

When Illiberals Govern: Educational and Cultural Policies in Hungary and Poland

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Abstract

Illiberal governments have been widely associated with democratic backsliding, the erosion of the rule of law, and executive aggrandisement. However, their impact on the various domains of knowledge production has not received enough scholarly attention. Through what policies do illiberal actors ensure the reproduction of their narratives? Do illiberal political leaders see education and culture as ideological vehicles, or do they consider them as arenas for power distribution? The article addresses these questions through the educational and cultural policy changes in two crucial cases of illiberals in power: post-2010 Hungary and 2015–2023 Poland. The article distinguishes between overt and hidden policy agendas, i.e., initiatives and aspirations that are driven by values and social or economic goals vs. policies serving purposes that cannot be openly represented. Through the analysis of legislative changes, party programs, and party discourse, complemented with semi-structured expert interviews, the study finds that despite sharing similar policy agendas, Fidesz and PiS considerably differ in the extent to which they transformed educational and cultural policies during their reign. While the main feature of educational and cultural policies in Hungary has been radical political power concentration, these policies in Poland rather served the ideological goals of the illiberal culture war. The article concludes that these differences were caused by the latitude afforded to these parties by their respective legislative majorities, indicating that whether illiberals have a supermajority in parliament influences the extent to which they can abuse their power.

Keywords

cultural policy; education policy; Hungary; illiberalism; Poland

1. Introduction

While the literature on the conceptualisation of illiberalism has proliferated over the past few years (Enyedi, 2024; Laruelle, 2022; Sajó et al., 2021), research on the policy outputs of illiberal governments remains limited, with most studies focusing on immigration (Bocskor, 2018; Okólski & Wach, 2020) and gender policies (Fodor, 2022; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Guasti & Bušítková, 2023). This article seeks to address this gap by analysing the policy proposals and measures introduced by European illiberal political actors in the fields of education and culture in the 21st century.

The fundamental question guiding this study is how the political narratives of illiberal parties are transformed into educational and cultural policy interventions. More specifically, we address the following questions: What are the leitmotifs of the political ideologies represented by illiberal parties? To what extent do interventions for ideological purposes shape the overt and hidden public policy agendas of illiberal parties in power? How does a strong commitment to values and ideology influence the educational and cultural policymaking practices of illiberal parties in government? What are the consequences of these policies?

To explore these questions, we focus on two crucial cases of illiberal governance: Hungary under Fidesz (2010–present) and Poland under PiS (2015–2023), mapping similarities and differences in light of their specific political contexts. In conceptualising illiberalism, we follow Enyedi (2024), defining it as a political ideology that advocates for power concentration, a partisan state, and a closed society.

The primary objective of this article is to identify shifts in policy narratives among European illiberal parties, particularly where they have held power for extended periods. Unlike studies that directly link ideological stances to policy proposals, this article argues that, upon attaining power, the implementation of educational and cultural policies is often ideologically inconsistent. While opposition parties can maintain ideological coherence in their policy proposals, illiberal parties in power must navigate complex political and institutional constraints, which can lead to divergences between rhetoric and substantive policy outcomes (Espeland Berg et al., 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Illiberal parties on the right often entrench ideological support through cultural conflicts, particularly when in power. These parties frame politics around values such as conservatism, traditionalism, nationalism, and exclusionary religiosity, aiming to integrate authoritarian elements into democratic structures (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). Such values promote narratives that seek to protect traditional identities, positioning education and culture as central battlegrounds for ideological influence. However, the actual policies vary significantly by country in terms of the extent to which they are primarily aimed at advancing ideological agendas or whether such motives are secondary to clientelistic objectives, such as power concentration, the channelling of funds to loyal allies, or elite replacement.

To understand the relationship between these two potential outcomes, we draw on the arm's length principle of cultural policies on the one hand (Hillman-Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989) and the theory of clientelism, understood as a form of informal governance (Hopkin, 2012; Muno, 2010), on the other. According to the former, the arm's length principle applies when "agencies...are kept at an arm's length

distance from the politicians in a ministry to prevent political censoring of individual decisions” (Vestheim, 2009, p. 33). Based on the extent to which such principles are applied, Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey (1989) differentiate between four models of cultural policy. The facilitator and patron models organise funding in competitive, market-based, and value-neutral structures, whereas the architect and engineer models combine professional and normative criteria towards the fulfilment of some social or ideological goals, respectively. While the laissez-faire approach of the first two models is only partially applicable to education policy, the shift from a decentralised professional “architect” state to a centralised ideological “engineer” state is also relevant in this domain.

Regarding clientelism, we define the concept as “a social relationship based on informal rules” (Muno, 2010), which facilitates the channelling of state resources from patrons to clients (Van de Walle, 2007). The most relevant aspect of this concept for our study is the distinction between formal and informal rules in the allocation of resources. To capture these differences, we distinguish between overt (formal) and hidden (informal) policy agendas, differentiating initiatives grounded in declared values from those driven by underlying objectives, such as power consolidation or political alliances.

By overt agendas, we refer to initiatives and aspirations in education or cultural policy driven by the values and socio-economic goals explicitly promoted by illiberal political parties, regardless of the extent to which these goals align with mainstream international discourse. In contrast, hidden agendas encompass initiatives and policies that serve purposes which cannot be openly declared, as they may contradict widely accepted ethical norms or constitutional principles. Examples of such hidden objectives include the concentration of state power, corruption, the purchase of political alliances, or the elimination of political opponents.

Regarding our specific cases, we hypothesise that since Fidesz has held a stronger parliamentary majority for a longer period than its Polish counterpart, it has been able to pursue clientelistic objectives to a greater extent than PiS, which, in turn, has incorporated more ideological elements into its educational and cultural policy agendas. Following the historical institutionalist tradition (Thelen, 1999), we consider how country-specific critical junctures (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007) and path dependencies have shaped policy outcomes across these two areas by focusing on key institutional and legislative changes.

3. Case Selection and Methods

While the previous section provided a general overview of the conceptual background of our article, the following paragraphs elaborate on the decisions that guided the selection of our in-depth case studies and the methods used for their analysis. The remainder of the article examines two cases of contemporary illiberal governance: post-2010 Hungary under Fidesz and 2015–2023 Poland under PiS, both of which are arguably crucial cases (Gerring, 2007) of illiberalism in Europe.

The two countries share various contextual factors that make them suitable for pairwise comparison. First, both countries are frequently highlighted in the literature on democratic backsliding (Carothers & Hartnett, 2024; Mechkova et al., 2017; Waldner & Lust, 2018) as countries that have recently experienced a significant decline in their democracy ratings (Coppedge et al., 2024). This decline has placed them among the group of “top autocratisers,” alongside Turkey and Brazil (Papada et al., 2023), due to weakening institutional constraints on the executive (Holesch & Kyriazi, 2022), the erosion of the rule of law (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacafa, 2021),

and declining media freedom (Polyák, 2019; Wójcik, 2022). These circumstances, along with strong electoral mandates, have led both governments to implement lasting policy changes while marginalising the role of experts and opposition in policymaking (Bartha et al., 2020).

Moreover, both governments have adopted a similar approach towards civil society, particularly independent NGOs, which have been framed as subversive organisations acting against national interests, often portrayed as “foreign agents” and actively restricted through legislative measures and financial obstacles (Gerő et al., 2023; Kravchenko et al., 2022; Labanino & Dobbins, 2023). This has led to the formation of “uncivil societies” (Kopecky & Mudde, 2005) in both countries, where civil society actors have very limited opportunities to influence policymaking.

