



“WE NEED TO MEET EACH OTHER”: SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY THROUGH DIALOGUE AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Cross-European reflections on democracy

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Prepared By:

DEMOS research team

www.democracydialogues.eu



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Reflections on democracy from across Europe

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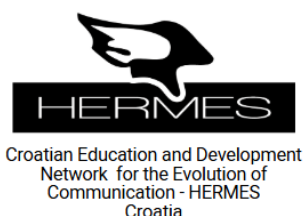


This report is inspired by the survey responses collected from participants in Croatia, Finland, Poland, and other countries across Europe, between October 2023 - January 2024.

About the DEMOS project

The "Democracy Dialogues" (DEMOS) project tackles pressing issues like the absence of dialogue, democratic crises, social polarisation, and challenges in conflict resolution. By fostering dialogue, the project aims to equip community leaders with essential dialogue facilitation skills and tools to navigate diverse perspectives and promote democratic values. With a focus on empowering citizens to engage actively in their communities, the project contributes to the ongoing effort to safeguard democracy in Europe.

For more information, please visit the website: www.democracydialogues.eu



Foundation "Let's talk"
Poland



Timeout Foundation
Finland



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INTRODUCTION

Democracy... It is messy, imperfect...and yet, indispensable. Alternatives invite images of authoritarianism and of absence of freedoms and rights. So - how do we navigate democracy's challenges? How can we address and improve the faults in our democracies, and safeguard all of its values, virtues and qualities?

This report is based on a survey about democracy conducted as part of the DEMOS - Democracy Dialogues project. The first part of the report briefly looks at the current state of democracy by drawing on leading research in the field. Next, it describes the DEMOS initiative. The overview of the survey and its general data concludes the first section.

The following three separate chapters take a deeper look at the survey responses gathered in the focus project countries - Croatia, Finland and Poland[1]. After a brief comparison of the findings, the report concludes with highlights and key concepts distilled from people's responses on the sources of democratic hope, and key concerns they have about the future of democracy in Europe.

Throughout the report, you will find quotes taken from people's responses to the survey, as illustrated by the two comments below. The blue frame indicates a more optimistic or positive reflection, while the red frame signals a concern or a point of criticism:

“
My hope for democracy is that it survives and learns from the current state of affairs; that a caring, humane society emerges that can listen to differing opinions respectfully, and recognizes the importance of caring both for humans and the environment.”

“
Instead of attacking each other for what political party you are affiliated with, we should enter in dialogue. Nobody wants to sit down and have a crucial conversation.”

We invite you to delve into our brief democracy report and wish you a pleasant and inspiring read.

DEMOS research team

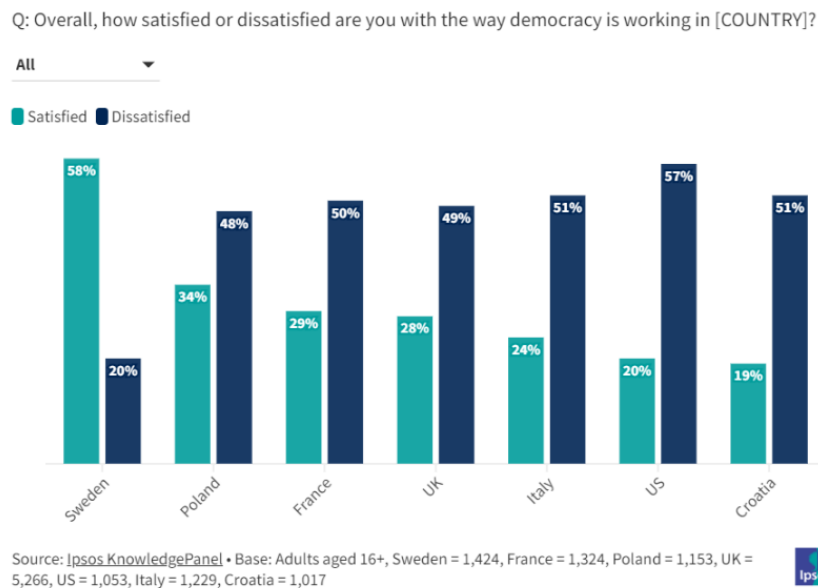
[1] The data on geography area size and population is drawn from the Eurobarometer 2022 data on European Union member states geography area size and population, at: https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/key-facts-and-figures/life-eu_en (Accessed: February 24, 2024), while the Gross Domestic Product Per Capita information on select European Union member countries, December 2022, at: <https://www.focus-economics.com/> (Accessed: February 24, 2024)

THE CURRENT STATE OF DEMOCRACY

Economist's Intelligence Unit published its 2023 Democracy Index in February 2024, under the overarching headline "Age of Conflict". The report's overarching findings do not offer much cause for optimism: the average global score for democracy has fallen to its lowest level since the index began in 2006 (from 5.29 to 5.23), with less than 8% of the world's population now living in a 'full democracy', while almost 40% live under authoritarian rule.[2] In similar vein, the Democracy Perception Index (DPI)[3] study from 2023 issued the following warning:

Governments...are not seen to be living up to the democratic expectations of their citizens: only a little more than half of the people that we polled are satisfied with the state of democracy in their country (57%). The dissatisfaction is not limited to non-democratic countries, but is also very prevalent in the US, Europe and in other countries with a long democratic tradition.

To continue with the worrisome reporting trend, IPSOS research from December 2023 on the state of democracy[4] also indicated that in the sample 7 countries surveyed, one in two people are dissatisfied with the state of democracy:



The "Global State of Democracy" report issued by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) also issued a warning against the perceived trend of 'democratic backsliding', "the erosion of checks and balances and constitutional freedoms in nominally democratic societies", with examples of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the United States put forward as countries where "the erosion of democratic norms has been engineered by leaders claiming to speak in the name of, and with the authority of, the people." [5]

[2] Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict, Economist Intelligence Unit report, February 2024, at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/> (Accessed: February 26, 2024)

[3] Democracy Perception Index 2023 report, Alliance of Democracies, p.6, at: <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/initiatives/the-copenhagen-democracy-summit/dpi-2023/> (Accessed: February 20, 2024)

[4] Christina TUDose, State of Democracy 2023, IPSOS KnowledgePanel, December 2023, at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/heading-biggest-election-year-ever-satisfaction-democracy-low> (Accessed: February 21, 2024)

[5] Global State of Democracy 2023, International IDEA, at: <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/> (Accessed: February 18, 2024)

Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), which produces the largest global dataset on democracy, titled its 2022 Democracy Report “Defiance in the Face of Autocratization.” Using a comparative lens, the report contains observations such as:

- Advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out.
- 72% of the world’s population – 5.7 billion people – live in autocracies by 2022.
- The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 is down to 1986 levels.
- Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, are back to levels last seen around the end of the Cold War.
- Freedom of Expression is deteriorating in 35 countries in 2022 – ten years ago it was only 7.
- Government censorship of the media is worsening in 47 countries.
- Government repression of civil society organizations is worsening in 37 countries.
- Quality of elections is worsening in 30 countries.[6]

It is this comparative longitudinal analysis that indicates the precarious state of democracy, given its various levels and forms of backsliding, in both consolidated as well as in ‘younger’ democracies around the world.

