systems, and opportunities for self-enrichment (Kopecky, 2005). Concurrently, protests against social inequality, mismanagement, and corruption are growing. As normative transformation objectives, democracy and the market economy have never been so contested or so imperiled by internal degradation. Clearly, if democratic systems do not provide a robust framework for ensuring rule of law opportunities for political participation, and if market-based economies do not guarantee fair and dependable rules of competition and social inclusion, then not only will they lose their appeal, but they will also evolve into illiberal and patronage-driven structures. Therefore, populist and authoritarian critiques of democratic processes, institutions, and norms will gain credence. In light of this, this paper will examine the threat to Polish democracy posed by the conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) and Jaroslav Kasczynski since their rise to power in 2015. Therefore, the study aims to examine the decline of democracy and parliaments in eastern central Europe in Poland.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach by analyzing a case study of the related issue. A case study will provide a more critical insight and reveal the dynamics and factor behind the democracy and parliaments issue in Poland. The research focuses on the decline of parliamentary system and factors contributing to the deterioration of democracy in Poland. The primary sources for this study were chosen through literature review from international journals, press release, e-books, and online media.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach by analyzing a case study of the related issue. The data analysis process involves sifting and sorting through pieces of data to detect and interpret thematic categorizations, search for inconsistencies and contradictions, and reveal the dynamics and factors behind the democracy and parliaments issue in Poland. The primary sources for this study were chosen through literature review from international journals, press release, e-books, and online media. The data analysis process is crucial in identifying the factors contributing to the deterioration of democracy in Poland and providing a critical insight into the issue.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Parliaments and representation

Perhaps more so than anything else, parliaments are the symbols of representation. Occasionally, they are deliberately designed to reflect the sociocultural diversity of a society. The communist legislatures attempted to ensure the equal representation of women, workers, and national minorities by establishing parliaments that were intended to reflect their respective societies. In the majority of modern European democracies, political parties serve as the principal agents of representation. The government is formed through the selection, campaigning for, and provision of lists of representatives by political parties. In this model of government representation, voters simply delegate their authority to the political parties that most effectively reflect their political preferences (Lewis, 2000). However, there can also be a link between parliaments and the electorate through various forms of constituency representation, in which individual MPs advocate for the interests of specific sectors of society or even individual constituents.

Typically, a set of informal practices determines which form of representation is dominant or what occurs when various forms of representation are in conflict. For example, if a representative is torn between the interests of his constituents and those of the government. Patterns of representation are also contingent on a variety of formal political institutions, notably the type of electoral system and the nature of political parties and party systems. The nature of post-communist parties, elections, and electoral systems has had a significant impact on the development of ECE parliaments' ties to the electorate (Malova & Krause, 2000).

Two decades after the fall of communism, scholars tended to identify a pattern of democratic progress among Eastern-Central European states that joined the European Union (EU). In terms of how democratic institutions and party competition evolved over time, there were setbacks and, more importantly,

enormous variation. This included fundamental democratic pillars such as political liberties and the rule of law. Today, in line with broader political trends in the transatlantic region, the narrative of progress in the region has been replaced by democratic regression or even authoritarianism. Hungary and Poland are the early leaders of democratization within the ECE. In addition, since assuming power, the Hungarian and Polish ruling parties have followed remarkably similar strategies centered on the consolidation of political and economic power in the name of nationalism. Since the return of the PiS party to power in 2015, Poland has experienced an unexpected democratic regression despite the presence of favorable conditions associated with democracy.

Democratic façade

After the fall of communism, Poland was one of the most successful ECE states to undertake a democratic transformation. After joining the European Union, Poland has been held up as an example of a successful European democracy, with a state based on the rule of law and individual rights that are well protected. In 2015, however, the populist party PiS won both the presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland. After the double victory, the party began dismantling the separation of powers in a democratic state's major checks and balances. The Constitutional Tribunal, the civil service, and the public media in Poland are all subordinate to the executive and under the party leader's control. Political rights have been restricted, and the party has seized control of the entire state apparatus. Poland has joined the ranks of countries experiencing democratic regression since the 2015 elections. It was a process driven by a portion of the political class that donned the radical populist mantle in order to garner public support, win elections, and rewrite the constitution for its own benefit. According to [Tworzecki and Markowski \(2017\)](#), the Law and Justice Party (PiS) sought to alter the rules in order to implement what it termed an exchange of elites ([Tworzecki & Markowski, 2017](#)). In other words, Poland falls into the category of democracies eroded by new elites.

