

## [Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / Democracy vs. Autocracy: Deepening Divide

I am Matej Skalicki and this is Czech Radio News Podcast, Wynohradská 12.

The European Union's highest court has ruled that Poland's controversial justice reform violates EU law.

There's particular concern over the recent creation in Poland of a special commission of inquiry into Russian influence.

It's impossible to agree on such a system without a real access to justice.

The European Parliament has declared Hungary is no longer a full democracy.

There are systemic threats to the rule of law and democracy in Hungary.

Democracy versus autocracy.

War deepens divide among Eurasian countries.

Freedom House, an American NGO, published a new annual report on the democratic governance in so-called nations in transit.

I spoke to a research analyst, Aleksandra Karpe, to learn more.

It's Sunday, July 16th.

Hi, thank you very much for joining us on this podcast.

Hi, Matej, thanks so much for having me.

So, Aleksandra, you annually evaluate the level of democracy in several countries, from Central Europe to Central Asia.

Apart from Ukraine, which country was affected the most by Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

Yes, it's a great question.

Matej, I think you're right to start with Ukraine,

which is, of course, bearing the brunt of Russia's authoritarian aggression.

But I think we have to keep in mind that the war has also had an impact on Russian democracy.

Russia lost ground on five out of a possible seven thematic indicators that we use in our report, and this resulted in the largest ever decline in a single year in the history of our report.

And this was largely due to the regime's use of the war to justify intensified repression of dissent at home,

and the further capture of state institutions and the centralization of power.

Now, I don't want to put everything on Russia, too.

We also saw Belarus with several declines as well as a sort of outpost for the authoritarian aggression,

of course, originating from the Kremlin.

But I also unfortunately have to highlight Hungary,

which was our second worst spore this year with the second worst decline after Russia.

And then this was largely due to just a continued autocratic project by Prime Minister Viktor Orban through flawed parliamentary elections last spring,

the further encroachment on civic space and judicial independence,

which led to three out of a possible seven declines.

But it's not all bad news in the region.

I know we started with Ukraine, but I think it's important to underscore that Ukrainian democracy was just remarkably resilient this year.

We saw civil society, of course, rise to the occasion,

but we also saw just basic governance functions and basic democratic processes continuing, which, given the circumstances, is really monumental.

In the last episode of our podcast, we were discussing with a foreign correspondent Papadopoulos threats for people in the Baltic region.

So how do these countries stand in your ranking?

How they assess the threats from Russia?

Sure. So the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania continue to receive the top scores in our report.

And this has been the case for several years now.

These are consistently some of our best performers.

I want to highlight Lithuania this year, actually,

because even though Lithuania already had a rather high civil society score in our past reports, the civil society score, again, improved.

And it hasn't improved since 2004.

And largely what we're seeing is just increased capacities of civil society actors, more proactive engagement with government folks, increasing consultations and just more willingness to work as equal partners.

And I think the first sort of lit mistest for Lithuanian civil society was the COVID-19 pandemic, but we're also seeing Lithuania as well as the other Baltic states really step up in support for Ukraine as well.

So by large a positive trajectory among this region.

I have to go back to the invasion again.

Sure.

What was the invasion of Ukraine, in your opinion, the biggest or the only factor for deepening the democracy crisis in the whole region?

Well, I think it's important to keep in mind that this year's report documented the 19th consecutive year of decline throughout the region of coverage.

So to pin it on one factor, I think, would probably be unwise, but looking just at 2022 and the decline we saw this year, it's probably the most significant factor, right?

And to maybe explain a bit more the mechanism there, you know, Moscow's full-scale invasion really deepened the divides we were already seeing in our region of coverage.

So we were already starting to see markedly different conditions in higher scoring democracies versus lower scoring autocracies in our report.

And in 2022 it became clear that these are really just two distinct groupings.

The autocracies became further repressive and even increasingly violent of course in the year as well

versus democracies for the most part were able to head in a more positive direction and really hold their ground ultimately in the face of this threat.

So what I'd really say is that reports found that Moscow's renewed invasion deepened the divide and that's what drove the decline more than, let's say, the war as a factor in and of itself.

If that makes sense, Matej.

Yeah, it makes sense to me.

I've already said that in your report you cover the countries from Central Europe to Central Asia. So V4 states included. How are the V4 states doing?

Yeah, you know, it's a bit of a mixed bag this year among the V4.

There weren't any score improvements across the four countries, which is of course disheartening, but we only saw declines in two of the four states.

So I've already mentioned Hungary was our second worst performer this year unfortunately, but Slovakia was the other country that saw a score decline in its national democratic governance score,

which is really just a reflection, I think, of now several years.

Unfortunately, a tense political environment rampant polarization and just unstable parliamentary functioning.

Of course, we had a collapse of government there in 2022.

And we also saw an inability of the government to set the time for the elections after the collapse as well.

So I think, you know, often we put Czechia and Slovakia in conversation due to their shared history, but even though both had very difficult and politically tense years,

I think the difference was in Slovakia, it's really starting to affect democratic governance and just basic parliamentary functioning, which is not quite what we're seeing in Czechia.

