



## SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 22/15

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*Project title: Returning to Europe and Turning Away From "Europe"? Post-Accession Attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe.*

### 1. Purpose of the project

This project addresses the recent backlash against European values in a post-communist setting, i.e. the manifold instances of populist attacks on or challenges to not only European integration but also what the European Union represents: tolerance, liberal democracy, respect for human rights and the protection of minority rights. Following the 2004 and 2007 eastern enlargements of the EU – sometimes described as a return to Europe – we have throughout the post-communist region witnessed signs of democratic backsliding, euroscepticism, the rise of radical right populism, the spread of corruption, and in some places an authoritarian backlash, and the rise of xenophobia and chauvinism. In order to analyze post-accession popular support for democracy and liberal values, the project focused on public opinion in Central and Eastern Europe. More specifically, the idea was to follow up on a series of opinion surveys conducted in the region in the 1990s up until the first EU enlargement; and confined to the Baltic states, in 2014. The idea with this project was to launch a new wave of nation-wide public opinion surveys in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia.

The project was to a large extent a follow-up to a previous project funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen): *European Values under Attack?* (1857/42/2012), which covered the three Baltic states.

### 2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

The empirical data collected within the framework of this research projected illustrates three significant patterns. The political cultures of the post-communist countries under review are characterized by high levels of political dissatisfaction, which are related to both support for democracy and “tolerance levels” (or European values), generally speaking. Moreover, the attitudes are related to socioeconomic status. The more likely respondents are to identify as “losers” in socioeconomic terms, the lower the levels of support for democracy or support for liberal values. This is also related to age, self-assessed income levels, and settlement (the urban–rural dimension).



At the same time, it is hard to find general patterns that are entirely consistent across countries. Support for democracy and liberal or European values seem to be correlated above all to the specific national contexts.

### **3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline**

The project contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding in the region, but offering a public opinion perspective of the developments in recent years. Contemporary political analyses of Central and Eastern Europe typically paint a gloomy picture of the region. In stark contrast to similar analyses in the 1990s, which tended to be about democratization, liberalization and Europeanisation, recent years' observers have rather emphasized nationalism, xenophobia and illiberalism. Following the 2004 and 2007 Eastern enlargements of the European Union – sometimes described as a “return to Europe” – we have throughout the post-communist region witnessed signs of democratic backsliding, Euroscepticism, the rise of radical right populism, and a general authoritarian backlash. This includes a backlash against what one might label European values in a post-communist setting, i.e. the manifold instances of populist attacks on or challenges to not only European integration but also what the European Union claims to represent: tolerance, liberal democracy, gender equality, respect for human rights and the protection of minority rights. See for example Sten Berglund et al., *Where Does Europe End?* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2009); Attila Ágh, “Post-Accession Crisis in the New Member States: Progressing or Backsliding in the EU?” *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 2:1, 2013; Ivan Krastev, “The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus”, *Journal of Democracy* 18: 4, 2007; Jaques Rupnik, “From Democracy Fatigue to Populist Backlash”, *Journal of Democracy* 18:;4; Martin Bútorá, “Nightmares From the Past, Dreams of the Future”, *Journal of Democracy* 18:4, 2007.

The reoccurring crises in the region have further added to the notion of a new East/West divide in Europe: the 2008–2010 financial crisis, the Crimea crisis from 2014 and onwards, the 2015 refugee crises, Brexit, the Covid-19 crisis – and, from 24 February 2022 – the Russian war on Ukraine. The mere titles of some of the more prominent analyses of contemporary politics in Europe and the world are telling of the academic (and pessimistic) *Zeitgeist* of our time: *How Democracies Die* (Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, 2019, New York: Crown); *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (Anne Applebaum, 2020, Murfreesboro: Diversified Publishing); *The Light That Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy* (Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, 2020, New York: Pegasus Books).

