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Illiberal Social Policy in Europe: When Policy Implementation Meets Welfare Ideas

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Abstract

This article examines the role of social policy in the electoral success of illiberal political parties in Europe between 2010 and 2024, systematically comparing social policies of illiberal actors in Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, we differentiate between the welfare ideas of illiberal parties and their actual policy implementations to understand the mechanisms behind their sustained popularity. We paid special attention to the link between ideas and policy reforms to understand whether illiberals carried out paradigmatic changes that altered the underlying goals of social policies. Our findings reveal that illiberal actors align their social policies with the welfare ideas they propagate, targeting specific demographic groups often neglected by earlier democratic politics. We observe that besides their exclusionary rhetoric and reforms against the "undeserving outsiders," such as immigrants, illiberals implement paradigmatic inclusionary reforms, especially to social insurance systems. Notably, the consistency and ideological alignment of their social policies contribute significantly to building loyal constituencies and challenging previous welfare state arrangements. This study highlights the necessity of recognizing the complexity of illiberal social policy to fully grasp the dynamics of their political appeal and offers insights to liberal democratic actors on effective policy responses.

Keywords

deservingness; far-right; illiberalism; social policy; welfare

1. Introduction

Illiberal parties are growing strong in Europe and globally. The invigorated return to power of Donald Trump in the US or the electoral accomplishments of the far-right Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria

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are recent cases in point that call for explanations for the enduring success of illiberal actors. Based on the qualitative analysis of welfare ideas and actual reforms of illiberal parties that had a chance to rule for shorter or longer periods between 2010 and 2024 in four European states (Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Poland), we argue that social policy plays a crucial role in their enduring popularity. Their success stems from actions being in close alignment with the ideas they communicated. The surprising consistency over time in how illiberals translated discourses into actual target groups and policy tools is essential for building loyal constituencies.

Following Zakaria (1997) and Enyedi (2024), we define illiberalism as the rejection of liberal democratic principles, aiming at the concentration of power and the dismantling of the institutions of checks and balances. Illiberal actors also oppose the principle of the neutral state or neutral bureaucracy and reject pluralism. Our research concentrates on right-wing illiberal actors that have a decisive populist communication style, feature authoritarian traits, and lean ideologically to the far-right (for more details, see Section 2). For illiberals, economic and social policies are of particular importance because, as opposed to outright autocratic actors, who often use coercion and violence, they exist under democratic or quasi-democratic circumstances. Illiberal actors and new autocratizers, unlike their 20th-century predecessors, aim at building popular legitimacy (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). While their political tactics and exclusionary discourses are often in the focus of media and scholarly attention, the recognition of social and economic policies of illiberal actors is still scarce (Rathgeb, 2024). These policies are, however, particularly important in popularizing far-right illiberal actors because they provide well-being, security, and often even dignity to a large share of the population. Without understanding illiberal actors' mechanisms of social policy making, we lose sight of a crucial element of their current electoral successes.

Academic work on the study of illiberal parties' policy positions is still fragmented and predominantly case study-focused (McCoy & Somer, 2021; Szent-Ivanyi & Kugiel, 2020), often concentrating on immigration, family, and gender policies (Bocskor, 2018; Fodor, 2022; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Okólski & Wach, 2020). Authors studying Western European far-right parties have shown how they adopted a "dualistic" understanding of welfare-state arrangements (Chueri, 2022; Enggist & Pinggera, 2022; Rathgeb, 2020). Our research expands literature geographically and overcomes the East–West divide: We compare two post-socialist, Eastern European countries (Hungary and Poland), and two "old" EU member states (Austria and Italy). These countries, at the same time, represent three welfare-state regime types: the hybrid or "mixed" Eastern European, the Bismarckian conservative, and the Southern European welfare states. One of our countries (Hungary) is an electoral autocracy and three are democracies. This diversity allows us to present illiberal social policy discourse and action under different geopolitical and welfare settings.

While most research focuses on the general welfare framing of illiberal parties, we separate discourses from actual social policy reforms. Based on our analytical distinction between ideas and actions, we could compare the promises of illiberal parties to their actual policy reforms. Our focus was on how illiberal parties turned their welfare promises into action, which social and demographic groups they targeted, and through what means. We have paid special attention to the link between ideas and policy reforms to understand whether illiberals carried out paradigmatic (i.e., third-order; see Hall, 1993) changes that altered the underlying goals of social policies.

Our analysis confirms earlier findings that illiberal social policy discourse is strongly divisive in a populist manner and differentiates between "we" and "them" and between "insiders" and "outsiders" based on

"deservingness" (Chueri, 2022; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016; van Oorschot, 2000). We have found that exclusionary and inclusionary discourses co-exist; illiberals call for the exclusion of unpopular minorities and they also initiate welfare state expansion for the "deserving" social groups. When we contrasted discourse with actual policies, we found that illiberal actors lived up to their promises and implemented reforms in alignment with their communication. What is more, in all our cases, we depicted a consistent direction of reforms that did not change substantially over the years. Finally, illiberals set themselves stubbornly against the pre-existing welfare-state arrangement and often implemented paradigmatic reforms, especially in the field of social insurance. We argue that the alignment over time with values and consistency in social policy reforms are crucial features for the political success of illiberal parties.

The remainder of this article is divided as follows: In Section 2, we elaborate on our theoretical framework of illiberalism and relate the concept to authoritarianism and populism. In Section 3, we present our methodology and introduce our analytical and interpretative approaches and case selection. We then present our analytical findings, divided into two main parts: Firstly, we outline results on the discursive content analysis of electoral manifestos and speeches, showcasing the primary social policy frames utilized by illiberal actors. Secondly, we present our findings on illiberals' social policy implementations and social policy tools when in power. In the final part of the article, we summarize our main findings, present avenues for further research, and suggest what liberal democratic actors may learn from illiberal social policy-making.

