

## Polarization and Democracy in Central Europe

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### Abstract

This article examines the dual role of polarization in fostering political mobilization for and against democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. Populist movements in this region often drive democratic decline, yet, notable cases, such as electoral victories in Czechia (2021) and Poland (2023), suggest that civil society can counter these trends. Following Schedler (2023), we perceive polarization as a fundamental democratic conflict about democratic norms and values. This study investigated how varying forms of polarization—ideological, affective, intransigent, and partisan sorting—affected the mobilization dynamics for and against democracy. We highlight that polarization affected mobilization for democracy more strongly than mobilization for autocracy—i.e., civil society successfully mobilized against populism. In a critical case study of limited polarized pluralism in the 2023 Czechia presidential election between populist and anti-populist candidates, affective and partisan sorting polarization were the strongest predictors of populist support, with anger at the political situation boosting votes for the populist candidate. At the same time, pro-Ukrainian stances drove support for the anti-populist candidate. Our findings revealed that affective polarization and partisan sorting significantly shaped mobilization outcomes, thereby impacting democratic resilience and decay. By distinguishing between types of polarization, this study enhances the understanding of their distinct roles in political mobilization, thus underscoring that while polarization can threaten democracy, certain forms can also strengthen civic mobilization against populist movements.

### Keywords

affective polarization; Central and Eastern Europe; democratic resilience; electoral mobilization; populism

## 1. Introduction

The rise of populism across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), specifically within the Visegrád Four (V4) countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—has marked a significant shift in the region’s political landscape. Leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Andrej Babiš in Czechia, and Igor Matovič and Robert Fico in Slovakia have capitalized on populist sentiments by challenging established norms of liberal democracy. Populism reshapes political discourse and results in societal mobilization and polarization (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022).

Polarization is an extraordinary democratic conflict that is fundamentally different from ordinary political disagreements (Schedler, 2023)—it poses significant risks to democracy by highlighting the tension between democratic principles and partisan interests (Svolik, 2019). High levels of polarization can degrade the quality of democracy through the erosion of trust and democratic norms and principles (Schedler, 2023; Svolik, 2019; Valentim & Dinas, 2024). On a theoretical level, two approaches to polarization dominate scholarly research: the cluster-analytical approach focuses on the study of attitudinal clustering, policy differences, and ideological distribution, while the conflict-analytical approach focuses explicitly on political confrontation and conflict dynamics in the public sphere (Schedler, 2023).

Scholars have particularly focused on two main types of polarization within the cluster-analytical approach: affective and ideological polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012). Affective polarization involves positive feelings toward the in-group and negative feelings toward the out-group, and it is driven by partisanship as a social identity (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019). Ideological polarization refers to the widening gap in policy preferences and ideological beliefs among political parties or the electorate (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). It is measured by the dispersion of policy positions and the extremity of viewpoints (cf. on a left-right spectrum: Layman et al., 2006; on identity: Guasti & Bustikova, 2023).

Recent studies have added two additional types of polarization that could be somewhat more loosely subsumed under Schedler’s conflict-analytical approach: intransigent and partisan sorting. Intransigent polarization is characterized by a refusal to engage or compromise with political adversaries (Rostbøll, 2025). Partisan sorting is defined as the internal homogeneity of parties and is linked to ideological polarization (Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2018). Intransigent polarization and partisan sorting can also be linked to Sartori’s original definition of polarization as the “presence of openly antidemocratic parties” (Schedler, 2023, p. 337).

The existing literature on polarization primarily focuses on its effects in two-party systems and does not fully address the complexities of multi-party systems in Western Europe (important exceptions: Gidron et al., 2023; Hartevelt & Wagner, 2023; Wagner, 2021) and in CEE (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021; Vachudova, 2019). This article fills this gap by applying the four types of polarization to the CEE region. It provides a nuanced analysis of how these different types of polarization interact with illiberal and pro-democratic mobilization, thereby offering fresh insights into the electoral implications of polarization. The study highlights the unique ways polarization affects the rise of populist movements and their electoral defeat.

The key question this article addresses relates to the dual role of societal mobilization in fostering and resisting democratic decay under the populist zeitgeist. Despite the general trend toward democratic decline

under populist rule in CEE, there have been notable exceptions wherein civil society has successfully pushed back against autocratic tendencies, which suggests a complex interplay between different societal forces. What mechanisms drive these divergent outcomes? Specifically, how do varying forms of societal polarization— affective, ideological, intransigent, and partisan sorting— influence the mobilization for or against liberal democracy in the populist context?

We leveraged comparative data from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2024) and unique quasi-experimental data from the 2023 Czech presidential election (Tabery et al., 2024) to answer these questions. The findings revealed that affective polarization, which is characterized by high levels of political anger and partisan sorting, particularly related to issues such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is critical for understanding the support for populism. These factors significantly predicted voter preferences, with affective polarization correlating strongly with support for the populist candidate. In contrast, partisan sorting, especially related to pro-Ukrainian stances, predicted support for the anti-populist candidate.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 develops a conceptual framework to facilitate understanding of the relationship between the four types of polarization and societal mobilization. Section 3 presents our data and method and Section 4 presents a comparative analysis of the V4 by detailing the evolution and extent of polarization across these countries. It also offers an in-depth case study of Czechia's 2023 presidential election via a quasi-experimental perspective on the specific types of polarization that played roles in that election. The concluding section discusses two potential trajectories for CEE democracies— democratic decay versus resilience— and highlights the conditions under which civil society can act as a bulwark against populism.

## 2. Polarization and Democracy in the CEE

In political science, the dominant understanding of polarization is that it represents an ideological distance between two or more political actors or between different segments of the electorate; it is often characterized by increasing animosity toward out-groups (Iyengar et al., 2012). However, in line with Schedler (2023), we understand polarization not merely as heightened ideological disagreement but as an extraordinary conflict involving political intolerance and the erosion of basic democratic trust. In this understanding, polarization poses an inherent vulnerability to democratic systems and highlights the tension between democratic principles and partisan interests (Svolik, 2019). High levels of polarization can degrade the quality of democracy (Svolik, 2019; Valentim & Dinas, 2024), trust (Schedler, 2023), and the willingness to reach compromise (Rostbøll, 2025). They can also lead to instability, dysfunctionality, and government inefficiency (Sartori, 2005).

In the current populist climate, negative attitudes toward out-groups have intensified globally and frequently eclipse positive feelings toward in-groups (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Two types of polarization have garnered significant scholarly attention. The first is affective polarization, which involves positive feelings toward one's own group and negative feelings toward opposing groups. It is driven by partisanship as a social identity (Iyengar et al., 2019). While affective polarization has been extensively studied in the United States bipartisan context, it is also increasingly recognized in multiparty systems (Gidron et al., 2023; Ward & Tavits, 2019).