### **4. New research questions that the project has led to**

The most often cited examples of a nationalist or illiberal turn in the region refer to Putin in Russia, Órban in Hungary and the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland, but the same tendencies are detectable in several other countries in the region. In fact, in a majority of the countries in the region, authoritarian right and far-right movements or elements have become



increasingly more influential in politics and society in recent years. The explanations for such authoritarian tendencies differ, and how we are to understand this phenomenon in relation to traditional parliamentary party politics remain open questions. Some have argued that the rise of illiberalism (i.e. the electoral success of rightwing populist parties) is related to unfulfilled and perhaps unrealistic expectations of the transformation era, after which many voters felt that the idea of “catching up with the West” never materialized. At the same, other observers have pointed out that disillusionment with liberal democracy is not exclusively confined to post-communist countries; and that the recent electoral success of radical rightwing parties can be found all over Europe. Important as the notion of Eastern Europe disillusionment seem to be for the emergence of popular support for rightwing populism, it is clearly not the full story.

In fact, backlash symptoms may be found all over Europe, and beyond. In the well-functioning democracies in Northern Europe, rightwing populist parties have had unprecedented electoral success in recent elections. The anti-immigration Sweden Democrats entered parliament in 2010; and despite having its roots in neo-Nazism and promoting outright opposition to multiculturalism, the party has remained a significant actor in Swedish politics. In the 2018 general election, they won some 18 percent of the vote. In a similar fashion, in Finland, the far-right Finns Party proved that opposition to both immigration and the rejection of climate change policies appealed to many voters, in the 2019 elections. In Denmark, the Danish People’s Party has a history of successful cooperation with the government parties on most issues, in return for acceptance of their anti-immigration political stance.

In Western Europe, we have for a number years seen parties of similar kinds in e.g. the Netherlands (Party for Freedom), Belgium (Vlaams Belang), France (National Front, more recently National Rally), Italy (the League) and Austria (the Freedom Party). These parties seem to have been able to capitalize especially on the 2015 refugee crisis. The Brexit Party in the UK is part of the same family of parties. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered parliament in 2017, with almost 13 percent of the vote. The party base its agenda on Euroscepticism and anti-immigration (especially hostility towards Muslims), and appeal in particular to voters in the former GDR parts of Germany. Populist parties have thus become significant political players throughout Western Europe; but common wisdom is that rightwing populist parties are stronger in post-communist Europe.

In Central Europe, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Órban stand out as something of a role model for other populist politicians in the EU, and with his party FIDEZ (and government coalition partner Christian Democratic People’s Party) he has used its two-thirds majority in the parliament to make constitutional changes, virtually getting rid of checks and balances, turning Hungary into what Órban himself label an “illiberal state”. The aim has been to take full control over all state institutions, and after that, to make it increasingly difficult for



critical journalists, NGOs, opposition groups and universities. The attacks on academic freedom also includes attacks on individual researchers.

In 2019–2020, the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) returned to power in Poland, with almost 44 percent of the vote. Voters, especially in the rural parts of the country, have been attracted to the party's emphasis on Catholic values, social welfare and Polish nationalism. In both Hungary and Poland, democratic freedoms have been steadily declining over the past decade. In the yearly rankings provided by *Nations in Transit* (NiT), a report by Freedom House focusing on democracy in Eastern Europe, Hungary recently dropped out of the group of “democracies” altogether, to become a “hybrid regime”. Poland is still labelled a “semi-consolidated democracy” in NiT, but the democracy ratings have been in decline over the past few years. The government has advocated distinctly discriminatory treatment of LGBT+ people, and introduced controversial changes in the abortion law. Also, press freedom has been under attack in recent years.

Towards the end of the project, after being extended, the situation in the region (and in the world) changed. The COVID 19-pandemic fundamentally changed the political situation, at least for a while. Some scholars have argued that the pandemic added to the democratic backsliding of at least some countries in Central and Eastern Europe, for example in Poland and Hungary. Incumbents, it would seem, seized the opportunity to silence or further marginalize the political opposition. COVID 19-restrictions was used, for all practical purposes, as democratic restrictions.

In order to cover this aspect, the project did a follow-up survey in the Baltic states, asking respondents about their attitudes and perceptions of the COVID 19-situation. That data is yet to be used in international publications.

