

Deconsolidation of Liberal Democracy in the Baltic States. The Issue of Compliance with the EU Standards at Institutional and Value Levels

Nataliia Khoma, Oleksii Kokoriev¹

Abstract: *This article analyses compliance of the post-Soviet Baltic States with the EU liberal-democratic standards, at both institutional and value levels. The authors prove that fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession did not determine an enhancement of the quality of democracy in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This study highlights that, in recent years, the Baltic States have entered a phase of stagnation of liberal-democratic transformations and that they need a more active position of the state on institutional reforms and resocialization of citizens to strengthen adherence to the political and legal values that the EU is based on. The article emphasises how the global financial crisis of 2008, the European migration crisis (2015) and the current coronavirus pandemic have all had an impact on the quality of democracy in the Baltic States. The authors focus on the incomplete process of value reforming among the Baltic population against the EU liberal-democratic standards. The article highlights that the post-totalitarian rotation of values in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is slow and faces rejection of European liberal-democratic values to a greater or lesser extent. It underlines the preservation of the totalitarian (Soviet) vestiges of political culture, which contradict the EU paradigm of values and prevent the Baltic States from improving the quality of democracy. It is noted that, in terms of the radicalization level in defending national interests, the Baltic countries take the intermediate position between the Nordic and the V4 countries, particularly Hungary and Poland that develop illiberal democracy patterns.*

Keywords: *Baltic States, values of the EU, quality of democracy, liberal democracy, deconsolidation of liberal democracy, lack of democracy.*

Introduction

In Article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), democracy is defined as a core EU value. This landmark agreement was aimed at strengthening the democratic dimension of the EU. However, for the second decade, the deficit of democracy (“Democracy in Crisis” according to estimates made by the Freedom House²) has been growing in the EU Member States, as well as worldwide. The defects of democracy are becoming clearer, and their range is increasing. Various radical socio-political organizations actively oppose democratic values and undermine them with hate speeches, intolerant

¹ Nataliia Khoma is a ScD in Political Sciences. She is Professor at the Political Science and International Relations Department, Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine. Her major research interests concern foreign policy, quality of democracy, issues of democratic transit of the post-Soviet countries. E-mail: nataliia.m.khoma@lpnu.ua

Oleksii Kokoriev is a ScD in Political Sciences. He is Lecturer and postdoctoral researcher at the Economically Autonomous Structural Subdivision Professional College of Communication and Informatization of O.S. Popov Odessa National Academy of Telecommunication, Ukraine. He studies compliance of the post-Soviet Baltic States with the EU standards and rules. E-mail: kokorev@ukr.net

² “Freedom in the World 2018. Democracy in Crisis”, *Freedom House*, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/democracy-crisis> (accessed 12 July 2020).

actions, etc. In the context of global deterioration of the quality of democracy, to a greater or lesser extent, the EU countries are examples of the increasing support for political organizations which promote narratives that are inconsistent with the values of liberal democracy.

Nowadays, it is justified to speak of a deterioration in the quality of democracy or of an anti-democratic reversal, which is more or less common for almost all states, including those that are gaining experience in democracy. Democracy seems to be gradually losing its liberal origins. Various forms of inequality are increasing; accordingly, the middle class is shrinking, which leads to the rise of anti-liberal populism. The global financial crisis of 2008, the migration crisis of 2015 and the recent coronavirus pandemic have intensified the fragility of democratic systems and jeopardized democratic consensus. So, a number of questions arise: do the EU countries, in particular the young Baltic democracies that we have been studying, meet the liberal-democratic standard at institutional and value levels? To what extent are they currently characterized by a deficit of democracy and what defects of liberal democracy do these countries face? How threatening is the democratic retreat of the young European democracies to accomplish the EU's goals and objectives?

It should be noted that the term liberal democracy is rarely used in EU rhetoric and texts. Some exceptional explicit references to liberal democracy may be found, for instance, in the debates of the European Parliament: The European Union has become a global player, always on the basis of its principles such as respect for peace, the quest for compromise, plus the defence of human rights and of liberal democracy. In particular, it is engaged in an effort to promote democracy in countries from North Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. The EU Treaties declare the Union a “representative democracy” and a “social market economy”, not a “liberal democracy,” but we believe that this integration unification is focused on the values of liberal democracy.

Although Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are not currently expressing an illiberal reversal, as Hungary and Poland are, these countries have recently stagnated and even regressed in terms of strengthening liberal democratic values. In this way, we suggest the hypothesis that, in recent years, the Baltic States, which joined the EU during the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union in 2004, have distanced from the commitments made in the course of fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria to the candidate countries. The emergence of this hypothesis is explained by certain inconsistencies with the liberal-democratic standards of the EU in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, at both institutional and value levels.

The increase in defects of democracy in the context of political radicalization in Estonia

During its EU membership, Estonia has received quite high international assessments in terms of the quality of democracy. This country has been recognized as a “bastion” of liberal-democratic values and strong support for the idea of “European House.” In the public opinion, Estonia has been considered a leader in democratic transformations among the Baltic States. Integration into Western structures and commitment to democracy and the rule of law have been its key elements of success in the post-totalitarian stage. However, the results of the last parliamentary elections (March 3, 2019) cast doubt on the stability of the liberal-democratic course of Estonia's

development, as the country has shifted to a more conservative, nationalist agenda. These processes require assessment of political science.

Democratic institutions in Estonia are currently quite solid, while political and civil rights are largely respected. The Freedom House NGO considers that Estonia belongs to a group of “free” countries; in the “Freedom in the World 2019”³ report, the country scored 94 points out of a maximum 100. However, more than 5% of the Estonian population do not have the citizenship of the state, therefore, they cannot exercise their right to vote in national elections. Despite the transition to the e-state model, corruption (especially political) remains an issue. There are cases of discrimination against national, sexual and other minorities. Gender gaps are recorded. This is not a limited range of problems in assessing the quality of Estonian liberal democracy.

Considering the existing problems in the Democracy Index 2019, the Economist Intelligence Unit has classified Estonia within a group of countries with flawed democracy. This assessment is based on the fact that, although free and transparent elections take place, and fundamental rights and freedoms are respected in Estonia, there are cases of pressure on journalists and media, intolerance, etc.

The democratic political culture of the population is insufficiently developed, the level of its socio-political participation remains low, and so on. Since 2006, when the democracy index was determined, Estonia has not delivered full democracy. One of the main reasons for that is the particularities of values, political and legal culture of people. The Estonian female sociologist T. Vihalemm identifies the values of health, peace, strong family, national security, personal happiness and a safe environment, etc. as priorities for Estonians⁴. Vihalemm emphasizes that, in terms of values, Estonians are still largely close to the former countries of the Eastern bloc, and they have not fully incorporated the values of the Nordic or Western European states. It should be noted that this is a common problem of all Baltic countries and not just Estonian.

