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American Perspective on the Quality of Democracy in Poland

Amerykańskie spojrzenie na jakość demokracji w Polsce

• Abstract •

The American model of democracy is identified with liberal democracy, which in the West is usually considered a democracy of the highest quality standards. The illiberal authorities in Poland criticize this model of democracy, introducing a number of legal changes which, in their opinion, are to lead to an improvement in the quality of democracy. American researchers quite unequivocally criticize the changes, especially those taking place in the area of independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media and women's rights. They also criticize the attitude of the Polish authorities towards minorities, including LGBTQ+ communities. Criticism also appeared from the American authorities, although in this case we were dealing with a large variation in the approach of individual administrations. The aim of the article is to analyze and evaluate the American perspective on the quality of democracy in Poland. During the research, scientists and experts from research institutions in Washington, D.C. and New York were interviewed.

Keywords: quality of democracy; United States; Poland; democratic backsliding; populism

• Abstrakt •

Amerykański model demokracji utożsamiany jest z demokracją liberalną, która na Zachodzie zazwyczaj uznawana jest za demokrację o najwyższych standardach jakości. Nieliberalne władze w Polsce krytykują ten model demokracji, wprowadzając szereg zmian prawnych, które w ich ocenie mają prowadzić do poprawy jakości demokracji. Amerykańscy badacze dość jednoznacznie krytykują te zmiany, szczególnie zachodzące w obszarze niezależności sądownictwa, wolności mediów i praw kobiet. Krytykują również postawę polskich władz wobec mniejszości, w tym środowisk LGBTQ+. Krytyka pojawiała się także ze strony amerykańskich władz, choć w tym przypadku mieliśmy do czynienia z dużym zróżnicowaniem w podejściu poszczególnych administracji. Celem artykułu jest analiza i ocena amerykańskiego spojrzenia na jakość demokracji w Polsce. W trakcie badań przeprowadzono wywiady z naukowcami i ekspertami z instytucji badawczych z Waszyngtonu i Nowego Jorku.

Słowa kluczowe: jakość demokracji; Stany Zjednoczone; Polska; demokratyczny regres; populizm

Introduction

In the modern world, the quality of democracy is an important issue affecting the quality of life of citizens of democratic countries. While in the 1990s we had a global wave of democratization, in recent years we have seen a retreat from democratic values, especially those of liberal democracy. The aim of the article is to analyze and evaluate the American perspective on the quality of democracy in Poland. This applies both to the perspective of American administrations and American researchers. The article does not consist in the analysis of legal and organizational changes in Poland, which cause a decrease in the quality of democracy, as much attention has already been devoted to this issue in the literature. The article concerns how these changes are perceived by American authorities and American researchers. The analysis is conducted in the context of the quality of democracy concept, assuming that liberal democracy has the highest standard of democracy. The main research problem is the question of how the quality of democracy in Poland is perceived in the United States and what is its significance in US policy towards Poland? The main hypothesis assumes that during the rule of the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) party, a decline in the quality of democracy in Poland is clearly noticeable in the United States. However, this issue is of secondary importance in US foreign policy, in which strategic interests take priority. As part of the research, scientists and experts from research institutions in Washington, D.C. and New York, focusing on issues of democracy and US foreign policy, were interviewed. The interviews were individual, non-standardized, unstructured and in-depth. The selection of interviewees was not influenced by their worldview and ideological beliefs.

Theoretical framework and literature review on the quality of democracy in Poland

The concept of the quality of democracy makes it possible to determine the degree of development of democracy, including the advancement of the process of democratization or democratic regression. In practice, this concept is primarily used to analyze the political regimes of the European Union countries, including the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In these countries, there are differences in the degree to which the model of liberal democracy is preserved, and as a rule, the political systems have not yet changed qualitatively (Szymański, 2020, p. 60). As Gerardo L. Munck (2016, p. 1) points out: “democracy is about more than elections”. Tom

