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To cite this article: Anna Gora & Pieter de Wilde (2020): The essence of democratic backsliding in the European Union: deliberation and rule of law, Journal of European Public Policy, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2020.1855465](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1855465)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1855465>



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Published online: 17 Dec 2020.



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# The essence of democratic backsliding in the European Union: deliberation and rule of law

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## ABSTRACT


This paper analyzes recent trends of democratic backsliding within the European Union (EU). While some scholars highlight threats to the rule of law and judicial independence as the key development and problem, others focus on elite discourse and partisan competition. We provide a comprehensive analysis of the essence of democratic backsliding by analyzing changes between 1990 and 2019 on key indicators of democracy – polyarchy, liberalism, participation, deliberation and egalitarianism – documented in the V-Dem dataset, within the European Union. We find that democratic backsliding at its core is structured by a deterioration of the quality of deliberation. Deliberation is also the component where EU member states differ amongst each other the most and which has featured the greatest deterioration in recent years. We conclude by spelling out the implications this has for EU policy.

**KEYWORDS** deliberation; democracy; democratic backsliding; European Union; rule of law

## Introduction

The European Union (EU) is witnessing declining commitment to its founding principles of democracy and the rule of law in several of its new member states. There is a consensus among political and legal scholars that democracy, and especially the rule of law, in this region is at risk (Kelemen, 2020; Kochenov, 2008; Pech & Scheppele, 2017; Sedelmeier, 2014). In response to these concerns, citing serious breaches against the rule of law, the European Commission invoked Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) against Poland in 2017. Calling for the European Commission to trigger Article 7<sup>1</sup> against Hungary has been discussed in the European Parliament since

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1855465>

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2015. On 11 January 2020, the '1000 Robes March' featured judges from across Europe marching in Warsaw to protest infringements on the independence of the judiciary.

EU institutions, legal scholars and judges seem to agree that what is happening in Hungary and Poland is primarily a deterioration of the rule of law. This includes such key factors as independence of the judiciary (cf. Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017). Rule of law is key to the 'liberal' side of liberal democracy. Dawson and Hanley (2016, p. 21) describe liberalism in this context as a *shared [commitment] to the norms of political equality, individual liberty, civic tolerance, and the rule of law*. In contrast to this heavy focus on the rule of law, two alternative groups of scholars direct our attention to necessary factors that safeguard both procedural democracy and its institutions against erosion. Essentially, the key problem identified by the first of these groups of scholars is a polarization among elites. This polarization becomes evident through a deterioration of public discourse where competing elites no longer acknowledge their opponents' legitimacy. When political elites change their aims from defeating their opponents within the democratic game to destroying them, we are witnessing a move from agonism to antagonism (Mouffe, 2005). It has been described as the rise of 'populist polarization' (Enyedi, 2016) and 'the weakening of the guardrails of democracy' (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The final group of scholars identifies the key to what is happening as a decline of participation. Labeled by some as 'post-democracy' (Crouch, 2004; Heartfield, 2013) this implies a decline in civic and political engagement. In some cases, declining participation is due to political disenfranchisement, while in others it is linked to weaknesses in the popular component of organized politics, particularly that of political parties (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012, p. 239). Each of these perspectives carries its own policy implications, including remedies and priorities. The European Commission's September 2020 Rule of Law report (European Commission, 2020) testifies to the current hegemony of the first perspective among policy circles in Brussels.

While most scholars acknowledge that democratic backsliding is a composite process containing multiple developments (cf. Waldner & Lust, 2018), consensus on the identification of its key features has yet to be resolved. Some focus on elite competition, others on rule of law. The focus often implicitly reveals a scholar's understanding of what really constitutes democratic backsliding. In the words of Waldner and Lust (2018, p. 96): ... *scholars have not considered carefully the indicators of backsliding*.

The main aim of this article is therefore to contrast these three different perspectives to evaluate their empirical validity and analyze the most important indicators among the EU's member states today. In other words, we set out to identify the essence of democratic backsliding. To avoid an implicit bias through a focus on one or two indicators of democracy, we include an

approximation of all key indicators of dominant understandings of what democracy is (Bühlmann & Kriesi, 2013). This includes not only the procedural and institutional minimum for democracy, which we align with Dahl's (1971) polyarchy but also components of institutional and procedural liberalism, the quality of deliberation, participation and policy output in terms of minimizing inequality. We assess the dimensionality of democracy within the EU and the composition of found dimensions. The core components of key democracy dimensions can subsequently tell us what the essence of democratic backsliding is. Are we primarily witnessing rule of law backsliding, as implied by the strong focus on these problems in recent literature (e.g., Closa & Kochevov, 2016; Marceau, 2019; Pech & Scheppele, 2017)? Or is the essence of democratic backsliding instead driven by increasing polarization amongst elites and more general deterioration of public discourse, or increasing inequality? Many scholars identify such various elements as components of democratic backsliding and some even argue there is a sequence, starting with a deterioration of discourse followed by rule of law backsliding (e.g., Pech & Scheppele, 2017). Yet, there are so far no systematic studies analyzing which of these developments is most essential in characterizing democratic backsliding among EU members today. The essence of democratic backsliding may shed important light on possible remedies, by showing the key developments most worthy of our attention.

