

Measuring academic freedom in a regional and global perspective

by **Vello Pettai**

Democratic backsliding has been an abiding and pervasive concern across the post-communist region for almost a decade. Data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset corroborate this phenomenon and show that one of the contributors to this decline is a narrowing of freedom for academic and cultural expression. While not being the sole driver of this recent backsliding trend, the opportunity for open academic and cultural exchange does remain an important principle of basic electoral democracy. Moreover, because it often goes hand in hand with levels of media diversity, it is part of the general health of a society's public sphere. It therefore speaks to the overall vibrancy of critique, oversight and accountability in a democracy.

THIS COMMENTARY WILL examine the V-Dem dataset from the perspective of not only how it specifically measures freedom

of academic and cultural expression in the post-communist region, but also how these levels can be compared to other regions of the world. How critical is the situation across Eastern Europe and Eurasia when viewed in a global perspective? How close are the trends we feel on the basis of news reports or single events to actual patterns of autocratization?

The V-Dem dataset provides a unique inroad into these questions thanks to its unprecedented conceptual breadth, geographic spread and temporal reach. (See text box adjacent.) At its core, V-Dem begins with an Electoral Democracy Index, which is principally composed of measures examining freedom of expression, freedom of association, and clean elections. In this respect, it aims to replicate Robert Dahl's original notion of polyarchy, which sought to understand democracy as a combination of contestation (expression and association) and participation (electoral rights).

When we look at how countries in Eastern Europe have fared on these three components over the last ten years, we see that declines have emerged most often within the realm of freedom of expression (Figure 1). This is particularly the case for countries like Hungary, Croatia and Serbia, and most recently in Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. In other words, in most countries of the region the problem of democratic backsliding is not the integrity of elections or the opportunities to form parties or civil society organizations. Rather, the decline in democracy comes in the form of no longer having a robust public sphere.

DRILLING DOWN DEEPER into this sub-index, we can highlight two of its main components: media diversity and academic expression. Figure 2 shows that by and large these two phenomena develop in parallel: where the range of media perspectives narrows or fewer media outlets regularly

V-DEM DATASET

The Varieties of Democracy dataset was first released to the public in 2016 as a novel data-bank of more than 400 variables measuring different aspects of democratic development for nearly 180 countries and covering the entire period from 1900 to the present. The variables range from institutional data that

have been taken from previously existing sources (such as electoral results or information about constitutional powers) to new variables that have been assessed by country-experts (such as to what extent there is a rigorous and impartial public administration in a country or how widespread consultation

is among political elites before decisions are taken). Each qualitative variable has been coded by an average of five country-experts for each year and for each country or territory. The result is an incredibly detailed and conceptually nuanced instrument for the measurement of democracy. One of its key in-

novations is to offer five different understandings of democracy – electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, deliberative – each of which is operationalized with its own set of variables and indices. The dataset has become the new standard in the field, both for academic research and policy analysis. See v-dem.net.