2. Conceptual Framework: Illiberalism, Authoritarianism, and Populism

The world is going through a definite process of autocratization, which is a new phenomenon compared to democratization processes after the early 1990s (Nord et al., 2025). The current, so-called third-wave autocratizing processes of the 21st century differ from earlier authoritarian regimes in that they rarely use direct coercion and refrain from the outright exclusion and elimination of unwanted minorities (Nord et al., 2025, pp. 19–20). In other words, political actors that pursue authoritarian political and social change today make strong efforts to maintain the façade of democracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). Often, these actors even claim to be *more* democratic than liberal democrats, as they pursue the "rule of the people."

Related to this global political process, over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of concepts. Authors often use terms like "illiberalism," "populism," and "authoritarianism" as synonyms. The confusion is understandable as all these notions attempt to grasp the same phenomenon of third-wave autocratization. Thus, their core is common, but they emphasise slightly different aspects of current anti-democratic processes. While literature on the conceptualization of illiberalism remains scarce, recent publications have provided valuable insights into its definition and exhibited an increasing academic interest in understanding autocratization in the 21st century (Blokker, 2021; Kauth & King, 2020; Laruelle, 2024; Smilova, 2021).

Illiberalism, in its original meaning coined by Zakaria (1997), refers to the fate of institutions in liberal democracy. It describes the demise of citizens' constitutional guaranties against the tyranny of the state, like checks and balances, protection of civil rights (e.g., free speech or free press), independent civil society and academia, the protection of property, etc. "Illiberal democracies" hold free (sometimes even fair) elections. Overall, illiberal actors believe in majoritarian democracy, hold elections, but are against a pluralist landscape of political and civil society. Enyedi (2024) adds that illiberal actors reject essential liberal democratic principles (as they concentrate power), are against a neutral state (that treats all citizens equally), and believe in a closed (as opposed to an open) society.

Concurrently, with this definition of illiberalism, not all the indicators listed need to be present at the same time for political actors, parties, or regimes to be defined as illiberal. As liberal democracy is understood to always exhibit the principles of limited power, a neutral state, and an open society, questioning or attacking any one of them constitutes an illiberal departure from liberal democracy. While Enyedi (2024) expands the concept of illiberalism to pre-war authoritarian regimes, we think that doing so is rather ahistorical as it lacks the historical perspective in which the concept of illiberalism was born. We argue that illiberalism as a term to explain authoritarian tendencies in the late-20th and early-21st centuries and the ways political actors currently depart from liberal democracy.

As our cases will also illustrate, illiberals are opting for a closed society and are afraid of social change. We argue that this feature relates to their common ideological leaning: Although we can find examples of illiberals on the left of the political spectrum, most illiberal actors are right-wing and socially conservatives, who believe in the "natural" hierarchies of society in terms of class, gender, and ethnicity (Enyedi, 2023). Most illiberals are also nativist: they want to maintain the primacy of native populations in their countries. Illiberal actors may, however, differ in their ideological emphases, which indeed affects their social policy preferences.

Authoritarianism is a concept that highlights the socially conservative features of autocratizers through their support for hierarchy and law and order (Mudde, 2007; Tillman, 2021). In the literature about political regimes, "authoritarian" refers to countries that, even in the narrow sense of the word, are no longer democratic. In this understanding, all authoritarian regimes also qualify as illiberal through negating liberal democratic fundamentals. Considering the process of democratic backsliding, liberal democracies first do away with constitutional guaranties and become illiberal democracies, and in a second step, they may eliminate fair elections and become electoral autocracies (thus, authoritarian regimes). Authoritarian thinking, just like illiberal thinking, negates political pluralism and aims at the concentration of power, and these features also have a profound impact on the policy-making process. Simultaneously, authoritarianism may also describe an ideological conviction that places "an emphasis on the maintenance of traditional values, strong law-and-order policies to deter and punish crime, and on the acceptance of a hierarchical society" (Tillman, 2021, p. 118).

Our third concept, *populism*, refers to the political style of actors who divide societies into two antagonistic groups, "us," the "pure people," against "them," the "corrupt elites" (Enyedi, 2024; Mudde, 2007). In this framing, the political opposition belongs to the "other" group and is treated as an enemy rather than a competitor. When populists rule, they aim at a top-down decision-making process, which is a feature shared with illiberals and authoritarians. This also means that they oppose institutions of reconciliation and avoid consultation with the opposition, civil society, and experts, which may speed up policy-making but may lead to a poorer quality of policies (Bartha et al., 2020; Weyland, 2009). Populism also aims at direct communication with the people (also related to policies) and pursues divisive rhetoric.

In this article, we primarily utilize the concept of illiberalism because it incorporates both institutional and ideological features typical of the 21st-century third wave of autocratization. Traits identified by Enyedi (2024), including the concentration of power, the partisan state, and building up a closed society, help us analyse the procedures, the content, as well as the discourses related to social policy-making under illiberal rule.

Given the scarcity of scholarship on illiberalism and social policy, we also rely on authors who analyse populist and radical right parties' welfare ideas. What stands out in the literature focusing on Western

European far-right populist parties is a "dualistic" approach when parties simultaneously promote neo-liberalism for the unpopular "outsiders," and call for protectionism for "insider" social groups (Chueri, 2022; Enggist & Pinggera, 2022; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016; Rathgeb, 2020).

Other authors point out that illiberals depict various "threats" to the welfare state and position themselves as "protectors," especially when they are in opposition (Lefkofridi & Michel, 2017, p. 233; Öktem & Szikra, 2023). Research also shows that far-right parties rely heavily on frames of national identity and reciprocity, rather than promoting equalizing redistribution (Abts et al., 2021; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016). Rathgeb (2024) highlights the role that specific welfare state contexts play in informing far-right parties' conception of redistributive deservingness.