Finally, Freedom House’s “Freedom in the World 2023” report, while also filled with warnings, offers some words of hope, indicating that despite of persistent challenges to media freedom and freedom of expression, including attacks on journalists globally, the fight for freedom endures across decades:

When Freedom House issued the first edition of its global survey in 1973, 44 of 148 countries were rated Free. Today, 84 of 195 countries are Free. Over the past 50 years, consolidated democracies have not only emerged from deeply repressive environments but also proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of new challenges. Although democratization has slowed and encountered setbacks, ordinary people around the world, including in Iran, China, and Cuba, continue to defend their rights against authoritarian encroachment.[7]

The key takeaway here is that democracy is not an end-state that one can arrive to, and then relax and let go of vigilance. It is a constant struggle: democracies thrive on active participation and robust deliberation, where individuals engage in meaningful discussions on pressing issues of the day. They need citizens to proactively hold their elected representatives accountable and advocate for their fundamental rights. At its essence, democracy flourishes when people not only voice their concerns but also actively contribute to shaping the collective destiny of their society through informed and engaged participation. In other words,

Democracy declines if people do not have a broad-based perception of ownership. With this in mind, it is important that democratic thought and action are deeply ingrained in people’s daily lives. This kind of democracy that is anchored in daily life could be termed the democratic way of life. With this in mind, it is important that democratic thought and action be deeply ingrained in people’s daily lives. Dialogue is one way to accomplish this.[8]

[6] Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization, V-Dem Institute, at: https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf (Accessed: February 23, 2024)[7]

“Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy”, Freedom House, p. 1, at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf (Accessed: February 24, 2024)[8]

“Why dialogue is necessary for defending democracy,” Hannu-Pekka Ikkäheimo and Kai Alhanen, November 30, 2022, at: <https://www.sitra.fi/en/blogs/why-is-dialogue-necessary-for-defending-democracy/> (Accessed: February 24, 2024)

DEMOCRACY DIALOGUES INITIATIVE

The project "DEMOS - Democracy Dialogues", implemented with the support of the Erasmus+ ADU funding program, is conducted by three partners: Croatian Education and Development Network for the Evolution of Communication - HERMES from Croatia, ERATAUKO (Timeout Foundation) from Finland and Fundacja Wspierania Dialogu (Foundation Let's Talk) "ROZMAWIAJMY" from Poland.[9]

The project came into being as a response to challenges such as the erosion of dialogue, a deepening crisis of democracy, escalating social polarisation, and the inability to effectively resolve conflicts and communicate across differences.

The main goal of this project is to strengthen democracy in local communities through open dialogue and skill-building. We are inspired, in part, by a recommendation by the European Commission, which says that democracy needs constant work and that citizens should feel empowered to speak up.[10] The DEMOS project activities involve developing the DEMOS dialogue model and an accompanying guide, along with DEMOS dialogue cards (or frames) facilitating dialogue sessions around key topics.

The main target group that will be involved in the project are adults, and we will strive to organize intergenerational and diverse groups to take part in DEMOS dialogue sessions.

The project started in October 2023 and will last for 21 months within the Erasmus+ funding program "KA220 - ADU - Cooperation partnerships in adult education".

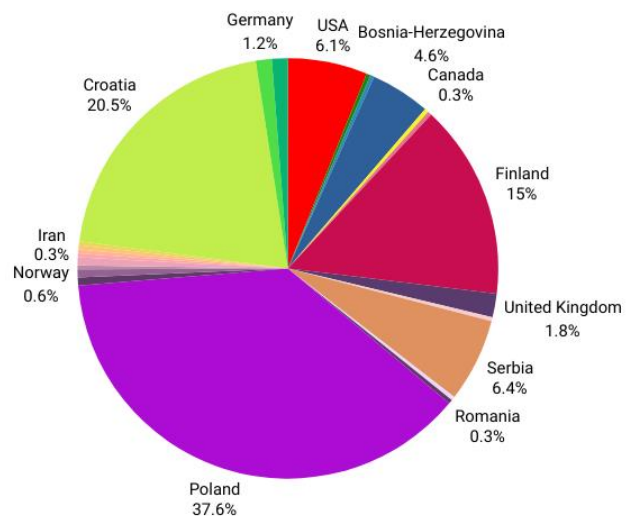
[9] This section is adapted from the short essay by Iwona Kozieja-Grabowska, "DEMOS (Democracy Dialogues) – how to use dialogue to strengthen democracy", e-PALE platform, November 22, 2023, at: <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/node/354155?fbclid=IwAR3FghpMPFuPczX2kfcW6n53x2ouqGi5rDbxYokwDb sw4F2Ps2fT6uHNZxg> (Accessed: February 10, 2024)[10] European Commission, "A new push for European democracy", at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy_en (Accessed: February 10, 2024)

PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY - DEMOS SURVEY

The DEMOS project's brief survey about democracy was carried out between November 2023 - January 2024, mostly focusing on the key three countries involved in the project - Croatia, Finland and Poland. The survey was distributed in Croatian, Finnish and Polish languages, with the addition of Swedish language survey for the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. To be inclusive and gather potential responses from a wider sample of individuals, we also disseminated the DEMOS survey in English language.

Altogether 328 individuals filled out the survey: 122 in Polish language, 104 in Croatian language, 54 in English language (most diverse group - people with different nationalities, residing in 16 countries, mostly in Europe, but also outside), and 48 in Finnish and Swedish languages.

It is interesting to note that we received 20 responses from people residing in the United States, many of whom indicated strong concerns about democracy in their country. From other European Union countries, we collected reflections from France, Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, Austria, Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Hungary.



To the question, “What is democracy, to you?”, most responses included rule by the people, majority rule, equality, human rights, justice, separation of powers, participation, with FREEDOM as the main concept dominating this particular brainstorm.

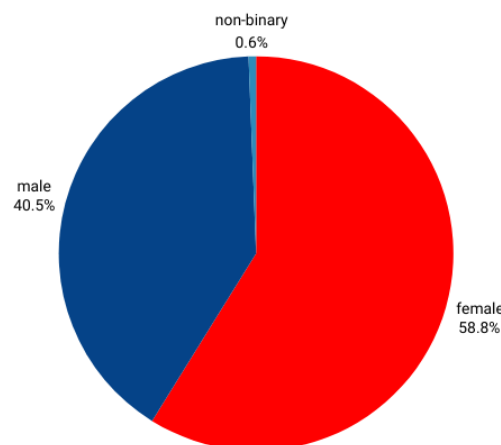
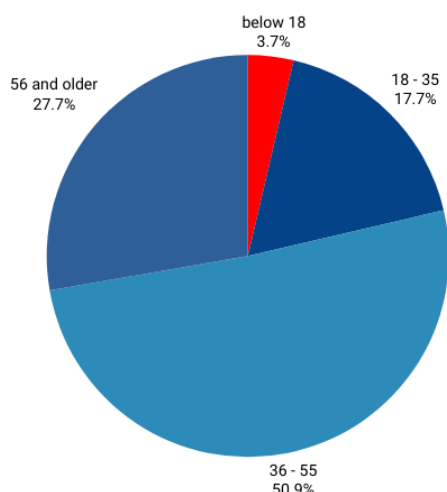


[9] This section is adapted from the short essay by Iwona Kozieja-Grabowska, “DEMOS (Democracy Dialogues) – how to use dialogue to strengthen democracy”, e-PALE platform, November 22, 2023, at:

<https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/node/354155?fbclid=IwAR3FghpMPFuPczX2kfcW6n53x2ouqGi5rDbxYokwDbsw4F2Ps2ft6uHNZxg> (Accessed: February 10, 2024)[10] European Commission, “A new push for European democracy”, at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy_en (Accessed: February 10, 2024)

The overall pool of 328 respondents had a slight majority of women participants, as can be seen in the chart on the right.

