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## A Comparative Political Analysis of Finland and Belarus Based on the 2022 World Happiness Report

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This analysis is in the field of Political Science, specifically Comparative Politics. This paper analyzes the scores of two countries Finland and Belarus on the 2022 World Happiness Report. Finland, known as the happiest country in the world is highly esteemed as a leader in democracy, healthcare, and education, and ranks number 1 on the World Happiness Report with a score of 7.821. Belarus\*, a former Soviet Republic famously known for its lack of free and fair elections, ranks number 65 with a score of 5.821 (Helliwell et al., 2022). According to the report, the asterisk near Belarus signifies that the ranking is based on survey reports from 2019, and not from 2020 or 2021 (Helliwell et al., 2022). This analysis explains the gap between the two countries and identifies factors responsible for the stark differences between the scores. Several factors identified that explained the differences in the scores were related to politics, such as formal political institutions (political structure within both countries), political informal institutions (political culture), election processes (validity of elections), and the presence of a steady modern democracy or lack thereof, determined by the presence of four requirements. Another important factor identified was economic performance and the presence or lack of economic stability. This paper concludes that although Belarus presents itself as a democracy, the country does not in fact qualify as a modern democracy because of its inability to pass the requirements of a modern democracy.

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**Keywords:** *Finland, Belarus, political science, comparative politics*

## Introduction

This article is an analysis of the differences in the scores of countries Finland and Belarus on the 2022 World Happiness Report. The World Happiness Report conducted its evaluation based on the following factors: Dystopia, Perceptions of corruption, Generosity, Freedom to make life choices, Healthy life expectancy, Social support, and GDP per capita (Helliwell et al., 2022). Finland ranks number 1 (7.821) and Belarus\* ranks number 65 (5.821) on the 2022 World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2022). According to the report, Belarus' ranking is based on survey reports from 2019, and not from 2020 or 2021 (Helliwell et al., 2022). The fact that survey reports for Belarus were unavailable from 2020 and 2021 is significant because a majority of countries analyzed had data consistently available throughout the years. The reason for the lack of data from Belarus is unknown. Happiness levels in a country can be explained by a myriad of factors. The differences in the scores of Finland and Belarus are as a result of formal political institutions, informal institutions (political culture), election processes (validity of elections), economic stability, and a steady modern democracy.

### ***Formal Political Institutions: Belarus***

Institutional arrangements are defined by the type of formal and informal institutional systems in a country. Formal political institutions in a country frame the living, economic, and social conditions. Examples of such institutions are official, legitimate, and legal governmental organizations and structures that shape the political governance in a country. Thus, they have an important effect on the factor of public happiness because of the amount of impact they have on society. The Bertelsmann Stiftung, an independent German organization produced a 2022 Belarus country report describing the formal institution in Belarus by stating, "According to the constitution, Belarus is a unitary, democratic, social state based on the rule of law" (BTI, 2022, p. 15). Within a unitary state system, the central authority is vested in the main executive government. With reference to the official Belarusian Presidential website, Belarus has a bicameral legislature called the "National Assembly of Belarus" where there are two official chambers: the upper house which is the Council of the Republic, and the lower house which is the House of Representatives (President.gov.by, 2022). Despite the existence of these political institutions, they are effectively powerless because President Lukashenko of Belarus holds the sole authority as an authoritarian leader.

### ***Formal Political Institutions: Finland***

Like Belarus, Finland has a unitary state system. According to the "European Committee of the Regions", Finland has been considered a parliamentary republic since the 1999 Constitution (European Committee of the Regions, 2022). In Finland, the president is elected by an "absolute majority popular vote" (NCEE, 2020). According to the Freedom House Report (2022), Finland's political system is representative of the people through the system of proportional representation and multi-party competition (Freedom House, 2022). The percentage of votes directly determines the distribution of seats in the parliament. Minority groups have representation in Finland's political institutional system because they have the chance to earn the votes for

seats in the legislature. The “National Center on Education and the Economy” describes Finland’s formal political institution by stating, “Finland has a 200-member unicameral parliament (Eduskunta). Almost all members are directly elected in single and multi-seat constituencies by proportional representation vote to four-year terms” (NCEE, 2020). The Eduskunta is the Finnish title for the parliament. Although both Belarus and Finland have fixed terms written in their constitution, only Finland abides by its constitutional terms. According to the Belarusian constitution, the presidential term is fixed for 5 years, with an original term limit of 2 terms. However, President Lukashenko removed this constitutional term limit in 2004 in order to stay in power and has remained in power for a total of 6 terms (BTI, 2022, p. 9). Ultimately, Belarus is an illiberal democracy because of Lukashenko’s 26 years of incumbency and his elimination of term limits in the constitution. The distribution of political power in formal institutions plays an integral role in affecting the levels of happiness in a population. In an authoritarian state such as Belarus, people do not have trust in the legitimacy of the government and do not have their voices heard. The lower the trust, the lower the happiness levels because the president is not democratically elected by the people in a free and fair election.