Once in power, far-right populist parties tend to implement fast and overarching policy changes across all policy dimensions, downplay technocratic expertise, and sideline veto-players, while adopting saliently emotional frames to polarize discourse on policy positions (Bartha et al., 2020). Some authors argue that far-right parties attack universal and means-tested social policies, while they do not confront social insurance programs where contribution and reciprocity are central (Busemeyer et al., 2022; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2020, 2022).

The conceptual novelty of our investigation is to contrast illiberals' welfare ideas with their actions in the context of three welfare-state regimes, including post-communist ones. This approach allows us to pinpoint paradigmatic changes that alter the core values and goals of the given welfare state configuration.

3. Case Selection and Methodology

To compare illiberal social policies in different institutional and geopolitical settings, we have selected four countries that are members of the EU and that have experienced illiberal rule over the past decades. Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Poland belong to three different welfare regime types, which allows for a cross-regime comparison. Austria is an exemplary case of the conservative Bismarckian welfare regime with strong social insurance coverage for the majority of the population and a high reliance on unpaid female labour and charitable organizations to provide welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Italy is a Southern European welfare regime that established a dual social system with strong security for labour-market insiders, while volatility and meagre coverage for everyone else. Unlike Spain, Italy has not reformed its primarily familialist welfare regime in the past decade, despite structural pressure arising from increased female labour-market participation (Morgan, 2013). Finally, Hungary and Poland belong to the Eastern European mixed welfare regime type with a close-to-universal social security system and high levels of female labour-market participation, coupled with complex and explicit family policies in Hungary and an implicit familialist system with weak state involvement in Poland, before the mid-2010s (Inglot et al., 2022; Szikra & Tomka, 2009).

We have studied illiberal actors across four Western and Eastern European countries: In Italy, we have primarily analyzed Brothers of Italy party (Fratelli d'Italia; FDI). But due to its short time spent in power so far, we have also studied the social policy ideas of the Lega Nord (Lega) since 2010. In Hungary, we focused on the Fidesz Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz); in Austria, we studied the FPÖ; and, in Poland, we focused on the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PiS). We have chosen illiberal parties that have relevantly shaped the political discourse about social policy in their countries over the last 15 years and

were in government for some time between 2010 and 2024, thus having had a chance to implement their welfare ideas in practice. These illiberal parties are all right-wing conservative, some often labelled as far-right. They all share an authoritarian leaning in their preferences for law and order and impose traditionalist values on society. These parties' cultural conservatism plays out especially in their common anti-LGBTQ+ stance. While PiS, Fidesz, and FPÖ are essentially nativists, FDI is more open on issues related to migration. All these parties demonstrate a populist style, but to varying degrees: Fidesz and FPÖ have been most combative against supranational elites, including the European Union, while PiS and FDI have been more open to reconciliation within and outside their country.

To answer our research questions, we have performed a qualitative content analysis of party documents, focusing mainly on election manifestos. While methodological discussions of the qualitative and quantitative text analysis of illiberal party documents are underrepresented in the literature, Schafer et al. (2025) present a promising new approach to finding a text-based method for measuring illiberalism. Other authors provide valuable methodological insights into the content analysis of populist text data (Abts et al., 2021; Hawkins & Silva, 2018).

Election manifestos are widely regarded as reliable sources for identifying party policies and ideologies, thus, they serve as our primary source of empirical data (Laver & Garry, 2000). These documents display the most unfiltered and clearest overview of a party's official policy positions and allow for comparative longitudinal and cross-national examinations of party positions on a variety of topics. Through qualitative content analysis, we gained a detailed understanding of specific policy areas' developments as well as a party's policy emphasis and omissions. To ensure a precise investigation of all policy positions and proposed policy tools, we also included prominent public and parliamentary speeches of illiberal actors concerning social policy, relying on our country-specific familiarity. Speeches of prime ministers or presidents served as key sources, especially in cases like Hungary, where Fidesz did not issue a party manifesto since 2007. To gather insights on illiberal policy implementation, we utilized secondary literature, analysed policy documents, and laws.

We have used two guiding questions and four sub-questions for the qualitative document analysis. The first relates to the analysis of party manifestos, electoral programs, and the communication of social policy reforms. The second set of questions helped us analyse the legislative and policy documents, policy tools, and the impact of the actual welfare reforms that illiberal parties implemented while they were in power. You can find these sets of questions below:

1. What kind of social policy *ideas* did illiberal parties present in their manifestos and programs?
    a. How did illiberal parties discursively *frame* social policy proposals?
    b. What were the *themes* that they narratively attached to the idea of welfare?
2. What kind of social policy *reforms* did illiberal parties implement as incumbents?
    a. Impact of reforms: Which *target groups* did they address? Who benefited from their reforms, and who lost out?
    b. Which social policy *tools* did they use to implement reforms?

Based on the analytical distinction between ideas and actions, we could compare the promises of illiberal parties to their actual policy reforms. Our focus was on how illiberal parties turned their welfare promises into action, which social and demographic groups they targeted, and through what means. We paid special

attention to the link between ideas and policy reforms to understand whether illiberals carried out paradigmatic (i.e., third-order) changes that altered the underlying goals of social policies (see Hall, 1993).

We focus on social policy "output," meaning the *content* of social policy reforms as laid down in legislative documents. We want to know what the *direction* of change was, which, in turn, informs us about the ideology behind the reforms. Are illiberals' social policy reforms equalizing or, on the contrary, increasing stratification (Esping-Andersen, 1990)? We comparatively assess illiberal parties' preferred social policy sub-fields (e.g., social assistance, pensions, family policies, etc.), and the social policy tools (cash transfers, in-kind benefits, tax exemptions, etc.) they used to implement reforms. Finally, we contrast social policy ideas with the reforms implemented to see if the reforms were in alignment with the ideas illiberals laid down in their social policy discourses.