A growing number of ECE leaders have abandoned even the pretense of adhering to democratic principles. As the democratic consensus of the post-Cold War order gave way to great power competition and the pursuit of self-interest, these politicians have ceased to conceal themselves behind a façade of nominal compliance. The shift in Eastern-Central Europe has accelerated attacks on judicial independence, threats to civil society, and attacks on the media. The breakdown of democratic consensus has been most apparent in ECE, which saw the greatest gains following the end of the Cold War ([Birch, 2001](#)). In Poland, the PiS party has waged war on the judiciary in an effort to transform it into a pliable political instrument. In 2019, the PiS government began persecuting individual judges after devoting its first years in office to an illegal takeover of the country's constitutional court and the council responsible for judicial appointments. By the beginning of 2020, judges who criticized the government's reform or correctly applied EU law were subject to disciplinary action. Prior to the rise of the PiS, such an assault on the foundation of democracy was unimaginable in Europe.

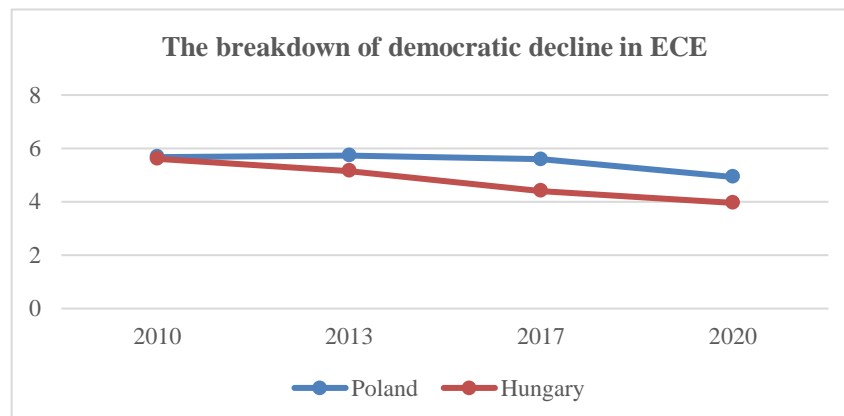


Figure 1. The decline of democratic consensus in two of ECE countries
Source: (Freedom House, 2020)

Increasing populism in Poland: The PiS grab the power

Since the early 1990s, populism has been a prevalent phenomenon in ECE. The primary cause is the failure of the catching-up process, which was intended from the outset of systemic change. Populism has been significantly more influential in ECE due to the emergence of political parties as a result of ECE populations' unmet high expectations. In actuality, the rising populism in ECE has been the political cost of the transition from state socialism to various semi-Western systems (Sadurski, 2018). Jaroslav Kasczynski was the driving force behind the conservative Law and Justice party in Poland (PiS). Although he refused to join the government and remained a member of parliament, he effectively held the reins. The Polish president, Andrzej Duda, and the prime minister were allegedly in his pocket. It was said that he was instrumental in assuming control of Poland's judicial system.

In its first year in power, the PiS attempted to seize control of the judiciary by stacking the constitutional court, politicizing the appointment of prosecutors, and eliminating court consent for state access to private internet accounts, which posed a direct threat to people's privacy. It was not limited to the legal system alone. Additionally, the PiS worked to place public broadcasting under direct government control. It was a clear method of controlling public opinion in a country where public broadcasting was still very important, particularly in rural areas, and where the party's main strength lies. In 2017, the party completed its control over the judicial system, prompting the EU commission to threaten sanctions (Sadurski, 2018). Because the EU views the system of checks and balances as fundamental to a well-functioning democracy. When Poland first joined the EU in 2004 along with other ECE nations, it adapted its domestic system to conform to EU requirements. The conflict between the Polish government and Brussels followed.