Beyond similarities in their overall political context, the two countries have also been juxtaposed in terms of the trajectories they have followed in educational and cultural policies. In the field of education policy, both the Hungarian and Polish illiberal governments have combined right-wing conservatism, populism, the mainstreaming of far-right ideas, and the strengthening of church–state relations in their policy agendas (Neumann & Rudnicki, 2023). Similarly, in the field of cultural policy, Bonet and Zamorano (2021) have identified shared patterns of illiberal cultural governance in the two countries, characterised by clientelist measures, censorship, and political control over cultural institutions, as well as a cultural policy narrative based on “exclusionary nationalism enforced through historical revisionism” (Bonet & Zamorano, p. 569). However, the authors also found that while Polish cultural policy was heavily driven by the promotion of specific values, including Catholicism, Fidesz has been more focused on redirecting cultural funds to public-private structures controlled by the party’s stakeholders (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021).

Therefore, while the two cases share a large number of traits in these policy fields, they differ in the extent to which they were driven by ideological motives. This constellation allows for the adoption of a most similar systems design (Przeworski & Teune, 1966; Rohlfing, 2012), which controls extraneous factors by contrasting similar cases with different outcomes (Anckar, 2008). In terms of outcomes, we expect ideological features to be more pronounced in Poland under the PiS government, whereas clientelism is expected to be the main driver of policy reforms in Hungary under Fidesz.

In terms of our methodological approach, we rely on a mix of qualitative policy analysis based on legislative documents and party manifestos alongside semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with culture and education professionals and experts in both countries ($n = 14$) between March and September 2023. Interview transcripts were inductively coded by the researchers using data-driven thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This enabled us to identify two main narratives that emerged across both policy fields: (a) ideological indoctrination, in which policy shifts were perceived as serving normative aims aligned with the governing parties’ ideology; and (b) clientelism, whereby policy changes were primarily driven by elite replacement and politically centralised control over public funds. Relevant quotations from the interview transcripts are used in the following sections to complement our analysis with more nuanced perspectives from stakeholders and professionals. The anonymised list of interviewees, the semi-structured questionnaire, and the coding scheme for the thematic analysis are provided in the Supplementary File.

4. Measures Serving Overt Educational and Cultural Policy Agendas in Hungary and Poland

In the area of educational and cultural policies, illiberal actors appear most concerned with implementing a canon that emphasises national values as opposed to cosmopolitanism, globalism, and cultural liberalism. However, the extent to which such considerations are made explicit varies regionally and depends on whether illiberal political parties are in government. This section explores the educational and cultural policy agendas in Hungary and Poland, where illiberal actors have been in power for a sustained period, enabling them to implement their policy agendas.

The educational policies of Hungary and Poland are deeply intertwined with each country's political context and historical narratives. Both governments have utilised educational reforms to promote their ideological agendas, portraying these initiatives as necessary corrections to the perceived failures of previous liberal administrations.

A significant aspect of educational policy under both Fidesz and PiS has been a strong tendency towards centralisation, though this has been more successfully implemented in the former case. In Hungary, this trend is epitomised by the establishment of the Klebelsberg School Maintaining Authority, which centralises administrative control over public schools and eliminates the professional, organisational, and financial autonomy of individual institutions. Through this Authority and the introduction of a system of government-issued single textbooks, the Fidesz government dictates curriculum standards and administrative practices, ensuring that educational content aligns with nationalist and conservative narratives. The overarching aim has been to create a cohesive educational framework that prioritises Hungarian identity and loyalty to the state while sidelining alternative viewpoints. As a high school professor of Hungarian literature explained, this shift has been reflected in the composition of the curriculum despite professional resistance:

Old Hungarian literature, which is not very interesting to children, has gained prominence, while contemporary or youth literature is underemphasised....All universities and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences protested this move. My interpretation is that this is an anti-professional revolution. (Interviewee 1)

Conversely, Poland's PiS government pursued a different strategy for centralising control over education. While it implemented significant changes to curricula and educational structures, the Polish context has retained a degree of local and institutional autonomy that Hungary lacks. During its tenure, PiS modified existing frameworks rather than imposing an entirely new system. For instance, the 2015 overhaul of the education system included reverting to an 8+4 schooling structure and shifting the school starting age back to seven while still allowing local governments and schools a level of operational independence. This distinction highlights that, while both governments prioritise central control, Hungary's approach has been more radical and comprehensive, facilitated by Fidesz's two-thirds parliamentary majority, which has enabled a swift and complete institutional overhaul with minimal institutional resistance.

Both countries have embedded ideological indoctrination within their educational policies, using schools as vehicles for their respective political narratives. In Hungary, the Fidesz government has emphasised

national history, culture, and values through a new national core curriculum, which foregrounds themes of nationalism and traditionalism in its detailed syllabi for each subject. This curriculum aims to cultivate a generation well-versed in Hungarian history, fostering loyalty to the state and its ruling party. The introduction of religious education and the expansion of church-operated schools further reinforce a Christian identity aligned with government ideology.

Similarly, in Poland, PiS restructured educational content to reflect its political worldview. Revisions to history curricula and the introduction of the “History and the Present” curriculum—which one professor interviewed (Interviewee 11) described as “propaganda posing as pedagogy”—aimed to instil a sense of Polish national identity while framing previous administrations as antagonistic to national interests. These ideological shifts extended beyond history classes, shaping the broader educational experience across subjects. However, while both governments promote ideological conformity, the Polish approach encountered greater resistance from civil society, teachers, and local authorities, leading to more contentious debates regarding the reforms’ scope.

Despite these shared goals, the methods of implementation differ significantly. In Hungary, aggressive centralisation and the removal of institutional safeguards have created a system in which local input is virtually non-existent, raising concerns about educational quality and equity. In contrast, Poland’s retention of a more decentralised educational structure allows local governments and schools to maintain a certain level of operational autonomy. While the PiS government’s educational changes were ideologically driven, they did not completely dismantle the entire framework of local governance. This distinction suggests that, although both governments prioritise control, their reforms have had markedly different outcomes—with Poland experiencing a more moderate impact on educational autonomy despite centralising certain policy aspects, such as regulating teacher salaries at the state level.

The responses to resistance from teachers and civil society further underscore the contrasting environments in which these educational policies unfold. In Hungary, the Fidesz government initially faced minimal resistance, largely due to its dominant parliamentary position and the effective silencing of opposition voices through the establishment of a Teachers’ Chamber based on mandatory membership. Consequently, the government has implemented reforms with little regard for public opinion or institutional checks. Conversely, Poland’s political landscape has proven more contentious, with the PiS government encountering substantial pushback from teachers’ unions, civil society organisations, and opposition parties. This resistance has created a complex interplay between policy implementation and public dissent, compelling the government to navigate an environment where educational reforms are continually contested.

Similarly to the field of education, cultural policies in Hungary and Poland under their respective governments reveal both parallels and divergences, particularly concerning their ideological underpinnings and the instrumental use of culture in shaping national identity. Both governments utilise culture as a tool for promoting nationalism and conservative values, albeit in ways that reflect their distinct political contexts and objectives.

In Hungary, Fidesz’s cultural policy measures often appear ideologically driven (Kristóf, 2017). However, some initiatives aim to enhance the quality of cultural production, improve public funding allocation, and increase access to cultural products. A notable example is the reform plan for popular music production adopted in 2021, which outlined objectives addressing challenges raised by industry professionals, such as

improving rehearsal space availability and concert halls in rural areas while also allocating public funds for music education and developing music studios. The plan has generally garnered support from observers and professionals for effectively integrating feedback from music industry interest groups.

