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EDITORIAL

Illiberal Politics in Europe: Ideology, Policies, and Impact

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Abstract

Our thematic issue focuses on the ideological and discursive foundations, policy outputs, and institutional impact of illiberal parties in Europe. The contributions highlight how illiberal actors reshape democratic institutions, popular attitudes, cultural narratives, and welfare policies. They also consider how illiberal ideas spread through mainstream political discourse. Crucially, the issue explores both the diversity of illiberal ideologies and the mechanisms of democratic resilience. Together, these studies show that illiberalism is not merely a rhetorical style but a substantive challenge to liberal democracy that operates through institutional changes, policy, and discourse.

Keywords

Europe; ideology; illiberalism; policy; politics; polity

1. Introduction: Theoretical Framing

If uncertainty in political outcomes constitutes a crisis, then democracy, by definition, exists in a state of permanent crisis. Vigilance over the resilience of democratic institutions is thus not a reaction to exceptional circumstances, but rather a continuous responsibility—both for scholars and, ideally, for citizens.

Yet the nature of the threats facing democracy is not static. At the close of the 20th century, concerns centered on phenomena such as the hollowing out of party politics, the erosion of ideological competition, declining citizen engagement, and the technocratic insulation of decision-making (Crouch, 2000; Mair, 2013). Political scientists observed the rise of radical challengers, but these forces were largely expected to remain marginal,

with mainstream "cartel" parties retaining dominance—thereby stripping democracy of meaningful alternation in power.

Many of the structural problems that preoccupied earlier generations of political scientists—such as low voter turnout, blurred boundaries between political and business elites, and the weakening of accountability—persist today. Others, including widespread distrust in political elites, electoral breakthroughs of radical challengers, and polarization, have intensified. However, the character of the threat to democracy has fundamentally changed. The skeptics of liberal democracy now present viable alternatives, both in terms of ideological visions and governance models. The post-war liberal order is being actively contested. In recent years, several countries have transitioned from democracy to electoral autocracy, with authoritarian incumbents managing to consolidate power.

The concept that some of us use to capture both the ideological modules of de-democratization and the actions that follow from them is illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024a; Kauth & King, 2020; Laruelle, 2022). Ideas justifying power concentration, the rejection of state neutrality, and the replacement of the standards of universality and rationality with the tribal taboos of closed society represent the most prominent arguments against liberal democracy (Enyedi, 2024b).

The democratic setbacks demand a reoriented research agenda. First, it is essential to examine whether different stages of autocratization constitute distinct political regimes and how these phases relate to mass political attitudes (Markowski & Kotnarowski, 2025). While elite preferences can shape regime dynamics independent of shifts in public opinion (Achen & Bartels, 2006), over time one must expect a degree of congruence between regime character and political culture—either because popular resistance compels strategic recalibration by leaders or because elites succeed in reshaping citizen policy preferences and feelings towards political opponents (Gidron et al., 2025). However, elite-driven polarization can prevent (further) democratic decline when it is the result of pro-democracy mobilization assembled against illiberal actors (Guasti & Michal, 2025).

The scenario where governing elites mold public values deserves far more scholarly attention. Illiberal leaders harness state resources, allied business networks, domestic allies, and, frequently, foreign partners to shape the ideological and political landscape. Analyzing the techniques and tools they use requires moving beyond questions of how checks and balances are weakened to analyzing how public policy is deployed to consolidate support (Szabó & Reiff, 2025). Particularly crucial are cultural and educational policies that align societal values with regime objectives (Čufar & Hawlina, 2025; Radó & Mikola, 2025).

Such policies do not exist in a vacuum; they are embedded in evolving discursive frameworks. Since radical constitutional reform is rarely feasible, democratic backsliding today often proceeds through legalism and the transformation of public discourse. This makes the analysis of political texts—speeches, manifestos, interviews, and legislative documents—an indispensable tool for understanding illiberal strategies. Furthermore, to fully grasp the mainstreaming of illiberalism requires expanding the textual analysis corpus to include philosophical writings, literature, and other elite cultural products, given the critical role intellectuals play in creating and legitimizing illiberal alternatives to the status quo (Schir & Laruelle, 2025).

