

## Digital Democracy and the Growing Threat of Illiberalism: Opportunities and Limitations as Reflected by the Estonian Case

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## Article

# Digital Democracy and the Growing Threat of Illiberalism. Opportunities and Limitations as Reflected by the Estonian Case

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**Abstract:** *Currently, the fourth and fifth waves of the industrial revolution are shaping the global political, economic, and social landscape. The development of robotics, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality (VR), doubled by the emerging importance of renewable energy sources, is redefining the relationship between the state and the citizen. In this context, the frequency of arguments that plead for an adaptation of the liberal democratic model to the digital environment is increasing. However, the latest developments in this*

*field are also facilitating the spreading of populist and radical messages. Digital innovation is therefore, in many countries, contemporaneous with a process of democratic backsliding. Our paper represents a preliminary attempt to estimate the potential impact of digitalizing the political and social spheres on the stability of liberal democratic regimes. Answers to the questions put forward are provided by analyzing the digital evolution of politics and society in Estonia. We highlight data linked not only to topics such as online voting, participatory budgeting, or digital skills but also data regarding political participation and democratic resilience. Our conclusions suggest that, although building a genuine digital democracy can have positive effects on the level of political and civic involvement of citizens, in order to annihilate the danger of illiberalism, an improvement in the lev-*

*els of trust in public institutions is also needed. Trust is a vital factor for blocking disinformation and ensuring that digital tools are not hijacked by populist groups with authoritarian tendencies.*

**Keywords:** *Digital democracy; e-voting; illiberalism; participatory budgeting; political participation; public opinion*

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## 1. Introduction

The optimism of the 1990s regarding a universalization of liberal democracy and market economy, fuelled, among others, by the American political scientist and international relations scholar Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1992), is becoming obsolete as time goes by. Especially after 2006, a wave of authoritarian resurgence swept across several regions of the globe. Europe, which seemed to be a safe haven for democracy after the decline of fascism and communism, was also affected. Recent evolutions have shaped an even more favourable environment for promoting radical ideas and policies (Freedom House, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many governments to impose restrictive measures, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which disturbed the global energy and food markets, are factors that strengthen the so-called *illiberal* political movements. Previously, the economic crisis that erupted in 2008 and the migrant crisis of 2015 played a similar role (Larsen, 2022).

According to Freedom House (Freedom House, 2023a), Hungary, a member state of the European Union (EU) since 2004, can be included in the category of *Partly Free* countries, which contains, among others, Ukraine, Morocco, Mexico, and Pakistan. In other words, a former communist country that underwent a successful transition to democracy and a market economy after 1989 can now be labelled as a hybrid regime. As mentioned above, Hungary's democratic decline is not singular in the European political landscape. For example, Poland shifted after 2015 towards a right-wing populist model, which undermined several civil rights. Moreover, in a country that is a founding member of the EU, Italy, the government is currently led by Giorgia Meloni, whose political party, *Fratelli d'Italia*, has fascist roots (Jäger, 2023). If we expand the observed geographical area, we can notice that the United States of America (USA), viewed for a long period in different academic circles as a model of democratic stability (Foley, 2003, p. 195), experienced as well an illiberal turn in the last decade. This turn has „moved the country out of a cohort that included other leading democracies, such as France and Germany, and brought it into the company of states with weaker democratic institutions, such as Romania and Panama” (Freedom House, 2021). A key difference between Romania and the USA is that, while Romania's Global Freedom Score in 2022 is similar to the one calculated in 2016, the USA experienced a 6-point downgrade (from 89 to 83) in the same period (Freedom House, 2023a).

Since the process of democratic backsliding accelerated and its impact became much more visible, the technological domain has also experienced radical changes. The Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells argues that the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen “the fastest diffusing technology in the history of communication” (Castells, 2010, p. xxvi) allowing the modern-day economy to be defined by “the almost instantaneous flow and exchange of information, capital, and cultural communication” (Castells, 2010, p. i).

In 2006, the first Apple iPhone was yet to be launched, and Facebook was worth *only* \$525 million; as of September 2023, the value of the company was around \$560 billion (Companies Market Cap, 2023). Moreover, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) had a disruptive effect in several fields, including education, the judiciary system, and economics. For example, ChatGPT, an AI chatbot developed by OpenAI, an American research laboratory, is capable of creating texts that can aid students in altering the results of educational evaluation. According to an editorial signed by the American political scientist Henry Kissinger and two American computer scientists, Eric Schmidt and Daniel Huttenlocher, the dangers of these transforma-

tions are broader and deeper: „generative AI systems have capabilities that remain undisclosed even to their inventors. With each new AI system, they are building new capacities without understanding their origin or destination. As a result, our future now holds an entirely novel element of mystery, risk and surprise” (Kissinger, Schmidt, Huttenlocher, 2023).

The latest technological evolutions are obviously impacting the political landscape as well. Social networks can be used as instruments for galvanizing social movements or influencing the electoral behaviour of citizens. On one hand, platforms like Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), or YouTube were pillars of the anti-authoritarian struggle known as the *Arab Spring*, that erupted in the Middle East in 2011 (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). On the other hand, leaders with authoritarian tendencies like the former American president Donald Trump were capable of boosting their appeal by using the same platforms (Schroeder, 2018).