Applying the concept of affective polarization to multiparty systems requires certain adjustments (Gidron et al., 2019; Wagner, 2021). Out-group animosity is typically directed toward a single opposing party in two-party systems. However, in multiparty systems, these feelings are distributed among several parties, and not all out-groups are viewed with the same degree of negativity. For instance, a supporter of Germany's Christian Democratic Party may perceive different levels of out-group distance from the Social Democratic Party (coalition partner), the Greens, and the Alternative for Germany (an opposition party, a mainstream liberal, and the other a populist radical-right party). Additionally, the size and influence of parties vary in a multiparty system, particularly as the political landscape becomes increasingly fragmented in Western democracies (Valentim & Dinas, 2024).

Affective polarization is distinct from ideological polarization, which is the second main type of polarization. Ideological polarization refers to the widening gap in terms of policy preferences and ideological beliefs among political parties or the electorate (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). It is measured by the dispersion of policy positions and the extremity of viewpoints on a left–right spectrum (Layman et al., 2006). This type of polarization increasingly includes a divide between cultural conservatism and ethnic nationalism on the one hand and liberal norms, such as minority rights, on the other (Bustikova, 2019; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Vachudova, 2019).

When combined, ideological and affective polarization—marked by significant ideological distance and negative perceptions of out-groups—can be exploited by political actors seeking power through deepening political divisions. Political opponents are portrayed as existential threats that necessitate a strong leader who operates without accountability to fulfill the “will of the people” while destroying democracy along the way (Schedler, 2023; Svobik, 2019).

In Sartori's original definition, antidemocratic forces fundamentally oppose the existing democratic order (Bosco & Verney, 2020) and its core principles—namely, the alteration in power, constructive engagement with political opponents, and the necessity of compromise (cf. Schedler, 2023). However, in Sartori's latter refinement of the concept, polarization occurs through severe, elite-driven ideological conflict and mutual delegitimizing between mainstream and anti-system parties (Sartori, 2005, as cited in Bosco & Verney, 2020). Christian Rostbøll (2025) suggested that this dynamic represents a distinct form of intransigent polarization that is characterized by a refusal to listen to or accommodate political adversaries. According to Rostbøll (2025), while ideological polarization pertains to what people believe, intransigent polarization concerns the intensity of their beliefs as shaped by political elites.

Intransigent polarization concerns the depth of conviction and the acceptable methods for achieving political goals. For illiberal antidemocratic forces, an existential threat justifies any means necessary, including violence (Sartori, 2005). Compromise becomes irrelevant and politics a zero-sum game, with direct democracy serving as its ultimate expression—which reflects the unrestrained will of the majority without protection for minorities. Thus, as Schedler in his adaptation of Sartori's concept of polarized pluralism highlighted, the ambiguity of contemporary illiberal forces lies in their claim of democratic legitimacy and is driven by perceived threats and the violation of democratic norms (Schedler, 2023).

Rostbøll (2025) and Mason (2018) also perceived partisan sorting as a distinct form of polarization. Partisan sorting is defined as the internal homogeneity of parties and is linked to ideological polarization. Partisan

identity becomes connected to particular social identities or cleavages in partisan sorting. This idea again resonates with the Manichean view of populism as the politics of “pure people” against “corrupt elites” (Mudde, 2004). Populist partisan sorting thus excludes parts of the population from the people based on their social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, or social class, cf. Canovan, 1999). Partisan sorting results in clearer party boundaries and more consistent policy stances within parties, thereby enhancing both ideological and affective polarization (Levendusky, 2009).

### **2.1. The Consequences of Polarization**

To understand the danger polarization represents for democracy, we need to assess the degree of polarization and its type, size, and temporal context (Rostbøll, 2025; cf. Sartori, 2005; Schedler, 2023). For example, the literature has shown that aside from its negative effects on democratic norms and social trust, affective polarization during electoral campaigns might positively influence electoral turnout, thus increasing political inclusion (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023; Wagner, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019).

Polarization is detrimental to democratic norms, stability, trust, and governance (Sartori, 2005; Schedler, 2023). A high degree of both affective and intransigent polarization can contribute to democratic backsliding by eroding trust in institutions and processes (Svolik, 2019). In a highly polarized political environment, particularly during electoral campaigns, it becomes easier for parties and candidates to dismiss unfavorable outcomes as illegitimate or “stolen.” Indeed, democracy relies on a collective commitment to agreed-upon rules and procedures. Crucially, the defining moment in an election is not the acceptance of victory by the winning side but the acceptance of defeat by the losing side. This act signals a commitment to democratic norms and an understanding that democracy is about upholding democratic values and ensuring the integrity of the democratic process.

However, the main aim of an election is not only participation and inclusion but the selection of representatives who can govern. In the legislative arena, affective polarization thus hinders cooperation, negotiation, deliberation, decision-making, and legislating. The basic premise of representative parliamentary democracy is not only minority protection but also the majority’s ability to govern (Ferreira da Silva & Garzia, 2024; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2025). Thus, a high degree of polarization undermines the ability to govern (Sartori, 2005). In governance and policymaking, therefore, high levels of polarization can lead to legislative gridlock and reduced policy responsiveness because political parties are less capable of and less willing to compromise (McCarty et al., 2016). This effect is particularly pertinent in multiparty systems, in which governing often requires building governing coalitions.

Finally, polarization spills from the political arena to the public sphere (Rostbøll, 2025; Schedler, 2023). The public sphere is the arena where, through the engagement of civil society, problems and preferences are discovered, articulated, and contested (Cohen & Arato, 1992). The public sphere relies on the principles of mutual respect and enlightened understanding (Rostbøll, 2025). Elite-driven polarization is detrimental to these basic democratic norms. Thus, it fractures societal cohesion and increases societal tensions and conflicts (Sartori, 2005; Schedler, 2023).

Understanding the types of polarization is the first step in assessing its challenges and finding ways to address them.

## 2.2. *The Impact of CEE Populism on Polarization and Mobilization For and Against Democracy*

The rise of populist movements in CEE has intensified political polarization and created a complex mobilization dynamic both for democracy and for autocracy. In the V4, populist leaders have effectively exploited societal dissatisfaction with traditional political elites by portraying themselves as the genuine representatives of the people. This approach has heightened affective polarization by framing political discourse as a dichotomy between a pure virtuous populace and a corrupt elite. Such rhetoric deepens ideological divides and fosters hostility toward out-groups, including political opponents, independent institutions, minority groups, and civil society.

Populist leaders in the V4 countries often capitalize on polarization to strengthen their hold on power. By framing their opponents as existential threats, they justify undermining democratic norms and institutions, including the judiciary and the media. The narrative of “existential threat” fosters a political environment in which compromise is seen as betrayal, and democratic checks and balances are viewed as obstacles to the will of the people. This dynamic exacerbates affective, ideological, and intransigent polarization and partisan sorting.

Conversely, the populist governance in the V4 countries has sparked a robust counter-mobilization among pro-democracy forces. Civil society groups, independent media, and opposition parties have rallied against the erosion of democratic norms and the concentration of power (cf. Sartori, 2005). For instance, in Poland, significant public demonstrations have emerged in response to governmental efforts to undermine judicial independence, while in Hungary, protests have been organized against media control and restrictions on academic freedoms. In Czechia, the civil society group Million Moments for Democracy organized large-scale demonstrations around the country in support of the rule of law and liberal democracy. However, mobilization against populism deepens societal polarization.