## Theory

Any assessment of democratic backsliding, whether of its key features or causes, is rooted first and foremost in one's normative and conceptual understanding of what democracy means (cf. Diamond, 2015, p. 142). A discussion on the essence of democratic backsliding thus needs to start with a short discussion on the essence of democracy. Democracy itself is a notoriously contested concept theoretically and an empirically diverse and complex phenomenon. Most understandings have in common the idea of some system of governance whereby governments and leaders are either directly or indirectly held accountable by citizens through open competition between their representatives. However, as pointed out by Schmitter and Karl (1991, p. 76), it *does not consist of a unique set of institutions or practices*. From this follows a lack of consensus regarding which features are normatively essential for democracy and how demanding a normative definition should be. Theoretical understandings of democracy are thus numerous, ranging from minimalist barebones definitions to 'thick' maximalist definitions.

There is a general consensus that recent developments in the newer member states pose challenges to a polyarchic understanding of democracy (e.g., Diamond, 2015; Sedelmeier, 2014). Whilst maintaining elections and thus nominally meeting minimalist criteria for democracy, Hungary, Poland

and other EU member states have been accused of enabling the erosion of key features that have become associated with modern liberal democracy. Most point to the undermining of the rule of law by Hungary's Orbán and Poland's Law and Justice Party, corruption in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, as well as a weak civic culture across the new member states as the root cause of this democratic erosion. The notion of democratic backsliding is meant to capture this deterioration within the spectrum of democracy, falling short of outright revolution establishing autocracy (Bermeo, 2016). Over the last few years, Poland and Hungary, the two poster cases of democratic backsliding in the EU, have been characterized as 'semi-authoritarian regimes' (Dawson & Hanley, 2016), 'diffusely defective democracies' (Bogaards, 2018), and 'hybrid regimes' falling somewhere on the continuum between full democracy and autocracy (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018). On a similar continuum, Hungary has also been labeled an 'elected autocracy' (Ágh, 2015). Applying its measures, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy index for 2018 evaluates both as flawed-democracies, while Freedom House's freedom index for 2019 continues to characterize Poland as free but situates Hungary within the partly-free position on the continuum. Taking different conceptual understandings of the essential criteria for democracy as their starting points, diagnoses of the degree of democratic backsliding and assessments of its severity have varied. This then justifies the importance of investigating various potential components of democratic decline separately to assess which offers the most powerful understanding of what is happening.

Waldner and Lust (2018) warn researchers of the possibility of overestimating the degree of backsliding when using continuous one-dimensional indicators. They point out that such indexes, in failing to distinguish movement on individual components of democracy, tempt the overinterpretation of small changes. Others are also cautious of the degree of progress or change that is implied by the term 'backsliding'. They argue that what we are witnessing is not the backsliding of healthy democracies but rather the consequences of the instability of democracies that never fully consolidated (Dawson & Hanley, 2016; Dimitrova, 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2015; Van Beek, 2019). Antoaneta Dimitrova (2010) suggests that leading up to EU membership, democratic institutions and the rules of the EU's *acquis communautaire* were adopted and implemented in new member states as 'empty shells' while coexisting alongside informal parallel systems. Empirical work showing that the 2004 and 2007 EU accession states have been converging with the rest of the EU in assessments of quality of governance over the last twenty years but not necessarily on independent democratic indicators seem to back these assessments (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017, p. 283). The implementation of democratic rules and institutions in the new member states has not been enough to secure them against backsliding. These

cautions further supplement the need to contrast separate perspectives based on the components they emphasize to evaluate their empirical validity.

Being a process characterized by a decline in democratic quality, understanding backsliding is strongly connected to the criteria used to assess democracy. The following analysis identifies three distinct strands of democratic backsliding literature, each rooted in a different scientific tradition and consequently highlighting different components as essential to understanding the big picture of recent trends in the EU: rule of law backsliding, a deterioration of political discourse, or a decline in participation.