Technological innovation can influence politics not only in pivotal moments like elections or social unrest. Social networks are usually tools for political actors, especially during electoral campaigns, and those who advocate for the widespread introduction of electronic voting are becoming more and more vocal, but we ought to take into account the fact that the influence of the latest industrial revolutions in the political and social lives of contemporary communities is not limited to the periods when the polls are open. Different experiments linked to the everyday lives of regular citizens, like the ones that bring political decisions closer to the voter through participatory budgeting, are meant to confirm a hypothesis that is seen as way too optimistic by its critics: integrating the digital component into the structure of liberal democratic regimes will lead to a significant growth in the level of political and civic participation.

If the above-mentioned hypothesis is true, then one could argue that the establishment of so-called digital democracies could act as a barrier in front of the authoritarian wave that is slowly but steadily advancing all over Europe. Therefore, this paper’s main goal is to fuel a discussion that, in our opinion, is currently not receiving in the academic field the attention that it deserves. The debate is built around the following question: how can we define the relationship between digital democracy and democratic backsliding? In order to begin the process of shaping an answer, it is necessary to address additional questions. What are the main features of a digital democracy? What are the main factors that are influencing the fluctuations in the level of political participation? Is the political and civic apathy of contemporary citizens a cause of the successes of several illiberal political movements? Can the struggle against disinformation be efficient in the current technological environment? Are the digital skills of European citizens properly developed for making additional steps towards a digital democracy? Is the construction of a digital democracy a feasible project as long as the relationship between the state and the citizen is characterized by mistrust?

Providing definitive answers to all these questions would be a far too ambitious target for a study of limited dimensions. However, addressing them can bring us closer to understanding if there is a direct relationship between the digitalization of politics and the stability of democratic regimes. Obviously, identifying a correlation would allow us to further investigate in order to establish if digital democracy can be seen as an antidote to illiberalism.

Given that the current paper is not trying to provide a final overview regarding the topic, we are focusing on only one country from the EU that has special importance for our endeavour: Estonia. The reasons behind the selection of this case will be detailed below. This introductory section is followed by a brief literature review that focuses on digital democracy, democratic backsliding, and disinformation in the online environment. The next section includes method-

ological considerations, revolving around hypotheses, methods, and the dynamics of the research. After this step, we begin our case study. We present Estonia's political profile and evolution regarding democratic stability and the development of digital democracy in this country in the last two decades. An important part of the discussion evaluates the implications of the utilization of electronic voting; therefore, observing the fluctuations in voter turnout is also necessary. Moreover, we also focus on information regarding the digital skills of Estonian citizens. All these elements create an image that is essential for formulating our conclusions.

Our paper combines descriptive, explanatory, and normative portions. Introducing the normative component is not equivalent to neglecting scientific rigor. Our goal is to highlight the importance of restoring the trust of the public in the state for preserving liberal democratic regimes and the importance of preserving liberal democratic regimes for protecting and strengthening political, civil, and social rights.

## 2. Literature review

The term *illiberalism* gained importance in the field of political science after the American journalist Fareed Zakaria published in 1997 an article titled *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*. Zakaria stated that illiberal democracies maintain procedures that characterize genuine democratic regimes, like free elections, but suppress civil rights and annihilate the mechanisms of checks and balances. According to him, countries like Bangladesh, Belarus, or the Russian Federation can be included in this category. Regarding Russia, Zakaria notes that illiberal democracies can be transformed, in certain circumstances, into outright authoritarian regimes (Zakaria, 1997, pp. 22-34). Later, Russia's evolution under the Putin administration confirmed the author's concerns. Today, more than 25 years after the paper appeared, similar concerns can be expressed regarding even member states of the EU.

The Hungarian political scientist János Kis argues that *illiberal democracy* is a contradictory concept, the main features of illiberalism being incompatible with the core values of a democratic regime (Kis, 2014). Several other authors prefer to avoid this term, putting forward other categories that, in their perspective, are better suited for describing the shady area that lies between democracy and authoritarianism. The political sociologist Larry Jay Diamond issued the following warning: not all the political regimes that organize free or partially free elections can be considered democracies. In fact, elections without democracy were quite common at the beginning of the 2000s. For instance, countries labelled as democratic, like Russia, Ukraine, Venezuela, or Turkey, were actually more appropriate for categories like *hybrid regime*, *ambiguous regime*, or *competitive authoritarianism* (Diamond, 2002, pp. 21-23).

In 2010, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way published a book titled *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, which intended to add clarity to the debate regarding the distinction between democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian regimes. The authors consider that a hybrid system maintains free elections, but the leading political force benefits from competitive advantages obtained by infringing democratic rules. Therefore, the unpredictability of electoral competitions is reduced. Moreover, civil rights are often ignored, and political power can be gained or maintained through violent means as well (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 12). However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, democracies are less frequently destroyed through violence than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: „Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box. The electoral road to breakdown is dangerously deceptive. With a classic coup d'état, as in



Pinochet's Chile, the death of a democracy is immediate and evident to all. The presidential palace burns. The president is killed, imprisoned, or shipped off into exile. The constitution is suspended or scrapped. On the electoral road, none of these things happen. There are no tanks in the streets. Constitutions and other nominally democratic institutions remain in place. People still vote. Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 9).