### ***Informal Institutions: Political Culture in Belarus***

Informal political institutions, as opposed to formal political institutions, are institutions that are not ingrained in the system of governance in a country. They are, instead, less official, and are more influenced by social change and political culture. One such informal institution present in Belarus is the mass protest movement that occurred in 2020 in opposition to incumbent president Lukashenko’s authoritarian regime. The political culture in Belarus is defined by the nationwide social mobilization, the resistance by citizens against the authoritarian regime. Belarus held an election between incumbent president Lukashenko and opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on August 9, 2020 (Bedford, 2021). The results of that election were widely protested by the Belarusian people. Scholars Olga Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse argue that the 2020 Belarusian protests classify as mass political mobilization in their article titled, “The Belarus crisis: people, protest, and political dispositions” (Onuch & Sasse, 2020, p. 1). Onuch and Sasse argue that the mass mobilizations were in response to President Lukashenko winning the election with “more than 80% of the vote” despite massive public support for Tsikhanouskaya leading up to the vote (Onuch & Sasse, 2020, p. 3). The authors affirm that the 2020 protests classify as political mobilizations because they occurred in a “competitive authoritarian context” and a “political repressive context” (Onuch & Sasse, 2020, p. 1). According to the 2021 Corruption Perception Index, Belarus is ranked 41/100 (CPI, 2021). This ranking determines that the closer to 0, the more corrupt a country is, and the closer to 100, the less corrupt a country is (CPI, 2021). The ranking of 41/100 demonstrates that there is clear evidence of corruption and election manipulation in Belarus. The higher the perception of corruption, the lower the public’s level of happiness is. The mass mobilization is reflective of the people’s outlook on the authoritarian regime and resistance to Lukashenko’s incumbency. Ultimately, the mass mobilizations are reflective of the people’s level of happiness in Belarus because it is clear that the Belarusian citizens are deeply unsatisfied with the regime.

### ***Informal Institutions: Political Culture in Finland***

Informal institutions and the political culture in Finland are stable and healthy. The Freedom House Report is an organization that researches, analyzes, and measures how free a country is depending on various factors such as political rights and civil liberties. Finland earned a perfect score and was ranked as 100/100 free (Freedom House Report, 2022). Most informal organizations are allowed to exist and participate in politics without being repressed. Minority far right conservative extremist movements such as the Nordic Resistance Movement are condemned by the government and are banned (Sallamaa & Kotonen, 2020). With regard to corruption levels, Finland was ranked 88/100 by the 2021 Corruption Perception Index (CPI, 2021). Informal coalitions, organizations, and social and political movements are not stifled, and are freely allowed to exist and operate, whereas no coalitions or organizations that question Lukashenko's regime are allowed to exist and operate. The presence of informal institutions in Finland have contributed to an increase of the public's trust in the government and institution and have thus led to an increase in happiness and satisfaction.

### ***Election Processes: Validity of Elections in Belarus***

The election system is an integral determinant component in happiness levels. The lack of validity of elections is reflective in explaining Belarus' happiness levels through their lack of authentic voting participation and accurate results. Belarus does not have free and fair elections that are decided by the people. According to the BTI 2022 report, there has been criticism from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) that Belarus has had "non-pluralistic election commissions, strict media regulations, a lack of sufficient transparency during early voting periods, and a lack of transparency during the counting of votes and the tabulation of election results" (BTI, 2022, p. 9). All of these factors limit the ability for the people to hold their government and leader accountable, which leads to lower happiness levels. Onuch and Sasse argue that the election result was deemed corrupt and was viewed as a product of "electoral fraud" by various opposition forces (Onuch & Sasse, 2020, p. 3). The high perception of corruption is directly related to corruptness in Belarus' election system. Belarus' election system does not ensure public trust, especially since Lukashenko has been Belarus' one and only president since 1994 (BTI, 2022, p. 9).

### ***Election Processes: Validity of Elections in Finland***

The electoral system in Finland is free and fair (Freedom House, 2022). According to the Freedom House Report, Finland achieved perfect scores of "4/4" on the aspects of their electoral system. Free and fair elections are held, and people have their voices heard through the parliamentary system. Finland has an "open list proportional representation system" in which voters write down the specific ID of their preferred candidate (Difford, 2023). Voters in Finland have the ability to exercise their voice and participate in the electoral process, which correlates to a higher level of happiness. Finland's proportional representation electoral system is more inclusive and reflective of all members of Finland's society. This type of system allows for greater diversity in varying ideologies, as opposed to a system like the "winner takes all system" where

the party that has the most votes wins. In the proportional representation system, minority groups have the chance to have their voices heard, which contributes to a higher happiness rating. Free and fair elections determine the fairness of the electoral system, and thus determine the trust levels that citizens have in their leaders and government. Political government accountability is a fundamental component of election processes, where the people must have the ability to hold their government accountable.