The first of these perspectives builds on a liberal understanding of democracy. The operationalization of liberal democracy varies widely. However, it is consistently characterized by an emphasis on representation which it favors over participation. It also stresses the importance of protection of civil liberties, the separation of power, and the rule of law (for examples, see Diamond, 1999, 2008; Lührmann et al., 2018; Møller & Skanning, 2013; Zakaria, 1997). In contrast to minimalist understandings of democracy that focus on elections and competing political elites (Przeworski, 1999; Schumpeter, 1976/1943), such maximalist definitions that stand behind the concern for rule of law backsliding include assurances guaranteed by additional components that the institutional side of democracy will function effectively, efficiently, and fairly (cf. O'Donnell, 2004). Based on this liberal understanding of democracy, the legal-institutional perspective on democratic backsliding is primarily concerned with the observed decay of liberal values and institutions, including most notably the rule of law (e.g., Gibler & Randazzo, 2011; Kochenov, 2008; Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

Contrary to this first perspective, a cultural-discursive perspective focuses on norms and discourse as the decisive factors in protecting institutional and procedural democracy from erosion. Tracing back to Almond and Verba (1963), authors have argued that a supportive 'civic culture' needs to be in place amongst citizens to support otherwise fragile institutions. Recent studies show the importance of public support for democracy for its survival (Claassen, 2020). Beyond citizens, the norms and discourse among elites matter too. Habermas (1991), for example, identifies the importance of a vibrant public sphere for open reasoned and justified debate. Forst (2007) goes as far as to claim that public discursive justification of politics and policies is a *sine-qua-non* for democracy. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify mutual toleration and institutional forbearance as the essential 'guardrails' of democracy. Mutual toleration is the norm amongst elites that competing elites are not the enemy to be destroyed, but rivals to be defeated. Their right to exist and participate in the game is not contested. Institutional forbearance implies restraint by those in power not to use all legal means available to play 'constitutional hardball' against their opponents. Combined, they form a live and let live mentality amongst political elites. Rising populism

within the EU comes with charges that rival elites are traitors and 'betraying the people' (Dawson & Hanley, 2019; Enyedi, 2016). In Romania, for example, mainstream political parties increasingly refer to each other as 'criminals' (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018).

The third perspective highlights declining participation as a key challenge to democracy (e.g., Mair, 2006). It focuses on a restriction of democracy's popular components. This is characterized by growing disenchantment with the political system leading to declining voter turnout and retreat from participation in political and civic organizations<sup>2</sup> paired with strategic depoliticization of policy away from traditional participatory mechanisms. While most analyses of democratic quality in new member states have focused on one-dimensional institutional and procedural 'backsliding', such a decline in the participatory quality of democracy is a dominant theme in literature on crises of consolidated, mostly 'old' Western democracies (see Macedo et al. 2005; McCaffrie & Akram, 2014; Putnam, 2000; Stoker, 2006). Mair (2006) identifies a withdrawal both of citizens and governments from meaningful participatory politics. Rather than engaging in solutions that foster political engagement, governments react with further depoliticization and shield political decisions from participation (Mair, 2006, p. 45). Despite being almost universally accepted as the normative benchmark to which real-world democracies are held, the liberal variant of democracy, the reference point of most of these observations, is certainly not the only one and it has not been without criticism. Proponents of more participatory or direct forms of democracy, also highlight democracy's popular component, arguing that liberalism's emphasis on individual liberties and representation exists in conflict and contradiction to participation and popular sovereignty (Mouffe, 2000; Schmitt, 1926; Schmitter, 2018), whereby the emphasis on representation limits opportunities for participation to regularly held elections and in some instances, occasional referendums. Therefore, we summarize this third, participatory perspective broadly to encapsulate core ideas behind democratic elements affecting the quality of participation in a meaningful way.

Bela Greskovits (2015, p. 32) posits that challenges to democracy are not one-dimensional, but instead appear on two dimensions as varying combinations of different degrees of hollowing of democracy's popular component and institutional-procedural backsliding. This opens the possibility that movement along one dimension might not necessarily be correlated to movement along the other. Based on hollowing data from 2000 to 2007 and backsliding data from 2009 to 2013/14, he observes evidence of backsliding, but not hollowing in Hungary and Slovenia. This pattern is not symptomatic of the entire region, however, as Poland ranks low on both hollowing and backsliding while Romania ranks highly on both. While some see a degree of optimism in the positive participatory indicators (Ágh, 2015; Dimitrova, 2018), others warn against interpreting them as positive indicators for

democracy. Morlino (2009, p. 212) cautions that the tendency of populist governments towards more participatory and even direct democratic tools are merely symbolic attempts empty of democratic depth. The documented difference in the deterioration of various components of democracy warrants a contrasting analysis.

The question of the essence of democratic backsliding, therefore, becomes the question of which component of democracy features the greatest deterioration over time and of how deterioration in one component is related to deterioration in others. Is it a change in the constitution and other institutions that we should worry about, or rather more informal changes in norms and elite discourse? If democracy does indeed exist as a multidimensional space, then these changes can be but do not necessarily need to be correlated.