In a related vein, the restructuring of public funds for film production under the supervision of Andrew G. Vajna, a Hungarian-born Hollywood producer, addressed significant concerns regarding the international marketability of Hungarian films. Serving as government commissioner for film production from 2011 until 2019, Vajna oversaw a dedicated fund that made the selection process more competitive and oriented toward anticipated popular reception and international success. This approach yielded notable achievements, including numerous festival nominations, two Academy Awards (in 2016 and 2017, respectively), and the rapid growth of Hungary's international film production sector (Valocikova, 2017). However, following Vajna's death in 2019, political pressures increasingly influenced film financing, resulting in a series of mediocre "historical movies" that reinterpret key episodes of Hungarian history from a revisionist perspective.

Despite positive developments in certain cultural sectors, most cultural spheres have been subordinated to the goals of ideological indoctrination (Bozóki, 2016; Kristóf, 2017). Nationalism serves as the prevailing ideological framework guiding cultural initiatives in Hungary, closely tied to the promotion of conservative values, particularly concerning family, gender, and authority. The Fidesz-led government has primarily targeted theatres and the literary scene in its self-declared "culture war," while classical and popular music have initially received less attention. Pressures to extend the culture war have intensified since 2018, following Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's declaration that "an era is determined by cultural trends, collective beliefs, and social customs. This is now the task we are faced with: We must embed the political system in a cultural era" (Orbán, 2018). Despite these efforts, Fidesz has struggled to connect with younger audiences, particularly in the realm of popular music, which is characterised by spontaneous, bottom-up dynamics that resist influence through institutional politics. As a journalist specialising in Hungarian popular music culture explained, they have mostly succeeded in co-opting older musicians:

One of the goals of the cultural policy of Fidesz is to reach young people; however, they never manage to use musicians who are popular among the youth. They mostly seduced those musicians who have accumulated lots of grievances, and had their careers ruined by the Communists before the democratic transition, by giving them prizes and state subventions. (Interviewee 14)

In Poland, PiS's cultural policies aligned closely with the broader nationalist and ethnocentric narrative of the administration. The PiS cabinets viewed culture instrumentally as a means to construct national identity, foster patriotism, and cultivate a sense of belonging (Kopeć, 2019). Given the intertwining of Polish national identity with Catholicism (Grzymała-Busse, 2015), PiS's cultural policies sought to promote traditional Catholic values while defending national identity against perceived threats from the left, the European Union, and "moral relativism." This framework embodied the politics of exclusion typical of illiberal regimes, establishing clear boundaries between "us" and "them," thereby stigmatising minority cultures, immigrants, and LGBTQI+ individuals.

Populism has significantly shaped PiS's cultural narrative, reflecting an anti-elitist stance and a push for folk and mass culture over elite artistic expressions. At the same time, despite its populist rhetoric, PiS has also

appealed to voters with higher levels of political knowledge, suggesting that its anti-elitism did not alienate “informed populist” voters (Stanley & Czeński, 2022). Culture served as a crucial element in PiS’s identity politics, with the past and collective memory becoming significant battlegrounds. PiS’s cultural policies were marked by historical revisionism and a martyrological vision of the nation’s history, invoking a specific mythology to control the present (Kotwas & Kubik, 2019; Kubik & Bernhard, 2014). This approach often depicted Poles as unilateral victims of World War II and the Holocaust while dismissing narratives that acknowledge any collaboration.

In its pursuit of centralisation and control, the PiS government reduced support for independent cultural enterprises, particularly civil society organisations and community activities misaligned with its ideological vision. Culture became increasingly subordinate to the state’s objectives, with government policies restricting civil society, a sector that had already been undermined by the pervasiveness of neoliberal frames among Polish civil society organisations even before PiS’s tenure (Jezińska, 2015). A closer examination of shifts in cultural financing reveals a centrally planned effort to build national identity through culture, primarily aimed at reinforcing a patriotic-religious identity aligned with PiS’s electoral interests (Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2022).

In summary, both Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland have utilised cultural policies to reinforce nationalist narratives and conservative values, albeit through different strategies and with varying degrees of success in transforming the cultural landscape. While both governments aimed to control cultural narratives, the effectiveness of these strategies has been mixed, with significant challenges remaining in redefining the cultural mainstream in both countries.

5. Measures Serving Hidden Educational and Cultural Policy Agendas in Hungary and Poland

The educational and cultural policies in Hungary and Poland under the Fidesz and PiS governments reveal how both countries employ reforms to serve underlying political goals, often consolidating political power while suppressing dissenting voices. Despite differing contexts and methods, a shared objective of exerting control over these sectors is evident in both countries.

In Hungary, the Fidesz government has implemented an extremely centralised education governance regime, aimed at consolidating political control over schools and even individual teachers. Since 2011, the appointment of school directors by the minister responsible for education has shifted from merit-based to loyalty-based selections, allowing for the replacement of many directors with individuals loyal to Fidesz and its ideology (Radó, 2022). This trend of politicising educational administration has extended beyond school management to research institutions and universities, particularly during the privatisation of public universities (Szent-Iványi & Tétényi, 2022).

Fidesz’s educational strategy is intertwined with a broader ideological agenda, which includes the preferential treatment of Christian churches within the education system. Various policies since 2010 have facilitated the takeover of public schools by religious institutions, operating under reduced public oversight. This privatisation is not driven by genuine demand for religious education; rather, it serves as a means of rewarding political allies and ensuring the regime’s dominance over educational content (Ercse & Radó, 2019; Radó, 2019). Financial

resources have been allocated preferentially to church-affiliated institutions, promoting their rapid expansion despite a general decline in interest in religious education.

The Fidesz government's use of financial control extends to discretionary funding for educational institutions. Such funding practices have created an environment where resources are allocated based on compliance with government directives, stifling institutional autonomy and fostering corruption among local educational leaders, who may prioritise political connections over professional performance. Additionally, repressive measures against dissent, exemplified by punitive legislation against teacher protests in 2022 and 2023, as well as the firing of several teachers and school directors, underscore the regime's efforts to maintain political control over the educational workforce.

Conversely, Poland's PiS government adopted a more incremental approach to educational reform, influenced by the absence of a supermajority in parliament. The primary mechanism of influence was the appointment of regional education superintendents by the minister of education, though their oversight remained limited. Attempts to enhance their powers through legislative efforts faced significant obstacles, including presidential vetoes and public resistance (Jakubowski, 2021). Although the PiS government sought to appoint loyalists to key positions, the decentralised nature of Polish educational governance persisted, hampering the government's efforts.

The alliance between PiS and the Catholic Church has been pivotal in shaping its educational agenda (Rónay, 2024). This partnership necessitated that the government continuously affirm its commitment to conservative values, often in response to demands from church leaders. As a result, educational policy increasingly focused on issues such as sexual education and national identity, reflecting the influence of religious conservatism on state initiatives. Furthermore, PiS sought to weaken opposition among educational stakeholders, as evidenced by the decline of the Solidarity Trade Union following backlash over salary negotiations during teacher strikes.

Fast-track legislative procedures enabled the PiS government to push through educational reforms, circumventing traditional consultation processes. This method facilitated the rapid implementation of policies with limited stakeholder input. Unlike in the case of Fidesz, however, the educational agenda of the PiS government did not appear to prioritise financial gains for party affiliates. While corruption existed at individual levels, systemic corruption related to educational policy decisions was less pronounced (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2019).

As in educational policies, the cultural strategies of both governments highlight their commitment to shaping national narratives through state control, particularly via elite replacement (Kristóf, 2017, 2021). Since 2010, Hungary's Fidesz government has sought to centralise institutions under direct governmental oversight while suppressing independent intellectuals. This approach has involved replacing cultural leaders with government loyalists, thereby promoting a national-conservative cultural doctrine (Humán Platform, 2020) and questioning the role of intellectuals in the regime (Szelényi & Mihályi, 2023).