While Poland avoided the devastation caused by the 2008 recession, it was unable to avoid the instability that caused its economic growth to fall from 5% in 2013 to 1.3% in 2013 (Zselyke, 2010). In 2015, when the PiS came to power, the economy returned to a healthy growth rate of 3.8%. Nonetheless, nepotism and cronyism were pervasive among those in positions of authority, such as politicians, businesspeople, etc. Thus, under the guise of judicial reform, the PiS promoted

multiple bills in a majority-controlled parliament, all of which were designed to allow the party to appoint judges at all court levels. Their objective was to appoint only judges who would support the PiS. It meant that they would be able to control the Supreme Court in order to win the election. President Duda obediently ratified the PiS-backed laws, giving the PiS the upper hand.

How Poland slowly moved away from liberal democracy

In 2015, the national conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) won parliamentary elections in the country. Since then, the party has substantially restructured Polish politics in order to rebuild the ECE state. The PiS has utilized its absolute parliamentary majority to subvert the rule of law and assault press freedom. These developments are addressed by the EU, which lacks the ability to enforce liberal democratic standards once a nation has joined the bloc. Nonetheless, it came as a surprise, as Poland had been viewed as an example of successful economic transformation and democratization, as well as a country that had benefited greatly from EU membership (Kucharczyk & Jace, 2018). However, Poland is frequently linked to Hungary and its leader. Despite the fact that Poland's democratic decline is evident, it is crucial not to view democratic development as a linear process. In addition, the changes in Poland are not brought about through constitutional amendments, as they are in Hungary, and they are met with a robust opposition.

In Poland, corruption as one of the key challenges in post-communist societies, is no longer a major concern. In addition, liberal democratic institutions, free media, and an independent judiciary appeared to be firmly rooted in society and the political system. Poland is regarded as an awkward nation and one of the EU's most pressing issues. A few months after the 2016 election of PiS to power, the European Commission (EC) initiated a rule of law dialogue with the Polish government to investigate the nature of changes made to the constitutional tribunal and public media functions (Heilig, 2019). From 2007 to 2015, Poland was governed by the liberal conservative and pro-European party led by Donald Tusk, the then-president of the European Council (Kopecky, *Parliaments in the Czech and Slovak Republics: Party Competition and Parliamentary Institutionalization*, 2001). He continued the liberal transformation that Poland had begun in the 1990s following the fall of communism. Then, however, there was a conflict between the two parties and their respective leaders. Kaczynski, the PiS party leader, has always questioned the utility of the liberal model for Poland's post-communist transition. When Tusk promised stability, credibility, and efficiency in the use of EU funds to advance economic modernization, he did not keep his word. Meanwhile, his administration was overshadowed by corruption scandals and scandals involving other officials' abusive behavior. On top of the weaknesses of the Polish welfare state and services, which became a source of discontent among citizens, these abuses of power precipitated a precipitous decline in liberal support. All of this created the conditions for Kaczynski's return to power. He was able to reach nearly all social groups and benefited from the country's sociocultural divide. Therefore, the rise to power of authoritarian populists in Poland is best understood as a

backlash against open society values and the political and cultural elites believed to represent these values (Kucharczyk & Jace, 2018).

Similarly, Kaczynski decided not to accept the position in the government while retaining complete control over the strategic decisions of the cabinet. He believed that a strong government that acts efficiently on behalf of the democratic majority and is able to take drastic measures to implement the majority's will without being constrained by a system of checks and balances was required. The purpose of Kaczynski's affirmative politics of public media control was to consolidate the national community on the values of a self-confident, community-oriented society, etc. In addition to rejecting the Western model, they supported a policy innovation that took into account the specific national needs of the Polish economy more effectively (Mounk, 2019). As a feature of the party's rhetoric, PiS remained convinced of its ability to influence political and economic development. Consequently, the most fundamental alterations to the political system that paved the way for an illiberal model occurred in the judiciary. The party violated the Polish constitution and the separation of powers principle. Kaczynski argued that the liberal democratic system's checks and balances prevented the democratically legitimated majority in the parliament from fully implementing its agenda. Therefore, reforms were required as the foundation of a new illiberal political system. These reforms occurred in numerous locations, and their fundamental and systemic natures were not adequately discussed in the legislature. Since 2015, there has been no independent constitutional court charged with evaluating the legality of acts passed by the Polish parliament. This constitutional court was controlled by the PiS, which prevented it from fulfilling its role as the guardian of the constitution.