Two decades ago, Ronald F. Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker⁵ argued that societies were based on the values of self-expression in sustainable democracies; there is a strong link between survival / self-expression values and democracy. It is obvious that, nowadays, the values of survival prevail over the values of self-expression for Estonians. At the same time, the EU values are founded on such integral pillars as responsible freedom (restricting oneself for coexistence and progress) and responsible cooperation (willingness to cooperate and to seek a compromise, activity, trust, tolerance, participation in decision-making, etc.). The values of survival, which are still vivid among Estonians, are contrary to the values of the EU. A high level of distrust of all those outside the close circle of people, and especially, of the so-called “Others”; great mistrust of state institutions, etc. are characteristics of communities where survival values dominate, which is an obstacle to the stability of liberal democracy.

Based on the criteria of democracy consolidation proposed by R.S. Foa and Y. Mounk, the level of consolidation of democracy in a certain state is determined by the degree of public support for democracy as a system of government; the degree to which anti-system parties and movements are weak or nonexistent; and the degree

³ ‘Freedom in the World 2019. Democracy in Retreat’, *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Feb2019_FH_FITW_2019_Report_ForWeb-compressed.pdf (accessed 23 June 2020).

⁴ I. Viirpalu, ‘On the Values and Identity of the Estonian People’, *Estonian Human Rights Centre*, available at <https://humanrights.ee/2019/09/eesti-inimeste-vaartustest-ja-identiteedist/> (accessed 29 June 2020).

⁵ R. Inglehart and W. E. Baker, ‘Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values’, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 65, no 1, 2000, pp. 19-51.

to which democratic rules are accepted. In the case of Estonia, firstly we see the issue of having similar characteristics to anti-systemic parties, movements and even their representation in the legislative and executive branches of the country. Problems in the political culture of Estonians are also clear, as the rules of democratic coexistence have not been embedded firmly in all socio-demographic groups in the country, yet.

In consolidated democracies (according to J. Linz and A. Stepan⁶), where there are no groups interested in regime change, the majority of the population is firmly convinced that democracy is the best form of governance and that the state apparatus operates on democratic principles. A certainly positive Estonia's feature is the development of a transparent and effective model of the e-state, which highlights democratic principles, and, in general, Estonians are committed to democracy. However, the problem is the existence of groups that are interested in regime change. First of all, we mean the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), its youth wing Blue Awakening and other radical political parties.

Consequently, in the current political process in Estonia, we can recognize signs of the deconsolidation of democracy. This was forecasted by the former President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves. He concerned himself with the preservation of the achievements of Estonian democracy⁷. Although Estonia's technological and economic growth has been quite significant in recent years (at least before the coronavirus pandemic), it is clear that destructive processes aimed at undermining neoliberal democracy have surfaced after the 2019 parliamentary elections. We imply the electoral success of the EKRE party. In 2015, this newly formed party that was running in the elections for the first time had 8.1% of votes (7 out of 101 seats in the Riigikogu). In 2019, it was already supported by 17.8% of voters (19 seats); this is the largest increase in electoral favour among Estonian parties. Considering these results, we can assume that there is a significant demand for the values and vectors of development promoted by the EKRE party in the Estonian society.

The EKRE party aims to preserve Estonian ethnicity and traditional values. The main matters of the party's discourse are anti-Russian stance, Euroscepticism, promotion of family values, and opposition to refugees⁸. In terms of conservatism, the party's program focuses on supporting reduction of Estonian emigration, prevention of immigration from outside the EU, discrimination against sexual minorities, etc. EKRE opposes multiculturalism, sexual minorities, feminism, same-sex partnerships, and others. The party advocates restricting the rights of the Russian national minority, and also believes that the Jewish minority has too many privileges in Estonia. Mostly, EKRE is criticized for its manifestations of xenophobia, nativism and even elements of neo-racism. The strengthening of the party's position in the legislative and executive branches of government contributed to the rise of right-wing radicalism and democratic retreat in Estonia.

Officially, the EKRE party attempts to promote its policies exclusively through parliamentary, governmental and other democratic institutions and procedures. However, organizations with an openly radical position often attend their public events,

⁶ J.J. Linz and A.C. Stepan, *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 5-7.

⁷ T.H. Ilves, 'We stand at the gate of two countries,' *Medium*, available at <https://medium.com/@ilvestoomashendrik/we-stand-at-the-gate-of-two-countries-dbecb7ef233b> (accessed 29 June 2020).

⁸ A. Kasekamp, M.-L. Madisson and L. Wierenga, 'Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society,' *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 66, no 1, 2019, p. 47.

such as the anti-immigrant movement “Soldiers of Odin Estonia”. As a result, a link between Estonia’s nationalist-conservative parties and extra-parliamentary militant extreme right groups is not ruled out. Mainly, EKRE is supported by Estonians who consider order (a neo-authoritarian value) rather than freedom (a liberal-democratic value) a priority. The EKRE party is most popular among the rural electorate, but the most worrying thing is that it is endorsed by young people aged 18-24.

It should be noted that conservative-nationalist values had been asserted in a milder form even before the EKRE party came to power in Estonia. First of all, they emerged from the desire to preserve the national culture and language after many years of destructive Soviet oppression. However, in our opinion, it is the current political course of EKRE that highlights the danger of a populist reversal for Estonia with the aggravation of Euroscepticism, the rejection of neoliberal values, the rise of hate speech, etc.

The rapid ascent of the radical EKRE party in Estonia, a country that has consistently implemented democratic standards for a long time, can be explained by a range of reasons. We listed the main ones below:

1. in 2012, the People’s Union of Estonia, a conservative party that represented the interests of the rural electorate, dissolved itself due to corruption. Its voters, as well as some members, partially joined the newly formed EKRE party. This process caused a structural shift in the party system of Estonia because until then there had been no influential right-wing radical party there;
2. official recognition of civil partnership by the state in 2014. This alternative to traditional marriage was possible for same-sex couples in particular. This decision divided the Estonian community into supporters and opponents of the institution (the first case in the post-Soviet territory). Even earlier, the matter of same-sex relations had been controversial in the Estonian community, while the legalization of civil partnerships had exacerbated differences between political parties over the concepts of marriage and family;
3. the beginning of the European migration crisis in 2015. This has aggravated the issue of Estonian reception of refugees, as well as criticism of EU migration policy. Estonian political parties, in particular EKRE, have manipulated the fears of possible problems in small Estonia, considering the need to comply with EU migration quotas;
4. agreement of the Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas, leader of the Estonian Centre Party (EK), with the EKRE party in order to form a new coalition government in 2019 (the head of the executive offered EKRE 5 out of 15 government positions, and agreed to discuss the idea of legal consolidation of the marriage definition as exclusively a union of a man and a woman). The leaders of EKRE, Mart and Martin Helme, are holding key positions in the country’s life, that is Ministers of the Interior and Finance, respectively. This is an example of an unpredictable alliance of ideologically opposed forces (pro- and anti-Russian), due to which the EKRE party is now represented not only in the parliament, but also in the government.

Despite the ideological differences, the Estonian EK and EKRE parties that formed the coalition government have common ground and, most importantly, are quite anti-liberal. For instance, they have demonstrated solidarity with the principle of the EU’s distribution of migration quotas after the beginning of the European migration

crisis. Therefore, the implementation of this course may cause Estonia to lose its high assessment of the quality of democracy.