Recently, political scientist Anna Grzymala-Busse highlighted that populism fuels democratic backsliding because of its ideological nature and that to block or reverse this process, the opposition must be capable of boosting political and civic participation (Grzymala-Busse, 2019, p. xxii). Regarding participation, Kurt Weyland and Raul L. Madrid share the following position: „populism can bring advances on the dimension of inclusiveness and participation, especially during the early stages of democratic development, when one of the crucial conflicts centres on the extension of suffrage" (Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 8). On the other hand, Anton Jäger, analysing the political situation in France, Italy, and Poland, notes that illiberalism thrives where voter turnout and political membership are in decline (Jäger, 2023). In October 2023, the Polish liberal opposition managed to obtain the majority in the Polish Parliament after elections characterized by a record-high turnout (Rolski, 2023). A solution for reducing political apathy could be represented by shifting the representative system towards one that has a more pregnant component of direct democracy, such as combining referendums with digital tools. However, at least at a discursive level, illiberal leaders can also plead for *returning* political decisions to the citizens (Deegan-Krause, 2019, pp. 67-68).

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There are several definitions of the concept of *digital democracy* (also known as e-democracy). Andrew Chadwick considers that electronic democracy represents „the use of information and communication technologies to enhance and in some accounts replace representative democracy" (Chadwick, 2018). Other authors state that digital democracy entails using the latest technological developments in order to promote or strengthen a democratic system; therefore, the process of governance is significantly modified and political participation is improved (Akinyetun & Ebonine, 2022). According to the German political scientist Marianne Kneuer, e-democracy is seen in certain academic circles as an antidote to democratic apathy/fatigue, capable of „revitalizing or modernizing democratic processes" (Kneuer, 2016, p. 667). On the other hand, the critics of the digitalization of politics argue that this process offers opportunities for leaders with authoritarian tendencies to implement dystopian projects. Kneuer proposes an alternative perspective, stating that "technology is ex-ante neutral, and its effect on political structures, processes, actors, behaviour and norms depends on the motives of use, the content that is transmitted, the way that the technology is used (quantitatively and qualitatively speaking), and, finally, on the political context in which the digital media are used" (Kneuer, 2016, p. 667). The author underlines that this topic, although it has gained visibility recently, is not covered enough in the academic space. She proposes the creation of an e-democracy index that would help us understand how developed the electronic component is inside different liberal democratic regimes. Kneuer considers that this index should focus on how free and accessible is the internet, on digital participation, and on digital governance (Kneuer, 2016, p. 672).

Former Estonian president (2006-2016) Toomas Hendrik Ilves argued, during one of the grimmest phases of the coronavirus pandemic, that the online interaction between governments and citizens is outdated and not secure enough (according to him, a remarkable exception is represented by Estonia). Especially during such a challenging period, the necessity of using interactive online platforms for activities linked to governance was gaining critical importance. Ilves stated that the transition toward digital governance cannot be completed if the relationship between authorities and individuals is not characterized by trust. If trust in government is at a proper level, democracies can be digitalized by ensuring secure digital identities for citizens and resilient data architectures for governments (Ilves, 2020).

As mentioned above, digital tools can be used not only to enhance democracies, but also to undermine them. Therefore, the concept of *digital democracy* is accompanied by terms like *digital hybrid regime* or *digital authoritarian regime*. If Estonia and the USA are perhaps the closest countries to reaching the status of digital democracy, Russia was, at least until recently, an excellent example of a digital hybrid regime, while China clearly belongs to the digital authoritarian category. The increasing importance of AI and big-data systems in China shapes a political model that can influence several other states, weakening liberal democracies worldwide (Wright, 2019).

Electronic voting (e-voting) is an essential tool in building a digital political regime. If the process of e-voting is free, fair, and secure, a regime incorporates an essential element for being considered a digital democracy. We must note that there is an important distinction for our topic: e-voting refers mainly to using electronic machines at the polls instead of paper ballots, while i-voting consists of remote voting through the internet (Borucki & Hartleb, 2023, p. 2). The presence of at least one of these approaches can be considered the genuine backbone of digital democracy. The existence of this backbone depends on the legal framework, the perception of the political parties, and the attitude of citizens (Borucki & Hartleb, 2023, p. 3). The case of Germany proves that the judiciary system can turn into an obstacle for advocates of digital democracy: in March 2009, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that online voting is unconstitutional. A reason of concern for the Court was represented by the fact that the „electronic voting system presents a vulnerable point for the legitimation of the democratic system. Enemies from within and from outside the country may attempt to hack the system and alter the election results” (Fitzpatrick & Jost, 2022, p. 9). In the Netherlands, similar concerns were expressed after a series of cyberattacks that were meant to show how unsafe e-voting really was. The safety of the voting process simultaneously became a worrisome subject for political parties and for ordinary citizens. Regarding the voters’ attitude towards e-voting, we must also take into account that there is a digital divide between them, influenced by socio-demographic factors such as age, education, work environment, and place of living. For the time being, the overview is the following: „people who are younger, male and frequently travel or live abroad are more in favor of voting online” (Borucki & Hartleb, 2023, p. 6). Another important aspect is represented by the fact that, obviously, digital literacy is not automatically equivalent to sharing democratic principles and values. Having highly developed digital skills can transform citizens into useful *agents of propaganda* for anti-democratic political forces. In modern-day society, “power is multidimensional and is organized around digital, interactive, and self-expanding networks” (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021, p. 19). In such an environment, blogs and platforms like Facebook or X are able to hold significant political influence. Online platforms are transnational and more popular than traditional media, being core elements of “the global-

isation of the public sphere and public opinion” (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021, p. 20). Therefore, it is essential for governments to make sure that democratic principles are not weakened by anti-democratic messages transmitted through digital means. The main challenge for such a task is to make sure that freedom of speech, a core democratic principle, is not affected by limitations imposed to counteract illiberal narratives. In order to make sure that governments in liberal democracies respect their citizens’ rights and do not overstep their attributions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), citizen initiatives, and governmental watchdogs have assumed the role of overseers of respecting the rule of law.