Illiberal actors who succeed in linking their strategic interests to narratives of national or civilizational identity gain a formidable advantage (Özoflu & Gerim, 2025). When radical political entrepreneurs anchor exclusionary narratives in widely held cultural values, they can break free from the political margins. This reframing may bolster their electoral appeal or pressure mainstream actors to adopt similar rhetoric and policies (Cossu & Froio, 2025; Wagner et al., 2025).

It is essential, however, to avoid assuming that all challengers to liberal democracy are inherently populist, nativist, or authoritarian—or that their evolution inevitably leads to radicalization. Alarmism, while seductive, is itself a problematic discursive strategy. But when carefully designed longitudinal studies (Böckmann et al., 2025) document a rise in illiberal values, such changes cannot be dismissed as cheap talk. The task is to assess both rhetorical consistency and the subsequent implementation of policies. Some illiberal promises are fulfilled, others are not, and the difference between the two is not accidental. While illiberal political actors make pledges both on culture and on the economy, they have a more solid record of staying true to their words in the former than in the latter area (Schafer et al., 2025).

Still, we cannot afford to overlook economic and social policies. First, whether illiberal governments reduce or exacerbate inequality is of profound consequence. Second, there is considerable variance among them in what kind of vision they offer for treating the everyday problems of citizens. For instance, anti-immigrant stances may be framed in terms of defending the welfare state, national identity, or traditional family structures. The perceived threat may be immigrants, or alternatively, global elites, progressive activists, or marginalized minorities. Their preferred social policy also varies: some target benefits to middle-class taxpayers; others to vulnerable (yet native) groups like single mothers or the disabled (Szikra & Autischer, 2025).

The world of illiberalism is inherently layered and ideologically diverse. Challenges to liberal democratic norms can emerge from a wide range of perspectives—including authoritarian, populist, traditionalist, religious-fundamentalist, nativist-nationalist, paternalist, libertarian, materialist, left-wing, civilizational, anti-modern, or prejudicial standpoints (Enyedi, 2024b; Halevy & Buštíková, 2025; Özoflu & Gerim, 2025). Given this heterogeneity, defenders of liberal democracy cannot rely on generic counterarguments. Effective responses must be tailored to the specific logic and appeal of each strand of critique.

2. Illiberalism and Polity: Impacts, Strategies, and Resistance

Four contributions in this issue explore the dynamic interplay between illiberalism and democratic polity. Two analytical dimensions structure this inquiry: the impact of illiberalism on democratic institutions and the strategies and tools illiberal actors employ to challenge democratic governance.

2.1. Impacts on Democratic Institutions

Markowski and Kotnarowski (2025) draw on the 10th European Social Survey to highlight the role of citizen attitudes in mediating regime legitimacy. They show that populist and illiberal views tend to erode democratic legitimacy. At the same time, authoritarian attitudes may paradoxically sustain it. They also argue that illiberal regimes systematically reshape democratic institutions by capturing key state organs and altering the normative framework of liberal democracy—developments particularly visible in Hungary and Poland.

Guasti and Michal (2025) demonstrate how different forms of polarization—ideological, affective, intransigent, and partisan—may contribute to both illiberal and pro-democratic mobilization using cross-national data from V-Dem and SYRI. Furthermore, they focus on the case of the 2023 Czech presidential election to show how the different mobilization strategies of each candidate affected each type of polarization. Affective polarization using fear was the best predictor for the vote choice of the illiberal candidate, while partisan sorting around policy towards Ukraine predicted the choice of the democratic candidate.