In a study of 13 Western democracies, Ferreira da Silva and Garzia (2024) showed that affective polarization can increase electoral turnout, but its effects depend on whether it fosters democratic competition or merely fuels political hostility. The dual mobilization in CEE—populists’ consolidation of power through mobilizing via polarizing tactics and pro-democracy groups mobilizing to resist these efforts—underscores the CEE countries’ deepening societal polarization, which permeates both the political and the public spheres and fuels political hostility. The ideological rift, which is characterized by increasingly incompatible worldviews between populist and non-populist elites and voters, intensified animosity, and intransigent polarization, thus represents an extraordinary democratic conflict that threatens a regime’s stability and undermines consensus on democratic norms and procedures (Schedler, 2023). The CEE region thus provides a critical and understudied case study of the global trend of democratic backsliding by illustrating how polarization can both fuel authoritarian tendencies and galvanize democratic resistance. As populist actors heighten conflict and redraw normative boundaries, non-populist forces are increasingly compelled to adopt a distinctly anti-populist position, thereby further entrenching the polarized divide (cf. Kluknavská & Havlík, 2024).

## 3. Data, Cases, and Methods

This article delves into the impact of polarization on democracy by specifically focusing on the V4 countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. In all four countries, populists have held power during the last decade

(Zulianello, 2020), and democratic erosion is a pressing concern (Coppedge et al., 2024). We proceeded in two steps: First, in a comparative analysis, we scrutinized the relationship between polarization and mobilization for and against democracy using linear regression on V-Dem expert data. Second, we zoomed in on the nature of polarization using unique Czech attitudinal data.

Since the onset of populism in 2010, the quality of democracy has decreased in all the V4 countries under study (see Coppedge et al., 2024). The Bertelsmann Transformation Index now ranks Czechia and Slovakia as democracies in consolidation (with declines of 0.60 and 0.75 points, respectively) and Hungary as a defective democracy (with a decline of 2.95 points). Poland is on the verge of defective democracy (with a decline of 1.60 points). Hungary experienced the most significant decline. Poland also declined significantly, while Czechia and Slovakia experienced a lesser decline.

Our methodological approach integrated elements from both the cluster-analytical (attitudinal polarization data) and conflict-analytical (mobilization events) approaches, as outlined by Schedler (2023), to capture the full complexity of polarization's dynamics and its impact on mobilization for and against democracy. This study analyzed societal polarization and mobilization for and against democracy in the V4 from the onset of populism in 2010 (i.e., the return of Viktor Orbán to power in Hungary) to 2023. A comparison across these four CEE countries—where democracy has declined since the onset of populism—provides a coherent framework for understanding how polarization interacts with different institutional contexts and trajectories. We built on most-similar systems design because these CEE countries share post-communist transition experiences, rapid democratization, party system volatility, European integration as a driver of democratization, and weak party identification and low trust in institutions (cf. Bértoa & Enyedi, 2021; Grotz & Weber, 2025). This design helped us assess the variations in outcomes—i.e., how polarization manifested differently in varying political settings—and explain why Poland's polarization led to mass mobilization, Hungary's to autocratization, and Czechia's to fragmentation, but not democratic crisis.

We showed the effects of polarization at the level of society ( $v2smpolsoc$ ) on two concurrent types of mobilization—for democracy ( $v2cademmob$ ) and autocracy ( $v2caautmob$ ). It is relevant to note that the variable on polarization had to overcome a transformation of inversion. While this variable had its real peak (the most polarized) at 0, other variables were reported by a different logic. Accordingly, we transformed this variable by  $transformed = v2smpolsoc - 4$ . As control variables, we utilized the GDP per capita ( $e\_gdppc$ ) and index of liberal democracy ( $v2x\_polyarchy$ ) to cover the as-usual determinants of polarization at the state levels.

In the second step, we switched to attitudinal data to analyze the nature and types of polarization in Czechia. Czechia occupies a distinctive position within the CEE region in terms of polarization. Unlike Poland and Hungary, where polarization has become structurally embedded in electoral and institutional dynamics, Czechia represents a highly fragmented but still competitive democracy—in Sartori's terms, Czechia represents the case of limited but polarized pluralism (Sartori, 2005). This makes it a crucial case (Gerring, 2009) for testing whether polarization necessarily leads to democratic erosion or whether its effects are mediated by other aspects, including electoral system design and public opinion dynamics. The availability of extensive survey data for Czechia was thus an analytical strength of the study because it enabled us to understand polarization at the mass level in the CEE region (cf. Ferreira da Silva & Garzia, 2024 for a study on 13 Western European countries). This methodological choice aligned with the recent emphasis on mass-level attitudinal shifts as key for explaining democratic backsliding (Schedler, 2021).



### 3.1. Data and Operationalization

For the purpose of comparative analysis, V-Dem data offers two polarization measures that combine ideological and affective polarization. We selected the measure of societal polarization to analyze how societal mobilization for and against democracy interacted with polarization. Polarization was measured on a reversed ordinal scale ranging from *serious polarization* (0) to *no polarization* (4). Both mobilizations for democracy and autocracy were on an ordinal scale ranging from *virtually no events* (0) to *many large-scale events* (4).

For the first part of the analysis, we implemented the multivariate linear regression technique with polarization as an independent variable and two types of mobilization as dependent variables in two separate models. The basic relationship was structured as follows.

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \text{GDP} + \text{LDI}$$

For the empirical analysis of Czechia, we utilized data collected by SYRI (The National Institute for Research on Socioeconomic Impacts of Diseases and Systemic Risks) in January 2021 through questionnaires administered to a representative sample of 951 respondents. The questionnaire included data on 286 relevant variables, from which we selected eight that aligned with the given research goals.

Our analysis considered the four distinct subtypes of polarization as defined by Rostbøll (2025): affective, ideological, intransigent, and partisan sorting. To ensure the quality of the data modeling, we removed incomplete rows-as-responses and answers marked as “I do not know” at both sides of the causal chain, which resulted in a final dataset of 556 observations. In all of the figures, 0 represented the absolute position for supporting anti-populist candidate Petr Pavel, and 1 represented support for populist candidate Andrej Babiš. We operationalized the attitudes toward the Czech government’s support for Ukraine as partisan sorting rather than ideological polarization because, in the specific context of the 2023 presidential election, these attitudes were directly aligned with distinct partisan identities. This operational choice reflected the clear alignment of partisan groups around Ukraine policy, which effectively sorted the respondents into distinct political camps.

Given the context of our study—the struggle between populism and anti-populism in the 2023 Czech presidential election—we found that crucial aspects of affective polarization were driven by positions related to worldviews rather than directly by ideological disparities. The best indicator of this was the question regarding feelings of anger about the political situation in the country. This sentiment was paradigmatically recognized as being linked with populism (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019). This connection has been confirmed by research in CEE as well (Frič & Gyárfášová, 2019). The 2023 election followed a significant wave of unprecedented anti-establishment mobilization, which the populist candidate Andrej Babiš sought to instrumentalize (Michal & Guasti, 2023). Consequently, we considered the following survey questions: “Generally, what are your feelings about the direction of events in the Czech Republic? When you think about the political and social developments in our country, to what extent does it provoke anger in you?” as representative of affective polarization. The responses were measured on a scale ranging from *no anger* to *high anger*.