In the theatre sector, the Fidesz government systematically replaced directors associated with left-liberal circles with loyal allies, impacting notable institutions such as the Hungarian National Theatre (Kristóf, 2017, 2021). The reshaping of the national literary canon has included integrating previously marginalised

conservative authors, including some anti-Semitic figures, into the mainstream (Pető, 2017). Furthermore, the government has funnelled public funding into alternative writing academies supporting right-wing authors, further consolidating state influence over literary production. A significant shift occurred in 2018 with the appointment of a loyalist to lead the Petőfi Literary Museum, an institution that gradually expanded state control over various cultural sectors and received considerable public funding. The transformation of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA) into a public body in 2011 further reinforced state influence, ensuring a steady influx of resources and facilitating the co-optation of previously autonomous artists (Nagy & Szarvas, 2021).

In music, the government's resource reallocation has favoured compliant leaders in institutions such as the Hungarian Academy of Music. Grants have been preferentially awarded to established artists loyal to the government, often at the expense of emerging talents (E. Barna & Patakfalvi-Czirják, 2022). The Kossuth Prize, a prestigious state award, has also favoured conservative artists, reinforcing the regime's dominance in the cultural sphere. As an expert on cultural policy explained, this has often led to a mismatch between current music industry trends and public media programming, which overrepresents "national rock" music and lyrics evoking patriotic sentiments (Interviewee 3). Through such arbitrary measures, Fidesz has managed to, at the same time, reallocate cultural funds to loyalists and marginalise independent intellectuals, while also creating alternative institutions where state control was previously insufficient.

In Poland, the PiS government elevated the profile of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage by appointing Minister Gliński as deputy prime minister, thereby making culture a focal point of their policies. The implementation of PiS's illiberal cultural policies involved indirect pressure, loyalty-based staff appointments, and fluctuating public funding, accompanied by censorship and the persecution of dissenting artists. Minister Gliński's tenure was marked by numerous cultural institutions subjugated to align with state interests, often resulting in unlawful leadership changes and significant discontent among employees. Consequently, contemporary arts were marginalised, while national heritage, folk culture, and religious values gained greater prominence. Institutions such as the National Museum in Warsaw and the Museum of Contemporary Art experienced declining public trust and reduced artist engagement due to these policies.

When direct control over an institution proved unfeasible, PiS either minimised funding or established alternative institutions to promote a nationalistic cultural narrative, for instance, the establishment of the Institute of Solidarity Heritage aimed to compete with the European Centre of Solidarity, while newly established entities such as the Pilecki Institute furthered the government's ideological stance. Additionally, PiS employed tactics such as blocking nominations for non-aligned staff and exerting indirect censorship through newly appointed leaders, who suppressed dissenting viewpoints. The persecution of artists, exemplified by a lawsuit against an artist who distributed an image of the Virgin Mary with a rainbow veil, illustrates the oppressive cultural climate that persisted between 2015 and 2023.

In summary, both Hungary and Poland demonstrate a commitment to controlling educational and cultural policies in ways that serve the ruling parties' interests. Hungary's Fidesz government relies on overt centralisation and political loyalty, rewarding allies with institutional leadership positions and public funding. In contrast, Poland's PiS government, operating within a more constrained political environment, pursued incremental changes while maintaining some degree of decentralised governance. The PiS government's cultural policies reflected systematic efforts to centralise control and reshape the cultural narrative, often

through the creation of new institutions. Despite their differences in approach, both nations exemplify how educational and cultural policies can be instrumentalised to consolidate political power.

6. Educational and Cultural Policymaking

6.1. *The Governance Context of Policymaking in Education and Culture*

The instruments employed in educational and cultural policymaking by illiberal governments largely depend on the governance context (Rindzevičiūtė, 2021). This may be influenced by stakeholder involvement in the policymaking process, rent-seeking dynamics, decision-making structures, policy implementation mechanisms, and the presence or absence of drivers of policy reform (Kingdon et al., 2014), as well as by the political-institutional framework and partisan dynamics (West & Nikolai, 2017). Building on the populist model of policymaking (Bartha et al., 2020), we anticipate a lack of stakeholder consultations (e.g., with policy experts and unions), heterodox and ad hoc policy initiatives, and an abundance of emotionally charged discursive governance.

In education policy, centralised governance systems typically rely on hard policy instruments, such as detailed regulations, discretionary decision-making powers delegated to de-concentrated government authorities for case-by-case decisions, and earmarked funding. Conversely, in decentralised systems, soft policy instruments dominate, aiming to influence the behaviour of autonomous lower-level actors. These soft instruments are typically procedural regulations, the clear definition of the decision-making competencies of different actors at various levels, financial and other incentives, outcome standards, and general-purpose grants (Radó, 2010). Comparative research on education systems in the UK and Germany has shown that decentralised systems generally foster innovation; however, their impact on educational achievement is mediated by socioeconomic disparities and systemic differences (West et al., 2010).

In light of these differences, the scope for selecting educational policy instruments varied significantly between the Fidesz and PiS governments. The autocratic-style governance of education requires specific structural conditions, which Fidesz, with its supermajority in parliament, was able to establish. In contrast, PiS, lacking the political mandate for deep constitutional reforms, was unable to override the highly institutionalised liberal policymaking framework. Consequently, PiS continued to operate within the decentralised education governance system inherited from previous administrations (Radó, 2021).

The contrasting governance contexts in the two countries are illustrated in Figure 1, which highlights the role of different decision-making levels in Poland compared to Hungary before and after the comprehensive education system overhaul (2011–2015). This structural disparity is the key underlying factor explaining the differences in the number and nature of systemic policy interventions implemented by the two parties, as well as the composition of their respective educational policy agendas.

While the educational governance contexts in the two countries diverged significantly (Neumann & Rudnicki, 2023), the latitude for illiberal cultural policies remained largely similar. This similarity arises from two key characteristics of the cultural sector. First, artistic freedom inherently grants cultural institutions a degree of autonomy, which can only be meaningfully curtailed in overtly repressive dictatorships. Second, the market for cultural products, even in less affluent countries, provides artists and institutions with opportunities for

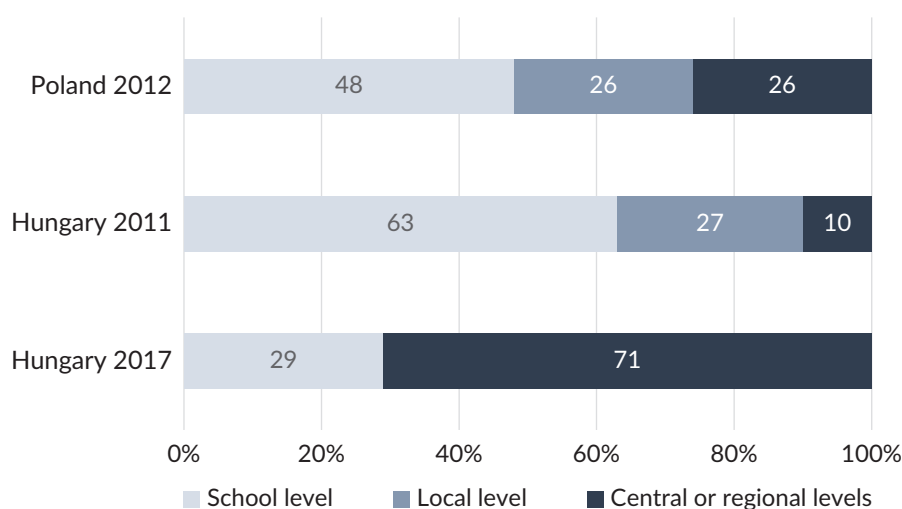


Figure 1. Proportion (%) of decisions associated with public lower secondary education taken at each level of government in Poland in 2012 and in Hungary before and after the 2011–2015 system reshuffle. Sources: OECD (2013, 2018).

survival, limiting direct government control. Unlike education, culture is not a public service funded almost exclusively by state resources and delivered by government-controlled institutions (Hillman-Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989). Consequently, the cultural policies of Fidesz and PiS relied on a similar policy toolkit. Both parties: (a) sought to capture cultural institutions, transforming them into ideological agents, and (b) controlled the allocation of public funds, prioritising ideological and political objectives—though this motive was more pronounced under Fidesz.