In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, freedom of speech in the digital world is restricted either directly, through legal limitations, like in the Russian Federation or China, or in a subtler way, through shaping the forms and topics of discussion, like in India. In liberal democracies, disinformation and hate speech can be contained through governmental regulations that need to be not only effective but also, as specified above, inoffensive toward freedom of speech. Obviously, democratic backsliding can be enabled by weakening such a democratic principle. Moreover, press freedom in the digital environment is also fundamental for digital democracy (Foreign Policy, 2022).

Digitalizing the political landscape is still a demanding mission for most of the EU countries. At the same time, successfully fulfilling this task might not be automatically equivalent to strengthening or maintaining the resilience of liberal democratic regimes. On one hand, populist leaders and movements can weaponize digital tools for manufacturing narratives that boost their appeal. On the other hand, by trying to silence the radical voices that are flooding the online environment, government officials can cross the thin border between *curing* and *poisoning* the *patient*. Implementing e-voting, participatory budgeting, and other similar initiatives can lead toward establishing a digital democracy. However, this opportunity is accompanied by a threat: those who undermine democracies can also benefit from this process. The dynamics of this dilemma ought to become more clear after we present our case study, which is preceded by a brief methodological section.

### 3. Methodology

Estonia is the EU member that is closest to being a complete digital democracy. It has a relatively small population of 1 322 765 inhabitants (Worldometer, 2023). From a geographic and historical point of view, the country can be considered a part of Central and Eastern Europe and has been part of a Communist political entity during the Cold War. Estonia, just like Latvia, Moldova, or Ukraine, gained its independence in August 1991, a few months before the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). It joined the EU on May 1, 2004, alongside Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Malta, and Cyprus. Politically, Estonia is a parliamentary republic, similarly to several other countries from the region, like Latvia, Slovakia, Hungary, or Slovenia. The main difference regarding the political system between Estonia and countries like Slovakia and Slovenia is that, while the Baltic state has a president elected by the Parliament, in the other two the head of the state is directly elected by the citizens (Congressional Research Service, 2023, pp. 4-5).

The first hypothesis that we explore based on our study case is that the digitalization of politics has the effect of strengthening liberal democratic regimes. This assumption, which we expect to be false, would stand its ground if the analysed data showed that Estonia’s score in the



Global Freedom Status realized by Freedom House improved while the project of creating a digital democracy was developed. Rejecting this hypothesis enables the discussion regarding the dangers of disinformation in the online environment and the role of trust in public institutions in neutralizing anti-democratic discourses.

The methods through which we build our conclusions are represented by qualitative document analysis and secondary data analysis. Regarding the secondary data analysis, we respect the three criteria considered essential by Septimiu Chelcea: the data included in the research comes from a dataset collected before this study started; the subject of our article is different from the theme of the research from which we use the data – none of the sources from which we used the data specifically mentions digital democracy as the main subject of their research; and for the databases that we used, the primary analyses have been finalized before this research has been published (Chelcea, 2001, p. 544). The source for the secondary analysis is the Special Eurobarometer 90.1 published in 2019, for which the data was collected in 2018 (European Commission and European Parliament, 2019). We used frequencies in SPSS in order to generate the data that we used in our paper. Indexes created by Freedom House and by the European Commission are also among the bases that we observe. We also highlight relevant information from reports and academic studies. As we will highlight below, future articles could rely exclusively on quantitative methodological tools and should broaden the analysed area in order to be able to draw generalizable conclusions.

#### **4. The digitalization of politics and democratic resilience. The Estonian case**

The digitalization of politics can include at least two above-mentioned aspects: using digital tools in the process of governance and allowing online platforms to have an important role in shaping the public opinion. In Estonia, both of these elements can be identified. According to Toomas Hendrik Ilves, recently, Estonia realized spectacular progress in the process of building a digital democracy. Among others, the accessibility of public services increased, citizen participation in civic life was enhanced, the transparency of public agencies increased, and new areas of innovation were unlocked (Ilves, 2020). A combination of technological capability and political will fuelled this evolution. The government issued a national digital identity for its citizens, guaranteeing the safety of its utilization and aiming to boost the trust of the public in this new initiative. Through this instrument, people are able to vote, check their medical records, establish a company, sign legal documents, etc. Overall, approximately 2 500 public services can be accessed using the digital ID. Therefore, online interaction is simplified, and the beneficiaries have the opportunity to better manage their time and finances. The authentication can be made through a physical ID card, a phone, or a digital application (Ilves, 2020).