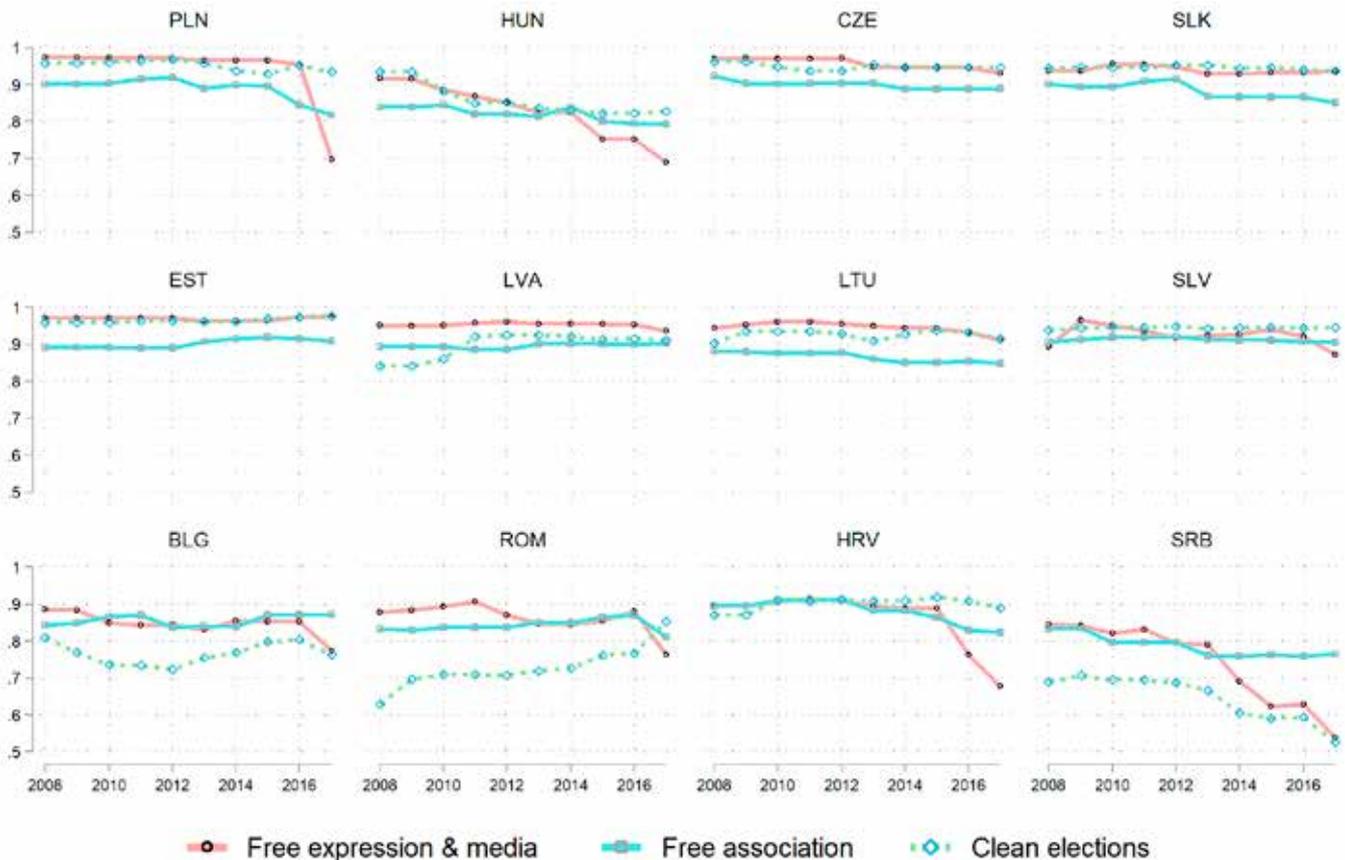


FIGURE 1: Components of electoral democracy in Eastern Europe, V-Dem database.

criticize the government, the level of academic and cultural freedom also diminishes. However, Figure 2 needs to be read with care because the scales of the two indicators are different. ‘Media diversity’ (on the left) is a composite of three base variables in the V-Dem dataset (*v2mebias*, *v2mecrit*, *v2merange*) and therefore has a value range from 0 to 1. Meanwhile, ‘academic expression’ (on the right) is a single base variable (*v2clacfree_osp*) and ranges from 0 to 4. However, in the figure the two scales have been synchronized to show the matching trends.

Generally speaking, the assault on me-

dia diversity has been more severe than it has been on the freedom of academic and cultural expression. This is particularly evident in Hungary, Serbia and Romania. At the same time, the fact that the freedom of academic and cultural expression has also slid (using the right-hand scale in Figure 2) from a near 4 to a 3 or below in many countries corresponds to a shift from ‘no restrictions’ to one where such freedoms are only ‘mostly respected by public authorities’. These are the corresponding characterizations given to these numbers on the 0-4 scale (see the V-Dem Codebook, v8).

To be sure, there is still room for the situation to worsen. For example, the next lowest ranking of 2 on the variable for freedom of academic and cultural expression would signify that “strong criticism of the government is sometimes met with repression.” Only Poland and Croatia appear to be nearing that danger zone. At the same time, the 2017 levels for these two countries (2.39 for both) put them below the V-Dem average (2.58) and noticeably behind the likes of Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Honduras. In fact, on this variable the countries are also behind a number of

