



## LITHUANIAN DEMOCRACY UNDER THE STATE OF EMERGENCY: WILL THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT THE ASSESSMENT OF THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE COUNTRY? – SYSTEM ANALYSIS

DEMOKRACJA LITEWSKA  
W WARUNKACH STANU WYJĄTKOWEGO.  
CZY PANDEMIA COVID-19 WPŁYNIE NA OCENĘ STANU  
DEMOKRACJI W PAŃSTWIE? – ANALIZA SYSTEMOWA

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— ABSTRACT —

Since the first quarter of 2020, the whole world has been struggling with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. More and more governments are introducing restrictions and bans for security reasons, with the aim of limiting the transmission of the virus and reducing health risks for citizens. The scale of the problem is best illustrated by the rising numbers of infections and deaths. In addition to the epidemic threat worldwide, the pandemic has brought to light many other problems and challenges. One of them is growing crisis of democracy around the world. Using a systemic approach, the article sets out to analyse the state and problems of contemporary Lithuanian democracy under pandemic conditions, focusing also on indicators of democracy and public opinion polls. It evaluates, inter alia, the state of

— ABSTRAKT —

Od pierwszego kwartału 2020 r. cały świat zmagają się z pandemią SARS-CoV-2. Rządy kolejnych państw ze względów bezpieczeństwa wprowadzają ograniczenia i zakazy, mające służyć ograniczeniu transmisji wirusa i zmniejszeniu zagrożenia zdrowotnego obywateli. Skalę problemu najlepiej ilustrują rosnące liczby zakażeń i zgonów. Oprócz globalnego zagrożenia epidemicznego pandemia unaoczniała wiele innych problemów i wyzwań, które ujawniły się także w rosnącym kryzysie demokracji na świecie. W artykule, wykorzystując podejście systemowe, postanowiono dokonać analizy stanu i problemów współczesnej demokracji litewskiej w warunkach pandemii, koncentrując się także na wskaźnikach demokracji i badaniach opinii społecznej. Oceniono m.in. stan demokracji

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Lithuanian democracy, the political system and its openness to citizens.

litewskiej, system polityczny i jego otwartość na obywateli.

**Keywords:** Lithuania; democracy; political system; ranking; 2020; pandemic

**Słowa kluczowe:** Litwa; demokracja; system polityczny; ranking; 2020; pandemia

## INTRODUCTION

A state of emergency is being imposed in many European countries in connection with the pandemic. Ever new restrictions are being introduced, creating a sense of insecurity and lack of influence over the current situation. This state of affairs may also translate into a deterioration of public opinion regarding democracy. When analysing the year 2020, one can distinguish at least two aspects: the first is an assessment of the state of the components of democracy<sup>1</sup> in the context of the pandemic and the resultant limitations, while the second refers to the general trends in the development of political regimes. A new report by the Economist Intelligence Unit signals that the global democracy index score has fallen from 5.44 to 5.37 points in 2020 as compared to 2019 (Democracy Index, 2021). It has decreased in most countries by almost 70%, i.e., to 116 from 167 (Democracy Index, 2021). Algis Krupavičius, one of well-known Lithuanian political scientists dealing with the dynamics of the quality of Lithuanian democracy, has recently drawn attention to a worrying phenomenon demonstrating the lowest average democracy index since 2006. This indicator has worsened over the past year mainly (but not exclusively) as a result of the restrictions on individual and civil liberties imposed by governments around the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indicators of political regimes have deteriorated in all regions of the world. The research of Algis Krupavičius became an incentive for the author of this article to focus more in-depth on the evolution of the quality of Lithuanian democracy in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

The aim of the article is to present the quality of democracy indicators and public opinion polls in Lithuania in comparison with other European countries and to answer the following research questions: Does Lithuania meet the criteria of a consolidated democracy? How does the quality of Lithuanian democracy

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<sup>1</sup> The democracy index consists of five elements or categories: electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

compare with that of other European countries? The achievement of the research goal has been enabled by the applied research methods: first of all, the method of system analysis as developed by David Easton, which has made it possible to become familiar with the mutually dependent elements of the political system, e.g., government, citizens (their activity, assessment of the government's functioning, expectations towards the government, interests of citizens, and transparency of the government's decisions) and influence on the system, as well as taking into account the conditions (e.g., pandemic) under which the system functions, and the quantitative method, which has made it possible to assess the state of democracy by means of numerical indicators and indicate potential changes in the quality of democracy in Lithuania. It is worth noting that Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) point out that without an effective state there can be neither effective citizenship nor successful privatization. The theory of democracy proposed by Linz and Stepan is a systematic comparative analysis of the process of democratic consolidation in Southern Europe, South Africa, and post-communist Europe. The approach proposed by these researchers placed the experiences of post-communist Europe in the literature on the theory of democracy.