4. Analysis

4.1. Social Policy Ideas and Discourses of Illiberal Parties

Our analysis shows that, when it comes to social policy, the illiberal discourse is highly inclusionary and exclusionary at the same time. Similar to the results of Chueri (2022), Enggist and Pinggera (2022), and Ennser-Jedenastik's (2016) on Western Europe, we have found that, in three of our four country cases, illiberals strongly promote a "dualistic" restructuring of the welfare state that protects the social groups they define as deserving insiders, while weakening the social rights of the undeserving. The Polish PiS, however, was an illiberal party that consistently stood for a universalistic approach without notable exclusionary discourses in social policy.

In line with the existing literature, we have found three common discursive frames in the four countries (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Common discursive frames of illiberal parties related to welfare.

Firstly, all scrutinized parties focus on performance and appreciate "hard work" in state help. Thus, productivity and reciprocity are at the centre of their redistributive ideas. Groups who are unable to work, including young families, children, youth, and disabled people, also feature high on the illiberals' welfare

agenda. Simultaneously, illiberal parties strongly promote support to the elderly in return for those "who have given a lifetime of service (to build up society), whether at work or within the family" (FPÖ, 2013). The "undeserving" are defined as those who would be able to work but, instead, "free-ride" on social assistance. The strongest cases are Hungary where Viktor Orbán proclaimed the "work-based society" as an alternative to the "declining" Western welfare state (Orbán, 2014); and Italy, where this division is present in all the main areas of welfare, and featured high on the agenda in Georgia Meloni's election campaigns (Meloni, 2022). Surprisingly, poverty is mostly missing from illiberal parties' programs. Instead, they talk about people "being treated unfairly by the system," especially in Austria. All the parties target workers, particularly those who appear to be the losers of globalization and are forgotten by mainstream parties. In this way, illiberals appeal to the populist idea of the "dysfunctionality" of the welfare state arrangement that is presented as targeting the "wrong kind" of beneficiaries.
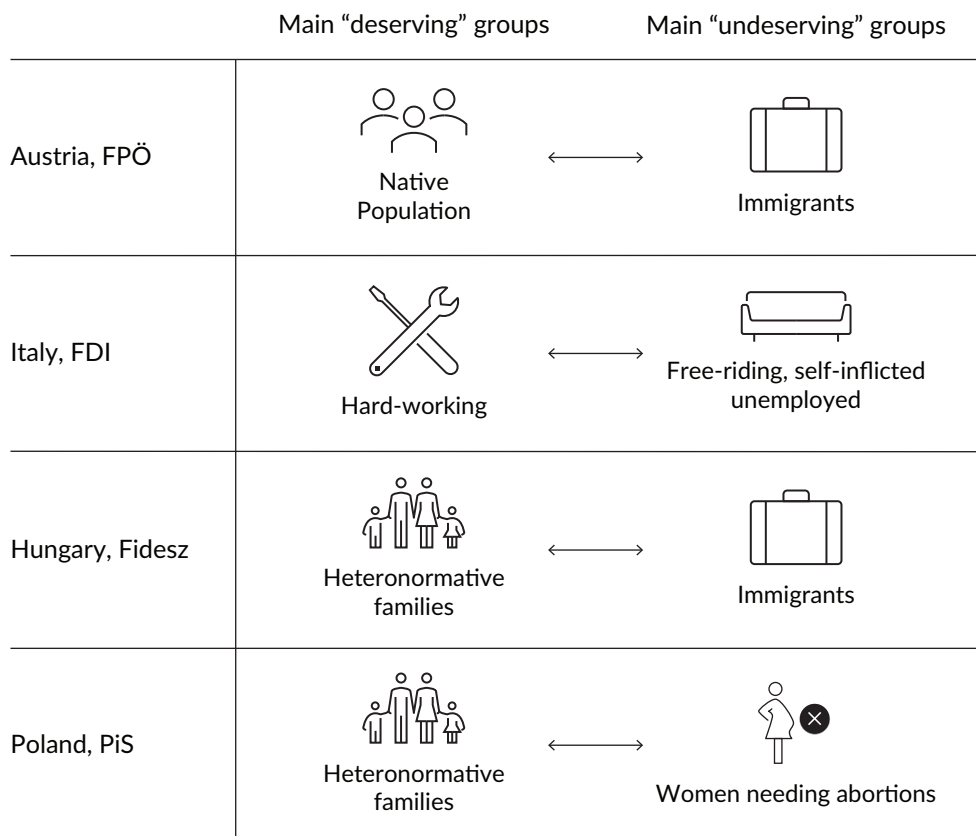
Second, illiberal actors are nativist when delineating the population eligible for social support, and sharply frame immigrants as exploiting welfare state arrangements. For FPÖ, this discourse is there in nearly all welfare ideas. This party went as far as requiring knowledge of the German language for social security rights and pursued the direct exclusion of immigrants from social rights. In Hungary, the anti-immigration discourse was linked to pro-natalist family policies. In Italy and Poland, social policies were the least connected to the issue of immigration. Notwithstanding their focus on merit, in neither of the countries can we imagine a discourse about the "hard-working immigrant" deserving of benefits (see Figure 1).

Thirdly, all parties define the "traditional" heterosexual family as the model to be promoted by the state. Over time, illiberals started to frame the "traditional" family as the "nucleus of society" (FPÖ, 2011, p. 8). In some countries, pro-family discourse was accompanied by an anti-gender equality agenda. Apart from FDI, all parties fail to acknowledge gender inequality as a problem. For example, Orbán celebrated "family mainstreaming" instead of gender mainstreaming from early on. In Poland, this went as far as posing an outright attack against female bodily integrity, while in Hungary (and recently also in Austria), sexual minorities have been targeted by the illiberal parties' hostile propaganda. In the light of the harsh anti-gender campaigns, it may sound surprising that none of the parties relegate women to housewifery. What is more, all push for female and motherly employment in line with their focus on productivity. Accordingly, they also promote accessible and high-quality childcare services. Illiberal parties promote women and mothers when they perform—that is, when they go out to work, give birth to children, or provide care—but not as individuals in themselves who should be equally treated. Interestingly, FPÖ does not promote mothers as such, but focuses on explicitly supporting fathers in childcare. Meanwhile, illiberals' divisive policies often appear under the disguise of the "protection of our children" and "our women" from Muslim intruders or from "homosexual propaganda" (FPÖ, 2024; Orbán, 2018).