In terms of disaggregation by age, as can be seen below, the majority of responses came from the 36 - 55 age group, with 56 and older group constituting 27.7% of the group and 18 - 35 a bit less, 17.7%. Minors were less than 4% of the respondents.



In terms of the questions, the survey was divided into three sections:

General/Basic Information

(about the respondents)

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What is your educational background?
- Which country do you live in?
- Which city/town/village do you reside in?
- What is the population of your place of residence?
- What citizenship(s) do you hold?

Opinions about Democracy

- What does democracy mean to you?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the democracy in your country? (1 being very dissatisfied, 5 being very satisfied) + Elaborate on the grade you gave.

Opportunities and Highlights

- What do you see as the biggest highlight or accomplishment in the democratic system in your country?
- Have you been positively surprised by any aspect of democracy in your country? Please explain.
- What future hopes and expectations do you have from democracy in your country?
- What future hopes and expectations do you have from democracy in the European Union?

Challenges and Concerns

- What do you see as the biggest challenges or problems in the democratic system in your country?
- Have you been disappointed by any aspect of democracy in your country? If yes, please explain.
- What concerns do you have about the future of democracy in your country?
- What do you perceive as the biggest challenges for democracy in the European Union?
- Do you have any additional comments or thoughts about democracy that you would like to share?

REFLECTIONS FROM CROATIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

GENERAL INFORMATION

CROATIA

Population: 3 850 894

Area size: 55 896 km²

GDP per capita: 17 642 €



Background information

Croatia, situated at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe, was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of World War I, which left a lasting cultural and architectural imprint on the region. In 1918, Croatia became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. During World War II, Nazi collaborators proclaimed the Independent State of Croatia, which remained in place until 1945. With the end of the war, the Allies' and the partisans' victory ensured that Croatia became a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The period between 1945 - 1980, during which Yugoslavia was led by Josip Broz Tito, witnessed significant socio-political changes, shaping Croatia's identity and laying the groundwork for its journey towards democracy in the latter part of the 20th century. During the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Croatia declared independence, leading to the Homeland War, marked by ethnic cleansing (war crime committed on both Serbian and Croatian sides) and territorial disputes. Since gaining independence, Croatia has made strides towards democratization, joining the European Union in 2013.

Democracy Key Characteristics and Developments

According to the Freedom House classification for 2023, Croatia is considered a semi-consolidated democracy, with a freedom score of 83/100 (a one-point drop from last year's score and status).[11] The qualification that Croatia receives in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index in 2022 is that of 'flawed democracy', with a score of 6.50 out of 10.00.[12] This news also received coverage in the Croatian media, as the fact that Croatia's democracy score was at the bottom of European Union's was received with somewhat of a stubborn response.[13] Finally, University of Wurzburg's Democracy Matrix from 2020, Croatia is considered to be a 'deficient democracy', with a score of 0.763 and a ranking of 45. The country's ongoing problematic relationship with its past (both the 1990s but also 1940s) adds to the democratic deficiencies, as the complex and unresolved legacy of conflict weakens democracy as well.

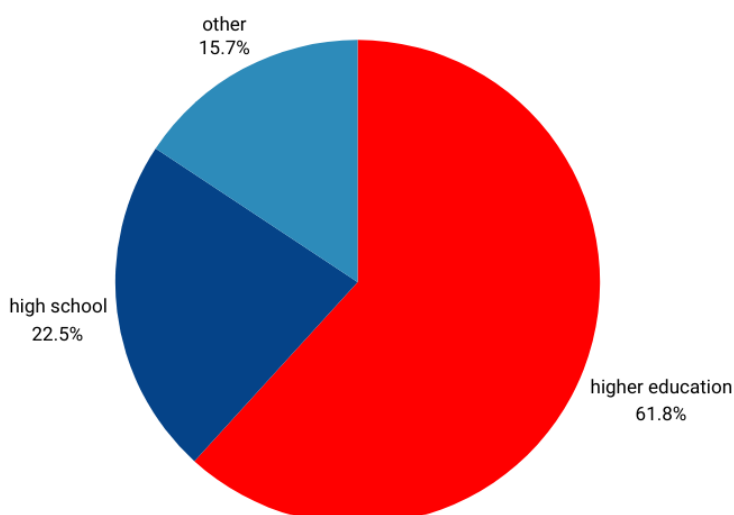
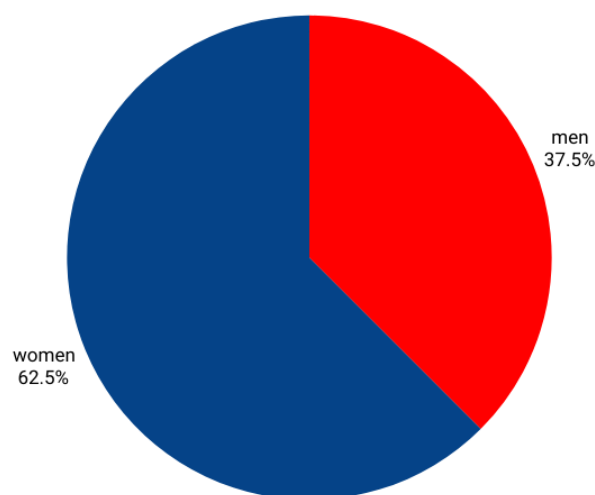
[11] Freedom House, at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/croatia> (Accessed: February 25, 2024)[12] Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2022, at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/> (Accessed: February 25, 2024)[13] "New Democracy Index: The Level of Democracy in Croatia among the Lowest in the EU," 16.02.2024., at: <https://euractiv.hr/politika/a6523/Hrvatska-medju-zemljama-s-manjkavom-demokracijom-u-EU-od-nas-slabije-samo-Rumunjska-i-Bugarska.html> (Accessed: February 20, 2024)

Survey Key Information

The survey that was promoted in Croatia collected 104 responses. Due to the fact that the survey was circulated, among others, also in the mailing list that gathers education professionals from the wider Western Balkans or former Yugoslavia region, multiple responses to the survey came from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. As the language was not an impediment, it was intriguing to observe that there was an interest, even beyond the borders of the European Union, to reflect on the quality of democracy in the world today.

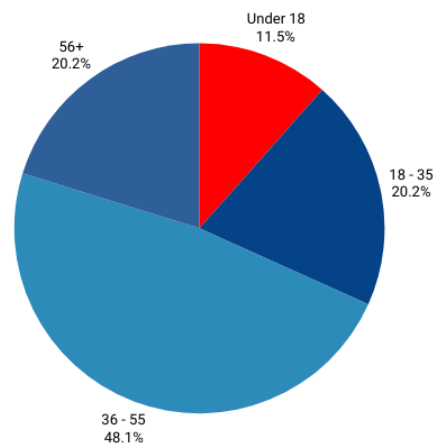
Out of 104 respondents, 67 came from Croatia, 15 from Bosnia-Herzegovina, 20 from Serbia and 2 from North Macedonia. In terms of geographical variety, the survey collected responses from people from different sizes of towns, with respondents coming from both villages with under 10.000 inhabitants, as well as municipalities between 10.000 - 50.000, those between 50.000 - 200.000, and finally those with more than 500.000 inhabitants. (In the case of the countries under question, capital cities.)