The first part of the article presents the indicators of the quality of democracy in Lithuania as compared to the other Baltic states – Latvia, Estonia, and Poland, while the second part focuses on the empirical presentation of the features of openness and transparency of Lithuania's political system. In theoretical terms, this article refers to system theory and contemporary subsystem theories, which represent an effective instrument for explaining political phenomena and for analysing the mechanisms of public opinion and society's political behaviour with respect to the functioning of democracy and the openness of the system to citizens.

The selection of the Economist Intelligence Unit (2020) and European Social Survey (2020) indicators result from the importance of the qualitative values which, in the author's opinion, allow the best assessment of the level of democracy and the condition of its individual elements. Thanks to this, it is possible to assess general trends in the development of political systems in the context of a pandemic. For example, the Democracy Quality Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence expert team is a weighted average based on the responses to 60 questions. The questions are grouped into five categories: 1. electoral process and pluralism, 2. civil liberties, 3. functioning of power, 4. political culture of citizens, 5. participation. The total value of the Economist Intelligence Unit index is the

average of all five categories (Szewczak, 2010, pp. 127–128). The index is the average of these ratings. It is assumed that the score above 8.0 points means full democracy, from 6 to 7.9 is a flawed democracy, from 4 to 6 is a hybrid system and up to 4 points it is an authoritarian system.

The European Social Survey, on the other hand, is a survey carried out by one of the world's best research centers that provides qualitative data on attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of citizens in 30 countries. The survey monitors indicators of social and public trust, political interest and participation, socio-political orientations, media use, moral, political and social values, social exclusion, national, ethnic and religious affiliations, etc.

## 1. LITHUANIA IN THE ECONOMIST INTELLIGENCE UNIT RANKING

In Western and Eastern Europe, average regional scores have decreased by 0.06 points: in Western Europe<sup>2</sup> from 8.35 to 8.29 points and in Eastern Europe from 5.42 to 5.36 points. In 2020, two Western European countries – France and Portugal – moved from full democracy<sup>3</sup> to the category of flawed democracy (Democracy Index, 2021).

Democracy Index experts note that the pandemic is the most powerful driver of restrictions on individual freedom that governments have ever introduced during peace or war. That the picture of reaction to restrictions and bans is no longer so clear-cut is evidenced by the aggravating open protest, which translates also into violence, as witnessed also in Lithuania. Constitutional rights are protected by Lithuanian courts (Masiokaitė-Liubiniene, 2021).

In Lithuania, there is growing discontent over continuing government restrictions linked to the coronavirus outbreak. In addition to most shops being closed, citizens' ability to leave their homes have been kept to a minimum, and people can only travel outside their district for work and medical purposes.

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<sup>2</sup> Erdogan's Turkey is also included in Western Europe, which lowers the score for the entire region. In general, one of the weaknesses of this index is that countries are divided into regions, e.g., North America is distinguished only with the USA and Canada and an artificial region of Asia and Australasia is created.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, full democracies cover only 13.8% of all the countries analysed and only 8.4% of the world's population, with authoritarian regimes accounting for 34.1% and 35.5%, respectively.

This subsection aims to present the quality of democracy indicators in Lithuania as compared to the other Baltic states – Latvia, Estonia, and Poland – in terms of system analysis. First, it is necessary to focus on the Baltic states and Lithuania in the context of Eastern Europe. Among 28 countries in this region<sup>4</sup>, 10 are EU countries. The Baltic states are in the top five. Estonia takes the first place, while Latvia and Lithuania the fourth and the fifth, respectively. According to Krupavičius, the situation is not bad, but there is not a single state in the region that meets the criteria for full democracy.

**Table 1.** The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Indices for Groups of the Baltic States in 2018–2020 (scale from 0 to 10 – a higher value of the index means a better rating)

Country	Overall rating 2018	Overall rating 2019	Overall rating 2020	I. Electoral process and pluralism (2020)	II. The functioning of government (2020)	III. Political participation (2020)	IV. Political culture (2020)	V. Civil liberties (2020)
<b>Baltic states</b>								
Poland	6.67	6.62	6.85	9.17	5.71	6.67	5.63	<b>7.06</b>
Lithuania	7.50	7.50	7.13	9.58	6.07	<b>5.56</b>	5.63	8.82
Latvia	7.38	7.49	7.24	9.58	6.07	6.67	5.63	8.24
Estonia	7.97	7.90	7.84	9.58	7.86	6.67	6.88	8.24
<b>Average</b>	7.38	7.37	7.26	9.47	6.42	6.39	5.94	8.09