2.2. Strategies and Tools of Illiberal Contestation

Halevy and Buštíková (2025) identify deep institutional entrenchment as key to regime durability and document a more ideologically rooted transformation: incorporating religious intermediary organizations into the state's core. Confessional illiberalism, they contend, unlike its prejudicial and reactionary counterparts, draws inspiration from interwar fascist legacies: eroding the secular foundation of liberal democracy by fusing state and church and reshaping both public norms and policy agendas. Halevy and Buštíková (2025) show how the mobilization of socially conservative actors and religious institutions is a core strategy of illiberal transformation.

A further common tactic highlighted by Özoflu and Gerim (2025) is the use of civilizational discourse to legitimize exclusionary and authoritarian policies. Analyzing Erdoğan's speeches, the authors demonstrate how appeals to civilizational identity and distinctness from the West serve to normalize illiberal governance and reinforce the durability of the illiberal regime. In parallel, Schir and Laruelle (2025) trace how cultural narratives and discursive manipulation—via popular novels—embed far-right ideologies in mainstream discourse utilizing social and discursive capital of public intellectuals in the ideological dissemination of illiberal narratives. Across these cases, illiberal actors construct alternative epistemic frameworks and networks that marginalize liberal-democratic norms and actors in order to consolidate and maintain illiberal rule through institutional means, cultural production, and cooptation of ideologically aligned actors.

3. Illiberal Policies: What Illiberal Parties Do in Power?

One of the decisive and currently understudied aspects of illiberal politics focuses on the policy-making processes and outputs of illiberal parties in power. Even though existing literature provides some cues on what constitutes illiberal governance styles (Boda, 2024), these insights have mostly been based on single case studies and have built on earlier studies on populist policy-making (Bartha et al., 2020). This line of work found that rather than sharing specific policy positions, populist parties resemble each other in their ways of policy-making, their relationship with experts, and public opinion. Specifically, they adopt ideologically diverse and heterodox policy measures that challenge mainstream paradigms, disregard minority preferences, sidestep consultative mechanisms, ignore expert opinion, minimize civil society participation, and rely on divisive and emotional discourse. The current thematic issue advances the research agenda by considering the real-world impact of illiberal governing parties across a range of policy areas.

3.1. The Role of Ideas and Culture

In their article, Radó and Mikola (2025) show how Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland have reshaped educational and cultural policies to consolidate power. The article differentiates between overt ideological

agendas (nationalism, conservatism, and religious identity), that both parties pursue, and hidden clientelistic goals such as elite replacement and centralized control, which are more pronounced in the case of Fidesz. The analysis highlights how the decentralized nature of the Polish education system has served as a safeguard to protect schools' autonomy in matters of curriculum, as well as financial management. The authors highlight that beyond institutional inertia, the ruling party's supermajority in the Hungarian case also facilitated more drastic reforms, while the changes enacted by PiS between 2015 and 2023 have been more subtle due to the party's limited room for manoeuvre. The article fills an important gap in the literature by emphasizing the role of cultural and educational policies as strategic tools in illiberal statecraft.

Focusing more closely on cultural policy, Čufar and Hawlina (2025) zoom in on the 2020–2022 cabinet led by Janez Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party. The article demonstrates how illiberal leaders use cultural policy to reshape national identity and silence dissent. The authors propose a typology of illiberal cultural interventions ranging from politicized appointments and censorship to memory politics and symbolic spatial control, demonstrating how culture becomes a vehicle for ideological consolidation, as well as how it may bolster democratic backsliding. The analysis also stresses how cultural oppression may intensify during crisis periods such as the Covid-19 pandemic, leveraging emergency powers to curtail protest and restructure the cultural sector. The Slovenian case illustrates how illiberalism reconfigures democratic space through targeted cultural interventions, with enduring effects even after political turnover.

