

Romania

Decline and Re-Democratization 2016-2020

- Liberal Democracy declined in Romania between 2017 and 2018, then bounced back between 2019 and 2020, resulting in a re-democratization.*
- The main features of decline included weakening of judicial independence and efforts to constrain and censor the media, paired with increasing disinformation and xenophobic rhetoric.
- A change in government in 2019 resulting from a vote of no confidence by parliament resulted in a new government restoring judicial independence and media freedom in 2019 and 2020.

1. Democratic Backsliding (2017-2018)

In 2016 the Social Democratic Party (PSD) [won the Romanian parliamentary elections](#) and formed a new government. A period of decline in liberal democracy followed, especially weakening judicial constraints on the government and increasing restrictions on media freedom. Romania's score on V-Dem's liberal democracy index saw a statistically significant decline from 0.62 in 2016 to 0.49 in 2018 (Figure 1).

The new government quickly faced criticism on both international and domestic fronts on account of undermining Romania's anti-corruption framework and judicial independence by [attempting to amend the Criminal Code](#) and [pardon certain offences of abuse of office](#). This led to the [largest popular protests](#) since the fall of communism.

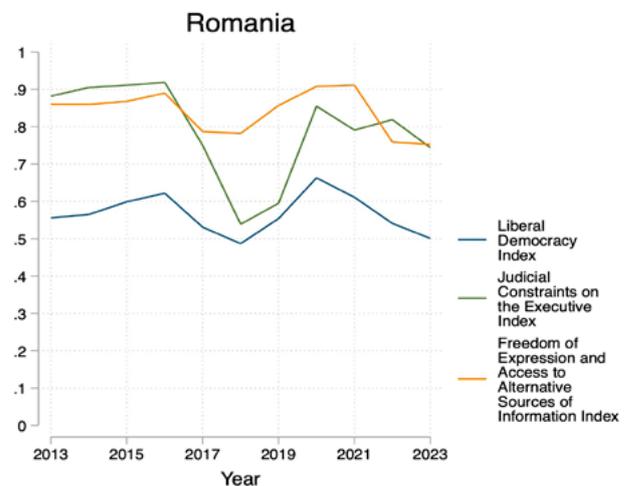
Subsequently, the controversial [proposals were withdrawn](#) and the [justice minister resigned](#) in February. Yet, the [political leadership continued seeking to weaken anti-corruption legislation](#), [decriminalise certain corruption offences](#), [undermine the rule of law](#), and [weaken judicial independence throughout 2017 and 2018](#), leading to [robust and persistent protests nationwide](#).

The ruling coalition [sought the replacement of top prosecutors](#), introduced [bills weakening judicial independence](#), and oversaw an [evident politicization of crucial regulators](#), such as the Court of Accounts and the entity tasked with supervising the electricity and natural gas sectors.

In July 2018, [the head of the National Anticorruption Directorate \(DNA\), Laura Codruta Kövesi, was removed from her position](#) following a Constitutional Court ruling. Many [commentators believed that the removal was politically motivated](#) as Kövesi had [indicted and investigated several ministers and legislators](#) of the PSD, [including the party leader himself](#).

The developments are reflected in the V-Dem data in Figure 1: the Judicial Constraints on the Executive Index saw a statistically significant drop from 0.92 in 2016 to 0.54 in 2018.

FIGURE 1: ROMANIA 2013-2023



In parallel, the government was criticized for [censoring and constraining media outlets](#). In October 2017, [senators approved a draft law that aimed to subject AGERPRES](#), the nation's primary news agency, to political control. [Reporters Without Borders similarly underscored concerns over the excessive politicization](#) of Romanian media and corrupt funding mechanisms, indicating a close relationship between media outlets and political interests.

The V-Dem data shows a decline on the Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index, moving from 0.89 in 2016 to 0.78 in 2018 (Figure 1), although this change is not outside the confidence intervals.

Especially noteworthy is the drop in the indicator on government censorship efforts on the media, a statistically significant change from 3.5 in 2016 to 2.4 in 2018, reflecting a substantial increase in government efforts to censor the media (this indicator is not shown in Figure 1, but is part of the index on Freedom of Expression).