It should be highlighted that the main instrument of democratic deviation is precisely the executive branch. Through its representation in the government, the EKRE party promotes innovations that can be critically evaluated in terms of liberal democracy. The entry of this radical political party into the governing coalition in 2019 became a turning point for the increase in democratic defects in Estonia.

The structure of Estonian civil society is represented by a rather radical illiberal segment, which can be defined as a quasi-civil society. This sector of civil society creates an atmosphere where nationalists, ethno-populists and others formulate narratives aimed at vulnerable groups (ethnic and sexual minorities, refugees, etc.). In turn, this raises the population to protect borders (from migrants), promotes extremist religious conservatism (advocating against abortion, sexual minority rights, etc.), attacks multicultural values⁹.

We should note that, regardless of the reasons, migrants have tried to settle in Estonia in recent years, a great number of Estonians are protesting against it, adhering to the position “everyone should live in one’s home country” (“iga roju oma vi”). At the same time, the above-mentioned intolerant slogan is being voiced more and more often in Estonia. Moreover, after the beginning of the European migration crisis, there were protests against the reception of refugees from the Middle East and Africa¹⁰. When assessing the refugee accommodation in Estonia, EKRE warned against accepting any number of refugees, as this would potentially make Estonia vulnerable to further EU pressure to accommodate even more asylum seekers. Politicians (such as Estonia's former Foreign Affairs Minister and the MEP K. Ojuland) used slogans such as “the white race is threatened by black immigrants”¹¹. This is an obvious manifestation of hate speech. As we can see, Estonia's policy is gradually becoming intolerant towards migrants who are mostly trying to move to Finland, Sweden and Germany.

The issue of Estonia's signing the Global Compact on Migration (2018) led to a split in the government¹². Part of the Estonian politicians perceived the signing of this document as a threat in terms of increases in the migrant stock in the country. Since the election campaign in Riigikogu was launched at that time, the migration issue was one of the main topics in the election programs and actions of political parties, and hate speech and intolerance were observed during the debates. In fact, anti-migration protests had taken place in Estonia before, such as the protests following the exacerbation of the European migration crisis. The anti-immigration attitude in Estonia was expressed, first of all, by the EKRE party and its youth wing called Blue Awakening, the Smart and Healthy Estonia movement, the People's Unity Party (RÜE) and others.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Estonian government leveraged the virus spread to radicalize the migration issue. The Ministry of the Interior,

⁹ L. Bustikova and P. Guasti, “The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?”, *Politics and Governance*, vol. 5, no 4, 2017, p. 169.

¹⁰ Since 2015, Estonia has accommodated only 200 refugees; approximately half of them left the country shortly after.

¹¹ S. Tambur, “Former liberal MEP Ojuland calls African refugees’ threat to white race”, *Estonian Public Broadcasting*, available at <https://news.err.ee/115949/former-liberal-mep-ojuland-calls-african-refugees-threat-to-white-race> (accessed 11 June 2020).

¹² In the end, Estonia signed the Global Compact on Migration, however, not on Dec 10th, 2018 in Marrakesh, but in New York.

headed by the EKRE party leader Mart Helme, initiated legal changes that allowed the government to unilaterally revoke long-stay visas for foreigners, residence and work permits for the third-country citizens in case of job loss in the Estonian labour market during the pandemic. On April 2, 2020, the amendments to the legislation on foreign citizens were approved. It should be mentioned that, while neighbouring Finland has eased demands on migrant workers, in Estonia the efforts of radical parties have led to an increase in migrant-phobia.

Following the strengthening of EKRE's position in the legislature and the executive, the Estonian media and individual journalists criticising the political force have been pressured to soften their criticism of this political party. Notable examples are the socio-political publication *Postimees*¹³ and the public broadcaster ERR. Until recently, the Press Freedom Index in Estonia was high and steadily rising, while after the 2019 parliamentary elections it declined in ranking from 11th place in 2019 to 14th in 2020. The reason behind was the increasing verbal censorship against Estonian journalists.

Problems of inefficiency in the functioning of control and regulatory bodies testify to the issues of the quality of democracy in Estonia. The most prominent case is the long-term money laundering of significant sums (about \$228 billion) in 2007-2015 by the unscrupulous clients from post-Soviet countries through the Estonian branch of the Danish financial institution Danske Bank. Only after the latter and the United States Department of Justice had conducted an internal investigation, the Estonian regulatory authorities launched their own inspections. A similar situation applied to the Estonian divisions of Swedbank regarding financial transactions during 2011-2017 (investigations were launched in 2019).

Despite a certain progress registered over the last three post-Soviet decades, currently, Estonia is not a “genuine lasting democracy”¹⁴ and the main reason lies in EKRE's activities. We assume that Estonia will not refocus itself towards illiberal democracy (as Hungary or Poland), but the stability of democratic values is undermined today and these processes may exacerbate, especially if radical political parties remain in office. If the electoral support of the EKRE party, hence its levers of power, continues to strengthen, it might contribute to the realization of its obvious intention to lead Estonia in a “third way”, free from the influence of both Russia and the EU.

Decelerating factors of the liberal-democratic transformations in Latvia

Despite the fact that Latvia is a full member of the EU, liberal democracy in this country is not stable, and its values are controversial for many citizens. According to the V-Dem Institute, Latvia is a liberal, not an electoral democracy, however, it is characterized by an increase in defects¹⁵. The Economist Intelligence Unit did not classify Latvia (as well as other Baltic States) as a stable democracy in its ranking of democracies, due to the shortcomings in terms of political culture and political participation. According to the results of 2019, Latvia ranked 38th in the world¹⁶ which corresponds to the assessment of governance as a “flawed democracy.”

¹³ S. Walker, ‘Racism, sexism, Nazi economics: Estonia's far right in power,’ *The Guardian*. 2019. 21 May.

¹⁴ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The short twentieth century, 1914-1991*, London, Viking, 1994, p. 442-443.

¹⁵ A. Lührmann et al., *Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020*, Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, 2020.

¹⁶ ‘Democracy Index 2019’, *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, available at <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index> (accessed 09 June 2020).

Undoubtedly, Latvia's fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria as a candidate country for EU accession and membership since 2004 has significantly reduced the impact of negative external factors on domestic political processes and has contributed to the democratization of the Latvian society. European integration was an effective tool for liberal democratization. Therefore, it was expected that the European vector of development restrained populist, right-wing radicals and other destructive processes in Latvia. However, after Latvia's accession to the EU, liberal-democratic transformations have decelerated and the symptoms of democratic fatigue have become more vivid. In particular, this idea is developed by the Latvian political scientist J. Rozenvalds¹⁷.

The stability issues of liberal democracy are obvious considering the results of the last parliamentary elections in Latvia (October 6, 2018) which showed an increasing distrust of traditional parties and politicians. Recently formed political parties (2016–2017) entered the Latvian Saeima. As the newest populists, they based their election campaign on standard topics, such as anti-corruption, the need for political class renewal, etc.