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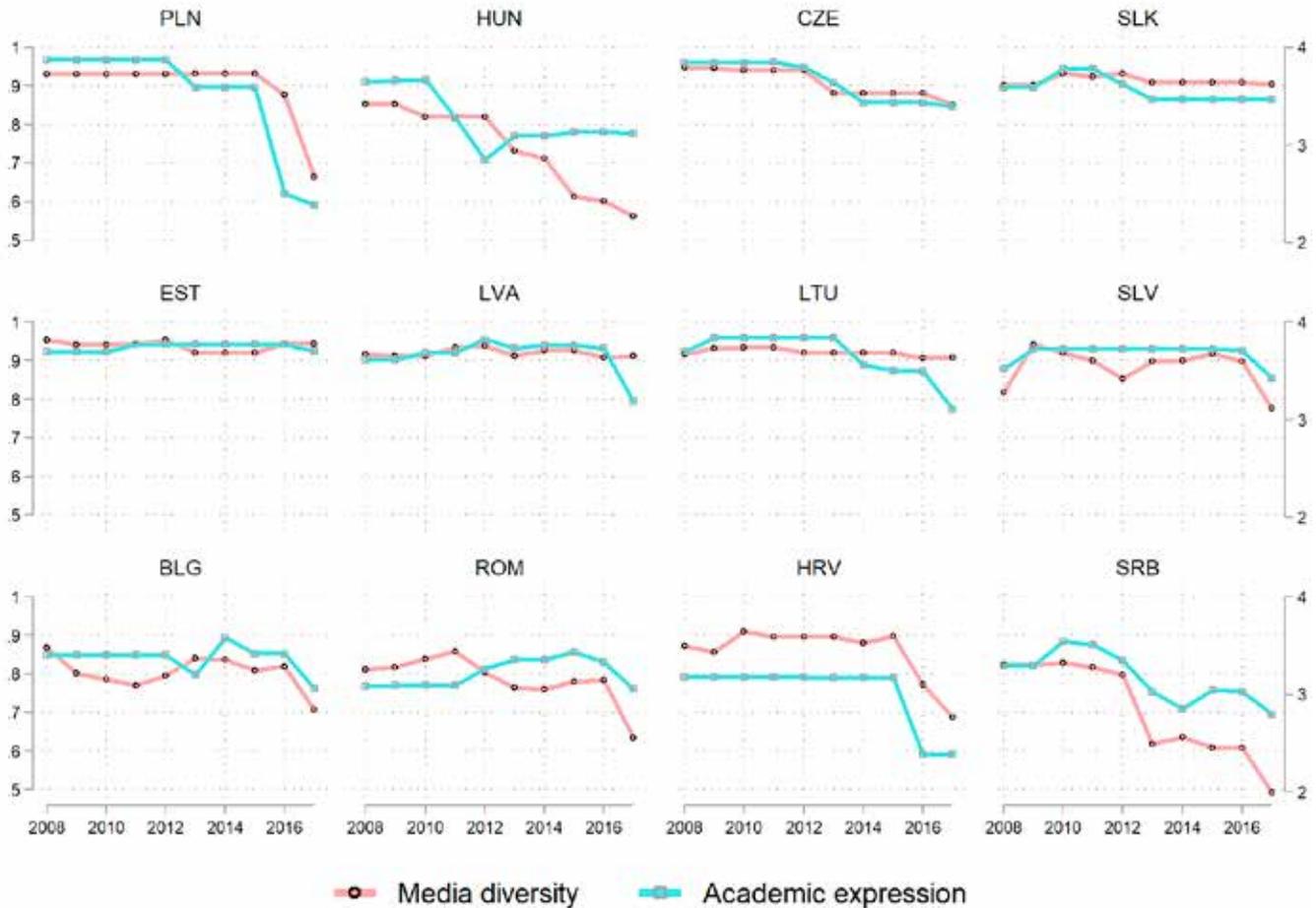


FIGURE 2: Measures of media diversity and academic expression in Eastern Europe, V-Dem database

Eurasian states such as Georgia, Armenia and Moldova. By contrast, the yearly Nordic average for this entire period never goes below 3.75.

In sum, world-wide levels of freedom for academic and cultural expression are generally above the mid-way point of the 0-4 scale (indeed, the median value for this variable in 2017 was 2.81). In this respect, these liberties are not as threatened as they are for V-Dem's indicators of media integrity, where average values are

often around 2 or below. In the current era of backsliding, autocratizing leaders are clearly more interested in cracking down on the broad contours of media freedom than they are on academic and cultural expression. Nevertheless, a negative trend appears to lurk also in this realm.

TURNING TO EURASIA, where autocracy is more the norm, the data show that freedom of academic and cultural expression

lags well behind the Nordic and global averages for seven of the twelve countries depicted: Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Only Belarus indicates a significant upward trend. Russia, in contrast, shows continued deterioration. Relatively stable and satisfactory countries on this indicator are Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Surprisingly, the measurement for Ukraine has declined from a regional high