In addition to these developments, [parliament also supported anti-liberal amendments to restrict civil society](#). [Disinformation](#) and [populist hate campaigns](#) with xenophobic and anti-Western rhetoric reportedly gained traction under the PSD-led government, including [allegations of the existence of a so-called Soros network](#), and [political narratives targeting sexual minorities](#). The deterioration of liberal democracy in Romania led to [concerns about Romania's EU presidency in 2019](#), including [warnings from both the European Commission and the European Parliament](#).

2. Democratic Improvements (2019 - 2020)

Democratic backsliding in Romania came to a halt when the SPD-government was ousted as a result of a [vote of no confidence from parliament](#) in October 2019. A new government, led by the National Liberal Party (PNL) assumed office in November 2019 and [moved in a more democratic direction](#).

The change in direction is primarily the outcome of abandoning the practices of the previous government, allowing courts and the media to exercise their roles unconstrained. As a result, the Liberal Democracy Index had a statistically significant increase from 0.49 in 2018 to 0.66 in 2020.

The change in government saw a [reduction in coordinated attacks on the rule of law and the judiciary](#). The Judicial Constraints on the Executive Index had a statistically significant change from 0.54 in 2018 to 0.85 in 2020 (Figure 1), as the judiciary was increasingly allowed to work without political interference and government attacks.

Romania also took [steps to contain corruption](#) and [strengthen the rule of law](#), for example reflected in the [conviction of the former Speaker of](#)

[the Chamber of Deputies](#) in 2019 for the abuse of state resources for party benefit.

The development also involved an [improved media environment and decline in xenophobic rhetoric](#). The Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index rose from 0.78 in 2018 to 0.91 in 2020 (Figure 1), a statistically significant increase. Especially, the government ceased much of the attempts to censor and constrain media, reflected in the statistically significant jump up on the indicator on government censorship efforts on the media from 2.4 in 2018 to 3.4 in 2020.

3. Looking Ahead

Despite the re-democratization, a political crisis in Romania in 2021 led to a renewed decline in democracy. Since 2021, the three-party governing coalition [has dealt with challenges](#) such as high energy prices and inflation. In 2022, [five ministers resigned due to integrity concerns](#), [internal party dynamics](#), or [contentious remarks regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) further contributing to the country's political instability. [Changes in local democratic governance](#) have also contributed to the decline.

Censorship efforts of the media have once again come to light as the [prosecutor failed to investigate a smear campaign](#) against a journalist who revealed the Prime Minister had plagiarised his doctoral dissertation. Moreover, [party subsidies have increased significantly](#) since 2020 and a [growing percentage of that money is spent on media](#). Such spending, especially on large TV stations and news sites with large audiences, [oftentimes lacks transparency and has resulted in greater political control of the media](#).

As a result, the Liberal Democracy Index has yet again declined, from 0.66 in 2020 to 0.5 in 2023 (Figure 1), a statistically significant decline. Whether Romania manages to undertake yet another democratic turnaround, and achieve more stable democratic rule, remains to be seen.

**This analysis partly overlaps with recent work on "U-turns" or "Democratic Turnarounds" as it focuses on declines in democracy being swiftly followed by improvements. However, this country brief only looks at whether there's been a statistically significant change down and then up on the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), a method adopted by V-Dem Democracy Reports up until this year to identify autocratization and democratization respectively. Analyses of U-turns and Democratic Turnarounds have adopted a more sophisticated analysis using the ERT which builds on the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). As changes in the EDI are not as substantial in these years in Romania, it does not count as a U-Turn using that methodology. However, the changes observed on the LDI are important, and this is the focus of this country brief. We call this a Re-democratization to avoid confusion over the different methodologies used here and those used to identify U-Turns/Democratic Turnarounds.*

ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) is a unique approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 16 staff. The project includes a worldwide team with 5 Principal Investigators, 22 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and more than 4,000 Country Experts. The V-Dem project is one of the largest ever social science research-oriented data collection programs.



Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
Sprängkullsgatan 19, PO 711
SE 405 30 Gothenburg Sweden
contact@v-dem.net
+46 (0) 31 786 30 43
www.v-dem.net
www.facebook.com/vdem institute
www.twitter.com/vdem institute
www.linkedin.com/company/vdem institute
www.instagram.com/vdem institute
www.youtube.com/@vdem institute