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Hijacking Democracy: Proposals on the Future of the European Union in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia (2015–2022)

Max Steuer [1,2,3]

[1] CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary
[2] Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia
[3] Jindal Global Law School, O.P. Jindal Global University, India

Correspondence: Max Steuer (steuerm@ceu.edu / ms2632@cantab.ac.uk)

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Abstract

EU integration has opened new controversies in making sense of democracy. This article studies how discourses on democracy in EU integration open spaces to hijack the concept of democracy, using a novel empirical dataset on proposals for reforming EU democracy formulated during the rise of the "EU crisis" rhetoric between 2015–2022. The analysis focuses on 131 proposals from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia as sources with the rationale to present forward-looking claims on EU democracy. The three EU member states have struggled with post-1989 democratic consolidation. Between 2015–2022, fundamental tenets of democracy continued to be undermined in Hungary with implications for the decision-making and legitimacy of the EU institutions. The analysis finds limited conceptual innovations in references to democracy in the proposals. Moreover, it shows how illiberal actors, identified by conceptions of democracy reduced to (state-level) majority rule, present conventionally antidemocratic ideas as embodying the spirit of democracy. In all three countries, democratic actors broadly failed to counter these hijacking attempts. The findings underscore the impoverished discourses on democracy in the context of EU integration in the small Visegrad countries. They also call for enhanced public representations of views on the EU in an inclusive manner.

Keywords

Czechia; de-democratisation; democracy; European Union; Hungary; illiberalism; intellectuals; national governments; political parties; Slovakia

1. Introduction

The growth of shared EU competence in the wake of the atmosphere of emergency triggered by the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 has amplified previously existing critiques of the lack of democracy in the EU (e.g., Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Wiesner, 2020). Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, "crisis talk" had become entrenched in EU thinking, fuelled first by economic and then by security concerns due to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the illiberal weaponisation of asylum (Steuer, 2017). Amidst these worries, two lines of criticism became difficult to distinguish from each other. One was that of anti-EU voices—including those calling for short-term, even unilateral solutions undermining fundamental rights on grounds of "emergencies" (Auer, 2022)—wishing to weaken or entirely diminish the Union's competences (Lorenz & Anders, 2020). The other was stakeholder dissatisfaction with the lack of proportionate democratic safeguards for the EU's capacity to enhance the public good by exercising supranational competences (Weiler, 2018). The difficulty in establishing the distinction between the two critiques carries a double risk of delegitimising critiques of the deficits of democracy in the EU, and delegitimising the EU altogether. Both could stifle EU democratic reform (e.g., Lafont, 2020). Attentiveness to the varieties of discourses of EU democracy is necessary to reduce that risk.

This article scrutinises a segment of discourses on EU democracy during a pivotal period of rising concerns of overlapping (or "poly-") crises, culminating in the Covid-19 pandemic. It analyses proposals on the future of EU democracy from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia, Central European countries with shared histories including the 2004 EU accession and with challenges in embedding democratic political regimes (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Hanley & Cianetti, 2024). This helps shed light on the local debate on EU democracy and understand who "wields" democracy in the EU context as a concept. Furthermore, it allows exploring discursive shifts amidst rising illiberalism (Halmai, 2021). This article, firstly, presents broad fault lines on the discourses of democracy in the EU, demonstrating the gap in studying particular constituencies' contributions (Section 2), and the significance of bridging that gap (Section 3). Secondly, it defends the analysis of original data on reform proposals (Section 4). The Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak proposals were assembled as part of a broader cross-jurisdictional project from official platforms of key actors supplemented by online search (Section 5). Thirdly, the article shows instances of how the concept of democracy was hijacked by illiberal actors, appropriating it with limited contestation or resistance from stakeholders endorsing the EU as a project, albeit at times critical towards the deficits of EU democracy (Section 6). The broadly opposing groups curiously came together in the *absence* of robust and comprehensive demands for advancing more participatory—and in that sense, *political*—processes in the EU and its member states (see Oleart, 2023; Wiesner, 2018; Section 7). The results point to how the diversification of actors and representations in discourses on EU democracy is not only in line with the EU's purported values, but also in the pragmatic interest to sustain the legitimacy of the EU project.