H1: Higher levels of affective polarization (i.e., stronger anger about the state's political situation) correlate with increased support for a populist candidate.

In our analysis, ideological polarization was proxied by the respondents' declared current support for specific political parties. Parties function as key vehicles of ideological representation, which made this approach able to capture the internal link between these unitary actors and their supporters. Ideological polarization is traditionally measured by examining the extent of ideological distance or dispersion between political parties (Dalton, 2021; Sartori, 2005) as well as among individuals and groups. While elite polarization focuses on the positions of political parties and members of parliaments, ideological polarization at the mass level captures citizens' ideological self-placement or policy preference. Herein, we focus on mass-level ideological polarization by using the perspectives of each party's supporters. It is important to note that the ANO movement (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011) provided the campaign base for candidate Babiš, whereas Petr Pavel ran as an independent candidate with external backing from ODS (Civic Democratic Party), TOP 09 (Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09), KDU-ČSL (Christian and Democratic Union—Czechoslovak People's Party), STAN (Mayors and Independents), the Pirate Party, and the Green Party. In the Czech political landscape, these parties are regarded as moderate, while SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy) is classified as radical right and KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia) as radical left. We retained the respondents' original answers because some expressed a stronger affinity for anti-populist party alliances—SPOLU (ODS, TOP 09, and KDU-ČSL) and PirSTAN (Pirate Party and STAN)—while others identified with single parties (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). We centered our analysis on the following question: "Which political party would you vote for if national elections were held now?"

H2: A higher level of ideological polarization (i.e., a greater variance between ideological camps) significantly increases the likelihood of voting for a populist candidate.

Referring to Rostbøll (2025), we understand intransigent polarization as being led by a reluctance to compromise with ideological opponents, imaging various types of cleavages, not necessarily based on socioeconomic pillars. This political behavior should be detectable in general attitudes toward democracy: support for a parliamentary dominant role within a representative democracy means the absence of anti-system thinking, whereas demand for a strong leader suggests a tendency toward anti-system attitudes (cf. Sartori, 2005; Schedler, 2023). To capture this division, we used the survey statement "It would be best to get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader who would decide everything quickly" and measured responses on a seven-point scale.

H3: Higher levels of intransigent polarization (i.e., more significant trust in a strong leader) correlate with increased support for a populist candidate.

Lastly, partisan sorting is perceived as rejecting issues closely associated with opposing political space. From this perspective, it is relevant to mention that the struggle between populism and anti-populism dominates Czechia (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2023), particularly in the context of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Support for aid to this country is linked with Czech pro-Western, anti-populist government policies, while opposition populist parties criticize pro-Ukrainian actions. Moreover, the approach toward Ukraine had become the most salient topic of the 2023 presidential campaign. The reason was timing and impact—the presidential election took place several months after the Russian invasion began, and Czechia accepted

650,000 Ukrainian refugees while it was simultaneously plunged into an energy crisis due to its previous dependence on Russian gas.

The specific entry of populism into this debate on the security crisis (Russian full-scale war on Ukraine) caused a fundamental change in the dynamics of the presidential contest, which had the character of a choice between a partisan and a nonpartisan candidate. Therefore, we assessed partisan sorting based on responses to the survey question “Do you agree or disagree with the actions of the Czech government supporting Ukraine in its war with Russia?” The responses were divided into four options ranging from *fully agree* to *completely disagree*.

H4: Higher levels of partisan sorting (i.e., critical positions regarding support for Ukraine) are associated with increased support for a populist candidate.

All four proxies of the single types of polarization were treated as independent variables, with the respondents choosing their reactions from a prepared ordinal scale in three questions and identifying a political party in the second model. For the dependent variable, we aimed to capture the inclination to mobilize for or against democracy, which was operationalized as voting for or against a populist candidate. In the context of the 2023 presidential election in Czechia, we classified Andrej Babiš as the populist (1 = *populist*) and his opponent Petr Pavel as the anti-populist (0 = *anti-populist*). Our selection of variables mirrored the internal structure of different kinds of polarization. Accordingly, we developed four logistic regression models—one for each type of polarization and its best reflection—and, to each of them, we added two control variables: age and education, which helped shape a complete image of the personal characteristics of the respondents.

Given that we examined the effects of various positions within polarizing topics on mobilization for and against populism, the arrangement utilized a strictly binary logic. The conflict between populism and anti-populism is a novel form of cleavage in Europe (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022; Moffitt, 2018). This binarity stems from the essence of the concept: poles around which citizen opinions cluster are relatively fixed. Therefore, binary logic does not necessarily shape the system’s format (Sartori, 2005) but instead forms distinguishable heterogeneous arenas. Additionally, multiparty systems uphold the principles of political and party pluralism, which encourages the use of ordinal data because people formulate opinions based on binary logic with a traceable intensity.

The timing of our data collection further emphasized this binary logic relative to the electoral run-off in the Czech presidential election, which naturally had the strongest intensity of binary logic and polarization. This enabled us to measure the effects of ordinal variables on two mutually exclusive situations. The mobilization process was presumed to be an inherent part of the mechanism standing behind the effect: voting for a populist or anti-populist candidate indicated that citizens were motivated and mobilized to vote for or against populism.

The most direct way to assess the effects of variables with ordinal logic on a binary dependent variable is to utilize a binary logistic regression model, which summarizes the probabilities of voting for each selected option (Menard, 2002, p. 12). The universal principle of our application is as follows:

$$\text{logit}(P) = \log(P/1 - P) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + (\beta_2 X_2) + \text{age} + \text{education}$$

To visualize our results, we utilized boxplots, in which the horizontal line depicts a median and the box reflects an interquartile range.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Societal Polarization and Political Mobilization in the V4

In the first step, we analyzed the interaction between polarization and mobilization in the V4 over time. While significant variation existed across the V4 countries, the most significant acceleration of societal polarization since the onset of populism could be observed in Slovakia (−1.64), followed by a much smaller increase in Czechia (−0.36) and Poland (−0.28). While polarization has been ranked as serious in Hungary (at 0.02), it was stable during the period under study, 2010–2023. Over time, the Czech case has been the most dynamic, with the rise and decline of polarization largely copying the electoral success and failure of populist actors. In Poland and Slovakia, the starting point was different—with higher societal polarization in Poland at the onset of populism—but the trend increased over time. Similarly, Slovakia experienced only increasing societal polarization over time, but at an accelerating speed from 2018 onward.