## **5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe**

The project has collected unique survey data, in two data sets (below). In addition to the publications based on this data (present and forthcoming), the plan is to make the data freely available to the research community. The data is being prepared to be included in the Data Access Unit (DAU) at the Library of Södertörn University. By doing so, the data will also be a de facto part of the holdings of the Swedish National Data Service (SND). The SND network consists of all Swedish higher education institutions and public research institutes that have agreed to create local units for managing research data (Data Access Units). The main task for a DAU is to assist researchers in their respective organisation in making research data as accessible as possible, in accordance with the so called FAIR data principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Re-usable). Also, including the data sets in Södertörn University's DAU is a way of ensuring secure storage of the data for years to come.



**Ekman, Joakim** et al. (2016) *European Values Under Attack Barometer* (Public opinion data: representative samples of the adult population in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia). Stockholm: Södertörn University (SPSS and STATA data file). Funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

**Ekman, Joakim** et al. (2021) *Baltic Barometer 2021. 30 Years after the fall of the Soviet Union* (Public opinion data: representative samples of the adult population in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.). Stockholm: Södertörn University (SPSS and STATA data file). Funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

## **6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community**

### **Articles in peer reviewed journals**

**Duvold, Kjetil** and Sedelius, Thomas (2022) “Presidents between National Unity and Ethnic Divisions: Public Trust across the Baltic States”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*. OPEN ACCESS:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01629778.2022.2064523>

Gherghina, Sergiu, **Joakim Ekman** and Olena Podolian (2021) “Anti-Establishment Parties and Voters’ Responses in Post-Communist Countries”, special issue, *Problems of Post-Communism*, July–August 2021, 261–263. OPEN ACCESS:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10758216.2021.1928831>

**Berglund, Sten** and Georgi Karasimeonov (2019) “In the EU and NATO but Close to Russia – Post-Crimea Attitudes in Bulgaria and Hungary”, *Polish Political Science Review*, December 2019. OPEN ACCESS:

<https://www.sciendo.com/article/10.2478/ppsr-2019-0010>

Gherghina, Sergiu, **Joakim Ekman** and Olena Podolian (2018) “Democratic Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe: Expanding the Research Agenda”, special issue of *Contemporary Politics* on democratic innovations in Central and Eastern Europe. OPEN ACCESS:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13569775.2018.1543752?journalCode=ccpo20>



**Ekman, Joakim**, Sergiu Gherghina and Olena Podolian (2016) “Challenges and Realities of Political Participation and Civic Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe”, *East European Politics* 32 (1), 1–11. OPEN ACCESS:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21599165.2016.1141091>

**Duvold, Kjetil** and **Joakim Ekman** (2016) “Nationality-driven Soviet Nostalgia: Determinants of Retrospective Regime Evaluation in the Baltic States”, *Twentieth Century Communism*, Issue 11 (11): Nostalgia, 43–66. OPEN ACCESS:

<https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/lwish/tcc/2016/00000011/00000011/art00004;jsessionid=2ckk7ic48d5wt.x-ic-live-01>

### **Monographs and edited anthologies**

**Duvold, Kjetil**, **Sten Berglund** and **Joakim Ekman** (2019) *Political Culture in the Baltic States*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gherghina, Sergiu, **Joakim Ekman** and Olena Podolian (2019) *Democratic Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe*. London and New York: Routledge.

### **Chapters in international volumes**

**Ekman, Joakim** and Erik Amnå (2022) “Civic Engagement” in Maria Grasso and Marco Giugne (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Participation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Ekman, Joakim** (2022, forthcoming) “Democracy in the Baltic Sea Region”, chapter in a research anthology on the Baltic Sea Region, Uppsala: Baltic University Programme (BUP).

**Ekman, Joakim** (2019) “Political Culture in the Baltic States”, Minsk: BSU, p. 489–494.

**Ekman, Joakim** and **Kjetil Duvold** (2018) “Political Communities and Potential Ethnic Tension in the Baltic States” in Tobias Spöri (ed.) *Frozen Post-Soviet Conflicts*. London and New York: Routledge.