These three perspectives – the institutional-legal, the cultural-discursive and the participatory – do not exclude one another in the sense that they deny each other's merit. They highlight different aspects of the same story rather than directly contradict each other. Five decades ago, Donald Puchala (1972) called out European integration scholars for each studying, albeit accurately, different small parts of the much larger 'elephant' of European integration. Details observed from one standpoint obscure the complexity of the beast, hampering our full understanding of its nature. Puchala's call to combine multiple standpoints reminisces of Allison's (1971) classic study – *The Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* – in which he used three different standpoints to provide the fullest possible account of transpired events. Heeding Puchala's call and honoring Allison's legacy, we argue that the three perspectives on democratic backsliding coexist but have not yet been brought together by scholars sufficiently. As a result, we are neither able to see the full picture nor able to directly compare the relative strengths of each perspective in capturing the story of democratic backsliding. We aim to shed light on the 'elephant' of democratic backsliding by comparing and contrasting different perspectives while remaining open to singling out which among them provides the most insight into the central characteristics – or 'essence' – of current backsliding trends. Empirically investigating which of the three approaches best captures ongoing developments, and how these approaches relate to one another is essential for a better understanding of what is happening. This knowledge is in turn necessary to inform effective policy responses.

## Method

The identification of the essence of democratic backsliding becomes empirically assessable through the analysis of the dimensionality of democracy in the EU and the core components of these dimensions. We proceed to



analyze a range of democratic indicators from one of the most renowned and elaborate comparative databases on democracy: the Varieties of Democracy database (V-Dem) (Coppedge et al., 2019). While reliance on any single data source always comes with limitations, the V-Dem dataset has several key strengths. It contains a range of indicators on democracy which are measured annually in over 200 countries. Key indicators are all indexed on a scale from 1 to 0, allowing direct comparison. Beyond its elaborate and comparative measurement of democracy, its key strength lies in being coded by national experts.

We treat the concept of polyarchy, which Dahl (1971) developed as a more precise and realistic normative measure of existing democratic regimes, as the procedural minimal bar for democracy. Polyarchy has been widely used as a minimum benchmark by institutionally focused literature on democratic consolidation (Herman, 2016, p. 254). Additionally, we propose that the addition of four more components – liberalism, participation, deliberation and egalitarianism – in different combinations and to varying degrees reflect separate maximalist democratic definitions supplementing polyarchy's institutions. Conceptually we treat each component as existing along its own one-dimensional continuum. Some, like participation, can theoretically exist without polyarchic democracy, while others such as egalitarianism largely exist as a normative addition to it when combined with liberalism.

*Polyarchic democracy* supplements the most minimal operationalizations of democracy as an electoral regime with a set of institutions deemed necessary for it to operate as a genuine democracy: freedoms of the press, speech and assembly, and the requirement that governments and parties are both responsive and accountable to voters. The *liberal* component reflects the twentieth century understanding of representative democracy that is backed by the protection of civil liberties including human rights, limited government and the rule of law. *Egalitarianism* is concerned with the equal distribution of resources, both material and immaterial, to the extent that this ensures equal opportunity for all citizens to participate in democratic life and the civil liberties that liberalism guarantees. It is one of the core values heralded by proponents of the welfare state and social democracy. The *participatory* component reflects the degree to which citizens can directly engage in democratic decision-making through citizens' initiatives, plebiscites and referendums, their participation in civil society and openness of the political system to civil society influence. Models envisaging citizens' direct participation in policy decisions, such as that advocated by Carole Pateman (1970), sit at the upper end of the participatory continuum.

The liberal, egalitarian, and participatory components are all characterized by institutional measures that can serve to enhance and safeguard procedural democracy. The final component differs in that it relates to the quality of deliberation between political elites in the public sphere, rather

than institutional or procedural arrangements. This *deliberative* component values public reasoning concerned with the common good that is inclusive of competing interests and diverse opinions over decision-making that is driven by coercion, emotion and/or sectoral interests. Highly deliberative models of democracy characteristic to the work of Jürgen Habermas (1991, 1998) form the demanding end of this continuum. The deliberative component, therefore, embodies the discursive perspectives on democratic backsliding in Europe that are shared by those who take a cultural-discursive perspective to diagnose and assess democratic backsliding. Unlike other components, the discursive component cannot easily be institutionalized to guarantee the robustness of a democracy. Procedural deliberation, for example, plenary debates, can indeed be institutionalized. However, the style and quality of argumentation, respect for other parties' contributions, and inclusiveness are part of the more general political culture. Therefore, an understanding of how these components contribute to the essence of democratic backsliding can also indicate whether the dominant legal-institutional focus is the optimal perspective for diagnosing current trends in the EU. Whether the observed decay in the rule of law, for example, is related to the overall quality of political discourse and deliberation within the EU.