The Minister of Justice was given discretionary authority over appointing judges and managing their careers. In addition, he possessed the authority to appoint the bodies in charge of conducting disciplinary proceedings against judges, as well as the ability to directly influence any disciplinary case (Bodnar, 2018). This was clearly an example of the executive branch's disproportionate influence and abuse of power over the courts. Similarly, the Supreme Court's independence and structure had been subjected to an unconstitutional assault. The PiS enacted a new retirement age with immediate effect in order to end the term of the then-President of the Supreme Court, and then elected a replacement through a process controlled by the ruling party. The criticism of the Western European model of society and political culture accompanied the reevaluation of the checks and balances as the fundamental importance for a liberal democracy. When the PiS came to power, the Europeanization process began to reverse.

Europe witnessed a rise in the notions of strengthening the nation state, opposing deeper EU integration, criticizing liberal democracy, and renationalizing the economy when the party came to power. In other words, the PiS's decision to abandon the Europeanization paradigm appeared to reflect the party's belief that it is at the forefront of Europe's transformation. Even further, the populist revolt against the establishment appeared to validate PiS's claim that the EU's populace was on their side (European Commission, 2017). The belief was that the institutional structure and political framework of the EU did not align with the Polish government's position. PiS believed it was at the forefront of the EU's

political transformation. Consequently, Poland's influence in the EU has diminished significantly since the PiS came to power, indicating that the parliament has also declined.

Democratic backsliding

Many academics use the term democratic backsliding to refer to alterations in formal or informal institutions that move a nation toward a hybrid or authoritarian regime (Erdmann, 2011). Existing powerholders drive a gradual process of democratic regression and precipitate a sudden breakdown of democracy, which constitutes democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding is defined more precisely by Nancy Bermeo (2016) as the state-led weakening or elimination of any of the political institutions that support an existing democracy (Bermeo, 2016). The most modern mechanism for backsliding is executive aggrandizement, in which the elected incumbent concentrates political power by neutralizing constitutional, institutional checks and alternative centers of social power (Cristobal & Bodewig, 2020). Typically, the targets are the courts and judiciary, as well as the media and businesses. Instead of engaging in overly anti-democratic maneuvers, backsliding governments capture and utilize existing institutions and regulatory mechanisms.

The post-communist ECE nations that are experiencing such democratic regression share two key characteristics. To protect the interests of the people and nation from opposition elites, governing parties first embrace intense populist appeals (Grzymala-Busse, 2003). In Poland, well-established mainstream conservative groups won a large share of the vote by capitalizing on public discontent with corruption and uneven economic growth. They have pledged to restore conservative social values and defend the country against liberals, foreign-owned businesses, and the European Union. In the meantime, political competition over socioeconomic issues has been replaced by competition over identity and values (Vachudova, 2017). The leaders of these ruling parties created the political cover to consolidate power and eliminate liberal checks and balances by claiming to defend the nation. In addition, they implemented a more centralized, illiberal model of political economy in order to bolster and expand their political power (Scheiring, 2015). Zsolt Enyedi (2016) stated that the polarization that sustains backsliding is sustained by the relatively institutionalized nature of the national conservative parties that spearhead it. Second, it is argued that the PiS came to power due to their political organisation and implantation in civil society, whereas their economic power has largely come after the elections that brought them to power. PiS organized and drew strength from conservative civil society for years by co-opting right-wing civic groups and establishing its own partisan groups. In addition to cultivating and constructing a conservative media base, the party used it to delegitimize opposing parties (Sadecka, 2018).