### ***Economic Stability in Belarus***

The presence of economic stability is vital in determining ratings of happiness in a country. The performance of the economy individually affects every citizen, every family, and every worker. Belarus has “imbalances in the economy” and is currently in an economic crisis due to various factors. First, a majority of economic structures are government controlled, which limits the workings of the free market. Because they are micro-managed by the government, there is economic stagnation that occurs. Belarus has also been impacted by lasting effects from the COVID-19 pandemic due to the lack of correct implementations of COVID-19 lockdowns and procedures (BTI, 2022, p. 14). The BTI report states that “Much of the economy is still controlled by the state which creates fertile ground for corruption” (BTI, 2022, p. 14). These factors all negatively affect economic growth and prosperity and contribute to lower levels of happiness among the people.

### ***Economic Stability in Finland***

Economic stability in Finland is free and fair and is not artificially controlled. Author Gerd Schienstock discusses Finland’s economic transformation in his text “From Path Dependency to Path Creation: Finland on its Way to the Knowledge-Based Economy” (Schienstock, 2007). Schienstock states that Finland transformed “from a raw-material-based, capital-and-energy-intensive economy into a knowledge-intensive economy” (Schienstock, 2007, p. 99). This path caused the massive rise in Finland’s employment and growth rate, and the drop of the unemployment rate (Schienstock, 2007, p. 99). According to Darren Zook from “The Journal of Democracy” the economic competitiveness of Finland ranks in the top numbers worldwide (Zook, 2009). Economic competitiveness allows domestic businesses to compete internationally, which increases the domestic economy and thus, improves domestic happiness levels. Economic stability has a direct correlation to happiness levels in a country. The more stable the economy of a country is, the more dependable the economic and financial situation is for individuals. Dependability equates to happiness because people are less stressed about their finances and their ability to financially sustain themselves in their country. Ultimately, economic stability increases happiness levels, while economic instability or massive fluctuations decrease happiness levels.

### ***Steady Modern Democracy: Belarus***

The factor of a steady modern democracy must be analyzed through the lens of whether a functioning modern democracy is present or is lacking. According to Caramani, et al, there are “four defining attributes of modern democracy” that are as follows: the presence of elections which are free and fair, “universal par-

ticipation” in the electoral process in the modern democracy, “civil liberties” for citizens within a modern democracy, and a “responsible government” that can be held accountable (Caramani et al., 2020, p. 89). Belarus fails to qualify as a modern democracy because it fails to pass the four factors defined by Caranami and the other authors. There are no free and fair elections because of the presence of corruption and the authoritarian nature of the political process. Although there is some citizen participation in politics, this participation does not result in honest election results. There is a lack of civil liberties, and there is no responsible and accountable government. Free and fair elections, citizen participation in politics, civic liberties, social trust, and a responsible and accountable government are all necessary components in a modern democracy. They are all major and necessary contributors to happiness levels in a country.

### ***Steady Modern Democracy: Finland***

Finland has a functioning modern democracy according to Caranami’s four defining features. Finland’s electoral system is regarded as one of the most free and fair (NCEE, 2020). Universal participation is a key element of Finland’s electoral system due to the proportional representation system. Civil liberties are protected within Finland’s constitution and there is a high level of social trust. Zook describes Finland as having the best international “social trust and civic order” which increases levels of happiness because of trust and stability (Zook, 2009). With regard to the responsible government criteria, Finland has a very responsible government due to the parliamentary system and term limitations, in which representatives are held accountable to the people. Set term limits help prevent corruption, abuse of authority, and promote public trust, which in effect increase the happiness levels of citizens. Zook describes political participation and accountability by stating, the Finnish government “offers effective and efficient conduits of communication that allow citizens to reach policy makers directly and to hold them accountable for their actions” (Zook, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this essay identifies several factors that determine happiness levels, and explains why a country receives the rank it does. The main factors that constitute a higher level of happiness in a country include the presence of economic stability, a stable and non-corrupt electoral system, and a steady modern democracy. Happiness levels deeply affect every citizen and affect their performance. The first step to improving happiness levels in a country is to examine these factors. Finland has a higher ranking than Belarus due to a more stable economy, better economic growth, a more structurally stable electoral system, and a steady modern democracy.

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