In our analysis, we only focus on EU member states to contribute to the current debate about democratic backsliding and possible counter actions on behalf of the EU. The limited selection of countries involved means that a full factorial analysis on all indicators of democracy contained in the V-Dem dataset would lead to unstable measurements. As a rule of thumb, we employ the standard to have four times as many cases as variables contained in principal component analysis. Besides the basic indicators, V-Dem also contains high-level indices and mid-level indices. The five high-level indices all contain polyarchy components, meaning they are not independent measurements. This violates a key assumption of principal component analysis. Hence, we resort to the mid-level indices. Of the 21 mid-level indices, several are again not independent from each other. Others are excluded due to a lack of variation or in accordance with advisement by the V-Dem team not to include it in such analyses. We end up with five key indicators for democracy: (1) the additive polyarchy index (*v2x\_api*); (2) the liberal component index (*v2x\_liberal*); (3) the participatory component index (*v2x\_partip*); (4) the deliberative component index (*v2xdl\_delib*); and (5) the egalitarian component index (*v2x\_egal*). These include key indicators of minimalist democracy, but also of maximalist understandings. We will briefly discuss each component.

Staying loyal to Dahl's definition, V-Dem's additive polyarchy index is built from indicators measuring the freedoms of association and expression, the share of population with universal suffrage, the degree to which elections

are free and fair, and whether the head of state and legislature are popularly elected. The liberal component index is calculated based on indicators linked to rule of law assessments, including the presence of individual liberties and equality before the law, and judicial and legislative constraints on the executive. The decline in democratic indicators most targeted by the EU and others taking an institutional-legal approach is captured by this variable. V-Dem operationalizes participation into four sub-variables covering elements of supply and some demand of participation: availability of access to direct popular vote, citizen participation in civil society paired with its degree of access to policy-making, whether local governments are elected and operate independently from unelected bodies, and whether regional governments are elected and operate independently from unelected bodies. The deliberative component index considers whether political elites defend their positions on public policy issues by offering reasoned justifications, as well as justifications based on the common good. It also considers the range of parties that are consulted, the degree to which counterarguments are respected, and the breadth and depth of deliberation in the public sphere (i.e., media). Finally, V-Dem's egalitarian component is constructed from indicators on the protection of rights and freedoms equally across all groups, equal opportunity for all groups to participate in politics, and the equal distribution of resources such as wealth, education and healthcare.

## Findings

To compare developments across different indicators of democracy within the EU, and within its new member states specifically, let us start with investigating basic descriptives of the five key indicators.

Table 1 shows the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of the five V-Dem indicators for the year 2019, the most recent year for which data are available. First, this shows that even though all EU member states are officially democracies and generally ranked amongst the world's most democratic states<sup>3</sup>, there is quite some variation within. We can see this in the substantive difference between minimum and maximum and in the standard deviations on all five indicators. Second, it shows that full and perfect democracy remains an elusive goal. Even the oldest and most consolidated

**Table 1.** Divergent democracy within the EU 28 in 2019.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Polyarchy	.73	.96	.91	.053
Liberalism	.61	.97	.88	.089
Participation	.40	.76	.65	.068
Deliberation	.40	.97	.83	.140
Egalitarianism	.62	.94	.85	.081

democracies in Western Europe do not reach perfect scores on any of the key indicators. That said, average scores are decidedly on the democratic side of the continuum from full autocracy to full democracy, even if participation does not stand out as strongly democratic.

Beyond these basic characteristics, what stands out is that the deliberative component index is the indicator with both the largest spread among EU member states – reflected in the largest standard deviation of .140 – and the lowest minimum, on a par with participation. If there is anything that differentiates the more democratic EU member states from their less democratic counterparts, it appears to be the quality of deliberation.

Table 2 shows how key democracy indicators developed in old and new member states since the advent of democratic backsliding in 2010. It shows how democracy deteriorated across the board on average in the most recent decade. It also shows that deterioration is most pronounced in the new member states. While participation quality is low, there is hardly any change in degrees of participation, which is consistent with the prioritization of representation over participation associated with liberal democracy. Rule of law backsliding as captured through the liberalism component is supported by these data, yet deterioration of deliberation stands out as clearly the most concerning development within the new member states.

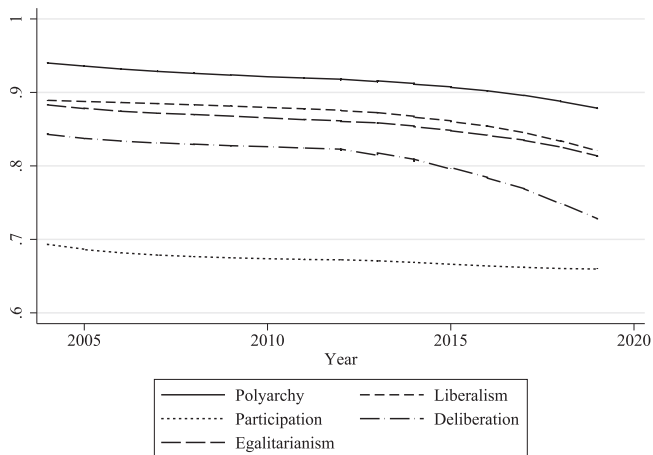
Taking a closer look at developments within the new EU member states, we see in yet another way how decreasing quality of deliberation stands at the heart of current democratic backsliding within the EU. Backsliding starts immediately after enlargement and across all five indicators. Figure 1 shows lowess lines of the five key democracy indicators for thirteen newer EU member states from 2004 to 2019. Note that recent years, starting