This reflects the latest Pan-European trend, that is, the growing popularity of right-wing radical, populist parties in the context of the economic decline, migration crisis, high-level corruption revelations, etc. At the same time, despite the Latvians' sensitivity to corruption, the society has not formed a firm understanding of its threats yet. Particularly, this idea was reflected in the significant support (19.8% of votes) of the "Harmony" Social Democratic Party ("Saskaņa"), although the favour of this party decreased compared to the previous elections (2011 – 28.4%, 2014 – 23%). Numerous corruption cases involving the Riga City Hall are connected with this party.

In the last parliamentary elections in Latvia in 2018, significant electoral support was received by anti-systemic populist political parties which for the first time declared themselves as subjects of suffrage. These elections restructured the political landscape of Latvia, as a transition to a more conservative, nationalist agenda took place. For example, the conservative Populist Party called "Who owns the state?" (KPV LV), which had 14.3% of votes, manipulated Latvian sensitive matters: cheap medication, creating favourable conditions for population growth to 2.5 million people (now, it is about 1.9 million people), increasing funding for medicine, etc. This party promoted itself as "being with people" as opposed to the elite, and its main task was to "cleanse" the Latvian political system.

Another political party, the New Conservative Party (JKP), which held 13.6% of votes in the first election campaign, based its campaign on supporting the introduction of a unified school system in the state language (i.e., for minority schools), defining marriage exclusively as a union of a man and a woman, arguing that the introduction of the institute of civil partnership in Latvia (as in Estonia) is unacceptable, in particular for same-sex couples, etc.

Latvian support for populist, conservative-nationalist parties demonstrates clearly the high electoral distrust of traditional parties and state institutions. This attitude was largely affected by allegations of corruption, particularly in connection with ABLV Bank which laundered money mainly from post-Soviet countries. We assume that the growing popularity of populists was promoted by the fact that criminal banking activities were not exposed by the competent Latvian government agencies,

¹⁷ J. Rozenvalds (Ed.), *How Democratic is Latvia? Audit of Democracy 2005–2014*, Riga: University of Latvia Advanced Social, Political Research Institute, 2014, p. 16.

but by the financial department of another state (the USA)¹⁸. This case caused a critical assessment of the Latvian state apparatus and its effectiveness, and therefore, a decrease in the public confidence in the government. In the light of the corruption scandal, there is a need for the new political forces that declared the socially expected slogans of criticism of the government and the necessity to effectively prevent and combat corruption.

The high sensitivity of Latvians to populism proves the instability of liberal-democratic values, and also civil society's readiness and desire to control the state institutions in their political and legal culture. There is a tendency for decline of voter turnout which jeopardizes the legitimacy of the power. For instance, in the 2010 elections for Saeima 63.1% of electorate voted, in 2011 – 59.5%, in 2014 – 58.9%, in 2018 – 54.5%¹⁹. There is a noticeable increase in the population's alienation from the ruling elite due to a wide range of reasons. At the beginning of 2020, 10.4% of the Latvian population had the status of non-citizens²⁰. However, the positive aspect is the automatic granting of the Latvian citizenship to children born to non-citizen parents (from January 1, 2020). It should be noted that, at the same time, the number of non-citizens in the Latvian population is gradually decreasing, for example, at the beginning of 2014 they represented 13%.

The majority of problems that we consider as a significant threat to the further democratization of Latvia are influenced by political and legal values, as well as a political culture in general. Most Latvians are characterized by a sense of political powerlessness, low confidence in politicians. According to the Eurobarometer survey²¹, Latvians have extremely low confidence in the government (28%), parliament (19%), the justice system (37%) and political parties (6%). This leads to a counterproductive alienation from politics. In this way, it reduces the prospect of strengthening the democratic political culture, and of establishing the liberal-democratic values.

Despite the liberal-democratic vector of Latvia's development, its policy continues to be destructively influenced by the oligarchy. For a long time, the country has actually been ruled by representatives of the oligarchy. Although the oligarchic capture of the state is not a typical characteristic of Latvia nowadays, the destructive impact of the oligarchs on state policy still persists in a latent form. Some politicians who are close to the Latvian oligarchs (A. Lembergs, A. Šlesers, A. Šķēle, etc.) have authoritative power now. Therefore, it is justified to question whether the efforts of Latvians are sufficient enough to finally oust oligarchs and criminal economic groups from Latvian politics.

In spite of the fact that value segmentation exists in society, the value of cohesion is increasing for Latvians. According to sociological polls, such values were stability and security a few years ago²². Latvian cohesion is strongly linked to traditional family values, which means conservatism; so, it can be a problem for the integration of certain

¹⁸ A. Higgins, 'Populist Wave Hits Latvia, Lifting Pro-Russia Party in Election,' *The New York Times*. 2018. 7 Oct.

¹⁹ To compare, there were 88.4% of voters in 1993 elections to Saeima.

²⁰ 'Distribution of Latvian population by nationality,' *The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, Ministry of Interior of Republic of Latvia*, available at https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/ISVP_Latvija_pec_VPD_2020.pdf (accessed 30 March 2020).

²¹ 'Standard Eurobarometer 92,' available at *European Commission*, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinionmobile/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/surveyKy/2255> (accessed 20 June 2020).

²² 'Cohesion is becoming increasingly important for the people of Latvia,' *Kantar*, available at <https://www.kantar.lv/latvijas-iedzivotajiem-arvien-svarigaka-klust-saliedetiba/> (accessed 30 June 2020).

liberal-democratic values into Latvian society. Latvian sociologists emphasize the high importance of security values and the dominance of conservative values in general for the Latvian society²³. Today, values are not divided only in the context of “citizens – non-citizens”, but also by age groups: survival values remain especially significant in older-age groups, while for young people it is the values of self-expression which are the basis for a liberal-democratic progress of any country.

Latvia's rating in the Press Freedom Index continues to grow. In 2020, the country ranked 22nd in the world (for comparison, Estonia – 14th, Lithuania – 28th place). However, in our opinion, a major obstacle to the sustainability of democracy is the underfunding of state media. Back in 2008, the Latvian government responded to the beginning of the global financial crisis with austerity and reduced the funding of state broadcasters by 25%. As it has not increased their support since then, a lot of journalists have lost their jobs, and many programs have been closed. Accordingly, the issue of quality and efficiency of content in the Latvian media has become topical. The closure of Latvia's oldest commercial TV channel, Latvijas Neatkarīgā Televīzija (Latvian Independent Television, LNT), on 1 January 2020 is likely to further weaken pluralism in Latvia's media environment and make it more difficult to prevent and combat fake news and disinformation. The quality of Latvian democracy is in danger. Latvia is in a group of countries targeted by foreign - primarily Russian - toxic disinformation propaganda campaigns²⁴.

It should be noted that the supervision of the Latvian media is highly politicized. The National Electronic Mass Media Council, which administers all kinds of media, is elected by the Saeima and consists of political party representatives. As a result, this public body operates in a highly politicized environment. During the election campaigns, the leadership of the Latvian, especially state, media comes under political pressure from both the government and the opposition. However, we should emphasize that Latvian journalists, particularly public radio, produce independent content and try to be an objective controller of the government.