Table 1 details the electoral mobilization in three types of elections (presidential, parliamentary, and European) in the studied countries. In all of the countries, populist parties mobilized previously passive

**Table 1.** Electoral mobilization in the V4 (2019–2024).

	Presidential elections	Parliamentary elections		EP (seats populists/non-populists)
<b>Czechia</b>				
Date:	01/2023	10/2021		06/2024
Voter turnout:	70.25%	65.43%		36.45%
+/- difference to previous elections	+3.65%	+4.6%		+7.73%
victory (populism/antipopulism)	anti-populism	anti-populism		populism (12/21)
<b>Poland</b>				
	07/2020	10/2019	10/2023	06/2024
	68.18%	61.7%	73%	45.68%
	+12.84%	+10.8%	+11.3%	−5.04%
	populism	populism	anti-populism	anti-populism
<b>Slovakia</b>				
	03/2019	02/2020	09/2023	06/2024
	41.8%	65.81%	68.4%	34.38%
	−8.67%	+6.43%	+2.6%	+11.34%
	anti-populism	populism	populism	anti-populism
	04/2024			
	61.12% (51.9%)			
	+19.32 (+3.16)			
	populism			
<b>Hungary</b>				
	n.a.	03/2022		06/2024
		69.59%		59.46%
		−0.55%		+16.1%
		populism		populism

voters (Leininger & Meijers, 2021). Furthermore, in Czechia (2021) and Poland (2023), mobilization took place on the populist and anti-populist sides of the spectrum, with anti-populism winning the 2021 general election and 2023 presidential election (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022) as well as the 2023 Polish general elections. In Slovakia, the 2023 general elections saw the return of populist Robert Fico, who was empowered by the radical right and extreme right, which, in turn, supported Pellegrini in the 2024 presidential election.

The 2024 European Parliament elections saw an increase in electoral turnout in Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia and a decrease in turnout in Poland. The results were very close in all of the countries in terms of the victory of populism/anti-populism. In Czechia, anti-incumbent populists on the right and the left won; in Hungary, Orbán maintained dominance; in Slovakia and Poland, anti-populist forces won. Neither the victory of populists nor the victory of anti-populists was resounding. Mobilization for and against democracy remained locked in a struggle.

#### 4.2. The Effects of Polarization on Mobilization for Democracy/Autocracy

The main outcome of the regression models, reported in Table 2, was that societal polarization positively affected mobilization for both democracy and autocracy. However, this effect was statistically significant only in the first case: we can observe a strong positive relationship between this type of polarization and mobilization for democracy in selected times and regions. The relationship between the variables suggested that this type of effect was stronger in the case of mobilization for democracy. Thus, the result was clearer. The liberal democracy index correlated positively with mobilization for democracy but had no statistical significance. Conversely, the increase in the GDP per capita also meant a rise in mobilization for democracy. Regarding model robustness, model 1 had a higher  $R^2$  value, indicating it explained more variance in the population compared to the other model.

**Table 2.** The contextual multivariate regression models.

	Model 1 (Mobilization for democracy)	Model 2 (Mobilization for autocracy)
(Intercept)	-15.63** (4.74)	1.14 (2.74)
Polarization of society	1.10*** (0.28)	0.42* (0.16)
Liberal Democracy Index	4.50 (2.71)	-4.19* (1.56)
GDP per capita	0.25*** (0.06)	-0.01 (0.04)
<i>N</i>	40	40
$R^2$	0.40	0.77

Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ . Source: V-Dem 2024 (Coppedge et al., 2024).

### **4.3. Polarization in Czechia**

Among the CEE countries, the Czech case did not show the highest polarization, but it did show the most dynamic evolution of polarization over time and represented a case of polarized pluralism (cf. Sartori, 2005). The 2023 Czech presidential election provided a valuable context for exploring how polarization manifests in electoral politics and its effects on attitudes and voter behavior (cf. Schedler, 2023). Marked as a struggle between illiberalism and democracy, the election offered a unique and insightful case study for exploring the interplay between polarization and mobilization for and against democracy. The competition between Andrej Babiš against retired general Petr Pavel encapsulated not only the ongoing struggle between populist and anti-populist forces (cf. Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022, 2023) but also the role of elites in fostering polarization and the impact of both populist and anti-populist communication on citizens' attitudes.

### **4.4. The 2023 Czech Presidential Election: Elite-Level Polarization**

The election campaign between Babiš and Pavel vividly illustrated the different strategies employed by the candidates to appeal to a polarized electorate.

**Babiš's campaign:** Babiš employed a strategy of division by exploiting the crises caused by the war in Ukraine—skyrocketing energy costs, inflation, and fears of the spread of the Ukraine–Russia conflict. Babiš's campaign crossed ethical lines by claiming that Petr Pavel would drag the country to war. These misinformation/disinformation tactics targeted vulnerable demographics, such as seniors and economically disadvantaged voters. This approach polarized the electorate and highlighted the ethical concerns related to populist campaigning strategies (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023).

**Pavel's campaign:** In contrast, Pavel's campaign emphasized unity and hope by drawing on the symbolic legacy of the 1989 Velvet Revolution and promoting values of decency and civility. Pavel's strategy was inclusive and reached a broad spectrum of voters, including those who had initially supported other candidates. By invoking a narrative of shared democratic values and rejecting his opponent's divisive tactics, Pavel appealed to a wide demographic, from liberal urban voters to more conservative and less affluent rural populations (Bustikova & Guasti, 2023).

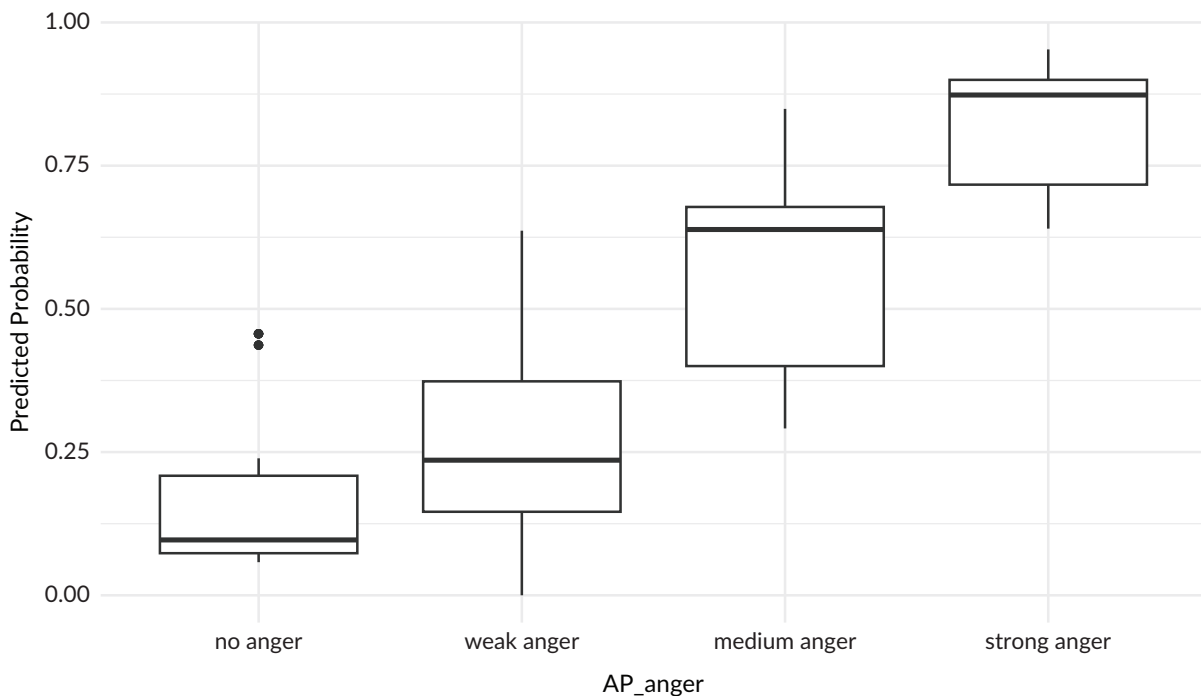
Petr Pavel defeated Andrej Babiš (58% to 42%) at the ballot box, with a historical voter turnout of 70.5%. The 2023 turnout was the highest in any election since the onset of populism. Babiš's tactic of demobilizing potential Pavel voters with fear and angst failed. Instead, Pavel's anti-populist, moderate message of hope and unity appealed not only to his core voters but also to some ANO voters (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023).