**Table 2.** Changes in key democracy indicators in old and new member states 2010–2019.

	Old EU member states <sup>a</sup>		
	2010	2019	Difference
Polyarchy	0.957	0.942	–0.015
Liberalism	0.936	0.926	–0.010
Participation	0.652	0.638	–0.014
Deliberation	0.933	0.915	–0.018
Egalitarianism	0.924	0.892	–0.032
	New EU member states <sup>b</sup>		
Polyarchy	0.920	0.880	–0.040
Liberalism	0.879	0.823	–0.056
Participation	0.677	0.668	–0.009
Deliberation	0.829	0.738	–0.091
Egalitarianism	0.868	0.808	–0.060

<sup>a</sup>Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

<sup>b</sup>Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.



**Figure 1.** Developments in newer EU member states along five key democracy dimensions since 2004.

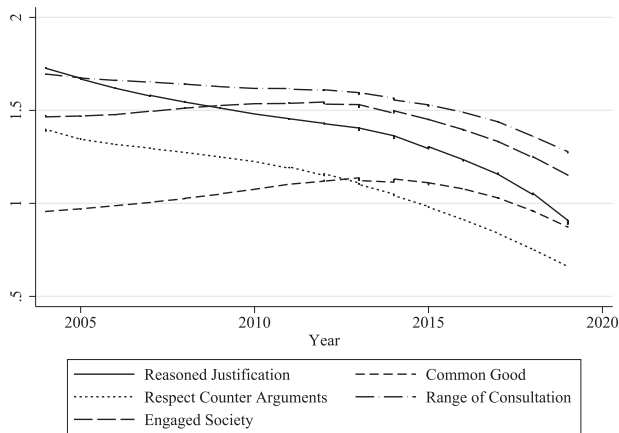
around 2012, reaffirm a rapid decrease in the quality of deliberation as the most noticeable development.

V-Dem's deliberative component index is a product of more detailed measurements of democracy. The quality of deliberation is reflected in

... the extent to which political elites give public justifications for their positions on matters of public policy, justify their positions in terms of the public good, acknowledge and respect counter-arguments; and how wide the range of consultation is at elite levels. (Coppedge et al., 2019, p. 50)

This definition contains the five components of this operationalization of the quality of deliberation: reasoned justification, references to the common good, respect for counter-arguments, range of consultation and engaged society. If deterioration of deliberation is the essence of democratic backsliding, what stands at the core of this development? To investigate, we unpack the deliberative component index and analyze its five constituting indicators.

Figure 2 shows that the drop in overall quality of deliberation is particularly driven by a decrease in the extent to which politicians provide justifications for their arguments and by a growing disrespect for counter-arguments. Hence, this data supports concerns amongst the proponents of the cultural-deliberative perspective that citizens in new member states are increasingly deprived of an opportunity to weigh politicians' advocated policies against commonly held values and world views. Citizens are confronted with a changing political climate, where opposing political elites increasingly see each other as enemies to be destroyed, rather than as adversaries to be defeated in elections. The presentation of reasoned justifications reflects an attempt by politicians to persuade voters, to provide a case for their policies to both



**Figure 2.** Developments of indicators of quality of deliberation in new member states.

believers and sceptics in an attempt to bring as many on board as possible. A decrease in respect for counter-arguments, for example through labeling political opponents as criminals (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018), tears away at citizens' willingness to accept a loss in election results and the social fabric that holds countries together. Other indicators of the quality of deliberation also show a decline since 2013, but it is not as steep as the decline in reasoned justification or respect for counter-arguments and follows on stability or a slight increase in the period 2004–2013. The data presented reflect a debate in which politicians speak to the base rather than try and convince or persuade all citizens and where basic civility among opposing elites is increasingly missing.

To check whether these reported average developments are not the result of extreme changes in one or two member states, but accurately capture the trends in new member states, we analyzed changes in rule of law and deliberation between 2010 and 2019 in each of the new member states. With changes on two key components of liberal democracy in thirteen countries, this provides a total of 26 individual developments. Of these 26 developments, 23 are negative. That is, we see a deterioration of both rule of law and deliberation in all new EU member states between 2010 and 2019, with the exception of a slight improvement in the quality of deliberation in Bulgaria and rule of law in Croatia and Slovakia.<sup>4</sup> Except for Bulgaria, Malta and Slovenia, each of the new member states feature a greater deterioration in the quality of deliberation than in rule of law. Note that the stronger deterioration in deliberation than in rule of law includes both 'poster boys' of democratic backsliding – Hungary and Poland – against which the European Commission has initiated Article 7 procedures for violations in the rule of law.