2. Conceptions of Democracy and Reforming the EU

The rise of a permanent crisis mode in the EU post-2010 has amplified concerns about EU democracy (Mavrouli & Van Waeyenberge, 2023, p. 406). The Hungarian government formed amidst the 2010 economic crisis engaged in a systematic deconstruction of democracy (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024; Jakab & Kirchmair, 2025; Szelényi, 2023). Hungary is a pivotal case, due to the governmental capture of public media, the stifling of dissent, and assaults on minority rights. The deterioration of democracy in EU member states

also questions the operation of EU institutions, particularly the Council of the EU (Scheppele & Morijn, 2025). When not all decision-makers are elected in free and fair elections, a deficit of even minimalist readings of democracy (Schedler, 2002) emerges.

Contestations over the meaning of democracy are amplified by the questionable democratic reservoirs of EU institutions independent from member state governments. For example, the direct elections to the EP are coupled with the latter's constrained competences despite its gradual empowerment (Mavrouli & Van Waeyenberge, 2023, p. 407; Ripoll Servent & Costa, 2021). Moreover, strengthening representative democracy via direct elections of the Commission or European Council President is not seen as a panacea. Critiques of representative democracy have multiplied, highlighting its limitations when not combined with avenues for public participation and deliberation (e.g., Borońska-Hryniewiecka & Kinski, 2024, pp. 20–23). Illiberal actors began to use ethnonationalist conceptions of "identity," presenting "national identity" in tension with the EU (Kovács, 2023a). Instead of allowing for a dual "demoicratic" identity (e.g., Nicolaïdis & Liebert, 2023), they have invoked identity to defend extensive powers for member state executives as the "pinnacle of democracy." Thus, the concept of identity can assist in understanding the perspective on EU democratisation.

The prime response to the critique argues that the EU is centred on output legitimacy. Here, the EU is democratically legitimate as long as it delivers (Bellamy & Lord, 2021; see also Schmidt, 2013). However, this response is losing credibility insofar as the EU institutions repeatedly *fail* to live up to the fundamental values, particularly regarding inclusion and openness (Ganty & Kochenov, 2024; Wilkinson, 2021, pp. 178–202). The growing recognition of the absence of coming to terms with the dominating colonial legacies of the EU's founding and the continued repercussions for present EU governance (Eklund, 2023) amplifies the calls for democratic EU reform.

Yet, what "more democracy" would entail remains contested. The Conference on the Future of Europe, as a novel initiative by the EU institutions to advance deliberation with EU citizens, provided a glimpse into the breadth of alternative conceptions of democracy that can materialise in EU politics. These deliberations nevertheless remained largely disconnected from political developments in the member states, and offered limited insights into discourses on EU democracy (Steuer & Organ, 2025). To the extent the member states remain pivotal in shaping EU politics (van Middelaar & Puetter, 2021), there is a dearth of studies that would open the "black box" containing not only governments' but also other actors' views (cf. Lacroix & Nicolaïdis, 2011).

Additionally, understanding the representations of democracy in the EU is particularly important in societies where democracy itself is under threat of deterioration. Here, the discursive space risks closing due to governmental assaults on fundamental rights and their attempts to control the space with narratives that "confuse notions, approaches and perspectives" (Drinóczi, 2018, pp. 88–89). These trends appear in the Visegrad region as well.

3. The Centrality of the Centre of Europe for a Democratic EU

The three small Visegrad countries do not have the benefit of country and population size, but, given their strategic location, especially after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and their significance in selected

decision-making procedures in the Council and the EP, they can shape the EU's future in pivotal moments. Moreover, these Visegrad countries have shared considerable similarities in their EU relations after the fall of state socialism in 1989. The "return to Europe" was central here (Ott, 2024). EU membership acted as an "endpoint" for joining fully-fledged independent states after a century of fast-changing political regimes with prevailing authoritarian rule (Bozóki & Simon, 2019; e.g., Heimann, 2009). The 1993 Copenhagen European Council with its substantive criteria for EU accession provided a beacon for these countries' politics to meet the determined yardsticks (Henderson, 2002, pp. 89–92). The "superficially pro-integration orientation of the third Mečiar government" (1994–1998; Henderson, 2002, p. 93), accompanied by Mečiar's semi-authoritarian practices, slowed down Slovakia's EU accession. Still, Slovakia could only accede together with Czechia and Hungary due to the pro-reform government and broader societal commitment towards "catching up" after the 1998 elections.