3.2. How Illiberals Address Redistribution and Inequality

Another stream of articles within the policy-focused contributions to this thematic issue analyzes how illiberal parties address redistributive conflicts (Szikra & Autischer, 2025), how targeted social transfers may be turned into vote-buying vehicles (Szabó & Reiff, 2025), and what is their impact on social inequalities (Schafer et al., 2025).

In their comparative case study of Hungarian Fidesz, Polish PiS, Austrian FPÖ, and Italian FdI, Szikra and Autischer (2025) demonstrate how illiberal parties use family policy to promote ideological agendas and consolidate power. Despite national differences, these parties employ welfare chauvinism, ethno-nationalist rhetoric, and selective redistribution to reward preferred constituencies while marginalizing others. The key beneficiaries typically include native-born, heterosexual families, at the detriment of immigrants and non-traditional families. The article shows how family policy becomes a strategic instrument of democratic backsliding, allowing illiberal actors to reshape welfare systems in line with authoritarian and exclusionary agendas.

Szabó and Reiff's (2025) study investigates how targeted rural spending has served Fidesz's electoral goals. Combining rich data with a quasi-experimental design, the authors show that funds were strategically allocated to electorally loyal areas, boosting Fidesz's vote share by mobilizing supporters and demobilizing the opposition. These programs reveal how clientelistic redistribution becomes a central tool of competitive authoritarianism: maintaining regime stability, reinforcing rural loyalty, and circumventing democratic accountability through a mix of programmatic and discretionary spending.

Finally, turning the focus from policy instruments to political discourse, and applying an innovative global dataset of 38,000+ political speeches analyzed via machine learning, Schafer et al. (2025) find that illiberal

leaders on the economic right systematically exacerbate income inequality. Although illiberals often campaign on economic grievances, the study shows that only right-leaning illiberal leaders translate their preferences into policy outcomes and these lead to greater inequality. Left-leaning illiberals and liberal leaders, by contrast, have no discernible effect. The findings challenge assumptions about the redistributive potential of strongman rule, revealing that illiberalism tends to amplify rather than mitigate structural inequality, especially when combined with economically conservative agendas.

4. Illiberalism and Politics: Mainstreaming the Far-Right

Illiberal parties have increased their vote share across Europe. In general, however, they do not command a majority and require the cooperation of centrist parties to govern and access power. Therefore, the mainstreaming of illiberal politics—through both the discursive persistence of illiberal parties and the adoption of illiberal positions by centrists—threatens to undermine the cordon sanitaire that has contained far-right illiberal parties. Three articles in this thematic issue contribute to the evidentiary consensus that illiberalism is being normalized.

4.1. The Discursive Persistence of the Illiberal Far-Right

Central to illiberal parties' influence on European politics is their consistent articulation of alternatives to liberal democracy. Böckmann et al. (2025) demonstrate that far-right MEPs maintained the frequency of illiberal rhetoric in their parliamentary speech from 1999 to 2019 and that the frequency of their illiberal speech has intensified recently. Their work shows that illiberalism provides an ideological framework that combines "unrestrained majority rule, ethnonational anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism" (p. 16). Similarly, Cossu and Froio (2025) show that the National Rally maintained "consistently negative rhetoric" on multiculturalism throughout the 2014–2021 period. That party's position provided a stable ideological anchor that other actors could turn to during periods of heightened political crisis. Wagner et al. (2025, p. 2) document this persistence through their word-embedding analysis across eight European countries, finding that far-right parties "exhibit minimal moderation upon entering government and radicalize when they leave." This pattern suggests that temporary tactical adjustments mask deeper ideological commitments that remain fundamentally unchanged by institutional participation.