Notwithstanding the above commonalities, we have also found substantial differences in the dominant welfare narratives of the four cases (see Figure 2).

Firstly, we have found that FPÖ is the most nativist among all parties, demanding to limit "dangerous and exploitative" immigration to the Austrian welfare state. As early as 1999 and 2002, this party had campaigned with slogans like "protecting the homeland," "Austria first," and "stop asylum abuse," and persistently linked this messages to protecting the Austrian welfare state from immigrants' "over-use" (FPÖ, 1999, 2002, 2017). FPÖ's harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric has been radicalized since the mid-2010s. In 2011,

	Main "deserving" groups	Main "undeserving" groups
Austria, FPÖ	Native Population	Immigrants
Italy, FDI	Hard-working	Free-riding, self-inflicted unemployed
Hungary, Fidesz	Heteronormative families	Immigrants
Poland, PiS	Heteronormative families	Women needing abortions

Figure 2. Narratives of illiberal parties about the main "deserving" and "undeserving" groups.

and in its consequent manifestos, FPÖ advocated limiting access to benefits for non-citizens. With the influx of refugees into Europe starting in 2015, this party has further sharpened its positions on immigration. In 2017, Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache said: "In no way should there be immigration into the Austrian welfare state" (Parlament Österreich, 2017). From 2015 onwards, FPÖ managed to connect almost all welfare ideas (pensions, family support, unemployment benefits, and childcare) to the issue of immigration. Their 2024 electoral programmes went as far as to argue for a complete stop of any support exceeding the absolutely vital health provisions to immigrants (FPÖ, 2017, 2024).

Meanwhile, Fidesz frames immigration as a threat to the prosperity of the "traditional, hard-working" Hungarian family, which is deemed most deserving. Simultaneously, Fidesz pushes its narrative of contributing productively to society by also connecting deservingness to employment and argues against free hand-outs to the unemployed. This party especially emphasizes a nativist narrative of supporting young families and mothers as the "future of the nation" (Orbán, 2018) as opposed to immigration. Since 2018, Fidesz has radicalized its rhetoric and argued for increased state child-support by connecting its social ideas to radical-right "replacement theories": "I believe that mothers must be respected and honoured. And I believe that if we do this, then in the Carpathian Basin there will be more of us Hungarians, rather than fewer" (Orbán, 2018).

As Orbán further argued in the Hungarian State of the Nation Address in 2019:

> We are living in times when fewer and fewer children are being born throughout Europe. People in the West are responding to this with immigration: they say that the shortfall should be made up by immigrants, and then the numbers will be in order. Hungarians see this in a different light. We do not need numbers, but Hungarian children. In our minds, immigration means surrender. (Orbán, 2019)

Unlike FPÖ and Fidesz, FDI in Italy does not rely so heavily on framing immigrants as the main "undeserving" social group but utilises policy tools that condition benefits on employment to activate the non-working native population. It is local social assistance that they mostly intend to strengthen, but only for people "truly in need," usually identified as families, businesses, and workers. Over time, both FDI and the Lega started to redefine the right to welfare benefits more narrowly. People who are able to work became the "undeserving lazy," thus not eligible for welfare policies. Only those who are unable to work through no fault of their own would deserve state protection. During the 2022 election campaign, the party already had a distinctive welfare character that centred on a sharp distinction between the "genuinely needy" and the "willingly jobless" population. It argued that for those who are able to contribute to society, the only way to welfare is through "work and the dignity brought by work." As Giorgia Meloni stated:

> The gateway of dignity of a man is work....We want to maintain and, where possible, improve the economic support rightfully provided to those who really are vulnerable and unable to work—I am thinking of pensioners in difficulty, disabled people...and also those who are without an income and have children to look after....However, for other people who are able to work, the solution cannot be the "reddito di cittadinanza" ["citizenship income"] measure, but rather work, training and job support....Citizenship income' has been a defeat for those who were able to do their part for Italy, both for themselves and their families. (Meloni, 2022)

Similar to Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland also focused on the traditional family as its primary deserving target. However, in stark contrast to the other country cases, PiS focused on building up a wide cross-class social coalition through its social and economic policies with a special emphasis on supporting women, young mothers, and the family. Interestingly, PiS did not frame an "outsider" group in opposition to its main target group of young families and women but promoted the more general "end to austerity measures." However, in 2020 and 2021, PiS commenced a harsh anti-abortion rhetoric and subsequent legislation, which pitted women having abortions as "enemies" of the "traditional" family.

4.2. Illiberal Social Policy Reforms

How did illiberals implement welfare ideas when they had the opportunity to rule? As surprising as it may sound, illiberal parties in all four countries, even as minor coalition partners as FPÖ, lived up to their promises. They implemented reforms in alignment with the direction of change that they envisioned in their manifestos and communication. What is more, in all the cases, we see a consistent direction of reforms that did not change substantially over the years.

Illiberal parties used social policy tools that best fit their values and aims. While illiberal reforms in the field of social assistance directed to the poor have been in the spotlight of media and scholarly analysis, our

research shows that most parties also implemented large and often paradigmatic changes to the social insurance systems that cover major risks of the working population. Concerning the variation of target groups and social policy tools, our research underpins the importance of previous welfare state regime types. All four parties, without exception, resolutely set themselves against the previous institutional setting of the welfare state in their countries (Abts et al., 2021). This makes sense, as social policy provides an excellent ground for parties to ideologically differentiate themselves from their predecessors. Furthermore, populist parties, like the ones under scrutiny in our research, typically negate earlier, mainstream policy consensuses and want to break with the status quo (Bartha et al., 2020).