In our opinion, the prospect of Latvian democracy is complicated greatly by destructive demographic changes, in particular, the rapid reduction of youth in the population structure. At the beginning of 2019, in Latvia, there were half as many people aged 18–24 as in 1991²⁵. The country has one of the lowest numbers of youth in the EU. According to estimates of Eurostat, half of Latvia's population will be over the age of 50 in 2040. In addition, the total country's population is declining; in 2010–2019 alone, it decreased by about 225,000 people. Another problem for the stability of democracy in Latvia is a quite fragile middle class, as traditionally this class is the social base of democratic transformations.

In recent years, new identity conflicts have arisen in Latvia. The focus has shifted from issues related to the Russian-speaking minority and non-citizens to matters regarding the place of neoliberal and national-conservative values in the Latvian community. It is exemplified by the problems of Latvia's ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence

²³ R. Rungule and S. Senkāne, 'Values of Latvian population according to Europe. Social research data,' in *Scientific conference theses* (Riga, 17-18 March 2016), Riga: Riga Stradins University, 2016, p. 274.

²⁴ A. Lührmann et al., *Democracy Facing Global Challenges. V-Dem Annual Democracy*, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2019, p. 34.

²⁵ 'Youth in Latvia, 2019', *Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia*, available at <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/characteristics/search-in-theme/394-youth-latvia-2019-latvian> (accessed 11 April 2020).

against women and domestic violence) and the Global Compact on Migration.

The Lithuanian parliamentary parties were divided on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. It should be mentioned that Estonia was the only Baltic country which passed the legislative ratification procedure. The position of national-conservative political organizations is greatly influenced by the authoritative church institution in Latvia, which is critical of certain points of the Istanbul Convention. The Convention ratification was seen as threatening by a number of high-ranking officials, including Dzintars Rasnačš²⁶, the former Minister of Justice. The issue of the Istanbul Convention ratification has even divided scholars of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, who have failed to develop a common scientific view²⁷. Critics of ratification point out that the document includes pro-Western liberal legal norms that are unacceptable from a conservative standpoint and inconsistent with traditional Latvian family values. Besides, more than 80% of the Istanbul Convention rules are already enshrined in other Latvian regulations. At the same time, ratification of the Istanbul Convention is crucial for the liberal democratization of Latvia, as domestic violence is much more common in this country than the EU average. Moreover, gaps in national legislation prevent victims of domestic violence from defending themselves and bringing perpetrators to justice.

Another intense topic in Latvia was the refusal to ratify the Global Compact on Migration (2018). On December 6, 2018, the Saeima of Latvia did not support the signing of this document, while the parliaments of Estonia and Lithuania voted in favour of the pact, but with certain difficulties. Latvia is in a group of countries that insist on the sovereign right to pursue a migration policy. It should be highlighted that Latvia's active participation in mitigating the migration crisis was supported neither at the governmental nor at the public levels.

When the migration crisis in Europe began to aggravate, public polls showed that more than three-quarters of Riga residents disapproved of refugees being admitted under EU quotas²⁸. This despite the fact that the country granted refugee status to only 63 people in the pre-crisis period (in particular, during 1998–2014). At the end of 2015, Latvia agreed to accept 531 asylum-seekers at the request of the EU, but it did neither fulfil its obligations in full (374 people were accepted), nor make adequate efforts to integrate them, to overcome prejudices, xenophobia, etc. As in other Baltic countries, migrants sent to Latvia under EU quotas were severely alienated and impoverished, getting insufficient support from the state to meet even vital human needs. So, their vast majority tried to change the country of residence after obtaining refugee status. The biggest fears of Latvians concern refugees and terrorist threats, and it seems that, at state level, no considerable efforts are made to dispel groundless fears and overcome prejudices.

There are no official restrictions on the right to association and peaceful assembly in Latvia, but authorities have obstructed certain public events, especially those organized by sexual minorities. We should mention that all the issues related

²⁶ M. Klūga, 'Latvia unlikely to ratify Istanbul Convention any time soon', *LSM.lv*, available at <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/latvia-unlikely-to-ratify-istanbul-convention-any-time-soon.a265133/> (accessed 09 May 2020).

²⁷ J. Zariņš, 'The Istanbul Convention has divided Latvian scientists', *SIA All Media Latvia*, available at <https://skaties.lv/zinas/latvija/sabiedriba/stambulas-konvencija-saskelusi-latvijas-zinatniekus/> (accessed 19 April 2020).

²⁸ D. Crouch, 'UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Volunteers tackle prejudice against refugees in Latvia', *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5698161118fe.html> (accessed 23 April 2020).

to the rights of the Latvian LGBTI community are very sensitive and linked with intolerance. Back in 2005, the Latvian parliament adopted an amendment to the text of the Constitution (Article 110) which defined marriage as precisely the union of a man and a woman. This amendment has strong political and social support and is unlikely to be repealed in the near future.

The progress of liberal-democratic transformations in the Latvian society is hindered by immature social assets, low confidence in the government, etc. The popularity of populists in Latvia and the strengthening of the anti-elite atmosphere in society are promoted by top-level corruption and cases of evasion of responsibility of high-ranking officials. Latvia is characterized by fragmentation and weakness of political parties, all civil society institutions, and general public mistrust of state institutions. In our opinion, although Latvia made significant progress in liberal-democratic transformations during the preparation for the EU accession, the intensification of democratic changes has stagnated since 2004, furthermore, even regression is evident on some issues.

Variability of political landscape and populist impact on the quality of democracy in Lithuania

The atmosphere of Euroscepticism, populism, radicalism, etc. is not critically exhibited in Lithuania. However, as in other Baltic States, liberal democracy has been tested for stability in the post-integration stage. There are a number of challenges to the liberal-democratic institutions to function effectively that do not correspond with the EU liberal-democratic pattern of political and legal culture in society. The “The Nations in Transit” reports published by Freedom House during the last years demonstrate that Lithuania has stagnated in promoting liberal-democratic values. Currently, Lithuania is classified as having consolidated democracy, but its democratic tendency does not increase further: in 2017, it had 78 points, while from 2018 to 2020, it received 77 points²⁹.

The primary evidence of the democracy defects in Lithuania is a low level of the population's confidence in the government and other main political institutions. According to the survey conducted by UAB Vilmorus³⁰ (in March 2020), only 7.5% of the respondents trust political parties, 10.6% – the Seimas, 24.9% – courts. In comparison, 89.8% surveyed Lithuanians are in favour of emergency services and 68.6% of the police³¹. The results of a public poll conducted by UAB Baltijos tyrimai³²

²⁹ ‘Nations in Transit 2017: The False Promise of Populism’, *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2017_booklet_FINAL_0.pdf (accessed 10 May 2020); ‘Nations in Transit 2018: Confronting Illiberalism’, *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FH_NationsInTransit_Web_PDF_FINAL_2018_03_16.pdf (accessed 12 May 2020); ‘Nation in Transit 2020. Dropping the Democratic Façade’, *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf (accessed 28 May 2020).