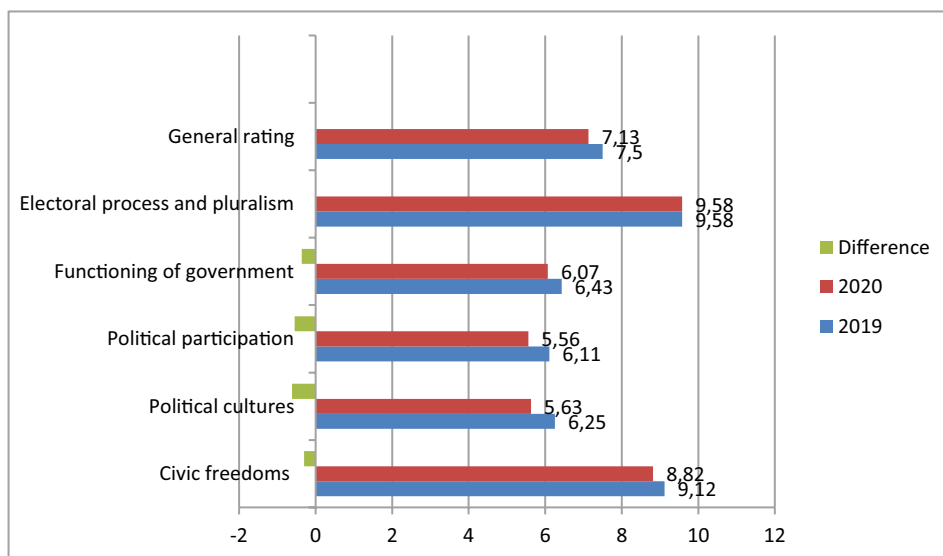
Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (2020).

The results for the Lithuanian democracy index – except for the elements of electoral process and pluralism, where the ratings for all three Baltic states are the same (9.58 points each) except for Poland (9.17 points) – are lower than the overall average (7.40 points), while the overall rating for Lithuania is 7.13, for Latvia – 7.24, for Estonia – 7.84, for Poland – 6.85 points (Table 1). However, Lithuania is ahead of Poland and its Baltic neighbours in the civil liberties category (8.82 points) because, according to Krupavičius, these countries still have a problem with foreigners (Krupavičius, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> According to Krupavičius, the division of countries into Eastern Europe raises reasonable doubts, as it includes not only post-communist European countries, but also five Central Asian countries – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and others, so it would be more reasonable to call them post-communist countries.

Estonia is the clear leader in the region. It scores highest in terms of the functioning of government (7.86), political culture (6.88) and best overall democracy index (7.84). Compared to 2019, the overall democracy index of the Baltic group decreased by 0.12 points compared to 2018. Overall, in the Eastern Europe<sup>5</sup> region, only six out of twenty-three countries (e.g., Poland, Slovenia, Russia, Moldova, Montenegro, Albania) saw an increase in the democracy index in 2020 (Krupavičius, 2020, May 30). However, as Krupavičius points out, only thirteen countries fall into the category of flawed democracy, the others being hybrid or authoritarian regimes. Therefore, the countries of the Baltic Sea region seem to be quite advanced on the road to democracy, and Estonia has already been close to the threshold of full democracy for some time – 8 points (Krupavičius, 2020, June 25).

While analysing the state of democracy in Lithuania, one can notice several clear tendencies. The highest ratings are in the categories of electoral process and pluralism, while participation and political culture receive much lower ratings (Table 1). In 2020, the ratings of the functioning of government slightly decreased (Flis, 2020).



**Figure 1.** Index of Democracy in Lithuania in 2019–2020

Source: Krupavičius (2020, May 30).

<sup>5</sup> Excluding five Central Asian countries.

According to the overall ranking, Lithuania dropped from the 36<sup>th</sup> to the 42<sup>nd</sup> place in 2020. It saw the largest declines in the categories of political culture (-0.62), political participation (-0.55) and the functioning of government (-0.36) with unchanged ratings for the electoral process and political pluralism.

According to Jūratė Kavaliauskaitė, political polarisation has played a negative role in the field of political culture. It was also promoted by the Seimas election campaign, which is in line with the constant trend of increasing anti-political and anti-activist attitudes (Kavaliauskaitė, 2014). One of the best indicators of this state of affairs is the fact that participation in Seimas elections has not reached the level of 50% for quite a long time (Table 2), as in 2020.

**Table 2.** Population Share of the Baltic States in National and European (2019) Parliamentary Elections

Country	Turnout in national elections (%)	Turnout in European elections in 2019 (%)
<b>Central and Eastern European countries</b>		
Poland	61.74	45.68
Lithuania	47.8	53.48
Latvia	54.58	33.53
Estonia	63.67	37.60
<b>Average</b>	56.9	42.6

Source: European Parliament (2019).

While analysing the data in Table 2, it can be concluded that among the countries of the Baltic region, Lithuania had the lowest turnout in national elections, while the Lithuanian citizens were more willing to participate in elections to the European Parliament, achieving the highest turnout in the region.