There was a majority of women who participated in the survey, as can be seen on the graph to the right (62,5% women, 37,5% men).



In terms of educational background, it can be seen in the graph to the left that while the majority of respondents have higher education (i.e. university), the survey in Croatia and neighboring countries attracted some individuals with high school level of education - which is unsurprising, as some of the respondents were under 18 years of age.

The ages of the survey respondents were rather varied, with half of them falling in the 36 - 55 bracket, and the remainder being evenly distributed in the under 18, between 18 - 35 and 56+ groups.



Of the 67 respondents from Croatia, there was a substantial geographical distribution and variety in terms of where they come from. People from as many as 22 villages, towns and cities filled out the DEMOS survey (Daruvar, Metković, Rijeka, Ivanec, Vinkovci, Novska, Zagreb, Koprivnica, Split, Vukovar, Našice, Murter, Krašić, Karlovac, Starigrad Paklenica, Đakovo, Zadar, Vrgorac, Gradečki Pavlovec, Osijek, Varaždin, Čabar).

From among the respondents coming from the neighbouring countries, people came from additional 10 localities in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Mostar, Zenica, Sarajevo, Odžak, Gračanica, Tuzla, Visoko, Konjic, Travnik, Banja Luka), and 12 in Serbia (Bor, Mladenovac, Obrenovac, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Beograd, Pančevo, Jagodina, Zrenjanin, Valjevo, Ub, Leskovac).

The extensive geographic reach of the survey distributed in Croatia and its neighboring countries should not come as a surprise, since the primary mailing list that served as the vehicle of survey's promotion went to 150+ teachers and educators (history, sociology, political science, civic education) in the region. Even though Croatia is a member of the European Union, and its neighbors Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia are not (yet), the similarity in the responses to the questions is substantial. Across the responses, one could qualify the overarching tone as **pessimistic**.

Opinions about Democracy

The responses to the question "What does democracy mean to you?" encompass a wide range of perspectives. Many view democracy as the rule and will of the people, emphasizing concepts like freedom, participation, and decision-making power. For some, it represents the freedom to choose and decide, while others underscore the importance of equal rights, justice, and respect for human rights. However, there's also an acknowledgment of challenges and discrepancies between democratic ideals and practical implementation, with observations ranging from disillusionment with the limitations of democracy to critiques of the quality of decision-making within democratic systems.

When asked “On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the democracy in your country?” (1 being very dissatisfied, 5 being very satisfied), the average grade given in Croatia and its neighboring countries is in the middle - 2.52. If we only look at respondents from particular countries, the ‘democracy satisfaction grade’ scores slightly differ:

Bosnia-Herzegovina = 2.4

Croatia = 3.00

Serbia = 1.76

It is unsurprising that Serbian respondents’ score is the lowest, as the country has experienced “the biggest deterioration in democratic performance scores in the Western Balkans in the past 10 years, with significant declines in 12 measures”, including freedom of the press, credible elections, rule of law.[14]

Opportunities and Highlights

To the question, “What do you see as the biggest highlight or accomplishment in the democratic system in your country?”, several people highlighted the country's entry into the European Union as a significant achievement. Additionally, participation in civil society and the inclusion of citizens in political decision-making processes were seen as positive developments. However, there were also criticisms and concerns expressed regarding the erosion of democratic institutions, the concentration of power in the hands of a few, and issues such as inequality and corruption. Even though this section was soliciting focus on the positive aspects of democracy, many respondents focused instead on ongoing issues such as corruption and the lack of citizen engagement in questioning and changing the system. Others mention specific challenges such as the dominance of political elites, limited freedoms, and ineffective institutions.

When asked, “What future hopes and expectations do you have from democracy in your country?”, many expressed a desire for greater accountability, transparency, and effectiveness in governance, particularly in addressing issues such as corruption and improving public services like healthcare and education. Others expressed hope for increased citizen engagement and participation, as well as a stronger emphasis on human rights and the rule of law. Some voices expressed concern and a desire for a better representation of marginalized groups and minorities, as well as a more inclusive and tolerant society.

When it comes to future hopes and expectations vis-a-vis democracy in the European Union, responses varied widely. Some people hoped for increased coordination on pressing issues such as climate change and migration, and a stronger stance against populism and anti-European movements. Others emphasized the importance of equality, social welfare, and human rights for all citizens within the EU. Again, even though this was the ‘hopeful and positive’ section of the survey, concerns were raised about bureaucracy, hypocrisy, and the need for greater accountability and transparency in EU institutions.

[14] Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1, International IDEA, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>> (Accessed: March 12, 2024)

Challenges and Concerns

The responses regarding the biggest challenges or problems in the democratic system highlighted widespread concerns about corruption, lack of transparency, and abuse of power by political elites. Other issues include apathy among citizens, polarisation, discrimination against minority groups, and the influence of money in politics. Inadequacies relating to the rule of law, media freedom and the education system were also mentioned. When responding to the question of whether they experienced any disappointments in democracy, the answers reflected a widespread sense of disillusionment with the functioning of democratic processes and institutions. Many individuals feel that their voices are not heard, that there is a disconnect between politicians and the needs of the people, and that corruption and political self-interest undermine the democratic system.

The concerns about the future of democracy revolve around authoritarian tendencies, lack of competent political options, erosion of trust in democratic institutions, and the rise of radical political movements. Other worries include government control over citizens' lives, privatization of essential services, intolerance, nationalism, and the influence of external powers. Additionally, there are concerns about the departure of young people, the manipulation of information, the erosion of democratic values, and the dominance of political elites. Many express fears about the persistence of corruption, political polarization, and the inability of the political system to address societal needs effectively.

To the question, "What do you perceive as the biggest challenges for democracy in the European Union?" respondents alerted at populism, the rise of anti-EU parties and movements, migration issues, climate change, and the increasing cost of living. Additionally, concerns exist about corruption, social polarisation, and the influence of external actors like Russia and the USA. Some individuals also expressed worries about people's resistance to change (e.g. migrations), the aging population, and the need to educate citizens about the principles and benefits of democracy. The EU faces the challenge of maintaining unity among its diverse member states while addressing issues such as bureaucratic inefficiency, cultural differences, and the rise of extremist ideologies.

Conclusion

Overall, the responses from Croatia and its neighbors point to significant structural and systemic challenges that hinder the functioning of democratic institutions. Addressing these concerns will require greater transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in political decision-making processes. It is interesting that there was, on behalf of some respondents, an awareness that it is the people that need to 'step up' and get more active in holding political elites accountable. Finally, there was also a warning that it is not democracy as a system that is to blame for all that is wrong in Croatia or the region today, but rather the abuse of democracy for self-interested and often corrupt intent:

"I am not concerned about the future of democracy but rather about the instrumentalization of democracy for wrong purposes."