³⁰ We should note that the level of trust to the mentioned institutions remained approx. the same in the previous months (according to the results of UAB Vilmorus). Thus, the new exacerbation of socio-economic problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic did not result the rapid decline of confidence in state institutions. The crisis of the power legitimacy has remained for a while.

³¹ ‘Do you trust or do not trust the following Lithuanian institutions?’, *Vilmorus*, available at <http://www.vilmorus.lt/index.php?mact=News.cntnt01.detail.0&cntnt01articleid=2&cntnt01returnid=20> (accessed 28 June 2020).

³² ‘Ratings: Confidence in the country's democracy has grown, but remains low’, *Delfi*, available at <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/reitingai-pasitikėjimas-demokratija-salyje-paaugo-taciau-vis-dar-islieka-zemas.d?id=83771521> (accessed 28 May 2020).

showed that 47% of people were sceptical when assessing the state democratic system. Youth below 30, citizens of the capital, females and people with higher education are more satisfied with the functioning of the democratic institutions in Lithuania. While males, people over 50 or those whose monthly income is less than 700 euros, farmers, retirees, unemployed citizens, housewives, representatives of the Russian and Polish minorities are less contented with them.

The quality of democracy in Lithuania is influenced by the populist and radical political parties and their representation in authorities. Nowadays, populist and radical organizations have not received significant levers of impact in Lithuania which is contrary to many young democracies of the EU. Lithuania is not generally included in the political discourse regarding European populism or extremism since their manifestation is insignificant compared to some other EU countries. However, we cannot ignore the fact that approximately a third part of Lithuanians vote for populist parties at parliamentary elections³³. Though there is no longer practice of a populism, populist rhetoric has expanded rapidly in the last decade.

The impetus of populism development in Lithuania had been given before the EU membership³⁴. Its manifestation was the election of the head of state (2003) R. Paksas due to the populist rhetoric, despite the existence of a strong electoral competitor, the pronounced Euro-optimist V. Adamkus. In 2002, Paksas initiated the establishment of the Order and Justice Party, which is still supported by Lithuanian voters (2004, 2008, 2012 and 2016). The discourse of the Order and Justice Party is not nationalist³⁵, as it rather manifests centrist populism. Although the Order and Justice Party was elected in the Seimas four times in a row, its popularity has now declined significantly after its involvement in political corruption (protectionism) was proved.

When the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS) opposition movement came to power in 2016, it marked Lithuania's transition to a new, conservative political agenda. The conservative position of LVŽS was manifested, first of all, in a Christian-oriented approach to marriage and family, preservation of national identity, etc. At the same time, the party did not initiate the radical changes contradicting the EU's liberal-democratic course during the four years of governance. This is especially noticeable when compared to the initiatives of the "Law and Justice" Polish party (PiS) or the Hungarian Fidesz Civic Alliance in recent years.

It should be noted that the LVŽS bypassed the issue of sexual minority rights in its election campaign and subsequent parliamentary activities. The underlying reason is the existence of different opinions within the party regarding the acceptability of the institution of civil partnership in Lithuania, in particular for same-sex couples (as in Estonia). On the one hand, the LVŽS aims to promote the conservative values of marriage and family, on the other hand, it hasn't become a radical platform that exacerbates this issue.

Therefore, despite the conservative course of the ruling LVŽS party, so far Lithuania has managed to avoid a rapid increase in the defects of liberal democracy.

³³ G. Aleknonis and R. Matkevičienė, 'Populism in Lithuania: Defining the Research Tradition', *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, vol. 9, no 1, 2016, p. 28.

³⁴ D. Pabiržis, 'Populist Ideology Parties in Baltic States During 2011-2012', *Politikos mokslų almanachas*, vol. 14, 2013, p. 121.

³⁵ A. Ramonaitė and V. Ratkevičiūtė, 'The Lithuanian Case: National Populism Without Xenophobia', in K. Grabow and F. Hartleb (eds.), *Exposing the Demagogues: Right-Wing and National Populist Parties in Europe*, Kortrijk: Drukkerij Jo Vandenbulcke, 2013, p. 264.

However, we assume that there is a current demand among the Lithuanian electorate for a more conservative party program. This request may achieve the expected result, as Lithuania has quite favourable conditions to form influential populist, right-wing radical political organizations: large ethnic minorities, conservatism of the population, historical tradition, and so on. The creation of several new Lithuanian political parties prior to the 2020 election campaign testifies that the dynamic search for “new faces” continues in Lithuanian politics.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable intensification of various nationalist protests in Lithuania. Though the local right-wing radical movement cannot be considered vigorous, its actions undermine the stability of Lithuania, obliged to uphold liberal-democratic values in terms of the EU membership. For instance, the unregistered Lithuanian National Union (LITAS), a radical neo-Nazi political organization, promotes hate speech, racism and anti-Semitism. Another active Lithuanian right-wing radical movement is the ethno-futuristic youth movement called “Kryptis”. However, it seems that the state does not consider these political forces as a potential threat to the democratic statehood of Lithuania, and connects the main dangers with the Russian Federation³⁶.

We should emphasize that the extreme right-wing political parties have not been elected to the Seimas yet, remaining on the margins of the Lithuanian political life. However, sometimes actions with the participation of radical political forces are carried out. On these occasions, manifestations of anti-Semitism, neo-racism, neo-Nazism, xenophobia, anti-immigrant behaviour are recorded. The main expression of the activation of the Lithuanian extreme right-wing political groups is rendered by the annual manifestations marking the memorable dates associated with the independence of the state.

Although, we consider the prospect of a sharp increase in the influence of left or right-wing populist parties in Lithuania doubtful, centrist populism in this country has an upward trend and their initiatives can also have a significant destructive effect. An example is the attempt to change Lithuania's electoral system at the end of 2019. At present, the electoral threshold is 5% for parties and 7% for coalitions (the mixed electoral system). At the time, the ruling parliamentary coalition initiated its reduction to 3% for parties and 5% for coalitions. The bill received the support of the Seimas, but the head of state G. Nausėda vetoed it and the parliament failed to pass it.

While the proponents of lowering the threshold considered the changes as evidence of a mature democracy, opponents figuratively compared them to a Trojan horse designed to serve low-impact parties found on the margins of Lithuanian big politics. Reducing the entry barrier would have further increased the number of parliamentary parties, but it wouldn't have led to the enhancement of a democratic decision-making; Lithuania already has one of the most fragmented parliaments in Europe. It is obvious that the lowering of the threshold was an attempt to make a political and legal decision without considering the interests of the entire Lithuanian society, but only those of individual political forces. In particular, political parties that do not share the values of liberal democracy could enter the parliament.

There are some other manifestations of the defects of democracy in Lithuania, such as uncivilized lobbying, corruption at various levels (from political to domestic),

³⁶ ‘National Threat Assessment 2020’, *Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania*, available at <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Gresmes-En.pdf> (accessed 18 July 2020).

etc. Particularly, corruption has been the greatest problem of Lithuania's democratic development for a long time. Uncover corruption cases in 2016-2017, against the then-leading political parties of the country (Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania, Labour Party) led to a critical loss of public confidence in many participants in Lithuanian politics.