The concept of democratic regression adheres to a linear conception of democracy. While the negative trends in Poland regarding the rule of law and press freedom should not be ignored, this perspective simplifies the understanding of what is occurring in Poland and Eastern-Central Europe. There can be tension between the stability of a democratic system and democratic contention and participation. A decline in the quality of one of these elements may or may not

indicate a decline in the other. After the fall of communism, for instance, the imperative to establish stable democratic institutions in ECE, coupled with the neoliberal imperative to rebuild the economy, sparked debates on political content and citizen participation. Despite the fact that the democratic system has stabilized since then, it has not necessarily encouraged the active participation of citizens beyond voting. In addition, a close examination of democracies reveals that shifting positions is common. In addition to institutions, civic resilience and responses to Poland's assault on liberal democracy also merit consideration.

Poland's civil society

In terms of civic resilience, the Polish civil society played a crucial role. Despite the fact that the country's political landscape had been polarized around PiS and their liberal-conservative opponent for over a decade, civil society represented a much broader political and cultural spectrum. Civil society's impact on political processes became crucial as its scope determined whether positions other than the right were reflected in national policymaking (Bermeo, 2016). Polish civil society is thriving and increasingly transcends NGOs. This civil society is exemplified by the mobilization, which began as mass protests and expanded into a broader spectrum of protest. The active and visible civil society posed a challenge to the government and represented a variety of political stances, but the ruling party was making their work more difficult.

The establishment of the National Institute for Freedom and the Committee for non-profit organizations in 2017 reformed the relationship between NGOs and the government. Through the distribution of state funding, the government has created a system that favors organizations ideologically close to the government. At the same time, changes to the laws regulating public gatherings favored government-friendly organizations. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the mobilization appeared robust and persistent.

Populism and illiberalism

The rise of populism and illiberalism in the ECE has threatened the apparent success of the region's democratic transition. The increasing polarization of Polish society led to a strong mobilization and politicization of the electorate (Bodnar, 2018). This posed a challenge to democratic consensus and prompted a vigorous civic mobilization. This action demonstrated that Poland's democracy was not as threatened as one might assume based on the country's weak and deteriorating democracy. The problem of polarization arose when the adversarial duopoly in the political sphere became the most influential factor. Voters support either PiS or the opposition centered around Civic Platform (PO). This prevented the thoughtful consideration of policy issues, as should be the case in a liberal democratic system. Because support for either party was not based on their policy positions, but rather on their opposition to the other. The country's democracy was deteriorating due to its dependence on its citizens.

The erosion of democracy in Poland

Due to its parliamentary system and proportional electoral law, Poland should have been immune from authoritarian ambitions on the political front. Moreover, Poland's constitution contains an extensive system of checks and balances as well as internal and external constraints on the power of raw majoritarianism (Piatkowski, 2018). In terms of political practice, Poland's parliamentary elections between 1989 and 2015 have resulted in peaceful transfers of power. Despite this extremely favorable outcome, Poland experienced unprecedented political turmoil following the 2015 elections. The Law and Justice (PiS) party won the presidency and majorities in both chambers of parliament, and almost immediately launched a systemic change agenda. Jarosaw Kaczyski, the leader of the PiS party, came to wield actual decision-making authority, while the offices of president and prime minister were reduced to mere ornaments. Technically, he was just an ordinary member of Poland's lower house of parliament, but he was referred to as the parliament's leader or strongman. This government pushed through legislation designed to undermine the judiciary's independence and oversight functions. It subdued NGOs and commercial media through restrictive regulatory measures, including restrictions on free speech and property rights. In addition, the government made a number of potentially troubling modifications to electoral laws and institutions responsible for conducting elections (Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2018).

Concurrently, the PiS government introduced new policies and signaled the notion that the state should once again oversee economic development and shoulder the responsibilities of providing citizens with housing, employment, and childcare. Possible explanations include the key mechanisms in Poland that have resulted in polarization at the level of the electorate due to the asymmetry of elite polarization. The 2015 election, which precipitated Poland's democratic regression, may be viewed as the culmination of the second post-communist party system's evolution. In the early 2000s, amidst a sluggish economy and concerns about Poland's approach to EU membership, there were indications that the party system was about to undergo substantial changes (Ciobanu, 2020). This transformation was spearheaded by two new parties, the PiS and Civic Platform (PO). Initially, there was a small ideological and programmatic gap between them, but they positioned themselves on opposing sides of the new era. PO specifically maintained a center-right stance and targeted economically prosperous individuals who were satisfied with the results of the post-1989 transformation. In contrast, PiS focused on the distributive effects of the post-1989 liberal democratic transformation and entire political order.