As opposed to earlier research that focused on exclusionary reforms, we have found that inclusionary, universalizing reforms are equally important to understand illiberals' success. In our timeframe, social policy expansion by far-right illiberal actors often provided well-being, security, and, at points, even dignity to a large proportion of the population. Our research shows that the main winners of illiberal social policy reforms were social groups neglected by previous liberal democratic actors. The most important target groups include low-income earners, (poorer) pensioners, young families, and (except for FPÖ) mothers. As a "deserving" social group, disabled people and their carers also received attention from illiberal actors.

4.2.1. Social Assistance Reforms

Illiberal parties implemented the most visible reforms in the field of social assistance. These are means-tested benefits directed to the needy, and eligibility for them often relies on the discretion of local bureaucracies. Although social assistance only takes up a minor share of the welfare budget, this area is particularly suitable to present their ideological preferences of "deserving" and "undeserving" social groups. As social rights are weaker (not enforceable) and institutions are more dependent on local administrations in this field, reforms are easier to implement than in the case of vast national institutions of social insurance.

Illiberal social assistance reforms aligned with the parties' particular exclusionary rhetoric. Alongside their activation agenda, FDI and Fidesz targeted the non-working as the major undeserving social group. The Italian reforms under Meloni are especially notable. Already in 2018, FDI made a distinction between those "who are able to work" and those "who are unable to work" and positioned itself sharply against the left-wing Five Stars Movement's flagship social policy program (i.e., the citizenship income). Accordingly, right after coming to power, Meloni revoked the citizenship income with an urgency decree. Technically, the illiberal government replaced the universal benefit with a more fragmented social assistance system. Starting in September 2023, and implemented throughout 2024, the maximum length of payment was cut to seven months for working-age individuals, but not for families with children, disabled individuals, and those over 60 years of age—perfectly fitting the "deserving" citizens, as depicted in FDI's rhetoric (FDI, 2024). Social assistance for people aged 18–59 years and fit to work (the "undeserving") became income-tested and conditioned upon the acceptance of the first job offer they received. In line with the activation agenda, social assistance benefit is now linked to compulsory job training and the completion of schooling for the young. Thus, Meloni did not adopt a welfare chauvinist approach but concentrated on the "non-working." A decade before Meloni's reforms, in Hungary, Orbán had implemented similar, but even more radical, activating reforms. In the name of a "work-based society" to counter "Western" welfare states, in 2011, Fidesz cut the length of unemployment benefits to a mere three months and linked social assistance to attendance in the public works program (Vidra, 2018). This party thus achieved one of its main social policy aims: that no assistance should be handed out without

work. But as opposed to Meloni, Orbán has done away with training and adult education for the unemployed. Instead, the public works program organized new local loyalty networks (Szombati, 2018) and secured Fidesz's popularity with the poor (and, among them, the most fragile rural Roma population) for the decade to come.

Meanwhile, FPÖ in Austria, as its harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric would suggest, gradually excluded immigrants from social assistance programs (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016). Initially, FPÖ, as a minor coalition partner, holding the position of the Ministry for Welfare, limited immigrants' access to social assistance payments and related services. From the mid-2010s, however, FPÖ used the language barrier as a new social policy tool. This was done step by step: First, the party implemented mandatory German-language courses and "integration agreements" for immigrants to receive benefits (Parlament Österreich, 2018b; FPÖ, 2013, 2017). During its second term, FPÖ already cut benefit levels for immigrants and refugees. Importantly, this illiberal actor also increased benefit levels for native families and people with disabilities. FPÖ radicalized over time: In their 2024 electoral program, they proposed to eliminate monetary benefits for immigrants, offering only in-kind support and restricting access to healthcare, covering merely the essential services, such as support for pregnant mothers (FPÖ, 2024).

PiS in Poland is the only illiberal party in this research that did not initiate exclusionary social assistance reforms. Although social assistance did not feature high on its agenda, PiS extended the generosity of the long-neglected unemployment benefit under the Covid-19 crisis (Aidukaite et al., 2021).

4.2.2. Social Insurance Reforms

Our research shows that illiberal parties' inclusionary reforms focus particularly on social insurance systems. These programs take over most of the welfare budget and cover the working population against main social risks, including sickness and retirement. Besides smaller incremental changes, these parties adopted path-shifting and paradigmatic reforms to these "sticky," path-dependent institutions that are difficult to alter.

A notable example of path-shifting reforms is the reversal of pension privatizations by Fidesz and PiS. Following the earlier wave of privatization in Eastern Europe, these illiberal parties re-nationalized the private pillars of their pension schemes. While both parties had opposed pension privatization during the 1990s and early 2000s on ideological grounds, it was the global financial crisis after 2008 that opened up the opportunity to reinstate the dominance of the former public pay-as-you-go pillars. Within no more than a couple of months in 2010–2011, in an illiberal manner, Fidesz nationalized private pension funds, decreased government debt, and stabilized the public old age pension system using the vast inflow of assets (Simonovits, 2011; Szikra & Kiss, 2017). Similarly, PiS was against pension privatization, but was more moderate in the implementation of the reversal, both in terms of procedure and the content of reforms, as this party reserved the private funds assets for future pensions of Polish people (Polakowski & Hagemejer, 2018). Both reforms stabilized the state-run pension system and decreased inequalities. In 2019, PiS introduced the 13th-month pension, a one-time additional annual benefit that Fidesz also reinstated. But, unlike in Hungary, where the additions were proportionate and, therefore, reinforced inequalities, in Poland, all pensioners received the same (flat-rate) amount at the level of the minimum pension.