Nevertheless, both governments employed restrictive or even repressive measures to varying degrees, including prohibition, withdrawal of public funding, banning, and implicit or explicit threats of repercussions. However, the extent and intensity of these measures differed significantly between the two countries. In Poland, such instruments were rarely used and remained relatively limited in scope. In contrast, Fidesz adopted increasingly repressive measures over time. Notable examples include the forced expulsion of the Central European University from Hungary (Enyedi, 2018) and the dismissal of protesting teachers in 2022—drastic actions that had no parallel in Poland. Notably, both governments were careful to maintain the appearance of legality; any autocratic or repressive actions were implemented within legal frameworks, ensuring that they remained technically “lawful.”

6.2. Framing Illiberal Educational and Cultural Policy Narratives

The relationship between values-based political narratives and actual policy measures in education and culture is rarely direct. The realm that bridges values-based political narratives and actual educational and cultural policy action is the way governments frame the policy discourse. Different policy narratives can be well described by certain keywords they use. The very function of employing certain buzzwords is to create an easily communicated reference for those who subscribe to a certain value or political community, reinforcing cohesion within the group. Therefore, the use of buzzwords in policymaking can bypass the highly institutionalised liberal framework of policymaking by communicating directly with citizens (Bartha et al., 2020). The meaning of these buzzwords is rarely properly defined; in fact, defining them explicitly

would often be counterproductive. However, they are ideally suited to providing a values-based background for educational and cultural policies, guiding the selection of issues to be addressed, shaping their interpretation, and setting the direction and objectives of policies.

A distinct characteristic of the educational and cultural policy narratives of illiberal conservative parties is that they typically do not frame their policies in comparison to those of other political parties but rather in opposition to the “mainstream/liberal discourse” on educational and cultural policy, as represented and partially shaped by international organisations. The practice of constructing educational and cultural policies in opposition to the international mainstream is largely based on turning away from the liberal institutionalisation of policymaking. This is why, for example, a recent analysis of Fidesz’s social policies is also based on a comparison with the mainstream social policy discourse (Bartha et al., 2020).

In education, the “international mainstream” is shaped by cooperation frameworks such as the European Union, the OECD, UN organisations, the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, and other development and charity organisations. The educational policy narratives generated by cooperation within these institutional networks are deliberately values-neutral to ensure the involvement of governments, institutions, and experts with diverse normative backgrounds. Even though national policy discourses are shaped by various factors, including the domestic institutional context and the role of national self-perceptions (Martens & Niemann, 2013), they are also subject to diffusion from other countries, particularly those that are geographically close or culturally similar (Seitzer et al., 2022). Due to the internationalisation of educational policymaking, the educational policies of centrist political parties remain within the mainstream discursive framework. Even if different conservative, liberal, and leftist parties in the political centre determine their priorities and policy designs differently, their policies are all well understood within the linguistic and public policy frameworks created by the international mainstream discourse.

Illiberal conservative parties, however, tend to step outside these boundaries. When seeking alternative public policy frameworks that reflect their values, they do not create new ones but instead, return to the language and educational policy goals of previous eras. Their emphasis is typically not on creating a positive agenda but on rejecting the current mainstream. Based on various policy statements and interviews with experts, it appears that the educational policy narratives of illiberal parties in Hungary and Poland incorporate very similar elements. Based on these insights, the core tenets of mainstream policy narratives on education policy, as well as their illiberal counterparts are summarized in Table 1 below.

Although internationally recognised benchmarks and performance indicators are less clearly defined in the field of culture, Western European mainstream political actors tend to ground their cultural policies in a well-defined set of values. Illiberal actors, in turn, challenge these values with a counter-narrative. Table 2, akin to the “liberal” vs “illiberal” cultural policy ideal types proposed by Bonet and Zamorano (2021, p. 563), provides an overview of what core values mainstream liberal vs. illiberal cultural policy narratives are based upon, which also provides insights into the benchmarks such regimes use to internally assess the success of their policies. Notably, the relationship between value orientations and actual policies is more direct in culture than in education. This is because the mainstream international discourse on culture is less “neutral” and “technical” compared to that of education.

Table 1. Educational policy narratives (bridging political narratives with actual policies): Different key motives of the international mainstream and the illiberal conservative educational policy discourses.

Contemporary Mainstream Educational Policy Discourse	Illiberal Conservative Educational Policy Discourse
Focus on learning	Focus on teaching
Targeting skills/competencies	Targeting knowledge/literacy
Applying multiple cultural references	Applying national cultural traditions
Emphasis on individual adaptation to work requirements	Emphasis on the short-term “needs” of the labour market
Attention to children’s rights	The “protection” of children
The scope encompasses individual learning environment	Teachers-centred, the scope is limited to schools
Emphasis on global changes	Emphasis on national traditions
Emphasis on social skills/ethics	Emphasis on religion
Special attention to disadvantaged/vulnerable pupils	Special attention to “talented” (i.e., middle-class) pupils
Procedures for cooperation and innovation	Procedures for order and tradition
Emphasis on multilevel governance	Emphasis on central government

Table 2. Cultural policy narratives (bridging political narratives with actual policies): Different key motives of the international mainstream and the illiberal conservative cultural policy discourses.

Contemporary Mainstream Cultural Policy Discourse	Illiberal Conservative Cultural Policy Discourse
Diversity seen as a value	Uniformity seen as a value
Multiple cultural references	National cultural traditions
International	National
Innovation	Tradition
Independent/alternative/underground artists seen as an indispensable source of creativity and innovation	Popular culture seen as an asset for solidifying national community
Preference for culture that is universally relevant	Preference for art that focuses on/reinterprets national history
Focus on cross-regional cooperation	Focus on domestic/national market
Funding for small-scale, local events embedded in local community	Public funds disproportionately allocated to “national heroes” and major events
Focus on youth culture, helping new generations of artists	Focus on older, established artists

6.3. The Outcomes of Educational and Cultural Policies

6.3.1. Educational Policies

Despite similar ideological orientations, the educational policies of Hungary’s Fidesz government and Poland’s PiS government have had markedly different impacts on educational quality. While the Fidesz administration has caused substantial harm, PiS’s policies have been comparatively less damaging. However,

neither government has demonstrated a commitment to improving educational performance as measured by international standards.

To assess the priority given to education by these governments, it is essential to examine their manifestos. A study analysing 15 manifestos of Western European populist radical right parties questioned the notion that political centrism broadens policy agendas (Espeland Berg et al., 2023). Although coming to power typically elevates the priority of previously low-agenda issues, education remained a low priority for both Fidesz and PiS, as reflected in government funding levels.

Common indicators of educational funding include the ratio of funding to GDP and the share of education spending within the total state budget. The former measures the level of funding in relation to a country's financial capacity, while the latter indicates government priorities. Although both Hungary and Poland allocate significantly less to education than the OECD average, Hungary's shortfall is more pronounced, as Figure 2 shows. Two key factors contribute to this disparity: Poland's still-decentralised, formula-based normative financial allocation system, which maintains certain financial inertia (Busemeyer, 2008), and the fact that Polish teachers' unions retained their right to strike, enabling successful salary negotiations during the 2019 teacher strike.