### **4.5. The Mass Level: Types of Polarization in the Czech Context**

This section analyzes the four types of polarization and describes the impact of each type on voters' decisions to vote for the populist Andrej Babiš or the anti-populist Petr Pavel in the presidential election. As a contest between two candidates in a run-off election, this type of voting serves as an example of a naturally polarized competition: the vote for populism was represented by 1 and the vote for anti-populism was represented by 0—Note: The survey questions used different scales, which is reflected in the X axis).

#### 4.5.1. Affective Polarization

Our first hypothesis posited that higher levels of affective polarization (i.e., stronger anger about the state’s political situation) correlate with increased support for a populist candidate. This link was confirmed by our analysis, which revealed a nearly flawless linear relationship between rising anger and support for Andrej Babiš (Figure 1). The most rapid increase occurred between the second and third ordinal levels: while respondents with mild anger were more likely to vote for the anti-populist candidate, Petr Pavel, those identifying as having *medium anger* increasingly shifted their support to Babiš. The statistical significance of the variables within the model is noteworthy: four of them—*medium anger*, *strong anger*, and both educational categories—demonstrated this characteristic and reported the effect intensity. Thus, higher anger and lower education levels explained the increased willingness to vote for the populist candidate.

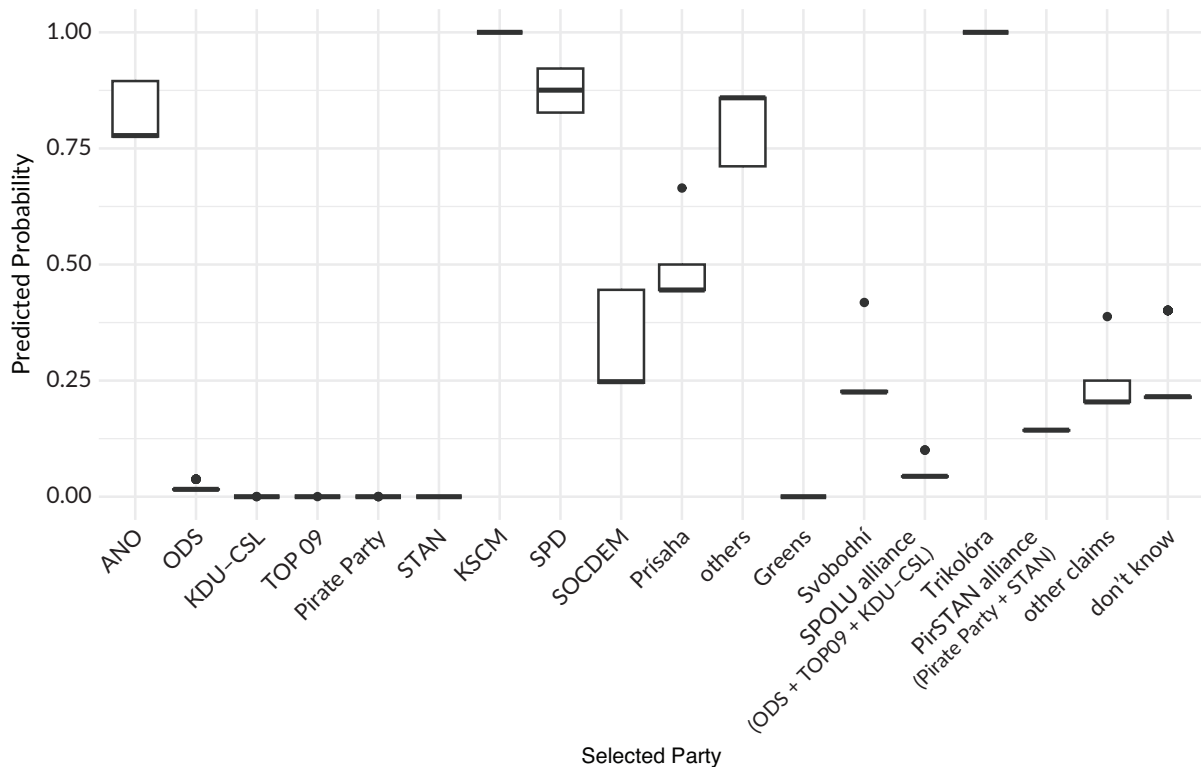


**Figure 1.** Predicted probability of the effect of affective polarization on the vote. Source: Tabery et al. (2024).

#### 4.5.2. Ideological Polarization

Testing the second hypothesis required measuring the variance in power between the two ideological camps. We counted this metric based on pre-existing data on the predicted probabilities of voting for either a populist or anti-populist candidate, as reflected in other stages of the research. Although the value of predicted probability 0.1410, as visualized in Figure 2, might appear moderate, it indicated a meaningful dispersion in candidate preferences aligned with party affiliation, thereby demonstrating clear ideological sorting among voters. Figure 2 clearly indicates cleavage between the populist and anti-populist blocs of parties, thereby corresponding to the relevance of the inter-bloc polarization, which was much stronger than the intra-bloc polarization. This analysis highlighted that political preferences were statistically significant in the cases of ODS, the PirSTAN alliance, SOCDEM (Social Democracy; formerly Czech Social Democratic Party [SOCDEM]), and Svobodní. While ODS and PirSTAN supporters were more likely to vote for Petr

Pavel, voters of SOCDEM and Svobodní exhibited internal divisions in terms of their candidate preference. However, the varying levels of statistical significance across individual parties suggested that while ideological positions may have reinforced voter support for candidates, this relationship was not consistently statistically significant. SOCDEM and Svobodní had long been oscillating between the populist and anti-populist blocs, with their position settling in the populist bloc after the presidential election.