REFLECTIONS FROM FINLAND

GENERAL INFORMATION FINLAND

Population: 5 563 970 Area
size: 304 316 km² GDP per
capita: 48 249 €



Background information about Finland

After more than 600 years, Finland ceased to be a part of the Kingdom of Sweden in 1809 and became an autonomous grand duchy under the Russian tsar. The Finnish Parliament was established in 1906 and it was something of a rarity. It was unicameral and elected by universal suffrage, women included. On 6 December 1917 Finland became an independent republic. Many of the structures of state had been created during the previous hundred years, if not earlier. Today, Finland is a parliamentary democracy based on competition among political parties, power being divided among the highest organs of government.[15]

Finland is a high-performing democracy. It is a sparsely populated country that is fairly homogeneous but also features three notable minorities: the Sámi indigenous peoples, the Swedish-speaking minority, and the Roma people. Finnish territory also encompasses the Åland islands, an autonomous region that hosts its own parliament and holds one seat in the national legislature. The Finnish political culture is pragmatic, as actors often cooperate across traditional ideological divides.[16]

In Finland there is a high level of public trust, and the country performs well in international comparisons of trust. The OECD Report on Trust nevertheless shows that despite the high national average, public trust in different institutions varies. According to the survey, 66% of citizens trust the central government, 61% trust the Government in power, 53% trust Parliament and 52% trust local government.

[15] Parliamentarism in Finland by Jarmo Laine, Academy of Finland, 2019, <https://finland.fi/life-society/parliamentarism-in-finland/> (Accessed: February 22, 2024)[16] The Global State of Democracy Initiative, Finland, International IDEA, 2024, <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/country/finland> (Accessed: February 22, 2024)

There are significant regional and demographic differences in these figures. Trust in government and public institutions is weaker for rural residents and among people with lower levels of education and income. If the disparities in trust deepen, this may weaken social cohesion and Finland's ability to cope with the challenges of for example an ageing population, climate change, digitalisation and the transformation of work.[17]

Although people's trust in public institutions and their satisfaction with democracy is high, the proportion who believe they can influence political processes is small compared to other high-trust countries such as the other Nordic Countries. The OECD emphasises that potential marginalisation in certain population groups should be tackled by promoting broader social dialogue in Finland.

Sitra, the Finnish Future Fund, made a survey in 2023 where they surveyed the experiences of Finns between 20 and 30 years of age and those over 30, with regard to social participation. The results show for example, that fear of conflict, disagreement or harassment is identified as a barrier to participation across all age groups. In the survey, 16 percent of respondents said that fear of conflict and disagreement had prevented them from participating in this sphere in recent years.[18]

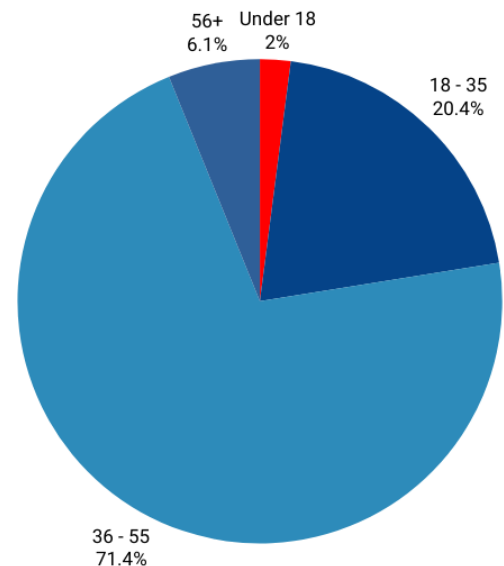
However, the most interesting findings of the survey relate to the differences between 20–30-year-olds and people over 30, when comparing their experiences of obstacles to social participation. The results show that 20–30-year-olds have more doubts about their own skills and knowledge and are more likely to believe that they lack the necessary attributes for social participation. Young adults also find participation more stressful and complicated, and the worry that they will have to take on too much responsibility is more likely to become an obstacle to participation.

The study is supported by the results of the annual national survey made by the “Well Said” project, which is a collaborative project coordinated by the Finnish Broadcasting Company and the Timeout Foundation. This survey shows that in 2023, 68% feel that Finnish debate culture has taken a turn for the worse. A total of 28% of the Finns feel that they cannot share their thoughts without fear (of others). 85% want more respect for other people, both in traditional media and on social media. At the same time, 77% of Finns enjoy in-depth discussions and situations where they can learn from the ideas of those involved in the discussion. The Finns would like to talk to each other about different societal phenomena as 64% answered that they would like to have more opportunities to enjoy constructive dialogue.[19]

[17] Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Finland, OECD, 2021, <https://www.oecd.org/publications/drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-in-finland-52600c9e-en.htm> (Accessed: February 23, 2024) [18] Demokratia osaksi arkea -publication, Sitra, 2024, <https://media.sitra.fi/app/uploads/2024/01/sitra-demokratia-osaksi-arkea-2.pdf> (Accessed: February 24, 2024) [19] National Survey, Well Said Project, Yle the Finnish Broadcasting Company, 2023, <https://yle.fi/aihe/s/10005655> (Accessed: February 24, 2024)

About the Demos Survey in Finland

The Finnish survey for the Demos project was made in two official languages of Finland, Finnish and Swedish. In total we got 40 answers in Finnish and 9 in Swedish. Most of the respondents were from the age group 36-65 the second biggest group being the age group 18-35. It would've been interesting to receive more answers from the oldest age group, which has seen the development of the Finnish democracy during the different decades.



The respondents were almost 50%-50% men and women. Most of them had higher education backgrounds, which can be seen in a more positive and trustful view regarding the democracy in Finland, according to the OECD trust survey. Most of the respondents live in Finland and we got a quite good representation of different areas and cities from South to North. Almost everyone was a Finnish citizen, which can also impact the results as many of those with immigrant backgrounds, and with for example multiple citizenship, don't participate as actively as Finnish citizens. This might be because of a lack of knowledge, language problems or because of feelings of not belonging to society.[20] It might have been beneficial to the survey to ask about a possible immigrant background.

Opinions about democracy

Regarding the question "What does democracy mean to you?" we got several answers. This also shows how comprehensive the term democracy is regarded. The most popular answers were freedom, representative democracy where all citizens over 18 have the possibility to vote, civic participation, security, justice and equity, a possibility to make an impact, equality, human rights and joint responsibility. Other themes answered were welfare, open decision making, trust, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, respect, free media, anti-corruption and education. It might be because of the history of Finland or because of the current situation in world politics and Russia's war in Ukraine that affects freedom and security being the most popular answers.

When asked to grade their satisfaction with democracy from 1 to 5, the overall grades were quite high, with 3.81 being the average score of all the votes. Of the total 49 respondents, 8 gave the highest satisfaction score (5), 29 individuals gave a slightly lower one (4), 8 gave an average score (3), while a handful of people exhibited pessimism in their democracy satisfaction scores - 3 individuals gave a score of 2, and one gave the worst assessment score (1).

[20] News article, Yle the Finnish Broadcasting Company, 2019, <https://yle.fi/a/3-10702382> (Accessed: February 24, 2024)

Most of the respondents were either content or very content about the state of democracy in Finland. Several respondents were worried about the development of democracy and emphasized that democracy is something you need to take care of even if the system would support strong and open democracy. Criticism and worries included topics such as past or current politics, lack of voting, distant decision making processes, financial situation of Finland, populism, current discussion culture, economical inequality and polarization.