A wide range of indicators can be applied to assess educational policy outcomes internationally. One significant indicator is the change in average reading literacy performance among 15-year-old students, as recorded by the OECD PISA surveys. Despite being only one of the OECD's many indicators of educational outcomes (Seitzer, 2023), PISA scores have played a major role in driving education policy changes in several countries (Martens & Niemann, 2013). Given their central influence on perceptions of education policy performance (Dobbins, 2014; Seitzer et al., 2021), the use of PISA scores as an evaluative tool is justified.

At the turn of the century, both Poland and Hungary performed below OECD averages. As shown in Figure 3, Poland experienced a sharp improvement following a successful education reform in 1998, eventually aligning with Scandinavian countries in key performance criteria. However, the 2022 PISA results

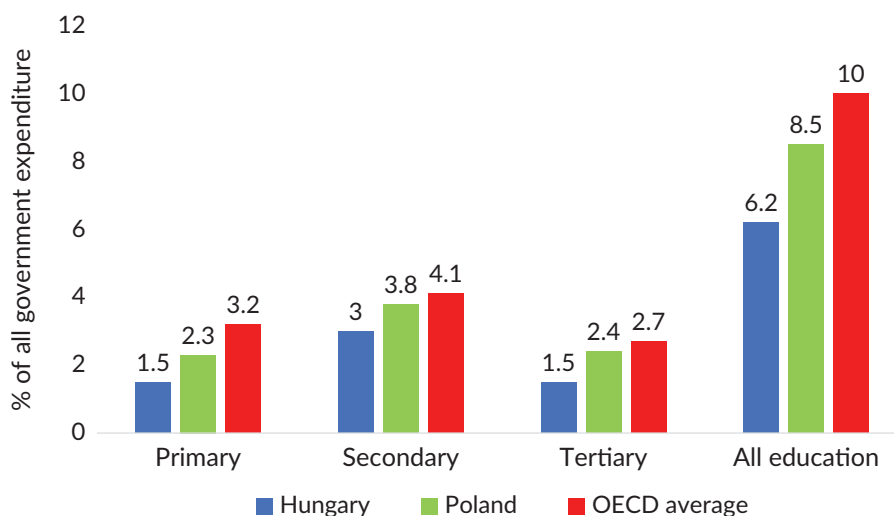


Figure 2. Government expenditure on education in Hungary and Poland as a percentage of government expenditure in 2020. Source: OECD (2023).

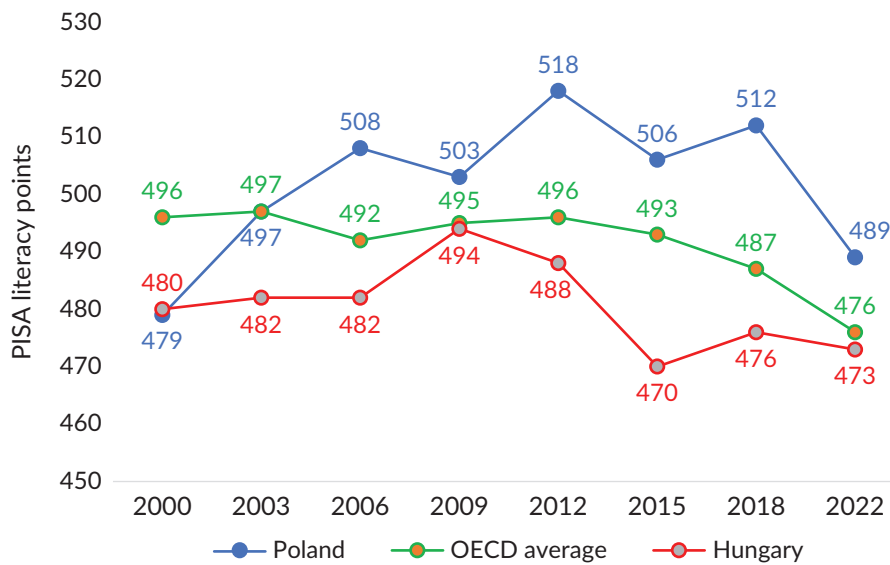


Figure 3. The change in reading literacy performance of 15-year-old students in Hungary and Poland between 2000 and 2022. Source: OECD (2022).

revealed a sharp decline in Polish students' reading performance, with scores dropping by 23 points. This decline is largely attributed to the impact of Covid-19 school closures, making it difficult to assess the extent of PiS's responsibility for the drop. Notably, the increasing social selectivity of Polish education reflects the policies implemented by PiS, as they reinstated a pre-reform school structure.

In contrast, Hungary experienced a slower improvement in educational performance until 2009, followed by a "transformational recession" (Kornai, 1993) due to the Fidesz government's radical restructuring efforts between 2011 and 2015. The almost complete education system reshuffle has significantly hindered educational outcomes, placing Hungary's education system far below the OECD average by 2015. Furthermore, according to the 2022 PISA results, Hungary now operates the most selective education system in Europe (Horn et al., 2016) and, even in global comparisons, demonstrates a severely diminished capacity to compensate for social disadvantages effectively.

As Figure 4 shows, at the turn of the century, both countries started at the same level in terms of the proportion of young individuals with higher education diplomas. However, Poland has made greater strides in aligning its educational attainment rates with those of Western Europe, largely due to its more effective primary and secondary education systems. While both countries experienced stagnation in higher education attainment rates during the 2010s, Poland's stagnation is primarily attributed to demographic factors beyond PiS's control. In contrast, Hungary's stagnation results from both demographic decline and the Fidesz government's restrictive higher education enrolment policies.

The effects of educational policies can also be assessed in relation to the ideological objectives of the ruling parties. While data for a precise evaluation remain scarce, existing research suggests that the influence of government-issued curricula on teaching content is often overestimated in Central and Eastern Europe (Halász, 2020). Likewise, the extent to which indoctrination shapes students' values and identities tends to be exaggerated. Although the suppression of critical thinking has been found to affect individuals' sense of agency (Costa-Font et al., 2024) and respect for authority (Diwan & Vartanova, 2020), these effects are

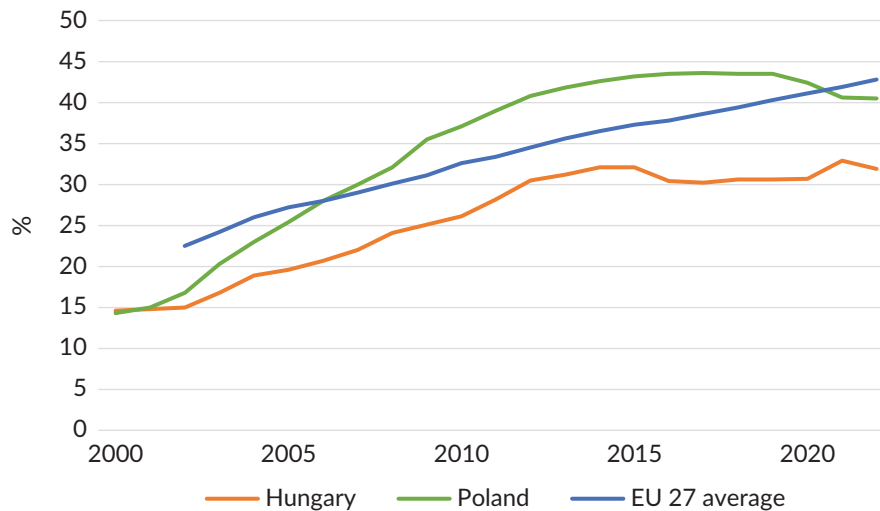


Figure 4. The change in the proportion of 30–34-year-olds with tertiary education attainment in Hungary and Poland between 2000 and 2022. Source: EUROSTAT (2024a).

significant only when comparing across different political regimes—i.e., between autocracies and democracies. Even though both Poland and Hungary experienced democratic backsliding during the observed period (Coppedge et al., 2024), it is unlikely that the limited policy instruments employed by their illiberal governments had a substantial impact on children’s socialisation within this timespan.