In 2007, the PiS lost to the PO and spent the subsequent years in opposition, during which its rejection of the status quo became more radical (Pierson, 2004). This radicalization occurred due to the cultural prominence of authoritarian ideologies and the internal politics of autocratically governed political parties. PiS was less of an organization and more of a personal domain for its chairman. Kaczynski insisted that the party be treated as his personal property. In the years that followed, these politicians or leaders advanced the party by outbidding its

ideology. It led to the radicalization and eventual authoritarianism of the party's internal politics, relationship with its voter base, and approach to the law.

Despite winning the 2005 election and serving as prime minister, the Kaczynskis' hold on power slipped away when another party on which the PiS relied for its parliamentary majority defected and Lech (Jaroslaw Kaczynski's twin brother and then-president) died in a tragic plane crash. Only in 2015, when it won the presidency and an absolute majority in parliament, did the PiS make a successful comeback. During those years, Kaczynski employed his power to launch a massive assault on Poland's democratic institutions and to transform state television networks into dependable sources of government propaganda. They took effective control of the country's court system, weakened the electoral commission's independence, restricted free speech, and initiated a number of high-profile trials against political opponents. The government has repeatedly attacked the country's power structure in ways that threaten the democratic state's foundations. The long-standing tensions between Poland's secular and religious communities have been exacerbated by Kaczynski's conspiracy theorizing and attacks on independent institutions.

The opposition had formed a coalition that included the center-right Civic Platform (PO) and leftist parties such as the Democratic Left Alliance (Tworzecki & Markowski, *Did Poland just vote in an authoritarian government?*, 2015). Despite the unity, the election result was disappointing, as the PiS emerged as the largest party. PiS was adept at providing tangible advantages to its supporters. The opposition has failed to coalesce around a charismatic leader capable of articulating a positive vision for the country's future, allowing the government's accomplishments to shine. In Poland, the rise of populism and anti-EU sentiment led to the victory of the PiS. In Poland, the three branches of government can no longer be considered independent and equal. The executive has significantly strengthened its position relative to the other two. The separation of power and checks and balances had broken down. In addition, the majority of the legislature passed a bill that effectively paralyzed the constitutional court (Forthomme, 2017). Shortly after its election, the Sejm (national assembly) passed a law amending the Broadcasting Act that stripped the National Broadcasting Council of its authority. In 2017, Jacek Kurski, a PiS politician, was appointed as the new head of Polish television, where the programming was filled with propagandistic sentiments and only praised the ruling power (Ciobanu, 2020).

In addition, the government passed a law regarding counter demonstrations and favoring state- or church-sponsored assemblies. Under the PiS government, NGOs and civil society groups were subjected to numerous defamation campaigns. For example, they were accused of having close ties with the opposition parties and a large portion of NGO budgets are spent on board member salaries, which should be channeled through a government body. In terms of ideology, the prevalence of traditionalist, nationalist, and catholic values had increased (Abramowitz, 2010). At the same time, discrimination based on race, nationality, and ethnicity, as well as hate speech, declined. During the period of transition, the church plays an important role in Polish society. Today, they play a crucial role in promoting sentiments and assisting the ruling party in its mission to spread Poland's ideology. In Poland, the

government faced numerous allegations of nepotism and corruption in state-owned enterprises. Kaczynski was aware of the fact that cases involving the abuse of judicial oversight, such as bribery or money laundering, are not prosecuted, which explains why officials are able to engage in corruption with impunity. Since the PiS took power, the rule of law and the status of democratic institutions have deteriorated.