Ginsburg and Aziz Huq (2018, p. 10) identify three minimum requirements for a constitutional democracy: a sufficiently free and fair electoral system that allows a peaceful transition of power between competing political options; maintaining basic civil liberties and political rights essential to sustain this process, such as freedom of speech and association; legal and judicial independent institutions upholding this process. Ryszard Piotrowski (2019, pp. 78–80) emphasizes the importance of the principle of checks and balances for the essence of a democratic system. It allows the exercise of power by the majority while preserving the rights and freedoms of the individual, including the rights of minorities. Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino (2004, pp. 21–22) indicate the eight most important dimensions in determining the quality of democracy: freedom; the rule of law; vertical accountability; responsiveness; equality; participation; competition; and horizontal accountability. According to Ellen Lust and David Waldner (2015, pp. 95–96), the highest quality of democracy is in liberal democracy, which is “characterized by a substantial respect for political rights and civil liberties. Other attributes of liberal democracy encompass the rule of law, free and fair elections, the separation of powers, and the protection of the human, civil, and political rights of the individual”. They define illiberal democracy as an example of a hybrid regime, i.e., one that “contains both democratic and authoritarian elements”. The decline in the quality of democracy constitutes, in turn, the phenomenon of democratic backsliding.

Anna M. Meyerrose (2021, pp. 2, 10) points out that democratic backsliding occurs when democratic institutions are weakened or eroded, which usually leads to an illiberal or diminished form of democracy, rather than autocracy. This is done by consolidating the executive at the expense of the judiciary, dismantling courts, undermining the rule of law, interfering with freedom of speech and media, and limiting opposition and minority rights. Sam Sharman (2020) claims that Poland began experiencing democratic backsliding in 2015 after the Law and Justice party won the parliamentary and presidential elections. In the literature, Hungary and Poland are considered the two most extreme cases of backsliding in the EU (Kelemen, 2020; Babinova, 2020; Bellamy & Kröger, 2021; Meyerrose, 2021; Cianetti, Dawson, & Hanley, 2018; Gora & de Wilde, 2022). Lisa H. Anders and Astrid Lorenz (2020, p. 1) believe that in Poland and Hungary democracy and the rule of law are “under siege”. As part of an illiberal trend, a parliamentary majority weakens the judiciary, restricts media freedom, curtails the activities of some NGOs and restricts minority rights. Actions limiting the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court as well as attacks on free media have been extensively discussed in the literature (Bunikowski, 2018; Havlík & Hloušek, 2020; Przybylski, 2018). Richard Bellamy and Sandra Kröger (2021,

pp. 622–623) point to the undermining of the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal in Poland, which is supposed to uphold the law enacted by the majority, and not be a positive supporter of enhanced majoritarian powers. Reforms in the area of the judiciary led to the launch by European institutions in September 2017 of the procedure under the Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union aiming at ensuring respect of the rule of law in Poland (Wolkenstein, 2020, p. 123; Gora & de Wilde, 2022, pp. 342–343). According to experts from the Brookings Institution, the PiS has brought the country close to “a point of no return concerning the independence of its judiciary” (Eisen et al., 2019, p. 17). In Poland, there have also been attempts to manipulate the electoral process. For example, Maciej Skrzypek focuses on Drafts Amendments in Electoral Code in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. He points out that some changes in the act are an example of irregular patterns of competition weakening democratic institutions. This in turn affects the decline in the quality of democracy and is one of the manifestations of democratic backsliding (Skrzypek, 2021, pp. 38–39). Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz and Erica Frantz (2017, p. 116) believe that the legal changes introduced in Poland in recent years constitute “apparent violations of democratic norms”.

As Jacques Rupnik (2023, pp. 12–13) notes, the PiS has followed the trend of democratic regression modeled on the Hungarian Fidesz, repeatedly pointing to the goal: “To make Budapest in Warsaw”. A number of actions were taken in Poland that led to the undermining of the principle of the separation of powers as well as the independence of the judiciary, which had previously occurred in Hungary. As a consequence, the very foundation of the rule of law was called into question, accompanied by attacks on independent media. Viktor Orbán himself defines this model as “illiberal democracy”, which, according to him, is not a contradiction of democracy, but a different form of it. The president of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, identifies with this approach. Vratislav Havlík and Vít Hloušek (2020, p. 116) refer to Kaczyński as an “opponent of liberalism”. As Ben Stanley (2019, p. 349) notes, Kaczyński is clearly skeptical of the liberal elites who had carried out democratic transition in Poland, which translates into antipathy towards the idea of liberal democracy. According to him, the rapid decline in the quality of democracy in Poland reflects both the political capture of democratic institutions and the functional hollowing out of those institutions by depriving them of pluralism. According to R. Piotrowski (2019, p. 80), in illiberal democracy: “the majority supports the subordination of independent institutions to the executive branch of government and where the rights of unaccepted minorities are restricted”. Olena Babinova (2020, pp. 84–85) thinks that in the European Union only Hungary can be defined as a state with a hybrid regime. However, she believes that Poland, next to Hungary,

is the most dramatic manifestation of the democratic backsliding on a trajectory towards such a form of regime.