**Table 3.** Principal component analysis.

Component	Initial eigenvalues		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.066	61.33	61.33
2	1.063	21.26	82.58
Rotated component Matrix <sup>a</sup>			
	Component		
	1	2	
Polyarchy	.878		
Liberalism	.842		
Participation		.985	
Deliberation	.910		
Egalitarianism	.863		

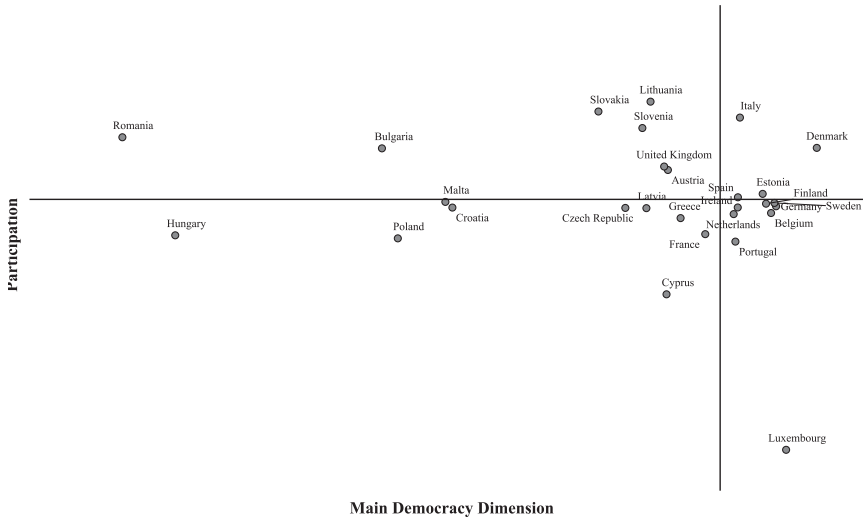
Notes: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Loadings reported >.299.

<sup>a</sup>Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

With a few exceptions, the thirteen new EU member states feature both rule of law backsliding and deterioration of deliberation. Yet, the initial analysis above reveals that the quality of deliberation is deteriorating more within the EU, especially within its new member states, than rule of law. It also reveals how differences among EU member states are now starker on deliberation than they are on rule of law. It furthermore revealed that standards of participation are considerably lower than those on rule of law and deliberation, but that they have not changed much in recent years. A decline in participation does not appear to be part of the democratic backsliding in new member states in recent years.

To validate these basic descriptive observations, we proceed to analyze recent developments in all EU member states in principal component analysis. The principal component analysis reveals a two-dimensional space of democracy in the EU (Table 3). This means the essence of backsliding may lie in either one of two dimensions. The first dimension consists of four out of five components – all except participation – and explains 61% of variance. Deterioration along this dimension can thus be considered general democratic backsliding. While the polyarchy, liberalism, deliberation and egalitarianism components all load onto this dimension, deliberation forms the core. This implies the quality of deliberation is the most accurate of the four components of this dimension for measuring democratic backsliding. The second dimension is mainly shaped by the participatory component index and explains 21% of variance. This shows that a decline in participation is a distinct and independent phenomenon, which should not be confused with the democratic backsliding observed in the EU.

Figure 3 below plots EU member states on factor loadings resulting from the principal component analysis. It portrays how each member state scores on the main democracy (x-axis) and participation (y-axis) dimensions. Lines are drawn through the mean on both dimensions, dividing the EU democratic



**Figure 3.** Two-dimensional democracy in the EU in 2019.

space into four quadrants. In the top-right corner, we see countries that perform comparatively high on both the main democracy and participation dimensions. In the bottom-left corner are countries that score comparatively low on both dimensions. Note that these are relative, rather than absolute, quadrants. Countries in the bottom-left quadrant are not necessarily autocracies. They are rather less democratic than the ones in the top-right quadrant.

Focusing on the main democracy dimension results for 2019 and interpreting that in light of the developments of key states described above, the most extreme development is not continued democratic backsliding in Hungary or the start of it in Poland, but rather the massive deterioration of democracy in Romania. The quality of deliberation in Romania decreased from .94 in 2016 to .40 three years later, on a scale from 1.00 to 0. Even if the 2016 result was a positive outlier, this is still an incredible development in such a short period. While participation does not change notably in Romania in these three years, the liberal component also sees a notable drop from .85 to .61, but this is clearly less dramatic than the deterioration of deliberation.