The 2016 decrease of the official pension age by PiS serves as another example of non-conventional pension reforms that clearly demonstrated the end of the neoliberal era. Lowering the pension age amidst

demographic ageing also went against the mainstream pension reforms in Western welfare states that typically increase pension age. Meanwhile, all parties, except FPÖ, allowed early retirement for women despite the EU regulation on sex-neutral pension age. PiS, Fidesz, and FDI also included the years spent in (unpaid) care work for children into the calculation of full pension eligibility. FDI added care for dependent family members in the *Opzione Donna* program (European Commission, 2024; FDI, 2024). Notably, illiberal parties linked these reforms to traditional gender roles and pronatalism, rather than to the idea of gender equality. Still, they positively discriminated in favour of women in the pension systems and contributed to the well-being of elderly women, especially of the lower classes.

Fidesz also used the pension reform for direct political purposes, as it set a compulsory pension age for civil servants to replace high-ranking judges and civil servants with younger loyal employees (Szikra & Kiss, 2017). This seemingly small, incremental reform to pension age serves as a telling example of illiberal social policy-making having a great impact on weakening checks and balances and contributing to the autocratization of the country's political system. Learning from its Hungarian allies, in 2017, PiS also attempted to decrease the mandatory retirement age for judges, a step endangering judicial independence. However, it withdrew the legislation in response to demonstrations and the intervention of the European Court of Justice (Duncan & Macy, 2020).

The social insurance reforms of FPÖ in Austria are exemplary cases of how exclusionary and inclusionary social policy reforms are intertwined under illiberal governance. On the one hand, these changes gradually excluded immigrants from social rights. On the other hand, they universalized access to social insurance for the native Austrian population and increased benefits, especially for low-income pensioners (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016; Parlament Österreich, 2018a). Just like in the case of social assistance reforms, from 2017, FPÖ indicated the knowledge of the German language as an eligibility criteria to receive social insurance benefits. This reform explicitly excluded immigrants from social rights, and, as such, is unlikely to have a counterpart within the EU. While earlier proposals affected the level and period of social assistance benefits (smaller amount of discretionary benefits for the poor and unemployed), the 2018 legislation affected the core of the conservative welfare state of Austria: pensions, sickness benefits, and services. FPÖ cut earned social rights that are linked to paying contributions (FPÖ, 2017; Parlament Österreich, 2018b). Thus, for immigrants, double eligibility criteria applied: one linked to performance (working hard and paying contributions), the other to culture (knowing the German language and culturally assimilating). Those who did not comply with either of these were excluded from social rights.

Parallel to its harsh exclusionary reforms, FPÖ implemented paradigmatic reforms to the pension system that equalized benefit levels for native insiders (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016, 2022; Parlament Österreich, 2018a). Earlier, the century-old Bismarckian social insurance system had been fragmented based on occupation in various industries and sectors, also differentiating between blue- and white-collar workers. This social insurance structure and the related differences in payments preserved the privileges of people of higher social status, including civil servants (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Palier & Hay, 2017). The path-shifting reform of FPÖ ended the scattered schemes and created one General Pensions Insurance Provider. Accordingly, the new pension system harmonized eligibility for different occupational groups and unified regulations. Meanwhile, the government also increased spending on pensions by nearly a quarter during the early 2000s. In the late 2010s, FPÖ, again in charge of the welfare ministry in a coalition government with the centre-right ÖVP, extended the same type of reforms to other fields of social insurance and unified the

former 21 social insurance providers into five. Just like with pensions, these changes eliminated former privileges and reduced administrative costs. FPÖ's persistent social insurance reforms thus demonstrate the equalizing endeavour of illiberal parties that cater for the masses of neglected constituencies.

4.2.3. Family Policies

Finally, a major area of social policies where illiberals expanded welfare is family policy. All illiberal parties promoted motherly employment and (except for FPÖ) initiated the expansion of childcare services. With the 2015 and 2018 family policy and demographic policy packages, Orbán targeted women (Fodor, 2022; Inglot et al., 2022), and mothers also featured high on FDI's agenda in power (FDI, 2024). More than in other fields, their social policy tools show great variety. The Italian illiberal parties like Lega, even before FDI, were market-oriented, similarly to Fidesz. Accordingly, they typically utilized "social policy by other means," including tax credits and exemptions, special grants, and vouchers (Béland, 2019). As fiscal welfare does not entail direct redistribution, illiberals could achieve both the promised "small state" (especially in Italy) and the expansion of family policies. The neoliberal idea of "choice" also featured high on the family policy agenda. Accordingly, Italian illiberals adopted tax deductions and credits for families, like the elimination of value-added tax on baby products. Since, in their view, cash benefits should be targeted at specific aims (as opposed to universal cash transfers), they preferred bonuses and vouchers. Both parties prioritized working mothers and promoted the development of childcare services. For example, Meloni introduced day-care bonuses of up to 3,600 euros for second and subsequent children, added three extra months of paid parental leave, and promised to invest 16 billion euros in childcare (FDI, 2024). Fidesz also expanded and increased parental leaves in Hungary for working mothers, while it also stopped means-tested benefits and decreased universal ones. Orbán's new, "flagship" family policy programs served as much of a boost to the market as the advancement of living conditions. For example, the large amounts of housing grants for working families in 2015 were available only for working parents and for newly built dwellings. In the case of young applicants, they also had to be married, reinforcing the conservative family model (Kováts, 2024). From 2019, the government also offered a loan to newlywed couples and a grant for large families to purchase vans (Hungarian Parliament, 2019). These innovative policies promoted middle- and upper-class families, while excluding those in need. Meanwhile, they also fed the bank sector and car merchants, as they were the direct providers of state-subsidised grants and loans. Thus, we could observe a pronounced financialization and fiscalization of family policies under Orbán.