You know, I'm sure we'll dig more deeply into the developments there,

but I think Czechia not having any score changes is actually a positive sign for Czech democracy.

You know, we're seeing that institutions are for the most part holding their ground

and able to at least keep, you know, those maintaining of basic democratic processes.

And just to touch briefly on Poland, Poland also didn't see any score changes this year,

which is another welcome development, I think, in this year's report,

given the history of really steep declines that we've seen in both Poland and Hungary throughout our reporting.

We haven't seen really any kind of democratic revival, let's say,

but we are definitely seeing a shift in the foreign policy realm, of course,

with Poland being one of Ukraine's staunchest and most resolute supporters.

So we're starting to see a bit of a divergence there from trends in years past.

We will go back to Czechia in a moment because we are definitely interested in that,

but let's stay with Poland and Hungary for a while.

Do you see any difference between the democratic governance in Poland and Hungary now?

Yes, certainly. I've alluded to it a bit, but I think 2022 was an interesting year

where we did start to see perhaps a divergence in the trajectory of these two countries.

You know, for several new years now, the governments have been essentially partners in crime

in defying the EU's democratic standards, and then in 2022 we saw them part ways on the issue of Ukraine.

Now, as I said, whether this divide in foreign policy can be leveraged into also divides

in the democratic trajectory of these countries remains to be seen,

and I think a lot is writing on the upcoming fall elections in Poland,

not only the results, but also the conduct of those elections.

As I mentioned, Hungary slipped further in its electoral process score this year,

and of course, hoping that Poland doesn't follow suit,

and we continue to see them diverging from the standpoint of democratic performance.

So we'll see Viktor Orbán continues to stubbornly sit on this geopolitical fence

between Brussels and Moscow, and what that's going to mean for the democratic performance of these two countries remains to be seen.

By the way, Slovaks also waiting for the upcoming election in September.

So do you think that those elections can change something?

Yeah, you know, it's hard to speculate on the future in Slovakia.

I think it's a country where observers are rightfully so increasingly raising alarm over developments there.

As I mentioned, you know, we're starting to see just basic state functions collapse increasingly, and the politicization of just basic state functioning and party relations is a worrying development.

You know, I'd like to see that be offended and change in 2023,

but a lot of that is going to depend on individual leaders and their parties,

but also on, you know, Slovak civil society and regular citizens going out to the polls

and mobilizing in a way that's going to set the groundwork for the needed democratic reforms

and to hold the government accountable once it comes into office.

So back to Czechia.

In your reports, you wrote that the people of Czechia made a clear decision in favor of democratic values by ushering populists out of office.

And of quotation.

What does it mean exactly?

Yeah, there's a lot to unpack there.

I think the first significant observation from this year's report is when you're looking at not only the recent elections,

the presidential elections that just took place in Czechia,

but also the general elections in 2021 when André Babiš was voted out of the prime minister's office.

What we saw in those moments was almost unprecedented mass mobilization in the streets for one and civic movements,

like million movements for democracy.

But we also saw record high or near record high voter turnout in both elections.

And this is significant, right?

This means that Czech voters are looking for change.

And in those moments voted resoundingly against the democratic erosion that had been facing Czechia for several years.

So, you know, what we do know about the Babiš era is in addition to the divisive populist rhetoric that was coming out of his office

and among his party and his affiliates was that democratic institutions were steadily waning and declining,

particularly the media, the judiciary, other parts of the court system and the prosecutorial services, right?

And all of those are still in need of shoring up and of rebuilding.

So, I think the second key observation here is, you know, this is a critical moment for the Czech government to rebuild some of those damaged institutions

and to show Czech citizens that democracy can deliver better social outcomes at this difficult time in Europe.

Alexandra, in this podcast we are talking about and we are discussing your reports called Nations in Transit.

Why is it called like that?

Yeah, it's a good question and we get it every year.

I know to many it can sound a little bit dated in the language.

People often wonder, can we still talk about these countries as if they're in transit, right?

I think we have to keep in mind the report was founded after the collapse of communism in those immediate, you know, early and mid-1990s years

where this was kind of the political science theory of the day, right?

Everyone was talking about democratic transition.

Will the state be able to transition to full-fledged democracies?

How can private markets and free markets and new state and non-state institutions help in those transitions?

I think now, 30 years later, we can see that some of the assumptions in that theory were maybe a bit misguided

or just didn't play out as we all expected.

But I think when you look at the last 30 years and 2022 in particular,

it's still clear and important to underscore that building and maintaining strong democratic institutions is going to be a constant struggle, right?

Democracy is in about one contest or one election.

It's a long-term process for reform.

And so with that in mind, I think all of the countries in our report are in transit in that sense.

Can we be more specific in explaining how do you access the level of democracy in the region or in the specific country?

Sure.

So I guess to start by giving you a sense more in detail of our results this year, right?

So I mentioned this was our 19th consecutive year of decline.