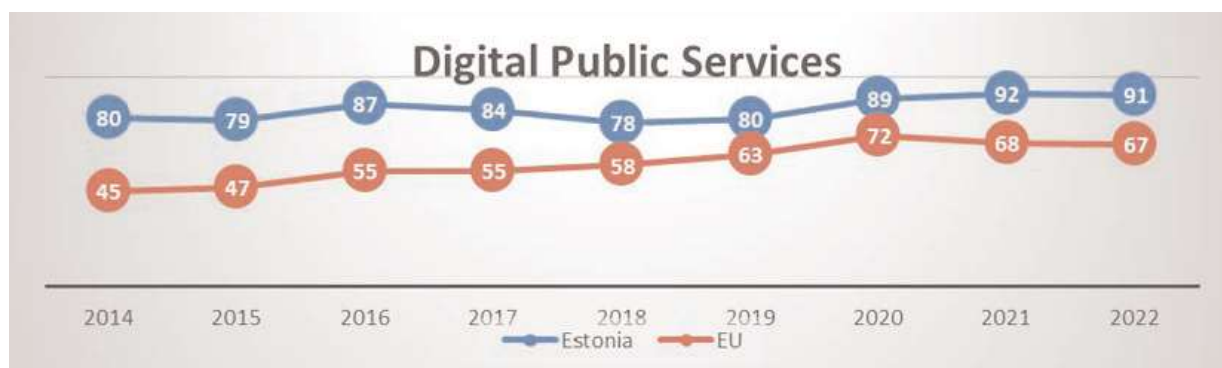
The implementation of the national digital identity system is just one of the steps made by the Estonian government toward establishing a complete digital democracy. In this entire endeavour, which aims to be based on privacy, integrity, security, and resilience, Estonia is proving to be a potential model for countries all over the globe. According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) realized by the European Commission, Estonia is in 7th place in the EU, with a score of 56.5, while the average score of the 27 member countries is just 52.3 (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. The evolution of Estonia's DESI score and of the average score of EU countries between 2014 and 2022. *Source: Digital Economy and Society Index, 2022*



From a methodological point of view, the index is focusing on four aspects: human capital, connectivity, integration of digital technology, and digital public services. Regarding the first item, Estonia is in 8th place in the EU, its score being more than 8 points higher than the Union's average (53.9 vs. 45.7). Regarding digital public services, an extremely important element for our study, Estonia is the undisputed leader in the EU, being the only member country that has a score that exceeds 90 points (Fig. 2). Obviously, the development of e-government is the main reason behind this success. On the other hand, connectivity and the integration of digital technology are fields that still require significant improvements. While the third item places Estonia above the EU average, connectivity is a major problem, with only Belgium being in a worse situation than the most Nordic of the Baltic states (Digital Economy and Society Index, 2022).

Figure 2. The evolution of Estonia's score and of the average score of EU countries regarding digital public services between 2014 and 2022.



*Source: Digital Economy and Society Index, 2022*

Although the implementation of the national digital identity system represents a success in the country's struggle to establish a digital democracy, the overall image offered by DESI highlights that, although Estonia is clearly above the EU average in this regard, the last 9 years have witnessed both positive and negative developments (Fig. 1).

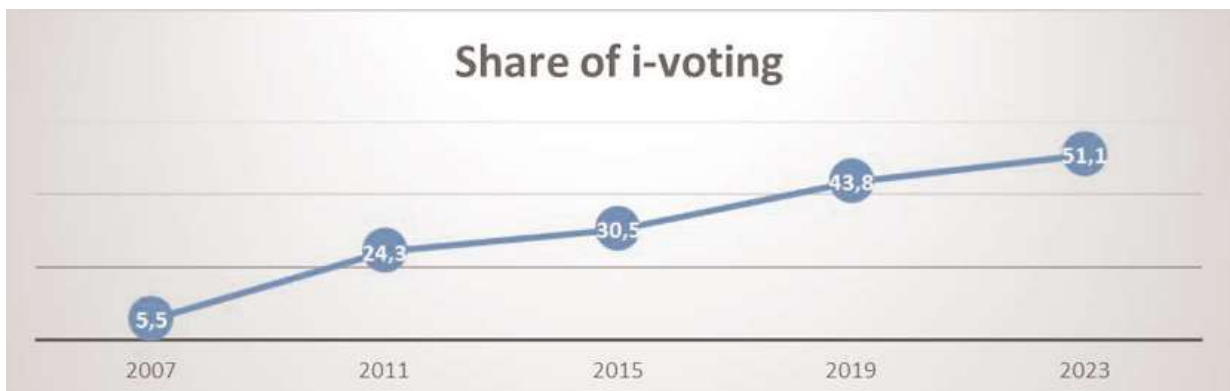
Since 2011, Estonia started to contemplate the idea of implementing participatory budgeting projects. In the autumn of 2013, such a project was implemented in Tartu, the second-largest city in the country after Tallinn, with a population of approximately 100 000 inhabitants. The sum used by the authorities for the implementation of the project was 150 000 euros. Subsequently, participatory budgeting spread all over Estonia, being used by more than half of the 200 local governments in the country. The process is developed as follows: the authorities decide the amount of funds for the plan, the public is consulted regarding the nature of the project, the citizens select the idea they consider the most suitable, and the implementation begins. The consultation and voting take place using electronic tools (Reinsalu & Krenjova-Cepilova, n.d.).

In the previous decade, Estonia made an even more important move in the endeavour of establishing a digital democracy: the citizens gained the possibility of voting online. Although both in the public sphere and in the academic environment it is usually stated that Estonia is a pioneer regarding e-voting, the precise term to describe the instrument that is used in elections is i-voting. As mentioned above, i-voting refers to remotely submitting your choice through the internet. Essential for the procedure is the national digital identity. Using this ID, voters have the opportunity of voting earlier. They also have the possibility of changing their option as many times as they see fit, the last option being the one which will be taken into account (National Democratic Institute, n.d.). Moreover, the *i-voter* is also allowed to physically express his option at the polls on Election Day, which obviously means that his electronic ballot will not be taken into consideration (ERR, 2021).