It should be noted that in 2020, for the first time in the history of the Republic of Lithuania, elections were held during the pandemic period. Due to the fact that numerous epidemic restrictions and the so-called hard lockdown were introduced – civil liberties (e.g., prohibition of movement and assembly) were visibly limited, which also affected the election campaign and the elections themselves. Candidates for the Seimas could not campaign undisturbed due to the prohibition of leaving their place of residence without a justified reason and the prohibition of organising political rallies, meetings, assemblies, etc. As a result, they were

not able to fully exercise their passive electoral right, which involves also the possibility of canvassing and campaigning. Due to the lack of such opportunities during the lockdown period, the election campaign in a traditional form was not possible and largely shifted to the Internet. Consequently, the citizens did not have full access to information about politicians, political agendas, etc. This was due to the fact that not every Lithuanian citizen has access to the Internet, where candidates and political parties presented themselves. At the same time, it should be noted that not all candidates had equal access to traditional media – as post-election reports indicated, candidates of ruling parties, who were promoted in public media, were in the lead. It may be concluded that the elections held during the pandemic period may raise many concerns regarding the implementation of the principles of free and equal elections (Krimmer, Dueñas-Cid, & Krivonosova, 2021; Musiał-Karg & Kapsa, 2021; James & Clark, 2021). It seems that this state of affairs could have significantly determine the opinions about the quality of Lithuanian democracy.

## 2. OPENNESS AND TRANSPARENCY OF THE LITHUANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Another issue that could potentially affect the state of democracy is the answer to the research question: Is Lithuania's political system open and transparent? An extremely important aspect is how the public in many European countries assesses the current government now and before the pandemic, as well as to what extent the approval of the government is increasing and whether it is sustainable.

As Krupavičius argues, there are at least several long-term impact variables (elements) whose estimates generate real consequences for political behaviour. These would include the overall openness of the political system to citizens, the responsiveness of the government to citizens' interests and the transparency of its decisions, and the self-assessment of personal competence in politics. All these variables (elements) are used periodically as indicators of the political system to measure the attitudes of European societies towards governments in the European Social Survey analyses.

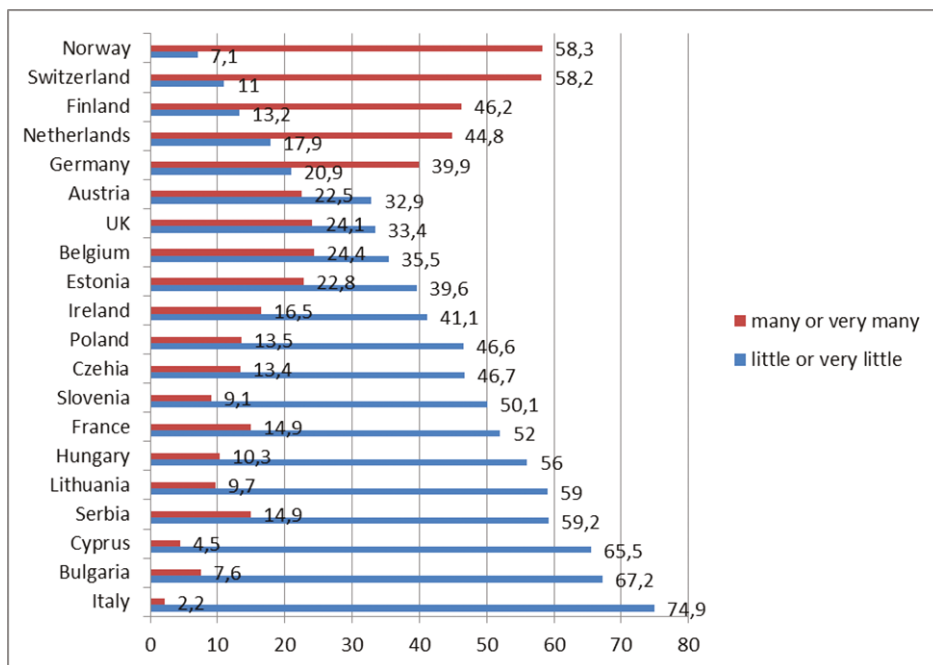
Satisfaction with the performance of current policies implies a short-term reaction of citizens to the implementation of government policies and the state of democracy in the country. The openness of the political system to citizens, in turn, is measured as the extent to which people think that politicians or political



institutions will listen to their opinions and act according to their expectations. As in David Easton's classic system analysis, where, in a political system setting, the "entry" process, i.e., expectations and demands of citizens towards those in power, defines citizens' expectations, while the "exit" process is the disclosure of decisions after feedback (Easton, 1957).

Evaluating the responses in the 2020 European Social Survey, one may note that the political system provides equal opportunities for political participation, where at one pole there are "much" or "very much" and at the other "not much" or "very little". According to the ESS, in Lithuania 59% of the population assess equal opportunities of political participation negatively and only 9.7% assess them positively, which means that Lithuania belongs to outsiders among 20 European countries (Figure 2).

The only positive aspect may be that in 2017, 76.6% of the respondents answered negatively to a similar question about the influence of ordinary citizens on politics and only 2.6% answered it positively. This implies a slight improve-



**Figure 2.** Does the Political System Give Everyone an Equal Chance to Participate in Politics in European Countries – based on the European Social Survey of 2020

Source: European Social Survey (2021a).