**Figure 2.** Predicted probability of ideological polarization on the vote. Source: Tabery et al. (2024).

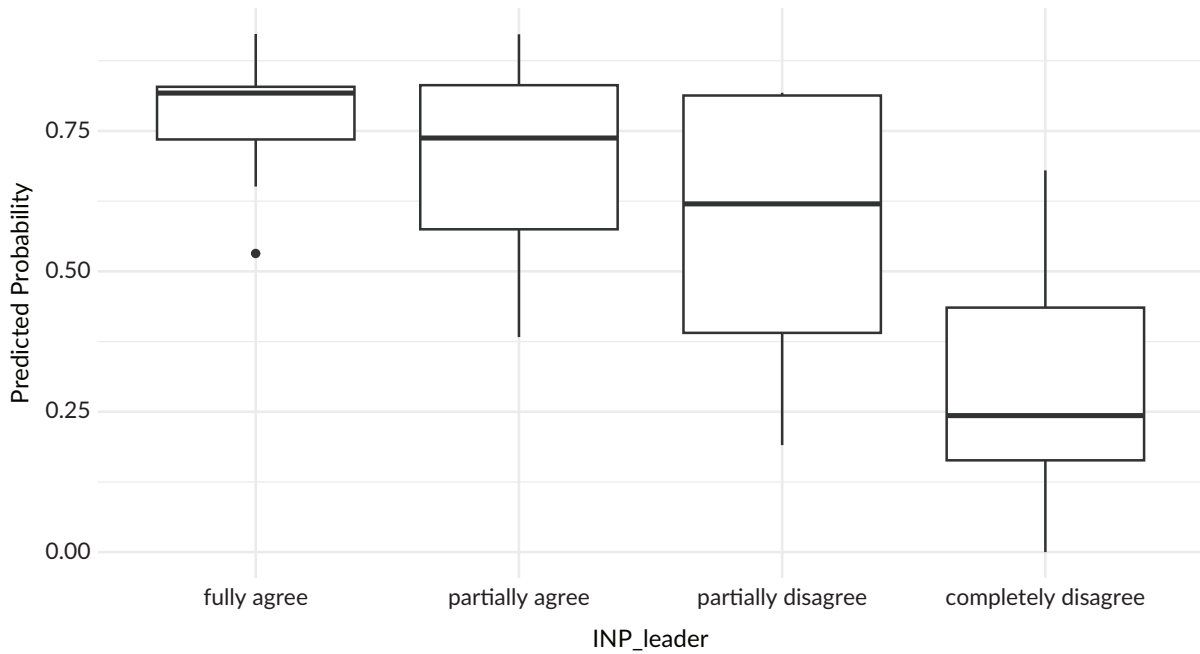
#### 4.5.3. Intransigent Polarization

The demand for a strong leader was unsurprisingly tightly linked with voting for a populist candidate. Nonetheless, this connection also lacked statistical significance relative to all of the independent variables. In the data, we observed that the affinity to vote for a populist candidate decreased as the preference for a strong leader diminished (Figure 3).

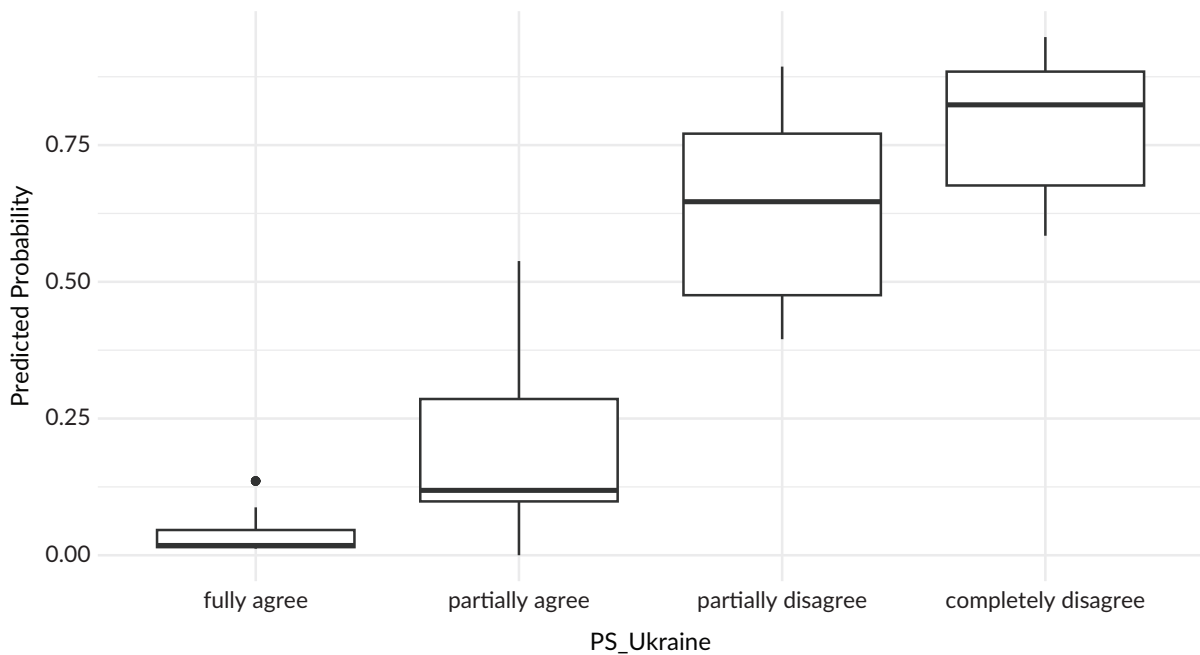
#### 4.5.4. Partisan Sorting

Conversely, the most important determinant of both populist and non-populist voting was found within the “partisan sorting” type of polarization. The effect of this type of polarization was formulated as our fourth hypothesis. All independent variables were statistically significant, thereby providing a clear explanation of the relationship. Support for the pro-Western government’s pro-Ukrainian steps was strongly observed in votes for Pavel. It was practically impossible to find respondents who fully and unreservedly declared support for Ukraine and voted for Babiš. Furthermore, this type of polarization was the most divisive, as evidenced by the massive gap between the *partially disagree* and *completely disagree* categories.





**Figure 3.** Predicted probability of the effect of intransigent polarization on the vote. Source: Tabery et al. (2024).



**Figure 4.** Predicted probability of the effect of partisan sorting on the vote. Source: Tabery et al. (2024).

#### 4.6. Summary of Models

Which type of polarization best explains the support for populism and anti-populism in the conditions of polarized pluralism? In the literature, affective and ideological polarization are privileged at this stage because they are relatively easy to measure and interpret. To confront that dominant research, we suggest

that Rostbøll's (2025) nuanced conceptualization of polarization work on descending a ladder of abstraction (Sartori, 1970) can help clarify nuances almost lost in the often-used categories of polarization. A comparative analysis of our four models showed that partisan sorting—with all three independent variables statistically significant and a high pseudo- $R^2$  metric—is the essential polarization subtype found in the Czech case (although model 2 explains population better potentially, the proportion of its statistically significant units remains well below the meaningful threshold). The partisan sorting model (model 4) archives the second-lowest value of the Akaike Information Criterion, which means a well-supported result. At this point, we consider AIC more fundamental than Bayesian Information Criterion BIC, which only partially accounts for model fit quality and is better suited to less sophisticated models. The second model demonstrating strong explanatory value is affective polarization. In this model, two out of three independent variables showed statistically significant effects, and their associated metrics approached high levels of model quality, highlighting the robustness of affective polarization in explaining support for populism.