6.3.2. Cultural Policies

In contrast to education, there are fewer universally accepted indicators for assessing the effectiveness of cultural policies, as cultural performance is less quantifiable and more directly influenced by values. This section evaluates illiberal cultural policies using objective measures, including overall cultural expenditure, accessibility, and inclusiveness.

A comparison of cultural expenditure reveals two notable trends between Hungary and Poland. As Figures 5 and 6 show, between 2012 and 2022, Hungary’s average cultural spending was more than twice that of Poland (2.74% vs. 1.22% of the GDP). However, this discrepancy may stem from reporting anomalies, such as Poland’s exclusion of religious and community services from its cultural expenditure, as these are recorded under a different budget category. More significantly, while Hungary’s cultural spending nearly doubled by the late 2010s, Poland’s expenditure remained stable.

This suggests that the Fidesz government had greater latitude to implement its ideological agenda than PiS. However, the picture becomes more complex when examining subcategories of cultural expenditure. In Hungary, spending on “recreational and sporting services” grew significantly, almost tripling due to a focus on spectator sports such as football, supported by favourable tax incentives (Molnár & Whigham, 2021). This emphasis on sports funding is politically motivated, reflecting its significance under the Fidesz regime.

Despite these disparities, Hungary consistently allocated more resources to cultural services—such as theatre, film, music, literature, and fine arts—than Poland. Although both countries maintained relatively high levels of cultural expenditure compared to the European Union average (see Figure 7), Fidesz’s substantial investment

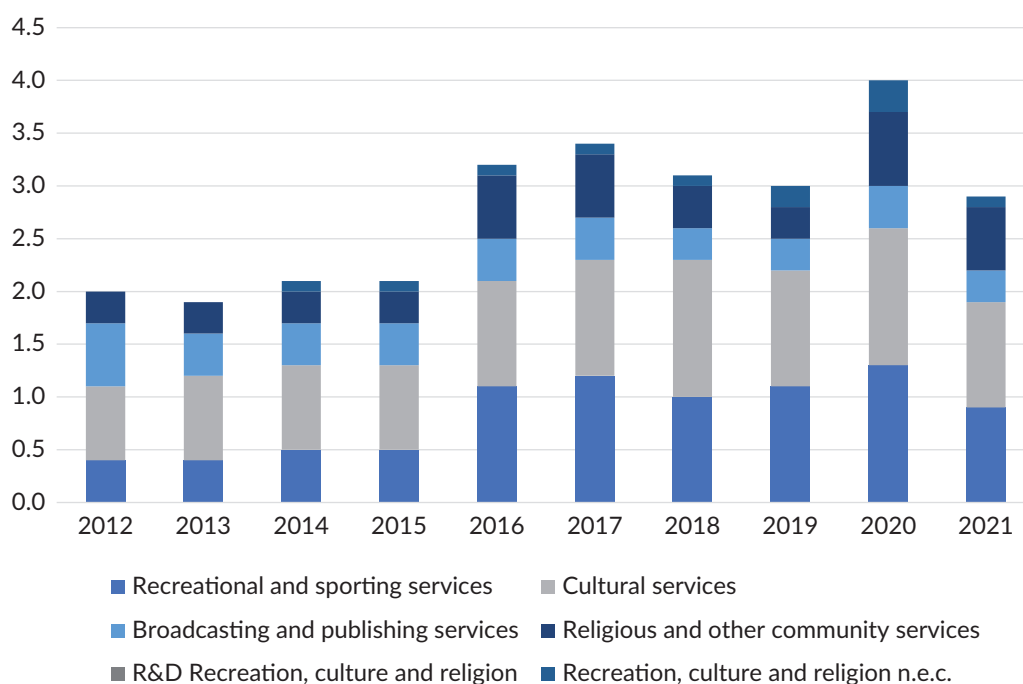


Figure 5. Culture and recreation spending as % of GDP in Hungary. Note: n.e.c. = not elsewhere classified. Source: EUROSTAT (2024b).

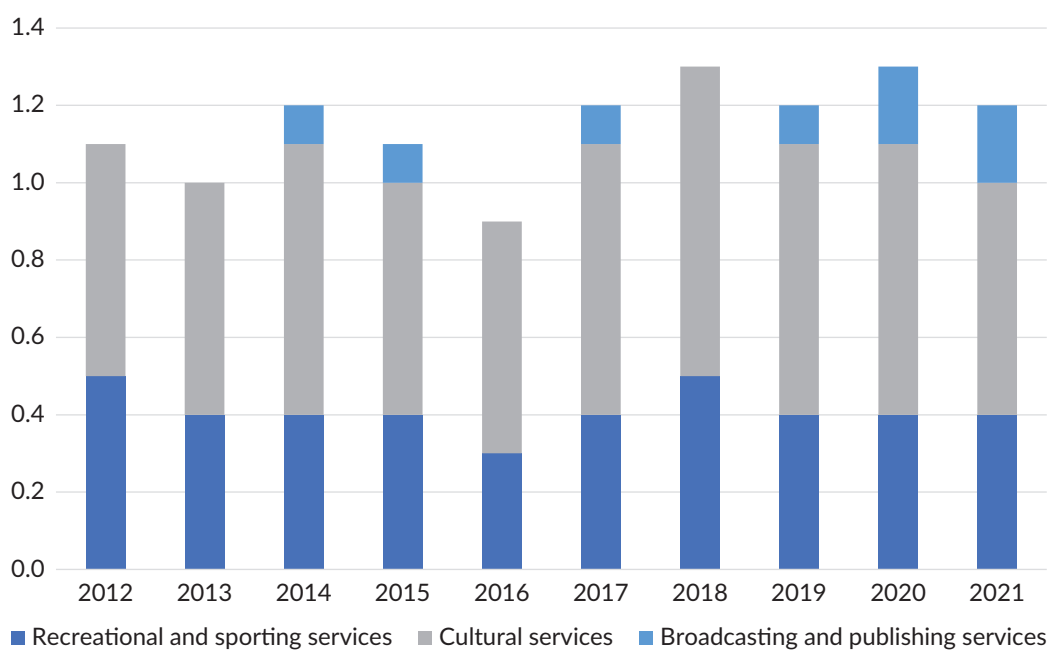


Figure 6. Culture and recreation spending as % of GDP in Poland. Source: EUROSTAT (2024b).