I-voting was used for the first time in the municipal elections held in 2005 (Borucki & Hartleb, 2023, p. 3). This instrument proved to be secure and effective; therefore, it was subsequently used in local, parliamentary, and European elections. However, at first, citizens were not quite enthusiastic about it. In 2005, only less than 10 000 of the approximately 1 million registered voters preferred to use the internet instead of paper ballots (Broache, 2005).

The first legislative elections that offered the possibility of i-voting were those held in March 2007. The interest in this innovative procedure remained low, with only 5.5% of the voters opting for it. Nevertheless, although there were debates and accusations regarding possible tampering acts, the citizens started to view i-voting with less scepticism. The interest in it grew steadily (Fig. 3). In March 2023, for the first time, more than half of the votes were cast online (ERR, 2023a). It is notable that almost two-thirds of the voters in the 25-34 age group used i-voting (Borucki & Hartleb, 2023, p. 13).

Figure 3. Share of i-voting in Estonian parliamentary elections.

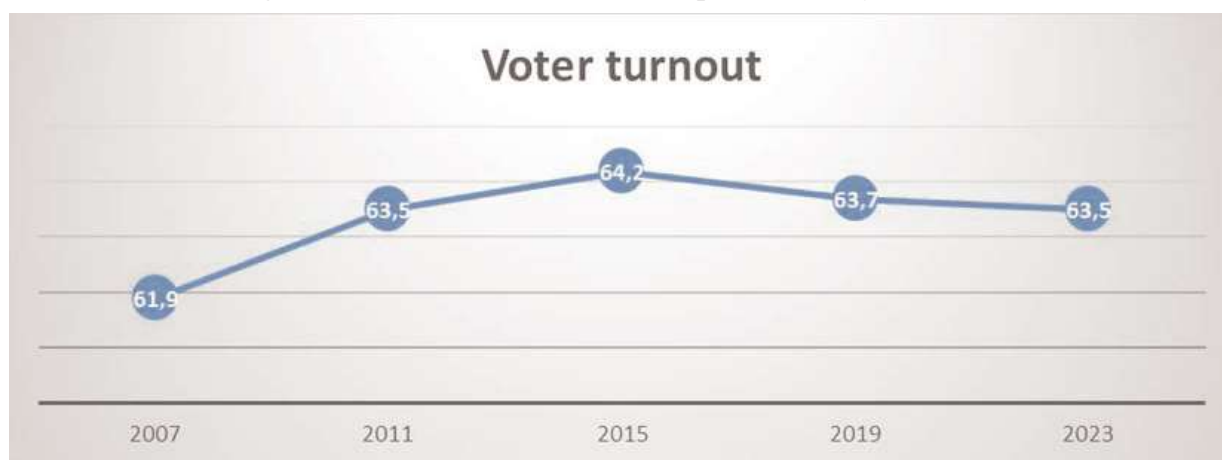


Source: ERR 2023a

While in Hungary and Romania, the radical/populist right-wing supported or supports the idea of implementing e-voting systems (Pivarnyik, 2018; Costea, 2021), in Estonia, the critics of the liberal democratic model argued that voting through the internet was used by the mainstream parties to alter the will of the people. Representatives of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) stated that „several anomalies and technical errors in the e-voting process had been observed, which call into question the reliability and trustworthiness of the infrastructure used in voting online. EKRE has in the past called into question Estonia's e-voting system, a system which is often presented to the wider world as a strong example of the marrying of tech and democracy” (ERR, 2023b). However, a decision of the Supreme Court confirmed that the elections were free and fair (ERR, 2023c).

The information from the previous paragraphs highlights that the Estonian approach is secure and slowly, but steadily gains the confidence of those who are interested in politics. Nevertheless, a key question for the topic of digital democracy remains: is e-voting boosting political participation? The evolution of voter turnout (61.9% – 2007; 63.5% – 2023) in the last five legislative elections suggests that no significant improvements were generated by the implementation of i-voting (Fig. 4). Previously, the turnout varied between 68.9% (1995) and 57.4% (1999) (Valimised, n.d.). In the almost two decades that passed since citizens obtained the possibility of expressing their options online, interest in the electoral process remained at familiar levels.

Figure 4. Voter turnout in Estonian parliamentary elections.



Source: Valimised, n.d.

As highlighted above, e-voting and participatory budgeting are key elements for the endeavour of building a digital democracy, and both are present in the Estonian case. However, we could not identify a correlation between i-voting and voter turnout at the parliamentary elections. Therefore, we are approaching another relevant question: is the digitalization of politics strengthening liberal democracies? According to Freedom House, Estonia is a free democratic regime. In 2023, its score (94/100) it's one of the highest in the world (Freedom House, 2023a). Unlike other former Communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe, Estonia's transition toward democracy and market economy was relatively stable. The *free* status was awarded to Estonia by US experts in 1991, the very year in which the country regained its independence (McColm, 1992, p. 196). After a brief hiatus in 1992, when Estonia was labelled

as *partly free* (McColm, 1993, p. 221), the initial status was regained (Karatnycky, 1994, p. 150) and is maintained until today. In 2004, a year before the pilot project of i-voting was implemented, Estonia obtained for the first time the highest score (1) in Freedom House's survey regarding both political rights and civil liberties, „due to the effective implementation of judicial reforms and greater economic freedom” (Freedom House, 2004). The scores remained the same until 2015 (Puddington, 2015, p. 247), when the methodology used by the organization was modified. After this modification, the situation continued to be stable, with the country receiving 94 points from 100 uninterruptedly between 2016 and 2023 (Freedom House, 2023b).