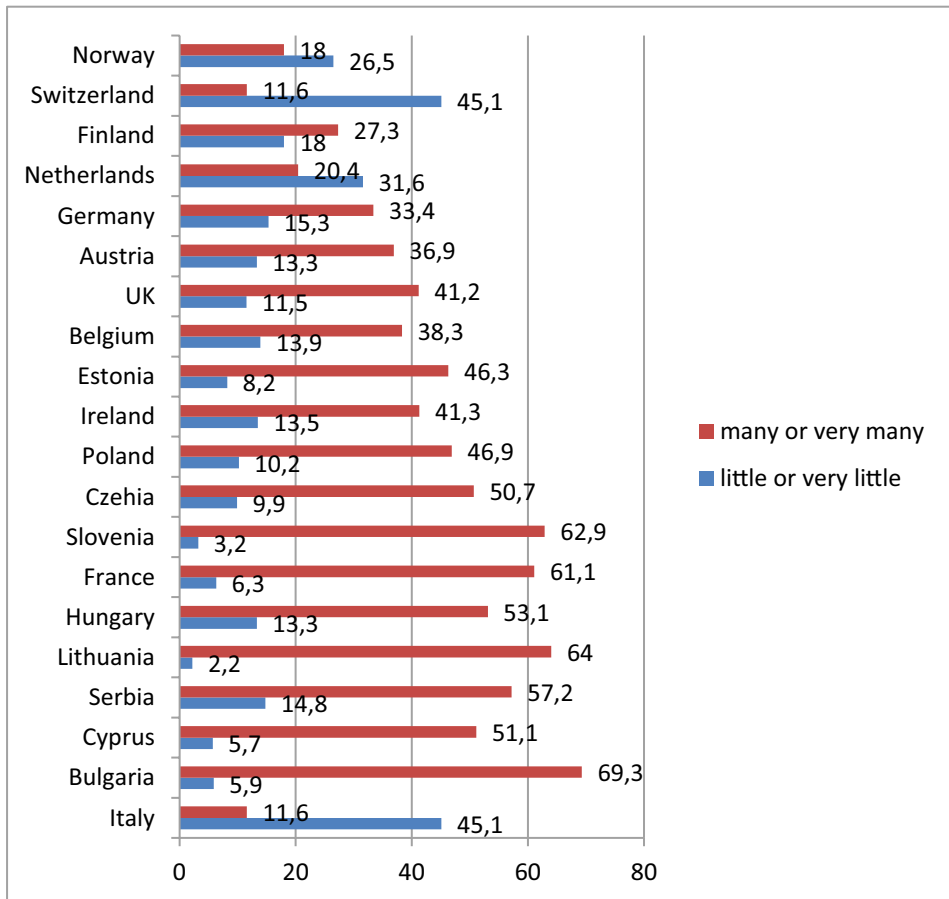
ment in 2020. Lithuania has probably made some progress, but the questions were not identical. In other countries – such as Italy or Hungary – there were also significantly more negative responses in the context of the older version of the question. However, equal opportunities for citizens to participate in politics, as is usual in such studies, are most favoured by Northern and Western European countries and least favoured in Central and Southern European countries.

According to Krupavičius, Lithuania looks even worse than in the ratings of equal opportunities when it comes to the extent to which the country's government takes into account the interests of its citizens. Only 2.2% of respondents in Lithuania believe that the government is able to respond “much” or “very much” to the interests of its citizens, while 64% give a diametrically different response (Figure 3) and the remaining 31.3% answer “slightly” (Krupavičius, 2020, May 30).

Several trends can be observed in the comparative context. First, the openness of the political system (positive ratings range from 2.2% to 58.3%) is rated everywhere better than the government's consideration of the citizens' interests (positive ratings range from 1.2% to 45.1%). Second, the grouping of countries by region on the basis of both variables is the same: Northern and Western European countries, followed by Central and Southern European countries. However, when it comes to Lithuania, while the positive ratings of the openness of the political system are six times lower than in Norway and Switzerland, which have the highest scores, the ratings for the government's consideration of the citizens' interests is more than twenty times lower than the respective highest scores in Switzerland. According to the latter indicator, Lithuania is simply miles away from more enduring democracies.

Another element is closely related to the two variables already discussed – transparency of political decisions. Although the corruption perception index in Lithuania has now slightly improved (Lietuvos Respublikos specialiųjų tyrimų tarnyba, 2020), the transparency of political decisions is assessed very critically (Figure 4). Among all 20 European countries, the estimates for this variable are the worst, as only 11.6% of the respondents on average believe that decisions in their national politics are “much” or “very much” transparent. 52.6% of the respondents on average believe that they are “not much” or “very little” transparent. Lithuania – in line with a recurring trend – is in top of those with the worst ratings, with 3.2% positive and 63% negative ratings, and 33.8% Lithuanians assessing their government's decision as slightly transparent.