4.2. The Centre Moves Right

More concerning than far-right persistence is the adoption of illiberal positions by mainstream parties. Cossu and Froio (2025) find evidence of "position contagion" in France on issues such as cultural diversity and Islam, with mainstream parties increasingly adopting negative positions that line up with the far right. This shift follows exclusionary civic frames, with parties across the political spectrum using laïcité to justify cultural exclusion while maintaining democratic legitimacy. Wagner et al. (2025) corroborate this pattern across European party systems, finding that conservative mainstream parties respond to and follow illiberal shifts in discourse by far-right parties. Importantly, this rightward drift persists regardless of whether far-right parties hold government office, suggesting that accommodation fundamentally misunderstands the mechanisms through which illiberal ideas spread. Temporary far-right moderation masks longer-term shifts in mainstream political discourse.

5. Summary

The main findings of the articles in this thematic issue are summarized in Table 1 below. Collectively, these contributions highlight how illiberalism reshapes politics, policies, and polity by strategically leveraging polarization, cultural diffusion, welfare policies, and rhetorical shifts to consolidate power. The diverse contexts studied emphasize illiberalism's adaptability.

Table 1. Summary of illiberals' impact on polity, policy, and politics.

Overarching theoretical dimension	Authors	Focus	Main finding
Polity	Markowski and Kotnarowski	Public attitudes and regime types in CEE	Populist/illiberal views reduce legitimacy; authoritarian ones may bolster it; diverse regime-attitude links exist
	Guasti and Michal	Polarization's effect on democracy in CEE	Mobilization against illiberalism and for democracy furthers polarization but can enable democratic resistance
	Halevy and Buštíková	Typologies of illiberalism	Confessional illiberalism fuses state and religion, entrenching power through deep institutional networks
	Schir and Laruelle	Cultural diffusion of illiberalism via fiction	Social and discursive capital enables far-right ideas to spread through mainstream literature
Policy	Özoflu and Gerim	Civilizational discourse in Turkey	Erdoğan uses civilizational identity to legitimize illiberal rule and distance Turkey from the West
	Radó and Mikola	Education/culture under Fidesz and PiS	Fidesz radically centralized control; PiS pursued subtler ideological reforms due to fewer institutional levers
	Čufar and Hawlina	Cultural policy in Slovenia	Illiberal regimes use cultural policy to consolidate power and suppress dissent, especially in crises
	Szikra and Autischer	Welfare policy under illiberals	Illiberals use welfare chauvinism to reward preferred groups and consolidate authoritarian agendas
	Szabó and Reiff	Rural spending and electoral outcomes in Hungary	Targeted programs increase Fidesz vote share by mobilizing loyalists and demobilizing opposition
	Schafer et al.	Illiberalism and economic inequality	Right-wing illiberal leaders increase inequality; left-wing ones have no significant redistributive effect
Politics	Böckmann et al.	Illiberal rhetoric in EU parliament	Illiberal speech by far-right MEPs has increased since 2017, showing a deepening ideological commitment
	Cossu and Froio	Impact of terror on French political rhetoric	Mainstream parties adopt far-right positions post-attacks, normalizing exclusionary discourse
	Wagner et al.	Far-right influence on party competition	Mainstream parties shift right on immigration; far-right discourse hardens post-government participation

6. Conclusions

While illiberalism rises globally and liberal democracy becomes the least frequent regime form, the quality of democracy in Europe remains comparatively high. However, the "cordon sanitaire" is weakened and occasionally broken. Thus, illiberal actors who question, challenge, or disregard liberal democratic norms are no longer confined to the political margins. They now hold public office, influence policy-making, and shape the contours of public discourse. While the extent of their impact varies, their rhetoric, legislative initiatives, and associated cultural expressions signal a departure from the post-war democratic consensus—and even more markedly from the liberalism that gained prominence after 1989. Illiberals exploit the inherent weaknesses of liberal democracy, shortcomings of mainstream politics, and the tensions inherent in multicultural societies; yet, they do not present a unified or coherent alternative to the existing order. Addressing their rise effectively requires a more nuanced understanding of their diverse agendas— ideologies, policies, and impact. The contributions in this thematic issue aim to deepen our understanding of how illiberals reshape democratic polities, policies, and politics.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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