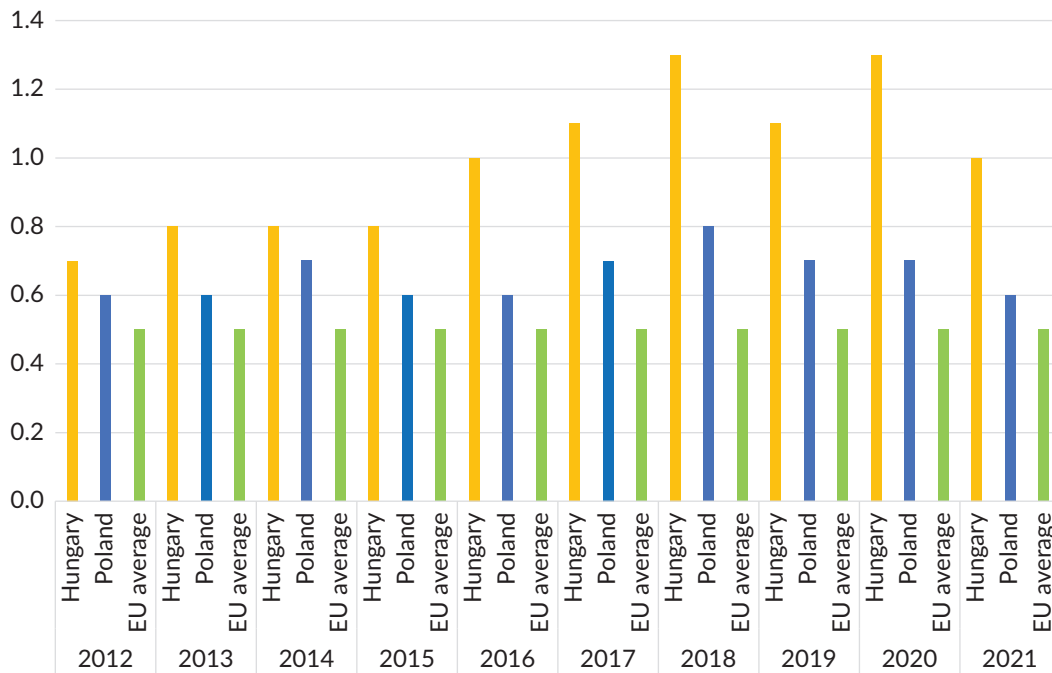


Figure 7. Total government spending on cultural services as a % of GDP in Hungary and Poland. Source: EUROSTAT (2024b).

facilitated a more radical restructuring of cultural institutions. In contrast, in Poland, public broadcasting was the only area with considerable spending increases.

However, government spending alone does not adequately measure the effectiveness of cultural policies, particularly in terms of accessibility, popularity, and inclusivity. Limited evidence suggests that cultural event attendance increased significantly in Hungary between 2010 and 2018, indicating that cultural consumption may correlate more closely with economic cycles than political agendas (R. E. Barna et al., 2019). As a cultural journalist explained, the most popular artists remained vocally critical of the government, which the government could only mitigate through arbitrary funding decisions:

It is not explicitly stated, but experience says that if you are very vocal and loudly criticise the government, you will most probably not get public funds. (Interviewee 14)

Nevertheless, as the recent commercial success of independent films in Hungary demonstrates, channelling public funds to support ideologically driven productions has had a limited impact on cultural tastes and consumer habits (“Fidesz advisor’s 7-billion-forint Petőfi film,” 2025). Further content analysis is needed to assess the extent of conservative or illiberal representation within cultural content.

Another indicator of cultural output could be the integration of national cultural scenes into international networks, as reflected by touring artists and major international events. Experts interviewed for this study agreed that demand for such events is driven largely by commercial rather than ideological factors, suggesting no significant signs of a “cultural boycott” against Hungary or Poland despite their illiberal tendencies. Moreover, Hungary’s political relevance in international conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine (Wagner et al., 2024), and the government’s anti-LGBTQ rhetoric may have even attracted artists to perform

in the country as a form of resistance. This was exemplified by the various demonstrations of pro-LGBTQ solidarity at the 2021 MTV EMA Awards held in Budapest (Gallagher, 2021).

In conclusion, the reallocation of public resources and the institutional takeover for ideological indoctrination have had a limited impact on cultural output and consumption in Hungary and Poland. However, developments such as the 2023 takeover of Hungary's largest book publisher by a pro-government think-tank merit close scrutiny, as a concentrated market share could facilitate a more significant push for an illiberal narrative in popular culture.

7. Conclusions

The political narratives of illiberal parties in Europe, particularly in Hungary and Poland, share a core set of ideological values, including conservatism, nationalism, religiosity, anti-pluralist majoritarianism, and authoritarianism. This article aimed to systematise their impact on two previously understudied areas: educational and cultural policy. While the foundational ideologies are similar, the specific compositions of these narratives are shaped by the unique cultural and political contexts of each country.

In analysing the educational policies of Hungary's Fidesz government and Poland's PiS government, a distinction emerges between overt and covert agendas. Hungary's educational policies are characterised by a pronounced push for central government control and the dismantling of institutional autonomy, reflecting a radical concentration of power. Conversely, Poland's PiS pursues a more populist approach, shaped by the limitations of its parliamentary majority, resulting in a more cautious strategy for power consolidation. Genuine educational policy interventions addressing pressing issues have been scarce in both countries. However, as hypothesised, signs of ideological indoctrination have surfaced to a greater extent in Poland.

In cultural policy, the agendas also diverge. Both countries utilise cultural policies to reinforce nationalism and cultural conservatism, often leveraging public funding into tools for promoting government-sanctioned values. Since 2018, Hungary's Fidesz government has intensified cultural conflicts, while PiS has similarly emphasised patriotic identity intertwined with Catholicism. This reflects both governments' tendencies to capture cultural institutions and create alternative cultural elites. However, Fidesz has viewed culture primarily as a domain for the reallocation of resources and institutions, serving clientelistic purposes.

A crucial covert element in Hungary's educational policy is the overt administrative centralisation aimed at exerting political control over educational actors, facilitating the establishment of an autocratic regime. This became particularly evident in 2022, with repressive measures against dissenting teachers and school directors. In Poland, the incremental concentration of power is more closely aligned with advancing the ideological goals of the Catholic Church, given the government's weaker political mandate. Thus, while Hungary's educational policies prioritise power concentration and elite replacement, those of PiS in Poland focused on advancing ideological agendas.

Despite similarities in ideological foundations, the Fidesz and PiS governments have differed markedly in their governance structures for education. Hungary's autocratic-style governance, bolstered by a parliamentary supermajority, has enabled significant systemic institutional changes, whereas PiS largely operated within an inherited decentralised system, making only incremental adjustments. However, the

cultural policy environments in both countries are relatively similar, shaped more by artistic freedom and market dynamics, with efforts to channel public funds toward ideologically aligned institutions.

Regarding dominant policy narratives, both governments have shifted away from international norms, instead appealing to the emotions and beliefs of their constituencies. This shift has led to the prioritisation of propaganda over evidence-based analysis, as both parties have exercised varying degrees of control over media narratives.

In terms of outcomes, Hungary's systemic overhaul has negatively affected the quality and equity of its education system, whereas Poland has largely maintained the positive effects of earlier reforms due to the greater autonomy retained by institutions within a more decentralised structure. In cultural policy, while both governments have prioritised national identity and memory politics, Fidesz has invested significantly more resources, enabling a more radical restructuring of cultural institutions than in Poland. However, the real impact of cultural policies on consumption appears to be shaped more by economic factors than political agendas, suggesting that the redirection of public resources has had limited effects on cultural preferences in both countries.

This research has several limitations. First, the reliance on interview data may have introduced biases into our analysis, both due to the selection of interviewees and the subjectivity or potential inaccuracies of their accounts. However, we argue that this limitation is offset by the direct insights gained from affected stakeholders. Second, trends following the change of government in Poland in late 2023 have partially reversed, raising questions about whether ideological influence in these policy areas is unique to illiberal governments. Third, the indicators used to gauge policy outcomes provide only a snapshot; they are not designed to measure the long-term effects of such policies on equity or cultural diversity nor to imply causality. Further research could employ models incorporating a broader range of quantitative indicators and longer time series to validate these findings. Finally, the idiosyncratic features of the PiS and Fidesz governments limit the generalisability of these results beyond the Central and Eastern Europe region and post-communist European countries.

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Conflict of Interests

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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