As opposed to the selective policies of Fidesz and FDI, PiS in Poland implemented a very different universalizing approach in family policies. Here, following decades of neoliberal rule and piecemeal family policy benefits, under illiberal rule, universal cash transfers took over. The centrepiece of these paradigmatic reforms has been the Family 500+ program—a universal child benefit of PLN 500/child (approximately 130 euros) a month for the second and subsequent children, extended to all children since 2019, paid up to their 18th birthday (Myck & Trzciński, 2019). Universalism was a break with earlier employment-related and means-tested policies that had been dominant for half a century (Inglot et al., 2022). The amount of the benefit and its length are among the most generous in Europe. In 2016, PiS also introduced a new universal benefit of PLN 1000 (approximately 260 euros) a month for mothers without a sufficient employment record (Suwada, 2019).

In terms of family policies, FPÖ is the odd-one-out, as it did not place family policies and mothers at the centre of its welfare reforms. Smaller, incremental policy changes in their first term included a bonus for second and subsequent children in *Kinderbetreuungsgeld* (childcare benefit). During their second term, FPÖ voiced strong concern for the poverty of single parents, initiated benefit top-ups, and extended nursing leave for this group (Parlament Österreich, 2018c, 2018d). In line with the equalization of social policies for "insiders," FPÖ introduced a family bonus for low-income earners and single parents, and, as opposed to its Eastern European counterparts, explicitly promoted fathers' childcare by introducing, in 2018, the new "daddy month" (Parlament Österreich, 2018d).

Our analysis shows that the exclusionary ideas of illiberal parties played out against differing social groups and with varying intensity. FPÖ implemented the most explicit exclusion against immigrants not only from social assistance, but also from the social insurance systems. At the same time, all parties except for FDI carried out paradigmatic, often equalizing reforms to the social insurance systems. With the exception of FPÖ, illiberal parties prioritized women and mothers in retirement opportunities and implemented expansionary family policies. Our findings concerning social insurance reforms contrast with the earlier literature that argued that far-right parties refrained from large-scale reforms to the social insurance systems (Busemeyer et al., 2022; Enggist & Pinggera, 2022; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2020, 2022).

While the content of their policy changes varied according to the underlying ideas of the parties, the implementation procedures always included illiberal elements. These were typically top-down changes, often issued via decrees or emergency legislation, rather than the normal parliamentary procedures. Illiberal parties avoided consultation with the opposition and civil society and went against mainstream expertise in a populist manner.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed and contrasted social policy discourses and actions of four illiberal parties that were in power between 2010 and 2024. In our sample, there are two post-communist "new" EU member-states and two "old" EU member states that belong to three distinctive welfare state regimes: the hybrid Eastern European (Hungary and Poland), the conservative Bismarckian (Austria), and the Southern European (Italy). In this endeavour, we have identified the welfare discourses of illiberal parties and their most important policy tools, we have revealed their innovations, and have pointed out instances of policy learning between them. Focusing on the actual policies of illiberal actors has rewarded us with a new understanding of the causes of their popularity in the longer run, beyond campaigns.

We have paid special attention to the link between ideas and policy reforms and revealed that most illiberal parties carried out paradigmatic changes that altered the underlying goals of social policies. Paradigmatic reforms mainly affected social insurance systems, like the unification of this institution by FPÖ or the reversal of pension privatizations by Fidesz and PiS. In some cases, the paradigm shift was overarching and reached an expansive set of social policy sub-fields. Notable examples are Orbán's shift from the idea of the welfare state to the "work-based society" in Hungary, which in practice meant changes from needs-based and universal benefits to employment-related ones in all welfare areas. The PiS party in Poland carried out reforms in an opposing ideological direction, changing the former selective (employment and means-tested) welfare system to generous universal benefits in family policies and expanding pension rights.

With their radical social policies, illiberal parties signalled the end of the former welfare state arrangement. Indeed, illiberals resolutely set themselves against the previous institutional setting of their countries' welfare state. This makes sense, as social policy provides an excellent ground for parties to ideologically differentiate themselves from their predecessors. Notable examples include the pension reforms of Eastern European illiberals and their move from the "mixed" welfare regime towards universalism in Poland and the merit-based Bismarckian direction in Hungary. The Italian case also confirms this approach. After long years of campaigning against "welfare fraud," FDI swiftly stopped citizenship income rights after coming to power, positioning itself sharply against the attempted universalism of the left-wing Five Stars movement.

Some of our findings about illiberal social policy-making may serve as lessons for liberal democratic forces. Most importantly, we have found that illiberals live up to their promises. As surprising as it may sound, their actions match their communication. Furthermore, illiberal parties' social policies were not only concise but also consistent over time: we have found no U-turns in their ideas or actions. Thus, consistency and words aligning with actions seem to be key features that help build growing constituencies. Furthermore, illiberal parties often targeted social groups that liberal democratic actors had formerly neglected. A striking example is the focus on women by all parties except for FPÖ, which played out in women's positive discrimination in early retirement or the discursive and material acknowledgement of care work.

More generally, all illiberal parties set themselves against austerity policies and, in one way or another, expanded welfare states. While earlier literature had largely focused on the exclusionary discourses of illiberals around "deservingness," we have found that their reforms led to more equality for "insider" social groups. These often impacted large sections of the population, like FPÖ's social insurance unification or PiS's lowering of the pension age. Our research thus highlights that equalizing and expanding social rights is winning voters.

Methodologically, we suggest a sense of "new objectivity," meaning that the "bad" politics of far-right illiberal actors should not make us blind to the possibility of their "good" policies (Skidelsky, 2018). Liberal democratic actors may learn from the successes of equalizing policies and focus on social policy ideas and fields that have avoided the attention of illiberal actors. One of these is certainly the issue of poverty, which does not feature on the agenda of the illiberal parties that we have analysed in this study. With this in mind, further research should also compare liberal democratic social policy discourses and actions and contrast them with illiberal social policy-making to check if our findings are exclusive to the rising right-wing populist illiberal political actors.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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