That's on the aggregate level, right?

So that's looking at the region as a whole.

And it just means that more countries saw declines in their democracy scores than improvements.

This year in particular, we saw 11 countries decline and only seven improve.

But I think what's really important to keep in mind is the nuance here, right?

Which is that as I mentioned, it's really the authoritarian states that are driving this decline.

So to put it into numerical terms, we have eight consolidated authoritarian regimes in our reports.

Six of those saw declines this year on at least one indicator.

And the other two were not able to decline any further because they've already reached the lowest possible scoring on all of our indicators,

which I can explain in just a minute.

So, you know, that's what's really bringing the region on the aggregate level down for yet another year.

When you take those eight countries, those authoritarian states out of the equation, we actually saw an aggregate improvement, right?

And this is a really important bright spot, I think, to highlight from the report is the EU on an aggregate level saw the smallest decline it's seen since 2010.

So if I can characterize the level of democracy, certainly on an aggregate level, there's a decline and democratic performance has worsened.

But democracies were able to hold steady for the most part, if not modestly improve and reform, which is a positive sign.

As far as the scoring goes, it's in a lot of ways a democratic process in and of itself.

So we consult many country report authors.

These are often locally based experts.

We consult our panel of expert advisors that are internationally and regionally based.

We also have a group of regional reviewers and peer reviewers and also of course, freedom houses own in house experts.

And together as a group, we have a series of discussion and provide numerical rating for each of the 29 countries in the report on seven different indicators.

I won't list all of them, but these range from media corruption, national and local governance to civil society.

Now, all of the ratings are on a scale of one to seven, the seven representing the highest level of democratic progress and one the lowest.

So to kind of give you a flavor, some of our countries that score ones are Central Asian countries like Tajikistan or Turkmenistan.

And I've already mentioned the Baltics tend to top the scales in the six, six and a half range as well.

Okay, so you ranked the countries with points?

Well, we don't rank them as far as, you know, first, second, third, fourth, but we provide an aggregate democracy score so that there is some means to compare these countries.

The Czechs are doing how?

All right.

So if we're taking stock of 2022 developments in Czechia, the democracy score that Czechia received this year was a 5.54.

So this puts it squarely right in the middle of the consolidated democracy category.

Certainly there's room for improvement.

You know, as I mentioned, our sixes in the report are often the Baltic countries and I think it sits pretty squarely within the Central and European countries as well as Slovakia is just below that as I recall.

You've already mentioned that we're seeing the 19th year of consecutive decline of level of democracy in the region.

Why is that?

Yeah, as I've mentioned, a lot of the decline is being driven by developments in authoritarian states. You know, we saw unfortunately the unrestrained use of state violence become really characteristic of that group of countries and I'm not just thinking of Russia's renewed invasion.

We're thinking of the violent repression of civic protests in Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan excursions into Nagorno-Karabakh.

So in a lot of ways, when you're talking about what drives the decline, it's just the worsening entrenchment of repressive policies in those countries.

And I don't want to lose the human element there, right?

This not only affects citizens on the ground, but makes it increasingly difficult for the domestic democratic forces that are there to demand accountability and ignite change in their countries.

But keep in mind that by and large, the democracies this year proved to be resilient and scored better, if not the same as last year, which given the pressure that the region is under with Russia's renewed invasion, I think is certainly good news.

And do you as a freedom house give also any recommendations how to avoid any further decline in the countries that underwent the biggest decline in a year, let's say Hungary?

Sure.

So we offer a series of recommendations for targeted to various audiences in different states in particular.

We have recommendations for the US, the European Union and democracies in general on ways that they can work together to roll back authoritarian gains and really revitalize democracy in this region.

The most important recommendation from this year's report that I really want to put a fine point on is we need to continue doing everything in our power to help Ukraine win this war and to help Ukraine win this war in its own terms.

I think it's so critically important to many countries in this region for democracies to show that they are united, to show a message of resilience and to show that deeper democratic reforms and protected democratic institutions can offer protections and support to those that are most vulnerable and also deliver better social outcomes and are ultimately the path forward.

So that's I think the most important recommendation at this point in time.

We also offer recommendations within the EU, as you alluded to in asking about Hungary, of how can we revitalize democratic processes in the EU and not only internally pushing back with democratic backsliding among member states, but also how can we rework a session processes in a way that's going to incentivize deeper reforms in the periphery of the EU as well. And finally, we also have an entire list of reforms geared directly towards those autocratic states that are really driving the decline, namely supporting human rights defenders and fighting transnational repression.

There's sort of something for everybody I would say in the policy recommendations section.

In particular, we also have four European Union states, barely targeted recommendations on what is going to be the path forward in corruption, which tends to be a major issue in all of these countries, and showing up the rule of law as well, which I think are two issues in Czechia, for example, that are going to remain top of mind in 2023.

Thank you very much for all the answers.

Yeah, thank you so much, Matve. Pleasure to be here.

And that's all for today. I spoke to Alexandra Karpi, a research analyst with Freedom House.

Thank you for listening.