Possibilities and highlights

The highlights of the Finnish democracy were seen quite similar with the meaningful aspects of democracy. Many respondents emphasized the education system, the welfare state and women's right to vote. Civic engagement was also named in its different forms. Becoming a member of the European Union was seen as an important step. Independence in general was also mentioned.

What has been surprising regarding the democracy in Finland has been the process of becoming a member in NATO, which has previously been quite a polarizing subject in the Finnish context. Regarding the discussion culture many answered to be positively surprised that we can still discuss different, even difficult topics together. The possibilities of social media were raised as a support for civic engagement, regardless of its faults.

Regarding the hopes and expectations of the Finnish democracy many respondents emphasized again the importance of taking care of the democratic system and participation. Many are willing to reform the system to be more inclusive in different levels of decision making. To support the youth and people with different backgrounds to vote and participate in decision making was seen as especially important.

“
I believe that only in democratic societies can we find solutions to the most difficult crises of our time and find solutions that do not leave anybody outside.
”

Regarding the hopes and expectations of the European Union the respondents emphasized transparency and open decision making as well as supporting civic participation. Many hoped the European Union would take care of democracy and expected leadership as well as decision making regarding key topics such as global warming, human rights and data protection. Unity, development and cooperation were regarded as important values.

Challenges and worries

Respondents are generally worried about the lack of people voting and declining motivation to take part in the decision making. Worsening discussion culture, extremism, far-right movements and polarization are seen as big challenges. Different groups or topics might be seen as a worry or threat to participation and democracy, for example right or left wing politics, religious communities, certain political parties, racism and inside networks.

People are worried about whether everyone feels like they belong to Finnish society and if those people who need support will get support. Lobbying or advocacy work as well as politicians who are only taking care of their own interest are seen as topics of disappointment and many feel that this prevents necessary development, inclusive and diverse participation or needed reforms. Many are disappointed with the conversation culture, lack of diversity in decision making, racism and hate speech.

Regarding the challenges of the European Union many similar topics arise. Respondents are also worried about how the different needs and situations of different member countries affect the decision making process in the EU. Many point out that some member countries have severe challenges regarding democracy, open society and anti-corruption. Support for Ukraine, transparency in general and cooperation between the member states are seen as important topics.

“
Democracy actually works, but
it is being challenged increasingly.
You have to work to support
democracy.
”

REFLECTIONS FROM POLAND

GENERAL INFORMATION POLAND

Population: 37 667 000

Area size: 307 236 km²

GDP per capita: 17 380 €



Background information about Poland

The reformatory tendencies in Poland date back to the end of the XVIII century when the Four-Year Sejm was held (between 1788 and 1792)[21] whose most important achievement was the Constitution of May 3 - the first constitution adopted in Europe and the second in the world. It roused the patriotic and civic feeling among Poles but was ended firmly by the military intervention of Empress Catherine II. Between 1772-1918 the sovereignty of Poland was non-existent, as its territories were divided by three neighbour countries - Russia, Prussia and Austria (the so-called Partitions of Poland). The end of World War I brought independence and democracy was introduced[22] - each year November 11th is celebrated as one of the most important national holidays, Independence Day. Independence also brought democracy as a state system. During World War II Poland was under Nazi occupation. According to the agreements made by the Allied Forces during the Yalta Conference in 1945, Poland lost its sovereignty and became part of the USSR (as Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa - Polish People's Republic). During that time, democracy was more facade than real, each party and each candidate in elections had to be accepted by authorities in the Soviet Union. Numerous strikes in 1980 resulted in the establishment of the Solidarność (Solidarity) trade union (or more a civic movement)[23]; it is estimated that 9-10 million of Polish citizens joined Solidarność. Poland regained its sovereignty in 1989 and the first fully democratic elections took place in 1990 [24]. Lech Wałęsa, the President of Solidarność, was selected as the President of Poland. Poland was considered a full democracy until 2019, when it got categorized as a "flawed democracy".[25]

[21] Encyklopedia PWN: Sejm Czteroletni, Encyklopedia PWN: źródło wiarygodnej i rzetelnej wiedzy (access: 30.01.2024)

[22] Niepodległa / Independent: Polskie drogi ku niepodległości - wersja rozszerzona - Niepodległa - świętujemy razem! (niepodlegla.gov.pl) (access: 30.01.2024)

[23] Encyklopedia PWN / PWN Encyclopedia: Solidarność, Encyklopedia PWN: źródło wiarygodnej i rzetelnej wiedzy (access: 30.01.2024)

[24] Muzeum Historii Polski / Polish History Museum: 20. rocznica pierwszych wolnych wyborów prezydenckich po wojnie - Muzeum Historii Polski w Warszawie (muzhp.pl) (access: 30.01.2024)

[25] Notes from Poland: Poland no longer rated as full democracy in new Freedom House index | Notes From Poland (access: 30.01.2024)

Democracy: Key Characteristics and Developments

The Freedom House report [26] considers Poland a free democracy with a total score of 81/100 points. Between 2017 and 2022, five key indicators of democracy in Poland declined. The Venice Commission criticised the Law and Justice party (PiS) for limiting public and opposition debates on legislation. The Quality of Democracy of Poland matrix [27] ranks Poland as the 54th country, with the index 0,71, 'deficient democracy'. The most recent research on the perception of democracy from 2022[28] shows how democracy is appreciated in Poland. Nine out of ten respondents (91%) agree that it is important for them to live in a democratic country. On the other hand, more than half of the study group (56%) disagree with the statement that Poland is fully democratic - almost half of the group (46%) observes deficits in Polish democracy. A minority of questioned Poles (4%) think that there is too much democracy in Poland; for most of them (60%) Poland needs more democracy and more than one-third (36%) is satisfied with the amount of democracy in the country.

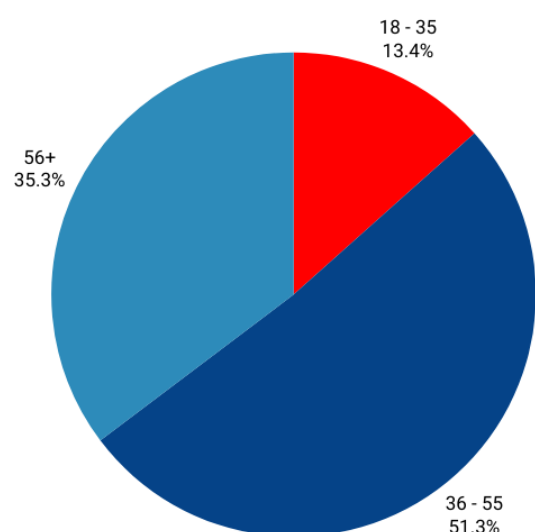
After the change of the government in December 2023 there is a big expectation in Poland that "democracy issues" will be improved.

Survey Key Information

Respondents were recruited through different channels - acquaintances of people connected with 'Let's Talk' Foundation and their networks, different NGOs, different FB groups, network of society of mediators, network of Seniors connected with: Polska 2050 and Warsaw Council, some Universities.

There were 122 responses in total. Two under age respondents were High School students and their answers didn't differ from those given by adult respondents. For example both of them as a highlight of Polish democracy declared entering the EU. The only thing that is worth mentioning is that one wished for more direct democracy, through referenda.