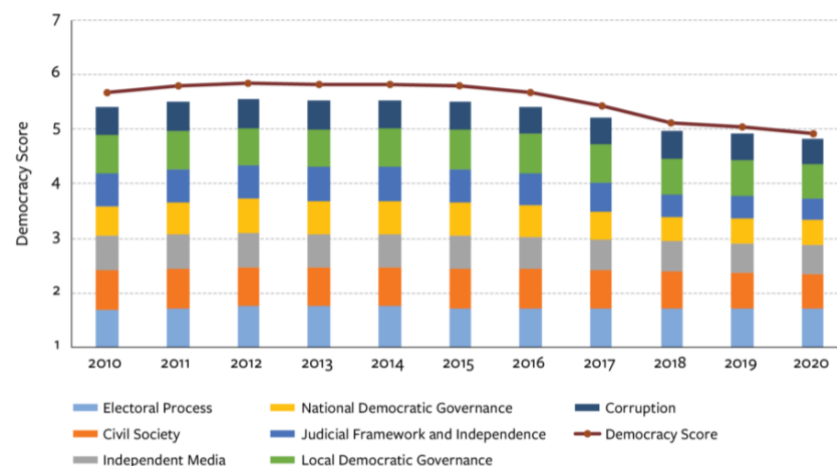


Figure 2. Poland's democratic score for each sector in the period of 10 years

Source: (Freedom House, 2020)

The quality of democratic governance in Poland continued to decline beginning in 2020 and each year thereafter. It negatively impacted many areas, including local governance, civil society pluralism, and the local judiciary. However, this did not prevent the parliamentary election from being the main event that significantly strengthened the mandate of the PiS government. The election resulted in a high voter turnout due to its unprecedented movement, despite accusations of a dangerous campaign. Despite intense domestic and EU criticism of its moves to undermine judicial independence, media pluralism, and civil liberties, the coalition led by the PiS continued to gain support (Markowski, 2006). Before and after the ruling, members of the legal profession continued to be subjected to substantial pressure from the executive and legislative branches, particularly through the excessive use of disciplinary proceedings. In addition, the government degraded the social and institutional autonomy of the cultural sphere by funneling state funds to select organizations and initiatives and appointing loyal supporters to the helm of museums and other cultural institutions. Simultaneously, media freedoms continued to decline. After gaining control of broadcasting regulatory bodies and public broadcasters, the PiS announced plans to restrict the remaining independent media. The public media continued to participate in political campaigns in support of PiS. As a result of the central government's announcement of tax cuts, local governments were placed in a difficult financial position. The largest Polish cities' liberal mayors were frequently the target of government criticism and negative propaganda by media outlets affiliated with the right wing, populist ruling camp led by PiS.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the quality of parliamentarism in Poland declined during the PiS's rule. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, chairman of the PiS, continued to act as a power behind the throne and frequently announced major reforms in his speeches. Poland's civil society remained vibrant but profoundly polarized. Local cultural and economic concerns primarily mobilized civic actors and organizations. Space and funding for independent cultural institutions that oppose the government's traditionalist agenda have continued to decrease. Multiple strikes occurred, including climate marches, demands for higher wages and funding for public services, education reform, etc. In the meantime, the Polish media industry is robust and ideologically and structurally diverse. In 2020, no new media-related laws were introduced. For their investigative articles, journalists remained routinely sued for defamation. Public radio and television continued to promote a positive, one-sided image of the ruling faction.

Local and municipal authorities in Poland, meanwhile, have broad authority but limited funding and frequent conflicts with the central government. Municipal authorities are a hindrance to the PiS's ability to govern, according to the PiS. The ruling coalition frequently criticized the autonomy of local government, which generated national political controversies. The pro-government media frequently attacked liberal mayors of major Polish cities such as Gdansk, Warsaw, and Poznan. Since 2015, when the PiS came to power, the ruling party has moved to control the judiciary through legislative changes, smear campaigns, an excessive use of disciplinary proceedings, court packing, and a takeover of key institutions. The constitutional court is favorable to the ruling majority, as it is presided over by a close ally of PiS leader Kaczynski. In addition, corruption has remained one of the major issues facing the Polish government. Combating corruption and strengthening state institutions were central to the narrative of the ruling party. However, there were an excessive number of scandals involving high-ranking PiS politicians misusing state resources for personal gain.

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