Licia Cianetti et al. (2018, p. 244) point out that countries like Poland and Hungary previously had quickly consolidated their democratic systems to now enter the phase of “authoritarian reversal”. They believe that the current problem of the poor quality of democracy in these countries is, among other things, the result of the legacy of communism, as well as the negative side effects of rapid political transition. R. Piotrowski (2019, pp. 87–88) points out that undermining liberal democracy, including the decomposition of the rule of law in Poland, is possible due to the lack of solid traditions of democratic government. In the literature, the activities of the PiS are often referred to as right-wing populism. Essentially populism is illiberal because it limits checks and balances (Gwiazda, 2021). As Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik (2019, p. 441) point out: “populists posit that they hail from the people, understand them, and are their only rightful representatives”.

Reactions of American administrations to the decline in the quality of democracy in Poland

Considering the growing military and economic potential and the key role on NATO’s eastern flank, Poland is of increasing importance to the United States. Legal changes taking place in Poland regarding the Constitutional Tribunal worried President Barack Obama, who, during the NATO summit in Warsaw on July 9, 2016, expressed concern about the rule of law and called for democratic institutions and media freedom to be upheld in Poland. However, his statement was mistranslated by the Polish public television in such a way as not to show criticism of the Polish authorities (Birnbaum, 2016). Although President Donald Trump showed no interest in upholding democratic standards in Poland, the U.S. Department of State (DoS) headed by Rex Tillerson did. In 2017, the DoS issued several statements criticizing the changes in the Supreme Court, standing up for democracy and the rule of law in Poland: “The Polish government has continued to pursue legislation that appears to undermine judicial independence and weaken the rule of law in Poland. We urge all sides to ensure that any judicial reform does not violate Poland’s constitution or international legal obligations and respects the principles of judicial independence and separation of powers” (U.S. Department of State, 2017). The DoS had also issued several statements in defense of freedom of speech and media freedom in Poland, including in the context of attacks on the opposition television station TVN and the so-called “Holocaust law” which

criminalized references to Poles as Nazis collaborationists (Yatsyk, 2019, p. 463). During Mike Pompeo's tenure as Secretary of State, although the DoS monitored negative developments in the areas of judicial independence and media freedom (U.S. Department of State, 2020), these changes were not officially criticized. Such criticism, however, appeared in the U.S. Congress, including by bipartisan groups and special agencies and committees composed of politicians, lawyers and experts, like the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

A significant change in the approach of the US administration took place with the takeover of the presidency by Joe Biden, who already during the campaign strongly criticized the authoritarian and totalitarian trend in the world, including the changes taking place in Poland. President Biden's administration has made rebuilding and strengthening democracy a key pillar of domestic and foreign policy (The White House, 2021). The DoS, led by Antony Blinken, issued a number of statements criticizing attacks on free media, mainly a draft law against the TVN station owned by the American Discovery group. According to a DoS statement, this bill was directed to "undermine freedom of expression, weakened media freedom, and erode foreign investors' confidence in their property rights and the sanctity of contracts" (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Criticism of the American administration towards the regression of democracy in Poland, however, died down with the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine. Due to the strategic interests of the USA in the region and the role of Poland in supporting Ukraine, the issue of the quality of democracy in Poland is not raised in diplomatic relations.

American discussion on the quality of democracy in Poland

Michael Miller (2022) believes that among American scholars of democracy and foreign policy, there is a general recognition, that there has been a decline in the quality of democracy in Poland, a classic democratic erosion. In the academic debate in the United States, relatively much attention is devoted to the issue of democratic regression in Poland. Researchers focus primarily on legal changes regarding the judiciary, which in their opinion are the most worrying. They point out that the legal changes in Poland in this regard, contrary to what the Polish government claims, do not serve to improve the situation in the judiciary and, more broadly, the condition of democracy, but to their political gain. The main goal is to keep the current ruling elite in power. An important issue is also LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights, which is most often studied in the context of protest and civil action. American academics devote much less attention to media freedom in Poland (Ganga, 2022).