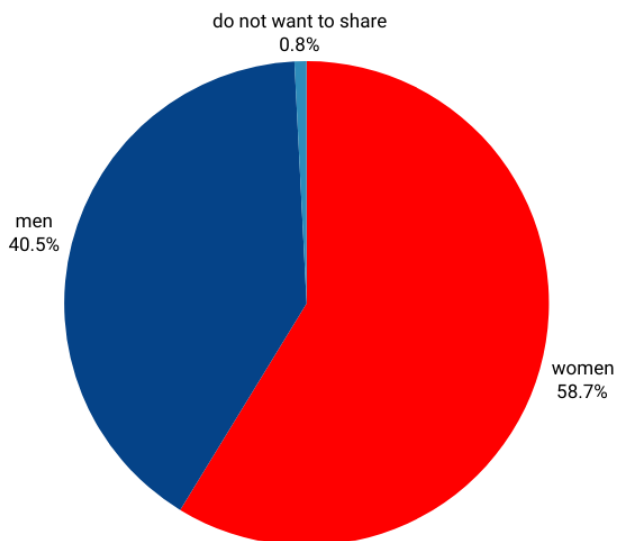
More than half of the group (51,3%) declared the age between 36 to 55 years, 35,3% - age 56 years or higher and 13,4% - age from 18 to 35 years.



[26] Freedom House: Countries and Territories | Freedom House (access: 5.02.2024)

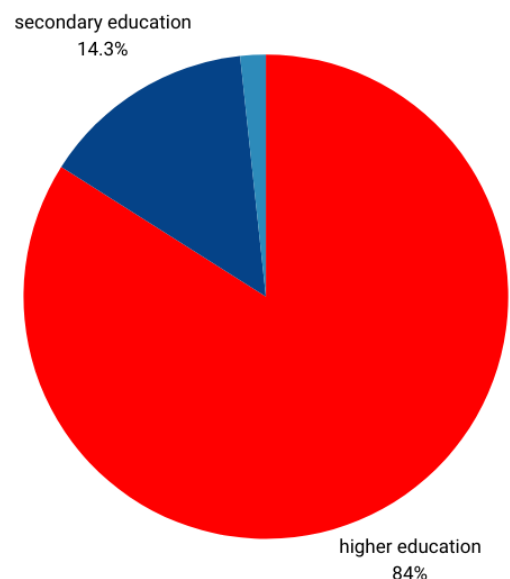
[27] Universität Würzburg: Ranking (democracymatrix.com) (access: 5.02.2024)

[28] Alliance of Democracies: Democracy Perception Index 2022 - Topline Results - Arkusze Google (access: 5.02.2024).



The majority of the group (58,8%) were women, with 40,3% men and one person not willing to share their gender.

Respondents with higher education were overrepresented (84%). 14,3% of the group declared secondary education and 1,7% - primary education. A possible explanation of this is that most of the members of the Let's Talk Foundation are highly educated. Respondents with lower education level were more difficult to reach, possibly less willing to take part in a survey containing quite specific reflective questions.



This also may have to do with the geographic distribution of survey respondents: 58% of the group were respondents from the mazowieckie voivodeship although it's only one from sixteen Polish voivodeships. Each region was represented in the research but from five of them there was only one respondent. Apart from mazowieckie, we had also 7,6% persons from wielkopolskie, 6,7% from łódzkie, 5,9% kujawsko-pomorskie, 4,2% dolnośląskie and 3,4% opolskie.

62,2% declared residence in a big city (over 500 thousand residents), 14,3% - city with 50-250 thousand residents, 10,1% - 10 to 50 thousand residents, 9,2% - less than 10 thousand residents and 4,2% - between 250 and 500 thousand residents.

Opinions about Democracy

The answers to the question “What does democracy mean to you” referred to democracy as a political or social system (form of governance, state management, existence of government - Sejm). Some respondents focused on minorities (respect for their rights; “equality of people, regardless of their views, skin colour or sexual orientation”; participation of different social groups) while others emphasised the common goal between citizens (actions for the common good). For some respondents, democracy is a space for expressing your opinions, where your free choice is granted.

The corresponding democracy satisfaction score was calculated as follows:

Whole group - N = 119 M = 2,87

As seen above, the means are slightly below the average answer 3 - neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The most popular answer was 3 - neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (47,9%). 21,8% of the respondents are more dissatisfied (2) and 21% - more satisfied (4). 7,6% declared strong dissatisfaction (1) and only 1,7% - strong satisfaction (5).

The negative democracy satisfaction scores came from people who reflected on the impact of PiS [29] political impact on the country’s rule of law and on the separation of powers, e.g., “The basic principle of the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers has been brutally violated. And there is a need to introduce strong protections against renewed autocracy at the constitutional level.” The respondents who were more neutral in their satisfaction weighed both positive and negative elements, e.g. “It functions, but imperfectly; although the last elections showed that people want to use their right to influence the way of governance, we are still far from countries where citizens are more involved in co-governance.” Some of the more positive satisfaction scores came from individuals who compared Poland to other places in the world, e.g. “I believe that compared to the rest of the world, our democracy is doing quite well. Of course, we have some shortcomings, but generally all democratic mechanisms work”.

Opportunities and Highlights

When it comes to reflecting on opportunities and highlights of democracy in Poland, three categories of responses could be identified - **governance, ideas and values, and quality of life**. The governance responses ranged from wanting the rule of law and judicial system to be restored (implicitly: after the rule of PiS) to wanting to hold PiS party politicians accountable. After the last elections, several respondents see an opportunity to sustain the separation of powers as they do not want nationalists to regain power. Some respondents would like to avoid left-wing politicians to rule the country. Others hope for more influence on rule by citizens (e.g. through referenda). There were also voices to improve the way how political parties function. One person wanted the continuation of the system transformation that started in 1989.

[29] PiS - Prawo i Sprawiedliwość / Law and Justice, the political party ruling Poland from 2015 to 2023

In the 'ideas and values' cluster of reflections, people mostly focused on the advancements made in addressing the exclusion of minority and/or marginalised groups (LGBT, migrants, discrimination based on religion, worldview, women) and on highlighting the importance of a sense of safety and freedom, freedom of speech and expression. Finally, in the 'quality of life'-oriented respondents, they highlighted the importance of stabilisation, investing into healthcare and education.

The highlights of Polish democracy included defeating communism (and the Round Table disputes) resulting in free elections since 1989; reintroducing democracy in Poland; and separation of powers. Some respondents were proud of Poland entering the EU, NATO and Schengen zone. There were also voices referring to social issues: new opportunities for women, people with disabilities and the existence of civic movements like Strategy & Future, activity of many NGOs and of KOD (Komitet Obrony Demokracji); and functioning of free media. Some respondents also emphasized the result of the last elections when PiS lost the majority in Sejm along with the very high voter turnout in comparison to former elections - around 75%.

When asked about highlights and opportunities related to **democracy in the European Union**, people focused on the governance or functioning of the EU and the individual influence of member states. Some expressed hope for the EU to advocate for democracy within its member states, emphasizing the importance of cultural diversity and individuality. Others mentioned the need for the EU to listen to the voices of all nations and address their specific needs. Additionally, a few respondents saw an opportunity to change some policies, such as lowering the voting age and strengthening democratic values and solidarity among member states to face global challenges together.