This overview highlights the fact that it cannot be argued that the digitalization of politics, in general, and the implementation of i-voting, in particular, increased the quality of the Estonian democracy, especially given that there is quite little room for improvement. However, it is notable that Estonia is one of the few EU countries that was not affected at all by the wave of democratic backsliding which engulfed the continent especially after 2008. A future study could clarify if there is a causal relationship between developing digital public services and the resilience of the Estonian liberal democratic regime.

Regarding freedom in the online space, the current situation is as follows: „Internet freedom is generally robust in Estonia, a consolidated democracy and European Union (EU) Member State widely known for its pioneering approach to e-government. Protections for user rights and media freedom are strong, as the Estonian government places few limits on online content. However, a number of Russian websites remained blocked during the coverage period in response to EU sanctions. Cyberattacks that targeted governmental websites generally had limited impact, in part due to countermeasures taken by Estonian cybersecurity officials” (Freedom House 2023c). Since 2016, the country's score has been over 90 out of 100 points. Thus, it can be stated that Estonia is so far successful in the task of applying a strategy that does not endanger freedom of expression and is effective against the spreading of toxic discourses that would play in favour of illiberal forces. The blockchain technology is useful in this regard, having the role of annihilating fake news by boosting transparency and data integrity (e-Estonia, n.d.)

Is the project of building a digital democracy feasible if the digital skills of the citizens are not properly developed? As mentioned above, according to the Digital Economy and Society Index, Estonia's score regarding human capital is above the average score of the EU countries. However, a significative decline can be observed between 2020 and 2022 (Fig. 5). This decline is partially fuelled by a reduction in the percentage of individuals with basic digital skills.



Figure 5. The evolution of Estonia's score and of the average score of EU countries regarding digital public services between 2014 and 2022.



Source: Digital Economy and Society Index, 2022

In 2019, 62% of Estonians possessed basic digital skills. In 2021, the figure decreased to 56%. Moreover, a similar decrease can be observed regarding the percentage of those who have above-basic digital skills: from 37% (2019) to 28% (2021). On the other hand, we can notice in the same period slight improvements in the percentage of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) specialists (from 5.8% to 6.2%) and ICT graduates (from 6.7% to 8.4%) (Digital Economy and Society Index, 2021). The causes of these evolutions are not entirely clear. Migration can be a relevant factor. Moreover, it is notable that Estonia is below the EU average regarding the percentage of enterprises that provide ICT training: 17% vs. 20% (Digital Economy and Society Index, 2022). It must also be taken into account that the *Estonian Digital Agenda 2030* focuses on digital public services, cybersecurity, and connectivity (Kralj, 2023); human capital is not considered as important as the three mentioned elements.

While between 2019 and 2021 the percentage of those with basic digital skills decreased, between 2019 and 2023, the percentage of those who voted online increased from 43.8% to 51.1% (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, it is obvious that improvements in the field of human capital are required if Estonian authorities want to expand the utilization of participatory budgeting and if they aspire to further enlarge the share of i-voting in elections. It is remarkable that Estonia has made important progress in developing e-governance while its percentage of individuals with basic digital skills is not even close to that of Finland or the Netherlands (79%) (Digital Economy and Society Index, 2022). Paradoxically, it could be argued that if more citizens acquire digital skills, the larger is the public for illiberal disinformation in the online environment.

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The resilience of a liberal democratic regime relies on the trust of citizens in the public authorities. As Manuel Castells observes, “the large majority of citizens around the world despise

their representatives and do not trust their political institutions” (Castells, 2009, p. xxiii). This factor is also important for the success of projects like i-voting or participatory budgeting. In the case of a country like Estonia, besides the national level, the European one must also be taken into account. According to a study realized by an NGO co-funded by the EU, the trust of Estonian citizens in the European Parliament is slightly higher than the trust in the national Parliament, which is 4.7 points out of 10 (European Movement International, 2019). However, a different research highlights that Estonian citizens are more satisfied with the national democracy than with the European one: 62.1% vs. 52.6% (European Commission and European Parliament, 2019). A worrying finding is represented by the fact that 51% of the respondents consider that a reunion of technocrats and businessmen would govern the country better than the current political class (European Movement International, 2019). This suggests that, although Estonia is not currently affected by the illiberal wave that is engulfing the EU, populist groups have the opportunity to capitalize on the citizens’ dissatisfaction with the political establishment.

Another study, realized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), highlights that Estonian citizens have higher confidence in the local government (53.9%) and in the civil service (51.8%) than in the national government (46.5%). We can notice that the figure regarding trust in the national authorities is almost identical to the one presented by the European Movement International regarding trust in the national Parliament. The OECD’s research also shows that people with financial concerns are less likely to trust the government than people who have stability in this regard (40.5% vs. 62.8%) (OECD, 2023). This information underlines the importance of reducing social inequalities to strengthen democratic regimes. The percentage of those who consider that social inequality is very/fairly important for the country is stunning: 78.1% (European Commission and European Parliament, 2019). The fact that Estonian democracy is not invulnerable is also reflected by the fact that only 25.18% of citizens have trust in political parties (OECD, 2023).