It was different in the American media, where little attention was paid to the issue of the erosion of democracy in Poland, because it was not dramatic enough to attract the attention of the American viewer, whose knowledge of events in other countries is negligible. More attention was paid to the problem of abandoning democracy in Hungary, as the process is much more advanced there. Nevertheless, some media, especially the left-wing ones, strongly criticized Poland for moving away from democracy. According to Sharon Wolchik (2022), before the full-scale war in Ukraine, Poland was portrayed by some of the American media and perceived by the American democratic administration as a country departing from democracy towards authoritarianism. The US media made public the issues of limiting the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media, women's rights to abortion, and LGBTQ+ rights in Poland. For the average American, however, the issue of Poland's departure from democratic values is irrelevant. Currently, the American media pay much more attention to Poland because of its crucial support for Ukraine and Ukrainians. However, the presented image of Poland is very positive (Miller, 2022).

Michael Doyle (2022) notes that in the long run the process of democratization is never smooth. An example is the 1920s, when the democratic trend was followed by a period of decline of democracy in many countries, including European ones. The next wave of democratization that took place in Europe and in the world in the 1990s is now in retreat. According to him: "In the past 15 years or so, there's been a pressure and major difficulties with the liberal democratic dominance in the world. We can see it in the collapse of at least a standard liberal democracy in Turkey, Hungary, and Poland. It's under challenge in all of those places, but in all of them still, the electoral system is the background condition. And none of them moved to a formal dictatorship, sort of autocracy like in China or for practical purposes in Russia". According to Doyle, although in countries like Poland there is visible pressure on the freedom of the media or assembly as well as other freedoms and democratic institutions, they are still populist rather than autocratic. One should agree with this statement, especially in the case of Poland where these restrictions are not so far advanced, but even in Poland the adopted trend raises concerns about the survival of democracy.

Kimberly Morgan (2022) claims that the Law and Justice is a populist party that tries to reach a wider audience through big spending programs and get support for conservative family values. Populism is on the rise across Europe and the world, but it is characterized by waves that come and then recede as public sentiment changes. However, populism becomes especially dangerous if it undermines the principles of democracy and democratic institutions, because then it is difficult to remove from power a particular party that is not committed to democratic processes. Paula

Ganga (2022) also believes that populism becomes particularly dangerous if the authorities, in order to maintain power, change the rules of conducting elections to favor them. The attempts to manipulate the electoral system in Poland, especially in the pre-election period, are very disturbing. They undermine the basic foundation of democracy, i.e., the free and fair nature of elections (Skrzypek, 2021, p. 47). The politicization of the judicial institutions that are supposed to oversee the electoral and legislative process is also of great concern.

Paula Ganga (2022) points out that it is dangerous when the authorities build around themselves a financial network of dependence that causes the broader elites to have a personal interest in keeping a given group in power. It is not about broad social programs, such as 500+, which are supported by a large part of society and ensure the votes of a given party. It is about making economic elites financially dependent on political decision-makers, e.g., through state-owned or state sort of adjacent companies. People benefit because by supporting the authorities they get managerial positions in these enterprises, and then pay off the debt in the form of campaign finance, all the more so because a change of government would deprive them of these positions. The longer a political party stays in power, the better chance it has of developing this system. It is very advanced in Hungary, where the opposition even calls this phenomenon “mafia state”. However, such a phenomenon has been also developing in Poland.

It is characteristic that the transition from democracy to hybrid regimes is often justified by significant social inequalities in a state (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 245). The PiS accuses the liberal elites that only narrow, privileged social groups were the beneficiaries of the democratic transformation. It has been carrying out a process called an “exchange of elites”, which, among other things, manifests itself in “rewarding its activists and supporters in a tidal wave of patronage and clientelism” (Tworzecki, 2019, p. 98). It is typical in populism that the elite, and to some extent the whole society, is divided into two groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, referring to the previous elites who were supposed to alienate themselves from society (Gwiazda, 2021, p. 582). According to Stanley Bill (2022, p. 119), the PiS’s populism is a “counter-elite”. It is not hostile to elites per se, but to the “wrong elite” who are opposite to “the people” represented by the “true elite” (“counter-elite”). The PiS brands its political rivals in a clearly pejorative way, for example, as communists or their direct ideological descendants (Korycki, 2017, p. 529). This also applies to broader circles, including legal, bureaucratic and academic circles, or at least those parts of them that are not favorable to the ruling party.