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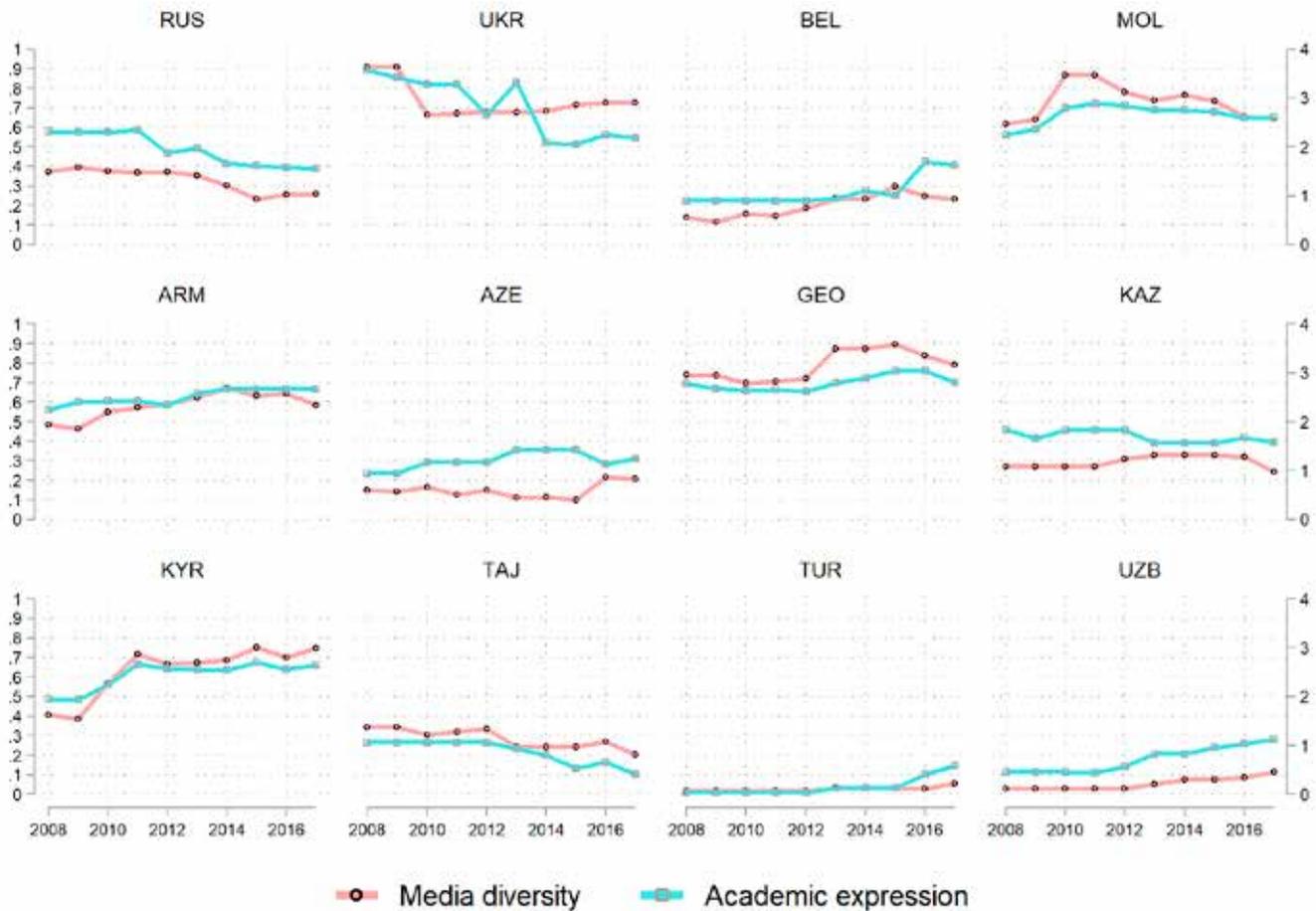


FIGURE 3: Measures of media diversity and academic expression in Eurasia, V-Dem database.

of 3.57 in 2008 to as low as 2.05 in 2015. In fact, all of the components of electoral democracy (free expression, free association and clean elections) have fallen consistently for Ukraine since 2010. This seems to indicate that the country has gained very little since its vaunted Revolution of Dignity in 2014.

Another analytical point to verify is the specific interrelation between media diversity and freedom of academic and cultural expression. Figure 3 shows that for Eurasian countries the sequencing between these two phenomena is again somewhat mixed. Whereas in some countries (such as Russia and Azerbaijan) the heavier emphasis has been on controlling the media, in Ukraine and Georgia pressure has been greater on academic

and cultural figures to circumscribe their opinions.

TO SOME EXTENT one could argue that neither of these two dimensions of expressive freedom need be related. After all, control over the media will go along one set of channels (intimidation of independent journalists, censorship within government-owned media outlets, etc.), while limiting the freedom of academic and cultural expression will follow others (biased funding for research and higher education, politicized decisions regarding the arts).

At the same time, we see that where one element goes, the other soon follows. This indicates that for autocrats these spheres *are* linked because such leaders

are ultimately interested in controlling the full spectrum of expressive freedom. Their desire to suppress critique and to ward off the accountability that derives from it is paramount. Therefore, they will work on both fronts, undermining media structures and stifling academic-cultural institutions. In Eurasia, rulers like Vladimir Putin or Ilham Aliyev have long since gone down this path. In Eastern Europe, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and perhaps others like Tomislav Nikolić in Serbia have also embarked on this aspiration. ✘

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