**Ekman, Joakim** and Mai-Brith Schartau (2017) “Politics in the Baltic Sea Region” in Bernd Henningsen, Tobias Etzold and Krister Hanne (eds.) *The Baltic Sea Region: A*



*Comprehensive Guide. History, Politics, Culture and Economy.* Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag.

**Ekman, Joakim** (2016) “The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy”, *Baltic Worlds*, Inhouse Edition, Marsh 2016.

**Duvold, Kjetil** (2016). “When Left and Right Is a Matter of Identity. Overlapping Political Dimensions in Estonia and Latvia”. In Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk (eds). *Borders in the Baltic Sea Region: Suturing the Ruptures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

### Conference papers

**Kjetil Duvold** (2021) “Trust, efficacy, and willingness to vaccinate: A glance at the Baltic Barometer 2021”, A presentation for 14th Conference of Baltic Studies in Europe (CBSE), Uppsala University, 1–4 September 2021.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2021) “Living next to Russia: political culture in the Baltic state”. A book presentation for the CES Booktalk Series, Center for European Studies (CES) at the Institute for International Studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) (online), 12 May 2021.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2018) “Support for the Political Community in Ethnically Divided States: Evidence from Estonia and Latvia”, paper presented at the ECPR General Conference, Hamburg, 22-25 August 2018.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2018) “Democracy between Europe and Russia: Political Cultures in the Baltic States”, Presentation of an upcoming book at the 2018 AABS Conference at Stanford University, 1-3 June 2018.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2018) “Democratic deconsolidation? The emergence of illiberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe”. Presentation at the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen’s University, Belfast, 7 February 2018.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2017) “Between Institutions and Personalities: Determinants of Trust in the Baltic Presidents” (with T. Sedelius). Paper presented at the NoPSA 2017 (The XVIII Nordic Political Science Congress), the University of Southern Denmark (Odense), August 8-11, 2017.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2017) “Returning to Europe and Turning Away From 'Europe'? Post-Accession Attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe”. Paper presented at the UACES Conference in Kraków, 4-6 September 2017.





**Kjetil Duvold** (2017) “Public Opinion in the Baltic States. A Report on Ongoing Research”. Presentation at the 2017 Baltic Studies Conference in Riga The Baltic states at 99: Past, Present and Future University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia, 19-21 June, 2017.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2017) “Public Opinion in the Baltic States”. Presentation at the 3rd Lithuanian-Nordic Annual Conference Security, Cooperation and Values in Northern Europe, the Norwegian Embassy in Vilnius, January 2017.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2016) “When Left and Right Is a Matter of Identity: Overlapping Political Dimensions in Estonia and Latvia”. Presentation at the joint VDU-ASN conference Europe, Nations, and Insecurity: Challenges to Identities, Kaunas 30/6-2/7, 2016.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2016) “When Left and Right Is a Matter of Identity”. Presentation at the expert seminar Regionalism at Europe's margins: Ruptures, sutures, representations. at The Jonah Skytte Institute of Political Science, University of Tartu, May 2016.

**Kjetil Duvold** (2016) “Nationality-driven Soviet Nostalgia: Determinants of Retrospective Regime Evaluation in the Baltic States”. Presentation at the Association for the study of nationalities, 2016 World convention, Columbia University 14-16 April 2016.

## **Other**

**Joakim Ekman** and Lina Pilo (2022) *Koll på demokrati*. Lund: Nypon förlag.

**Joakim Ekman** and Ramona Rat (2021) “2. Sustainable Societies”, *Book of Abstracts: Interdisciplinary – Multicultural – International. Oral Presentations Given at the BUP Symposium 2021. Online, 19–20 October 2021*. Uppsala: The Baltic University Programme, p. 12.

Mörner, Ninna et al. (red) *CBEES State of the Region Report 2021* (2022). **Joakim Ekman** part of the editorial board.

Mörner, Ninna et al. (red) *CBEES State of the Region Report 2020* (2021). **Joakim Ekman** part of the editorial board.