The Polish government has a narrative that it is strengthening democracy in Poland, but an illiberal democracy. M. Miller (2022) believes that there can be an

illiberal democracy, just as there can be many other forms of democracy, and none of them is perfect. Democracies are existing as a sliding scale of quality, and one of the important elements influencing the quality of democracy are civil liberties. Miller says: “You can have democracy in the sense of having competitive elections that are reasonably free and fair, but you violate certain core civil liberties or even human rights in some cases. If you strip away all civil liberties, then you can’t have free and fair elections. Because if you have no independent media, no free speech, no right to protest, no right to organize, then even when you have taken multiparty elections, they’re not going to be real elections, because you’re not allowing any sort of space for people to really organize and form a real opposition”. As noted by P. Ganga (2022), in this context the situation in Poland does not look bad, because it still “has a very vibrant civil society and people who are willing to go out and protest without the fear for their life if they do so”.

According to Julie George (2022), democracy can be seen not only as a type of regime, but also as a process of institutionalizing democracy, a process of deepening democracy. Even though Poland is struggling with problems in this area, it can still be a kind of positive path for Eastern European countries that are less advanced in democratic processes. In addition, she states that criticism of the West, including the US, towards Poland is hypocritical. The US has a massive history of structural racism that has yet to be overcome. There is the notion of wanting to create a historical memory that has a particular viewpoint that is the united solidarity, which does not correspond to historical reality. Undoubtedly, this statement is true, but it cannot justify countries that are currently making breaches in democratic principles.

M. Doyle (2022) believes that every country has to discover its own route to democracy or it will not be stable. The United States can provide on requests technical advice and training to improve the process of democratization and help monitor adherence to democratic standards. First of all, the American authorities should conduct regular hearings on the quality of democracy and the rule of law in Poland, including mainly Congress through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the U.S. Helsinki Commission. These activities can provide the American administration with knowledge in this regard and encourage action to counteract democratic decline in Poland. If necessary, it could apply sanctions against specific corrupt actors under the Global Magnitsky Act of 2016 (Eisen et al., 2019, p. 68). According to Stephen Biddle (2022), the US approach to the problem of violating the principles of democracy and the rule of law in Poland will largely depend on who becomes the next president. He says: “If Trump is elected, the democratic reforms in Poland won’t be important at all. If Trump ends up as the president of the United States again, then there’s going to

be no incentive for Poland to liberalize politically and strong disincentives to. If Biden is reelected, it'll be the other way around". The final outcome of the war in Ukraine and how the Polish authorities will be able to capitalize on the support given to Ukraine will be also of great importance. As P. Ganga (2022) notes, the United States benefits from the foreign affairs toolbox. According to her, USA cares about promoting democracy but it cares more about its strategic interests. Therefore, with the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the issue of the regression of democracy in Poland was overshadowed. Poland's role in the implementation of US strategic interests in the region will significantly affect Washington's attitude towards the quality of democracy in Poland.

As M. Doyle (2022) rightly points out, in the case of European states, "the real engine of democratization" should be the European Union, not the United States. It needs, however, to solve a series of internal problems so that it can defend its own democratic order. As he states: "The Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union is a disaster. It assumed that there'd be only one country that was backsliding into autocracy. And we now have at least two, which means that it prevents any forms of either sanctions or positive encouragement. It is very much needed to send a message to countries that if they choose to go an autocratic route, there'll be a restraint maybe even exclusion from the EU. The Article 7 is not credible". EU institutions have been trying to pressure countries like Hungary and Poland through budgetary mechanisms. However, Article 7 should be changed, which would be difficult, as it would require a revision of the Treaties. As K. Morgan (2022) notes, Hungary and Poland are often thrown into one bag and treated among the European Union countries as "kind of bad apples" or "bad pupils in the class". Hungary has gone much further down the path of democratic regression, but because of the alliance with Poland, it makes it very hard to introduce sanctions against Hungary because of the blockages in the various European institutions. The authorities of Poland and Hungary have repeatedly announced their readiness to block sanctions against them on the basis of Article 7, which was a manifestation of mutual protection by the authorities of these countries (Wolkenstein, 2020, pp. 118, 123). Some Western European countries, including France and Germany, are in favor of a general reform of the decision-making process in the European Union, consisting in moving away from unanimity to qualified majority. While, according to them, this would lead to healing the decision-making process in the EU (Morcos, 2022), in some countries, including in Poland, this is perceived as a threat to sovereignty. A.M. Meyerrose (2021, p. 3) believes that the instrumental role of the European Union institutions in the promotion of democracy in post-communist countries may itself be a source of weakness of democratic institutions in these countries and