To summarize, we have documented a deterioration in the quality of deliberation as the essence of democratic backsliding within the EU. Many indicators of democratic backsliding co-occur together. Deterioration in rule of law and in deliberation tend to go together, as shown by the PCA. In contrast, participation forms a separate dimension of democracy. In other words, our analysis reaffirms that liberal democratic backsliding and declining participation are two separate and independent processes. We document a deterioration in liberalism in most new EU member states. This warrants the attention of the EU, legal scholars and some political scientists pay to rule



of law backsliding. However, in various ways, we show how the deterioration of deliberation forms the essence of democratic backsliding in the EU. The quality of deliberation forms the core of the main democracy dimension in the EU, separating the better performing from the worse performing democracies within the EU. We also show that the quality of deliberation within new member states is deteriorating faster than other key democracy indicators, including polyarchy, liberalism, participation and egalitarianism. Finally, we show that EU member states now differ from each other the most in terms of deliberation. The difference between member states with high-quality deliberation and low-quality deliberation is starker than the difference between member states with strong and weak rule of law and those with rich and poor opportunities for participation. A focus on deliberation rather than rule of law reveals the most pressing problems facing new member states and redirects attention from Hungary and Poland towards Romania as the most problematic case.

## Conclusion

While many observers agree that a process of democratic backsliding is occurring within new member states of the European Union, there are different perspectives on the essence of what is going on. EU institutions like the European Commission and European Parliament as well as legal scholars and protesting judges direct our attention to a deterioration of the rule of law and independence of the judiciary as the heart of the problem. In contrast, several social scientists draw attention to the deterioration of deliberation as competing political elites increasingly challenge each other's legitimacy and right to exist. Finally, a third group of scholars has highlighted patterns of citizen disengagement in terms of both declining quality of and demand for democratic participation. While different strands of scholarship do not explicitly deny that democratic backsliding is multifaceted, their different focus raises the question of what the essence of democratic backsliding is. Which development stands at the core of democratic backsliding? We have addressed this question and find through various analyses that a deterioration in the quality of deliberation forms the essence of democratic backsliding within the EU.

Beyond contributing to the academic debate concerned with understanding democratic backsliding, our findings carry important policy implications for the EU. Democratic backsliding and divergence of quality of democracy within its borders has significant implications for the functioning of the EU as a political system. Its core values as laid out in Article 2 TEU are in danger.

Our study raises a key policy question. Why are EU institutions so predominantly focused on rule of law problems within EU member states, when a deterioration in the quality of deliberation is clearly the essence of democratic backsliding? A well-known saying provides an initial answer here:

'once you have a hammer, every problem starts looking like a nail'. The primary tools available to EU actors are rule of law instruments. This includes measures within Article 7 TEU and the Cooperation and Verification Mechanisms with Bulgaria and Romania. In current discussions on the new Multiannual Financial Framework, it is again rule of law concerns that take center stage. With its 'rule of law hammer' in hand, EU policymakers are naturally tempted to see developments in new member states as 'rule of law nails'. Yet, this only provides an initial answer to our question. The follow-up question is: Why does the EU only have rule of law mechanisms to enforce member state adherence to the democratic requirements laid out in its treaties when we know that democracy is a multifaceted and composite system? Perhaps a sociological explanation applies here. The EU Treaties are drawn up by lawyers. They are the logical experts to do so. Lawyers have been trained to focus on the rule of law. Hence, they may also elevate concerns with rule of law beyond other elements of democracy. Without overweighing the entire complexity of the 'elephant' of democracy, this would lead those drafting the Treaties to provide the EU with only partial tools to address democratic backsliding. Investigating the credibility of such a sociological explanation goes well beyond the present paper. We invite future research to focus on the extent to which all three of the key perspectives – the legal-institutional, the cultural-deliberative and the participatory perspective – are represented in the creation of policy to address democratic backsliding.

## Notes

1. Articles 7 of the TEU refers specifically to a breach of one or more of the founding values outlined in article 2 of the TEU: 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities' (Article 2, TEU).
2. This overlaps with Robert Putnam's original warnings of the implications of a retreat from public life on democracy in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000).
3. As of its latest report in 2020, V-Dem no longer considers Hungary a democracy (Lührmann et al 2020).
4. This changes are so small, however, that they could easily be measurement errors.

## Acknowledgements

This research was carried out as part of the RECONNECT project, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 770142. Supporting data and materials for this article can be accessed on the Taylor & Francis website, doi: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1855465. Sina Özdemir delivered great input on earlier versions. We thank our RECONNECT colleagues for valuable comments, especially Amichai

Magen, James Wilhelm and Kolja Raube. This paper was presented at the 26th International Conference of Europeanists, Madrid; the Comparative Institutions and Regimes seminar, University of Oslo; and the RECONNECT Workshop 'Are Populist Parties Threatening Democracies in Europe?', Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. We thank all participants, specifically Ben Crum and Carl Henrik Knutsen. This article reflects only the authors' view. The European Commission Research Executive Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research was carried out as part of the RECONNECT project, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 770142.

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