The confidence in the news media (42.57%) is higher than in political parties but lower than in the national government. The most utilized sources of information regarding politics are television and newspapers, both of which have a percentage above 60%. On the other hand, only 47.64% of the respondents indicated social media, and only 32.62% indicated other online sources (OECD, 2023). This partially explains the fact that the government is capable of containing the danger of spreading illiberal messages online. We must take into account that this reality is also shaped by the fact that Estonia is in 26<sup>th</sup> place in the EU regarding connectivity.

As we saw above, between 2007 and 2023, the confidence of the public in i-voting registered a spectacular increase. However, according to a Eurobarometer realized in 2018, 46.4% of citizens were very/somewhat concerned regarding potential frauds/cyberattacks. Moreover, 36.6% considered that i-voting could eliminate the secrecy of the ballot. Also, 48% are very/somewhat concerned that this electronic instrument can be difficult to use (European Commission and European Parliament, 2019). The data presented above suggests that the possibility of further developing the role of i-voting in the Estonian electoral system is endangered by at least two factors: the lack of trust in the political establishment and the significant percentage of individuals who do not possess basic digital skills. Additionally, connectivity represents an issue that makes this goal more difficult to reach.

Overall, the Estonian case study reflects not only the advantages of digitalizing the political field but also the risks and limitations that revolve around this process. As highlighted above, Estonia is presented by various sources as one of the most successful countries in

strengthening its electronic level of governance. However, although it is obvious that Estonia's practices can inspire other states that intend to engage on the path of digital democracy, a thorough analysis emphasizes that an apparently bright image has in reality several shades of grey. Having the proper technological instruments is necessary, but not sufficient for building a genuine digital democracy. Offering ICT training to citizens and improving connectivity are also key elements. Even if all these aspects are properly approached, it must be understood that e-governance is not a *magical* solution for protecting liberal democracies.

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing conclusions regarding the relationship between digital democracy and democratic backsliding is a difficult task, especially because the academic literature does not include a broadly accepted definition of digital democracy. Thus, it is easier to measure the positive or negative evolutions of a democratic regime than to quantify the progress made by a country in its endeavour to digitalize the governmental sphere. The analysed domain is further entangled by the fact that digital tools can be used efficiently by hybrid and authoritarian regimes as well. However, there are several details that can enlighten the topic of our study. Identifying them in a country that is presented by Freedom House as *free* indicates that this country can be labelled (or is close to being labelled) as a digital democracy. Among the elements that characterize e-democracy, we can identify i-voting or e-voting, digital public services, participatory budgeting projects, or the utilization of blockchain technology. As highlighted above, they are present in the Estonian case; of particular importance is the fact that in 2023, more than half of the voters expressed their options at the legislative elections remotely. Nevertheless, the overview we presented also includes a notable underdevelopment regarding connectivity and the digital skills of a large segment of the population.

One of the goals of establishing a digital democracy is to boost political and civic participation. In this regard, our conclusion is that e-governance cannot guarantee on its own significant increases in the level of political participation. The highest voter turnout in post-communist Estonia was in 1995 (68.9%), 12 years before i-voting was first utilized in parliamentary elections (the highest turnout after 2007 was in 2015 – 64.2%). Obviously, the involvement of citizens in political and civic life is not reduced to elections; participatory budgeting is an element that brings political decisions closer to the people. Nevertheless, the overall Estonian political landscape does not include, in the last 15-20 years, a spectacular increase in participation. Firstly, electronic tools have a limited impact in this domain as long as connectivity and human capital are not properly developed. Secondly, as reflected by the data presented above, trust in public institutions is a key factor; radicalism or apathy can easily engulf those who are alienated by the political establishment. It is worth mentioning that reducing political apathy is not always synonymous with containing the influence of populist parties. Recently, parliamentary elections took place not only in Poland (October 2023), but also in Slovakia (September 2023). In both cases, turnout was above the post-communist average. In Poland, the turnout (74%) was even higher than in 1989. In Slovakia (68%), it was the biggest in more than 20 years. However, the results were completely different; while in Poland the liberal opposition obtained the majority of the parliamentary seats, in Slovakia the new governmental coalition includes a populist left-wing and a radical right-wing party (Rohac, 2023).

Disinformation in the online environment often proved to be one of the most efficient weapons of the illiberal forces. In the Estonian case, for now, the situation is under control; the internet is not a safe haven for the enemies of democracy. Remarkable is the fact that the authorities managed to obtain this result without restricting the freedom of speech in the online space. As highlighted above, blockchain technology is an important element in this endeavour. However, as long as trust in the national government is below 50%, the danger of a populist party succeeding, both online and offline, is at a high level.

Future studies could draw generalizable conclusions by broadening the number of analysed cases. This approach would also require relying more on quantitative methodological tools. An option would be to focus on the relationship between the presence or absence of e-governance and the resilience of the democratic regime in all 27 member states of the EU. Another possibility would be to include countries that have made important steps in the process of building a digital democracy from other geographic areas, like Singapore, South Korea, or even the USA. Regardless of the details, trust in the government and in a democratic regime is an element that cannot be avoided. Rebuilding this trust will be essential for future attempts to digitalize politics. Those who state that their main goal is to protect liberal democracies must take into account the following reality: „The decline in confidence clearly shows that governance is no longer so much guided by the values of the common good. It is the responsibility of the elites to rehabilitate the idea of anticipation and preparation for future evolutions, to ensure social macro-equilibrium (inequality has increased everywhere in the developed world), and, above all, to regain the trust of the population. Without trust, democracies malfunction” (Dobrescu & Durach, 2023, p. 44).

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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