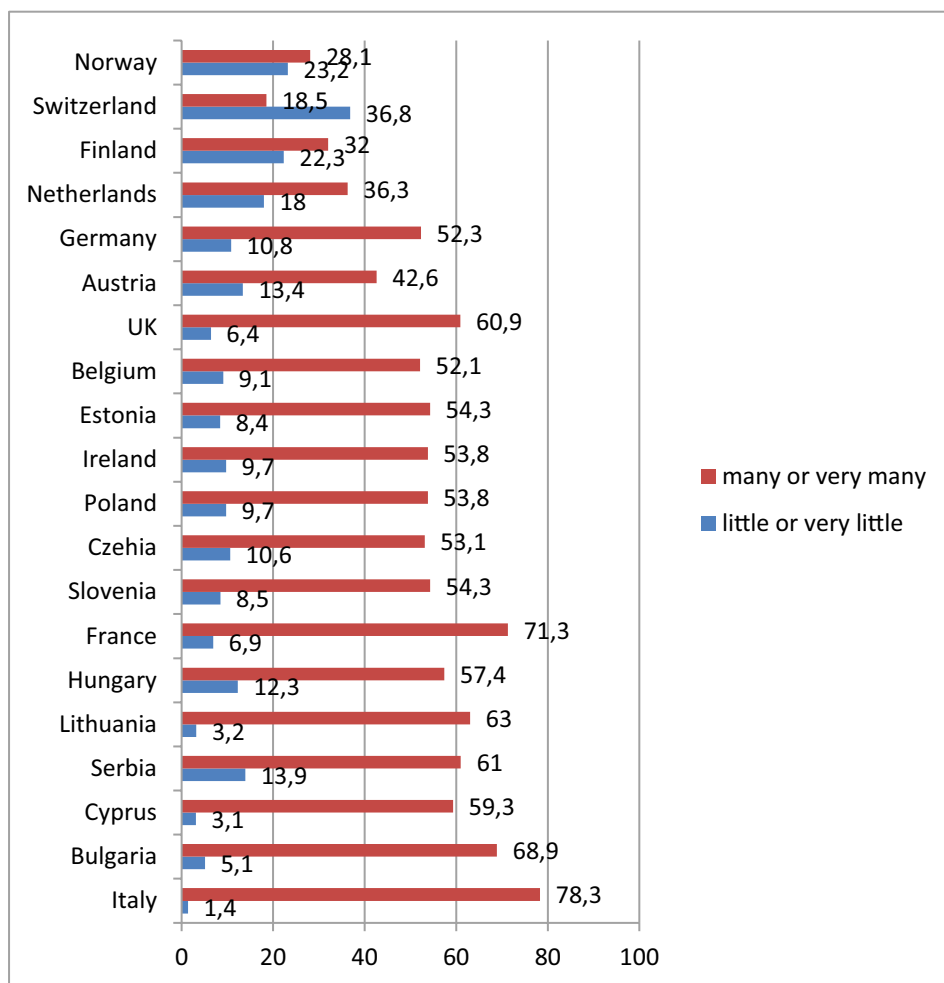
The lack of political transparency even in Western democracies is a clearly noticeable problem in their societies. Despite all efforts, no effective solution



**Figure 3.** Does the Country's Government Take Into Account the Interests of All Its Citizens – based on the European Social Survey of 2020

Source: European Social Survey (2021a).

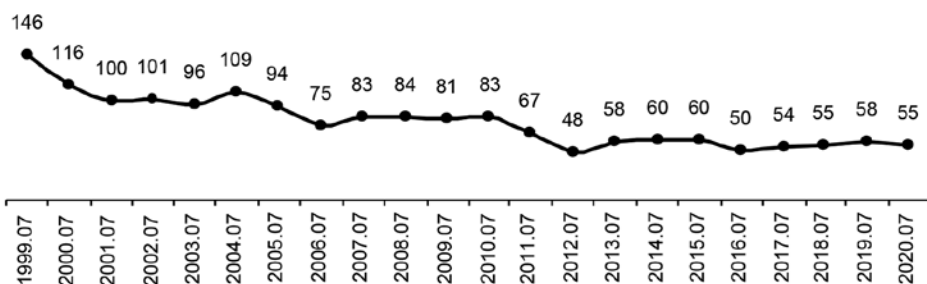
has been found although the openness of the political system, the government's consideration of the interests and needs of its citizens and the transparency of its decisions correlate in Lithuania with the political trust and ratings of the current government, as well as the state of democracy. The above element had a negative impact on the European Social Surveys in 2019. According to them, only 6.5% of the respondents had confidence in Lithuanian political parties (estimates of 7–10 points), in politicians (Figure 5) – 8%, in the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania (Figure 6) – 9.5%, in the government (Figure 7) – 13.3%, in the legal



**Figure 4.** Are Decisions in National Politics Made Transparently by Governments? – based on the European Social Survey of 2020