## 5. Conclusions

The key question this article addresses relates to polarization's dual role in fostering societal mobilization for and against democracy under the populist zeitgeist. Despite the general trend toward democratic decline under populist rule in CEE, there have been notable exceptions where civil society has successfully pushed back against illiberal tendencies and achieved electoral victories (e.g., 2021 parliamentary elections in Czechia and 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland), which suggests a complex interplay between polarization and mobilization for and against democracy. To answer the question about what mechanisms drove these divergent outcomes and how varying forms of polarization influence the mobilization for or against liberal democracy in this context, we proceeded in two steps. First, we leveraged V-Dem data to analyze the interaction between polarization and mobilization for and against democracy. In the second step, we used the SYRI dataset to analyze the mobilization potential and success of the four types of polarization in mobilizing for populist and anti-populist candidates.

Examining the intricate interplay between societal polarization and political mobilization in the V4 countries over time revealed significant changes since the onset of populism. From 2010 to 2023, societal polarization notably strengthened in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, with a smaller increase in Czechia. Hungary consistently showed notable levels of polarization, while Slovakia experienced the most significant acceleration. Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia moved from polarized pluralism toward a deeper entrenchment of the extraordinary conflict (cf. Sartori, 2005; Schedler, 2023).

Electoral mobilization data from various CEE elections indicated that populist parties successfully mobilized previously passive voters across the V4. In Czechia and Poland, mobilization occurred on both the populist and anti-populist fronts, leading to anti-populist victories in recent elections. Slovakia saw the return of populist Robert Fico, while Viktor Orbán maintained his dominance in Hungary. The 2024 European Parliament elections showed increased turnout in Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia. Turnout decreased in Poland, and close results occurred between populist and anti-populist forces in all four countries. Our regression models revealed that societal polarization positively affected mobilization for democracy and autocracy, with a stronger and statistically significant effect on mobilization for democracy. This nuanced analysis underscores the complex interplay between polarization and mobilization and its impact on democratic resilience and decay in the V4 countries.

Echoing Sartori's insight that polarization significantly influences democratic stability (Sartori, 2005), our analyses confirmed that polarization not only can destabilize democratic institutions but can also activate pro-democracy societal mobilization under the conditions of polarized pluralism. We found conditions of polarized pluralism present in Czechia and Poland, absent in Hungary, and to a lesser degree in Slovakia. The dual mobilization for and against democracy observed in Central Europe can be interpreted using Schedler's (2023) conflict-analytical approach. The mobilization against populism in Czechia and Poland exemplified resistance to perceived democratic norm violations, while the mobilization in Hungary and Slovakia reflected a deeper entrenchment of extraordinary conflict, undermining basic democratic trust.

The study also leveraged a SYRI dataset (Tabery et al., 2024) to gauge which type of polarization drove mobilization. We drew on Sartori's insight that leaders are potent polarizing agents who exacerbate polarization by deploying divisive rhetoric, personalizing politics, and intensifying intra-party hostility (cf. Sartori, 2005). The effects of elite-level polarizing strategies can be studied in terms of the intensity and types of mass-level polarization (cf. Kluknavská & Havlík, 2024). The Czech case, which has been characterized as limited but polarized pluralism (Sartori, 2005), represents a crucial case for the mass-level examination of polarization's subtypes.

Affective polarization was assessed by examining citizens' anger about the political situation, ideological polarization through support for different parties, intransigent polarization through support for a strong leader over parliament, and partisan sorting through stances on support for Ukraine in the context of the Russian invasion. The analysis employed logistic regression to examine the relationship between these forms of polarization and support for populism—which was represented by voting for Andrej Babiš—versus anti-populism, which was represented by voting for Petr Pavel in the 2023 Czech presidential election. The findings revealed that affective polarization and partisan sorting were the most significant predictors of support for populism. Affective polarization showed a strong correlation between higher levels of anger and support for Babiš. Partisan sorting was particularly decisive, as support for pro-Ukrainian policies was a strong indicator of voting for Pavel, which highlighted the deep division in Czech society along these lines. Thus, an antiestablishment mobilization that fomented anger mobilized populist voters (cf. Michal & Guasti, 2023). On the anti-populist spectrum, support for pro-Ukrainian policies mobilized and drove voters to the anti-populist candidate.

This article contributes significantly to the study of polarization, democracy, and illiberalism in CEE by providing a nuanced analysis of how different types of polarization interact with populist and anti-populist mobilization. We demonstrated that populist leaders like Andrej Babiš strategically generate polarization as a mobilization tool.

Unlike previous research, which often treated polarization as a monolithic phenomenon, this study differentiated between four subtypes of polarization and highlighted their unique roles in shaping the political dynamics of mobilization for and against democracy in the context of the populist zeitgeist. By applying these concepts to the survey data in a multiparty context, this article further illuminates the complex ways polarization affects both the rise of populist movements and the resilience of democratic institutions in the CEE context (cf. Ferreira da Silva & Garzia, 2024). Using survey data from the 2023 Czech presidential election, in which populism and anti-populism directly competed, allowed for a granular exploration of mass-level polarization, thereby offering fresh insights into the electoral implications of polarization's subtypes.

Furthermore, this article advances the theoretical understanding of polarization's impact on democracy (cf. Schedler, 2023; Svobik, 2019) by arguing that intransigent polarization, characterized by an unwillingness to compromise and an existential view of political competition, is crucial in the undermining of democratic norms (Rostbøll, 2025; Svobik, 2019). Combined with affective polarization, this form can create a fertile ground for populists to erode democratic institutions by delegitimizing the opposition and concentrating power (cf. Mudde, 2004; Schedler, 2023). By distinguishing between the different types of polarization, the article not only deepens our understanding of how polarization contributes to democratic decay but also highlights the conditions under which civil society and democratic forces can counteract these trends—when they mobilize for democracy under polarized pluralism and outweigh mobilization for autocracy.

The case of Czechia shows that under polarized pluralism, affective polarization and partisan sorting are key to explaining political mobilization. While ideological and intransigent polarizations were present, they had less influence on electoral outcomes. Hence, not all types of polarization represent the same threat to democracy. The conditions for democratic resilience can be summarized as follows: a strong civil society mobilized against populist threats, the presence of clear strategically utilized polarization around core democratic issues (e.g., geopolitical alignment and democratic norms), and polarized pluralism—in which anti-system party/parties are present, but not dominant.

The study highlights the need for further research—particularly at the mass level and focused on interaction effects and a nuanced interpretation of probabilities—to fully comprehend the complexities of polarization. Further comparative analysis across broader European contexts could test the generalizability of our findings beyond the CEE context and clarify how institutional contexts, types of populist actors, their strategies, and media landscapes mediate polarization's impact on mobilization and democratic stability. A dual focus on polarization's divisive and mobilizing effects can provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the current challenges to democracy in the CEE region and beyond. Future research should acknowledge the limitations inherent to survey-based data—particularly capturing complex context-specific attitudes—and explore these mechanisms across diverse cases to further enhance generalizability.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University), Dean Schafer (Mississippi State University), and Bálint Mikola (CEU Democracy Institute).

## Data Availability

Data for this article is available at: <https://doi.org/10.14473/CSDA/CH1VEA>

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