Many respondents emphasised the positive influence of EU on Poland, as a guarantee of stability and territorial integrity, as well as democratic values. Partnership in the EU is seen as having forced Poland to introduce some positive changes in national defence, energy policy, healthcare system, migration. Some respondents highlighted the economic benefits stemming from membership, structural funds and grants from the EU. A few respondents appreciated EU's influence in mandating member states to respect the interests of minorities, introducing intercultural dialogue, equal opportunities for citizens from different member states.

Challenges and Concerns

Three sets of responses emerged when asked about different challenges and concerns people have about democracy in Poland: systemic and governmental issues, civic issues, and national reconciliation. Concerns were raised about the politicization of institutions, lack of independence of key bodies like the Supreme Audit Office and the Polish National Bank, the dominance of main political parties, the overuse of power by politicians, authoritarian tendencies, and the lack of separation between church and state. Civic issues centered on the lack of education among citizens, leading to susceptibility to manipulation and the rise of populism.

Concerns were expressed about low political knowledge, misconceptions about patriotism, and the radicalization of youth. National reconciliation was highlighted as a challenge, as well as a pressing need, encompassing both citizens and politicians, and requiring social dialogue and compromise. Concerns were raised about the rise in hate speech, social divisions, and the inability to listen to each other. Overall, there was a call for social reconciliation and acceptance of the needs of different social groups.

The greatest threat to the democratic system is the existence of a very strong populist-nationalist trend, strengthened during the last 8 years of rule by PiS and its coalition partners. It is correlated with deep political divisions in society, reaching down to the family level. The process of settling disputes and reconciliation will be very difficult and long.

Among the **concerns and challenges in democracy at the EU level**, there was a call for greater equality among member states, with suggestions to diminish the hegemony of countries like France and Germany (some lamented the unequal treatment of "young Europe" compared to "old Europe"). Another significant aspect highlighted was the importance of recognizing and respecting the diversity of member states, with an emphasis on preserving national identities. There were also divergent views on the level of influence the EU should exert on issues within member countries, with some advocating for harmonization of rules, such as tax systems, to discourage support for populist or far-right parties. Respondents also cited issues such as indecisiveness, bureaucratic red tape, strong lobbying interests, and centralization of structures. Lastly, there were calls to prioritize maintaining the integrity of the EU and focus on economic matters. It is worth noting that a few voices had a negative stance towards the EU altogether, advocating for its disintegration and even suggesting Polesxit, limiting Poland's participation to the Schengen zone. At the same time, a few respondents raised concerns about the potential dissolution of the Schengen zone and the undermining of democracy in certain member countries. Other challenges mentioned included migration issues, the EU's role as a peacekeeper, and concerns about trust in European institutions. There were also mentions of influences from far-right and far-left ideologies, as well as worries about language and cultural differences and the lack of a grand vision for the EU's future.

Conclusion

The DEMOS brief survey about democracy was carried out during a particular moment in time of Poland's government transition, following 8 years of PiS governance. Unsurprisingly, the timing of the survey affected people's responses, reflecting a nation in a phase of change.

While some are optimistic about this shift, others remain uncertain or dissatisfied. The transition is expected to enhance democracy and the rule of law, yet it also raises concerns about increased polarisation and unmet expectations among voters seeking change. The foundation 'Let's Talk' sees a pressing need for education on constructive dialogue and conflict resolution to bridge the gap between differing viewpoints.

The survey primarily captured voices favoring the government change following the 2023 elections, indicating high expectations for democracy in the near future. However, there's a notable absence of diverse perspectives, such as those from the political right and nationalists, suggesting the importance of engaging with these groups through dialogue sessions and community outreach to ensure broader representation and inclusivity.

“

Democracy is
first and foremost civic
co-responsibility.
In this sense,
it is a value,
a gift
and an obligation.

”

COMPARING THE FINDINGS

Citizens from three arguably very different countries in the European Union - Croatia, Finland, and Poland - provided rich reflections on democracy in the brief survey carried out as one of the foundational activities of the DEMOS project.

Croatia and its neighboring countries' pessimism and disappointment in democracy were palpable in people's responses - in the past thirty years since the breakup of Yugoslavia, there were high hopes and expectations of the democratic system of governance in this region. Introducing democracy and a multi-party system, after all, was one of the pretexts under which the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution broke out. In this survey sample, people's trust in democracy to meet their needs is heavily affected by (perceptions of) corruption, disillusionment with the political elites, and a feeling of resignation about bleak future prospects.

Finland, the wealthiest and the most stable democracy in this group provided an insight into people's measured reflection on and appreciation of democracy's benefits, as well as caution about some of its shortcomings or potential risks. Finland consistently ranks among the top countries in the world for democracy, according to various indices. Respondents in the DEMOS survey seem to value principles such as equality, transparency, and participation, which are fundamental to democracy. At the same time, they were concerned about polarisation, worsening participation and discussion culture, and foreign political developments such as the war in Ukraine.

The DEMOS survey was implemented at a very particular time in Poland, in the immediate aftermath of the 2023 elections that resulted in a change of government. After eight years of rule of the political party whose policies elicited many concerns about democratic backsliding, both inside Poland as well as from European Union vis-a-vis Poland, there was a sense of sigh of relief breathed by many of the respondents. At the same time, the high polarisation within the country, and the inability to communicate across differences, made many of our Polish respondents worried about hard work ahead in the domains of restoring democratic institutions and processes, as well as in bridging the deep-running societal divides.

On the following pages, we have grouped the keywords from all the respondents, generating two separate word clouds: one, featuring democratic elements that all respondents view as sources of hope or opportunity in their countries or in the European Union, and another, composed of perceived challenges and concerns that people have about democracy in their countries, and in the EU.

Some of these key concepts will be further developed into Democracy Dialogue Cards, or frames, that will be one of the key tools in the upcoming series of Democracy Dialogues that will take place in Croatia, Finland and Poland, and hopefully, in other European countries as well.

[illegible]

Top Achievements:

- ## Hopes for the Future of Democracy:

- 28

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The brief survey carried out as part of the DEMOS project indicates that there is a mix of optimism, skepticism, and uncertainty regarding the future of democracy, both within some of its member states, as well as within the EU.

While some hope for greater inclusivity, respect for diversity, and stronger democratic values, others question the effectiveness of EU institutions and express doubts about the EU's ability to address pressing social and political challenges.

Survey responses indicate that people are worried. Political elites with questionable motives and methods are a cause of concern, as are divisions and polarisation that seem to run deep on just about any topic of contemporary relevance, be it foreign policy, migration, climate change, vaccination, women's rights, and gender equality matters.

At the same time, 300+ people who took the time to reflect on these topics also indicated an awareness of personal responsibility, as well as response-ability of individual citizens - to make their voices heard, to participate, to reach out and engage in dialogue across differences, and to actively contribute to safeguarding democracy from various risks, harms, as well as from its own 'design flaws' or systemic weaknesses.

We conclude this report with a call to action from one of the survey respondents, who eloquently captured the spirit of our Democracy Dialogues initiative:

“

Democracy is freedom.
Freedom to be whoever you are,
freedom to not be told who you must be.
Democracy is far more than voting, its legitimacy is derived
from participatory listening, from learning about issues
and loving your neighbors and community.
There must be robust institutional safeguards to preserve democracy
and we all must be able to participate.
Bystanders harm democracy, echo chambers suffocate democracy.
For democracy to succeed in the 21st century
we need to meet each other.

”