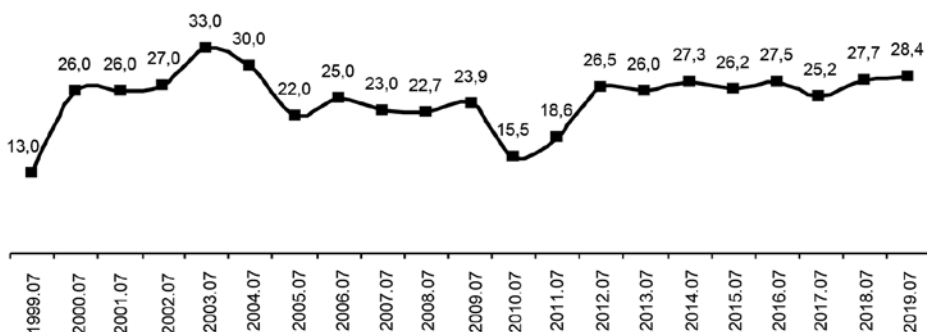
Source: European Social Survey (2021a).

system – 26.1%, and 25% in each other – an indicator of social trust, which has been part of the downward trend since 1999. Compared to the 1992 survey, where 38.1% of the respondents had trust in the political system, it can be concluded that there is a clear downward trend. Another problem is the continuing tendency of the undecided to trust political institutions. This tendency can be described as a passive or weak perception of politics by the citizen.



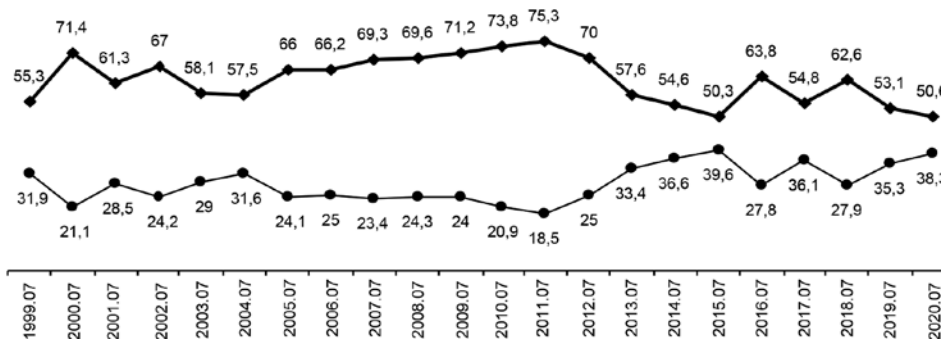
**Figure 5.** Trust in Lithuanian Politicians in 1999–2020

Source: Gaidys (2020).



**Figure 6.** Neither Trust Nor Distrust in the President in 1999–2020

Source: Gaidys (2020).



**Figure 7.** Neither Trust Nor Distrust in the Seimas in 1999–2020

Source: Gaidys (2020).

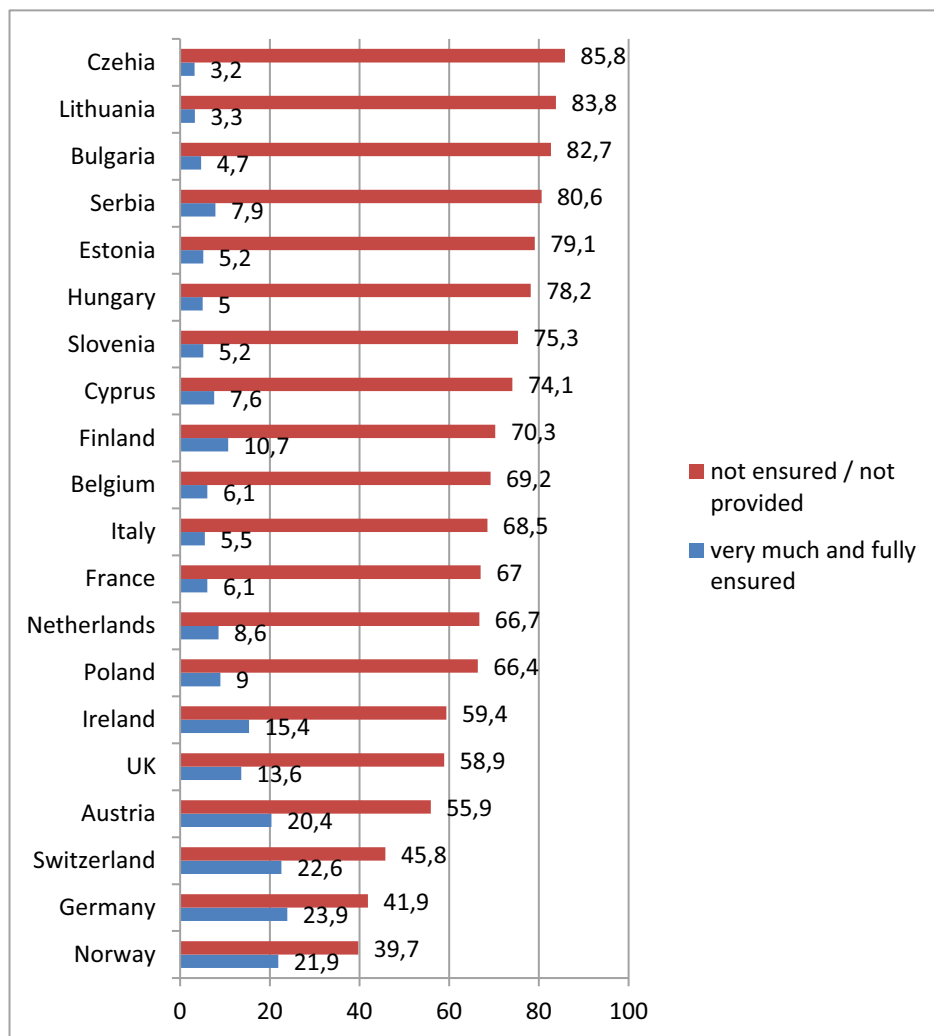
The above analysis indicates basically no progress, if not a regression of trust in all political institutions. In theory, the aggregate indicator explaining these trends is satisfaction with democracy. If in 1999, according to the European Social Survey, 25.5% of respondents were satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Lithuania and only 23.8% in 2019 (European Social Survey, 2021b), this is all a clear sign of a lack of progress towards democracy.