make them susceptible to backsliding. Attila Vincze, on the other hand, points out that the incomplete diagnosis of European institutions in assessing the quality of democracy in the member states means that the instruments for counteracting the regression of democracy are ill-suited or halfhearted. He also indicates that the European Commission is more willing to take action against Poland than against Hungary (2020, pp. 211, 220). This is puzzling given the fact that the erosion of democracy in Hungary is greater than in Poland.

Problems with the quality of democracy in the USA and limitations in its promotion abroad

James Goldgeier (2022) claims that the problem of adhering to democratic principles affects many NATO countries, not only European members, but also the United States. According to M. Doyle (2022), the US has never been a good role model in terms of democratic standards. In the 1990s, the US promoted democracy with great success, but this was followed by a crisis during the presidency of George W. Bush, whose administration abused military force in promoting democracy around the world. Later, however, the election of Barack Obama, the first African American president in a “country with a horrendous history of slavery and racial discrimination, gave a real breadth of enthusiasm and was a big step forward”. But then there was the presidency of Donald Trump, which was “a horrible model of right-wing populism”. Doyle believes that the best the United States can do is to bolster its own democratic standards, including strengthening its electoral system, to make it less vulnerable to manipulation, both from inside and from outside. It is also very important to rebuild a vibrant middle-class. Moreover, Washington needs to be more restrained about military interventions. Instead, it should pay more attention to provide a rhetorical and institutional support for actors supporting democracy. If that happens, the US will be a more credible example of democracy for the rest of the world.

Michael Miller (2022) notes that there is a lot of pessimism about American democracy among American scholars, and he shares this pessimism. He says: “I wouldn’t be surprised if our democracy broke down within, let’s say, ten years or so”. One of the reasons is that a significant part of the Republicans and the public supporting them question the legality of the presidential election. Miller thinks that there is nothing unique in the US compared to other countries that could protect it from the collapse of democracy. Robert R. Kaufman and Stephan Haggard (2019, p. 428) believe that although it is unlikely, “we should not entirely

dismiss the possibility that the United States might devolve toward a competitive authoritarian regime that locks the incumbents into power”. Although this prospect is unlikely, given that the US is the main promoter of democracy in the world, it raises serious concerns.

In recent years, the crisis of democracy in the USA has been associated mainly with the person of President Donald Trump, which was particularly emphasized by the Democratic circles. The most symbolic confirmation of this was the undermining of election results by Trump and his supporters, which led to the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. According to James Lebovic (2022), President Trump’s “mercantilist approach and mercantilist philosophy”, as well as the ability “to mold facts and invent facts to suit his worldview”, made that he was much more respected by autocratic than democratic heads of state. The same was true of domestic issues, culminating in inspiring demonstrators to attack the Capitol. Later, Trump disputed the attorney general’s investigation and the ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States unequivocally rejecting his allegations of election fraud. It is interesting that many of these people were previously appointed to positions by Trump. As Lebovic concludes: “reckless disregard for the truth counts as much as it is knowingly ignoring the truth”. Similarly, P. Ganga (2022) believes that the Trump administration did not criticize Poland for the problems with democracy, because President Trump himself undermined the foundation of democracy, which is democratic elections, claiming that they were stolen. K. Morgan (2022) believes that under Trump, there was no effort to support democracy in Poland, if only because his administration was contemptuous of democratic institutions such as the EU and NATO. President Trump was not interested in upholding liberal democracy in the CEE countries, on the contrary, he supported illiberal, conservative-populist parties such as the Law and Justice in Poland or Fidesz in Hungary (Appel, 2019, pp. 263–264).