Cases of non-transparent lobbying mechanisms are reported in Lithuania, despite the fact that the institution of lobbying has been legally regulated since 2001. Cases of large Lithuanian corporations promoting their own interests by pressuring the members of the Seimas, using illicit gain tools, and blackmailing have been reported. Corruption cases involving Lithuanian branches of overseas banks such as Swedbank, DanskeBank, Nordea, Lithuanian Bank Snoras, Ukio Bankas and others have had an international impact. In general, corruption (especially top-corruption and political corruption) is currently restrained insufficiently in Lithuania, while corruption pragmatism is still common for Lithuanians.

The quality of Lithuanian democracy is affected by manifestations of intolerance towards various minorities (national, sexual, etc.), which contradicts the values of neoliberal democracy. The most discriminated groups are, first of all, Lithuanian Roma, members of sexual minorities, refugees and others. In recent years, there has been an increase in anti-Semitism. Discriminated groups become victims of hate speech and related illegal actions. Although, at institutional level, Lithuania is making anti-discrimination efforts in line with the EU policy, however, the sustainability of the policy on preventing and combating discrimination is undermined by low public support, as well as citizens' intolerance.

It is obvious that Lithuanians' ingrained prejudices, the emergence of the latest ethnic stereotypes and the existing fear of immigration contribute to the spread of xenophobia, homophobia, migrantophobia, romophobia and others. We do not rule out that cautiousness with the "outsiders" (migrants, refugees) comes from the historical past of Lithuania. "Others" still cause fear of possible occupation, the imposition of different socio-cultural patterns of behaviour, etc. In terms of intolerance towards sexual minorities, the Lithuanian community has consistently maintained a conservative stance on marriage and family. We consider that the current efforts of Lithuanian state institutions to prevent the spread of neo-racist, homo- / transphobic and other types of hate speech cannot be described as sufficient.

Although the impact of the illiberal political parties in Lithuania has been minimal so far, the erosion of the party system combined with the LVŽS' inability to maintain a degree of confidence in the technocratic government of S. Skvernelis created favourable conditions for more conservative political elites to come to power at the regular parliamentary elections which were held in two rounds on October 11 and 25, 2020. Ruling LVŽS lost its popularity, instead, electoral support for the conservative Homeland Union — Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS LKD) party grew rapidly. Despite the steady growth of conservatism within the Lithuanian government, there has been no significant radicalization of the policy, although this was expected taking into account the rising socio-economic issues under the COVID-19 pandemic. The radical right parties which had become more active before the election were unable to surpass the minimum 5-percent vote threshold required to enter parliament. There is a broad and strong consensus among Lithuania's political parties to remain committed to the country's membership to the European Union, but not all EU initiatives are

supported by the Lithuanian establishment.

Consequently, we believe that, currently, Lithuania highlights the problems of compliance with the liberal-democratic standard of the EU at institutional and value levels. Having fulfilled the necessary requirements for accession to the EU, Lithuania entered a phase of stagnation of the liberal-democratic transformations after the European integration process. Now, it needs a more active position of the state in terms of institutional reforms and resocialization of citizens to strengthen adherence to the political and legal values that the EU advocates.

The issue of the quality of democracy may aggravate in the near future against the backdrop of the destructive socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In our opinion, the quality of democracy in Lithuania depends on the lack of civil society activism, a need to strengthen the liberal-democratic values of the political and legal culture among the population and the necessity to enhance the government's dialogue with citizens. Overcoming these negative trends together with intensifying institutional reforms is the basis for the progressive development of liberal democracy in Lithuania.

Conclusions

For the young Baltic democracies, the prospect of joining the EU was a driving force for democratization, but after gaining the desired status of EU Member State, the motivation to advance democratic change has diminished. The Baltic States have faced fundamental problems (such as EU accession, “break up with Moscow”³⁷), growth of European issues against the global economic crisis (since 2008), increase in Euroscepticism and populism, the migration crisis (since 2015), beginning of another socio-economic downturn as a result of large-scale quarantine restrictions due to the global coronavirus pandemic (2020), slowed liberal-democratic progress, etc. There is no significant deviation from liberal-democratic transformations (as in Hungary or Poland) in the Baltic States, however, there is an obvious stagnation in the strengthening of liberal democracy. The Baltic countries do not embody or support tendencies of Euroscepticism, populism, radicalism, etc. extensively, but in the post-integration phase, liberal democracy is being tested for stability.

In order to get integrated into the EU, the Baltic States had to meet the Copenhagen criteria that concerned primarily the procedural and institutional aspects of democracy. However, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania face a difficult and time-consuming task to reform the values of the population in accordance with the Western liberal-democratic standard. The cases of the Baltic States prove that if the political will of the state leadership make changes in the political system fairly quickly, the rotation of values is very slow and with more or less resistance. It is clear that the vestiges of the previous (undemocratic) political culture, which do not match the EU value paradigm, are still quite firm and affect the quality of democracy in the Baltic States. The survival values of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians dominate values of self-expression which hinders the strengthening of liberal democracy. The Baltic population has more or less ingrained prejudices, the new emerging ethnic stereotypes, fear of immigration which contributes to the spread of xenophobia, homophobia, migrantophobia, romophobia and others. At present, the efforts of Baltic national state institutions and civil society participants to reform the values of the population in accordance with the Western

³⁷ B. I. Makarenko, “Twenty-seven years later: are there post-communist states?”, *Politeia*, vol. 92, no 1, p. 103.

liberal-democratic standard cannot be characterized as sufficient.

The Baltic States maintain a common problem of distrust of traditional parties and state institutions due to the large-scale corruption revelations of recent years and the ineffective actions of the state to respond to corruption cases. In addition, another danger to the quality of democracy is the Russian toxic propaganda campaigns in the Baltic States. Presently, liberal-democratic values in the Baltic States are undermined by the intensification or even the rule of populist, right-wing radical, conservative political parties.

At the same time, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania remain reasonable in their relations with the EU on the most pressing issues. This is noticeable when comparing the Baltic countries with other groups of post-totalitarian European countries, especially V4. For the Baltic States, the priority remains a partnership within the EU, rather than a strong defence of national interests with the undermining of common European values. Baltic countries use fewer radical methods in defending national interests and their manner can be characterized as an intermediate one, between the Nordic countries and the V4 countries.

The aforementioned arguments enable us to draw the conclusion that, at the time being, all Baltic countries do not fully meet the liberal-democratic standard of the EU at institutional and value levels. Having fulfilled the necessary requirements for accession to the EU, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania entered a phase of stagnation of the liberal-democratic transformations after the European integration process and currently need a more active position of the state in terms of institutional reforms and resocialization of citizens to strengthen adherence to the political and legal values that the EU advocates. The COVID-19 pandemic added to the complexity of the task by raising new issues about the quality of democracy, promotion and granting of human rights, etc.