Another important element is the finding that higher levels of systemic accountability are associated with higher levels of political participation as well as electoral voting. However, as Krupavičius notes, the subjective competence of the individual (citizen) or their ability to understand the mechanisms of politics and responsible political behaviour is crucial in this case. This begs the question whether Lithuanian citizens trust their own competence in politics? Data from public opinion polls should be used in this respect. In 2019, only 3.3% of the respondents in Lithuania were highly or completely confident in their own ability to participate in political life, while 83.8% were not confident in their own competence (Figure 8). In this ranking, Lithuania is the penultimate one among 20 countries.

Subjective competence is a particularly good predictor variable of political activity. The correlation coefficient between participation in parliamentary elections and subjective competence in the analysed countries is assessed negatively with only -0.38 points. The correlation between electoral participation and negative equality of opportunity in the political system is even higher at -0.47 points. The highest correlation can be seen between the ratings of electoral participation and negative government responsiveness to the citizens' interests: -0.51 points (Krupavičius, 2020, May 30).

In view of the above, several conclusions should be drawn from these correlations for the political life of Lithuania. First, it should not come as a surprise that since 1990 only around 50% of Lithuanian voters have participated in parliamentary elections, as the level of frustration with politicians and political institutions is extremely high (Petrauskienė & Žilinskas, 2013). Predicting the voter turnout in Lithuania is quite easy. The assumptions of such a low voter turnout (in Lithuania, participation in elections is about 15% lower compared to the countries analysed above) are not short-term but long-term ones (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyrtausioji rinkimų komisija, 2020). At the same time, these correlations also explain the low level of trust in democracy. If the citizens of a given

country believe that they can influence government decisions, they have more confidence in democracy or the system, and vice versa. The above analysis shows that the opposite is true in Lithuania.



**Figure 8.** Are the Citizens Confident about Their Own Ability to Participate in Political Life? – based on the European Social Survey of 2020

Source: European Social Survey (2021a).

## CONCLUSIONS

While evaluating the state of Lithuanian democracy on the basis of the 2020 Democracy Index (2021) of the Economist Intelligence Unit, one can conclude that the data quoted above indicate that Lithuanian democracy is currently at the stage of stagnation and there is not much progress within it. Interestingly, this state of affairs has been observable over a fairly short time span.

The analysis provided in this article demonstrates that the restrictions on civil liberties introduced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic correspond to the performance of government policies during the pandemic period, as well as translating into the electoral process itself and election results. One may even draw the conclusion that in the case of parliamentary elections – due to the restrictions in place affecting the exercise of, for example, the passive right to vote – the fully democratic nature of the elections under pandemic conditions was not preserved. In short, where pandemic management is effective, the assessment of the state of democracy and its quality decline to a lesser extent. By contrast, when pandemic management is not effective, declines in the ratings of the quality of democracy will be more prominent.

It is worth noting that an important element of the political system of Lithuania after 2004 was the aspiration for the Europeanisation of the political system through membership in the EU structures. The European Union, whose membership criteria include democracy and rule of law, has not significantly improved the quality of democracy in Lithuania (EUR-Lex, 2020). One of the key pieces of information on the Democracy Index was the Economist's Democracy Index report of 2018, which indicated a deterioration in the global indicators of trust in democracy around the world. Further, in 2020, experts from Freedom House called the past year the worst year for democracy in the world. Lithuania – like the other Baltic states – has seen a drop in the Freedom House ranking (2020).

The above analysis shows that the Republic of Lithuania no longer meets the criteria of a consolidated democracy according to the theory of Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, where a consolidated democracy exists in a country when democratic principles become “the only possible rules of the game in town”. While evaluating the reports on the ESS public opinion polls on the openness and transparency of the political system, it should be concluded that the political system of Lithuania is not as stable and open to the citizens as, for example, the



one in the countries of Northern or Western Europe, a factor that has a significant negative impact on the ratings of the state of democracy in the country (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

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