After losing the election, Trump began to attach even more importance to the illiberal democracies in Central Europe, focusing mainly on Hungary. As S. Biddle (2022) puts it: “Trump’s political movement in the United States has spent a lot of effort building up Hungary as a model for what they want American politics to be... Hungary especially, and to a lesser extent, Poland, I think now get Trump and his followers attention in ways they didn’t when he was president, because this fascination with Hungary has come largely after Trump left office”. Now the issue has become political theater played out in the media, including through staunch supporters of Donald Trump like television host and conservative political commentator Tucker Carlson and others who are constantly broadcasting to Trump’s political base. It is worth noting that in the USA, various circles, mainly conservative

ones, have a similar approach. Therefore, some US states face increasing challenges on liberal democratic values, such as women's rights or the rights of LGBTQ+ communities (Wolchik, 2022).

According to M. Miller (2022), democratic values and principles are important in the foreign policy of the USA, which generally attaches great importance to the promotion of democracy in the world. However, individual administrations are flexible in this respect, as they have to balance other values and interests. For example, the US has had for decades very good relations with Saudi Arabia, which is undemocratic. Significant economic and security interests make it sometimes "that it might be worth looking the other way". P. Ganga (2022) notes that the United States has certain mechanisms to stop the regression of democracy in countries like Poland, but the question is whether they would decide to use them in violation of their strategic interests. Another issue is that the US could be accused of interfering in internal affairs of other states. Particularly after the mistakes of the Bush administration in promoting democracy in Iraq, the US political elites are more restrained in reaching for decisive instruments. In practice, they rather resort to soft methods in the form of using the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), supporting local NGOs and civil society, and proclaiming attachment to democratic values by US ambassadors, including the ambassador to Poland.

Michael Miller (2022) believes that in a situation where the quality of democracy in Poland is deteriorating, the American authorities will remind the Polish authorities of this. However, due to the primacy of security interests, they will not decide to seriously loosen relations in the area of security or economics. The most important thing for the US is that there are still multiparty elections in Poland, and the details of strengthening the executive at the expense of the judiciary are not that important. It could be different if there was a full scale coup. However, even in the case of countries where there was an actual military coup, which took place in Egypt in 2013, the US, due to the importance of security relations, maintains close cooperation with this country. Steven Pifer (2022) argues that Poland's departure from democratic standards has been concerning Washington, but not enough to make real talks about sanctions against Poland. He notes that one of the requirements imposed on countries before joining NATO was the principles of democracy, individual freedom, and the rule of law. These values are written in the preamble of the Washington Treaty of April 4, 1949, but in practice there were exceptions to this requirement. An example is Greece and Turkey, which joined NATO in 1952 to stop the spread of Soviet influence in these countries. Currently, there are countries in NATO that violate the principles of democracy and the rule of law, mainly Turkey and Hungary. M. Doyle believes that the brave defense of Ukrainians against authoritarian Russia

gave a real boost to the democratic and liberal international order, something like a new “breath of life” in democracy. Before the war, in the context of strengthening the authoritarian powers, mainly China and Russia, the end of democracy in the world was becoming a fact. The chance to extend the dominance of the democratic West in the world is both maintaining positive democratic standards at home and promoting them abroad, as well as unity among Western countries in the face of threats to the democratic international order.

Conclusions

There is no perfect democracy, because every democracy has some flaws. Nevertheless, Western researchers, including American ones, usually point to liberal democracy as a democracy of the highest quality. In this kind of democracy, the electoral process gives the greatest chance of presenting alternative options. Moreover, it ensures the protection of minority rights against the dictates of the majority. Among American researchers, there is a fairly clear assessment that the process of democratic backsliding has been taking place in Poland under the rule of the Law and Justice party. The actions of the Polish authorities causing a decline in the quality of democracy are being criticized. Particular criticism concerns actions aimed at limiting the independence of the judiciary, but also towards limiting women’s rights and the rights of minorities, including the LGBTQ+ community, as well as attacks on independent media. The American authorities approach the erosion of democracy in Poland in different ways, with the Democratic administrations paying much more attention to it. The Republican administration of President Trump is often identified with a period of democratic regress in the USA. For all American authorities, however, the strategic interests of the US in the region have priority, which pushes the issue of the quality of democracy in Poland into the background. Paradoxically, the illiberal authorities in Poland, violating the principles of democracy and the rule of law, may be more favorable to the USA, due to their unambiguously pro-American attitude.

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