References

- Aleknonis, G. and Matkevičienė, R., 'Populism in Lithuania: Defining the Research Tradition', *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, vol. 9, no 1, 2016, pp. 26-48, doi: 10.1515/bjlp-2016-0002.
- Bustikova, L. and Guasti, P., 'The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?', *Politics and Governance*, vol. 5, no 4, 2017, pp. 166-176, doi: 10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156
- 'Cohesion is becoming increasingly important for the people of Latvia,' *Kantar*, available at <https://www.kantar.lv/latvijas-iedzivotajiem-arvien-svarigaka-klust-saliedetiba/> (accessed 30 June 2020).
- Crouch, D., 'UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Volunteers tackle prejudice against refugees in Latvia,' *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5698161118fe.html> (accessed 23 April 2020).
- 'Democracy Index 2019', *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, available at <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index> (accessed 09 June 2020).
- 'Distribution of Latvian population by nationality', *The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, Ministry of Interior of Republic of Latvia*, available at https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/ISVP_Latvija_pec_VPD_2020.pdf (accessed 30 March 2020).
- 'Do you trust or do not trust the following Lithuanian

- institutions?', *Vilmorus*, available at <http://www.vilmorus.lt/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=2&cntnt01returnid=20> (accessed 28 June 2020).
- Foa, R.S. and Mounk, Y., 'The Danger of Deconsolidation', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no 3, 2016, pp. 5-17.
 - 'Freedom in the World 2018. Democracy in Crisis', Freedom House, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/democracy-crisis> (accessed 12 July 2020).
 - 'Freedom in the World 2019. Democracy in Retreat', *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Feb2019_FH_FITW_2019_Report_ForWeb-compressed.pdf (accessed 23 June 2020).
 - Higgins, A., 'Populist Wave Hits Latvia, Lifting Pro-Russia Party in Election', *The New York Times*. 2018. 7 Oct.
 - Hobsbawm, E., *The Age of Extremes. The short twentieth century, 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph; New York: Viking Penguin, 1994, 627 p.
 - Ilves, T. H., 'We stand at the gate of two countries', *Medium*, available at <https://medium.com/@ilvestoomashendrik/we-stand-at-the-gate-of-two-countries-dbecb7ef233b> (accessed 29 June 2020).
 - Inglehart, R. and Baker, W. E., 'Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 65, no 1, 2000, pp. 19-51.
 - Kasekamp, A., Madisson, M.-L. and Wierenga, L., 'Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 66, no 1, 2019, pp. 47-58, doi: 10.1080/10758216.2018.1445973
 - Klūga, M., 'Latvia unlikely to ratify Istanbul Convention any time soon', *LSM.lv*, available at <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/latvia-unlikely-to-ratify-istanbul-convention-any-time-soon.a265133/> (accessed 09 May 2020).
 - Latvijas iedzīvotāju sadalījums pēc valstiskās piederības', *The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, Ministry of Interior of Republic of Latvia*, available at https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/assets/ISVP_Latvija_pec_VPD_2020.pdf (accessed 30 March 2020).
 - Linz, J.J. and Stepan, A.C., *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 504 p.
 - Lührmann, A. et al., *Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020*, Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, 2020, 40 p.
 - Lührmann, A. et al., *Democracy Facing Global Challenges. V-Dem Annual Democracy*, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2019, 76 p.
 - Makarenko, B. I., 'Twenty-seven years later: are there post-communist states?', *Politeia*, vol. 92, no 1, pp. 97-113, doi: 10.30570/2078-5089-2019-92-1-97-113
 - 'National Threat Assessment 2020', *Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania*, available at <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Gresmes-En.pdf> (accessed 18 July 2020).
 - 'Nations in Transit 2017: The False Promise of Populism', *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NIT2017_booklet_FINAL_0.pdf (accessed 10 May 2020).
 - 'Nations in Transit 2018: Confronting Illiberalism', *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FH_NationsInTransit

- [Web PDF FINAL 2018 03 16.pdf](#) (accessed 12 May 2020).
- 'Nations in Transit 2020. Dropping the Democratic Façade', *Freedom House*, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf (accessed 28 May 2020).
 - Pabiržis, D., 'Populist Ideology Parties in Baltic States During 2011-2012', *Politikos mokslų almanachas*, vol. 14, 2013, pp. 115-137, doi: 10.7220/2335-7185.14.5.
 - Pinior, J., 'European Neighbourhood Policy', *European Parliament Debates*, 18 January 2006, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20060118+ITEM-012+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&query=INTERV&detail=3-403> (accessed 19 June 2020).
 - Ramonaitė, A. and Ratkevičiūtė, V., 'The Lithuanian Case: National Populism Without Xenophobia', in K. Grabow and F. Hartleb (eds.), *Exposing the Demagogues: Right-Wing and National Populist Parties in Europe*, Kortrijk: Drukkerij Jo Vandenbulcke, 2013, pp. 263-291.
 - 'Ratings: Confidence in the country's democracy has grown, but remains low', *Delfi*, available at <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/reitingai-pasitikejimas-demokratija-salyje-paaugo-taciau-vis-dar-isliekazelmas.d?id=83771521> (accessed 28 May 2020).
 - Rozenvalds, J. (Ed.), *How Democratic is Latvia? Audit of Democracy 2005–2014*, Riga: University of Latvia Advanced Social, Political Research Institute, 2014, 304 p.
 - Rungule, R. and Senkāne, S., 'Values of Latvian population according to Europe. Social research data', in *Scientific conference theses* (Riga, 17-18 March 2016), Riga: Riga Stradins University, 2016, 274 p.
 - 'Standard Eurobarometer 92', available at *European Commission*, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinionmobile/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/surveyKy/2255> (accessed 20 June 2020).
 - Tambur, S., 'Former liberal MEP Ojuland calls African refugees 'threat to white race'', *Estonian Public Broadcasting*, available at <https://news.err.ee/115949/former-liberal-mep-ojuland-calls-african-refugees-threat-to-white-race> (accessed 11 June 2020).
 - Viirpalu, I., 'Eesti inimeste väärtustest ja identiteedist', *Eesti Inimõiguste Keskus*, available at <https://humanrights.ee/2019/09/eesti-inimeste-vaartustest-ja-identiteedist/> (accessed 29 June 2020). 'On the Values and Identity of the Estonian People', *Estonian Human Rights Centre*, available at <https://humanrights.ee/2019/09/eesti-inimeste-vaartustest-ja-identiteedist/> (accessed 29 June 2020).
 - Walker, S., 'Racism, sexism, Nazi economics: Estonia's far right in power', *The Guardian*. 2019. 21 May.
 - 'Youth in Latvia, 2019', *Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia*, available at <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/characteristics/search-in-theme/394-youth-latvia-2019-latvian> (accessed 11 April 2020).
 - Zariņš, J., 'The Istanbul Convention has divided Latvian scientists', *SIA All Media Latvia*, available at <https://skaties.lv/zinas/latvija/sabiedriba/stambulas-konvencija-saskelusi-latvijas-zinatniekus/> (accessed 19 April 2020).