Even after accession, the positions of the "new member states" towards the EU remained volatile. Reservations against fully committing to deeper EU integration remained the norm, with some stakeholders asking to limit such progress due to "national identity and sovereignty" (Malová & Lisoňová, 2010, pp. 169–170). Before the "illiberal turn" in Hungary (Jenne & Mudde, 2012), Czechia was among the most outspoken critics of further EU integration. The Czech EU discourse after the fall of state socialism was shaped by the contestation between "two Václavs" (Blaive & Maslowski, 2011): former presidents Václav Havel and Václav Klaus. Both professed anti-communist leanings. Klaus' opposition to the EU has shaped Czech EU politics (Rakušanová, 2007). The series of post-2015 challenges, notably with recognising the EU's commitments in relation to people facing political persecution and later the Covid-19 pandemic, have enhanced anti-EU tropes in Hungary relatively more than in Czechia and Slovakia (Drinóczi & Mészáros, 2022; Steuer, 2019). In all three countries, anti-refugee sentiments have spurred and translated into the rejection of the temporary relocation mechanism adopted by the Council in late 2015. This was followed by calls for "flexible solidarity" to allow member states not to commit to hosting any refugees (Braun, 2020, p. 933). With the notable exception of refugee rights, however, the debate supported the belonging to "the EU core" in Czechia and Slovakia. In fact, Slovakia was particularly vocal in the ambition to belong to "the core" (Kazharski, 2019) during its EU Council presidency in 2016.

This difference seems to align with the divergent historical trajectories of entering the EU: Slovakia had to overcome a semi-authoritarian regime episode in the 1990s, unlike Czechia. Yet, Slovak discourse has not overcome the underlying illiberal opposition towards the EU. Robert Fico, the four-time PM of Slovakia (as of 2025) initially pragmatically embraced the EU, but underwent a U-turn after such support had become incompatible with his personal political ambitions (Malová & Dolný, 2016). His change of attitude has aided Slovakia's post-2023 de-democratisation. Despite the differences in trajectories, both Czechia and Slovakia's position vis-à-vis the EU remained indecisive. For example, only a few voices openly rejected the Hungarian PM Orbán's policies, and the Visegrad group did not lose purchase completely despite the de-democratising drifts (Rupnik, 2023).

4. Methodology: Analysis of Reform Proposals from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia between 2015–2022

The analysis of EU reform proposals focuses on the concept of democracy during a pivotal period that began with the refugee crisis in 2015 (see Gilbert, 2015; Kazharski, 2022, p. 181). The latter accelerated

existing anti-minority and anti-EU sentiments in the Visegrad region. By 2022, the standards of democracy in the region, put under pressure by the Covid-19 pandemic, further struggled with polarisation caused by the denial of violations of international law committed by Putin's Russia in Ukraine (e.g., Bajomi-Lázár & Horváth, 2025; Wenzel et al., 2024). Thus, the data analysis covers a pivotal period which has facilitated the post-2023 illiberalisation of Slovakia (e.g, Haughton et al., 2025, pp. 9–11; Steuer & Malová, 2023), the cementing of non-democratic practices in Hungary (Enyedi & Mikola, 2024; Scheppele, 2022), and the possibility of illiberal actors to succeed in the 2025 Czech elections.

The analysis of proposals pertaining to the post-2015 development can be situated within existing works examining EU discourses (e.g., Wiesner, 2024). The proposals cannot encompass the entirety of the discourse on EU democracy and democratisation, as not all representations in this discourse need to be presented in a forward-looking format. If the data source only presents an opinion on democracy in the EU, but has no forward-looking element (what ought to be done in the future), it would not qualify as a proposal. The forward-looking element makes the concept of "proposals" capacious enough to avoid confining the sources only to very specific reform plans. It also ensures that the sources remain relevant for better understanding the discourse on the futures of EU democracy, because making proposals signals the intention of the actors to engage with an audience and to receive responses. Indeed, proposals combine the forward-looking element with the demand for engagement and relationality. They are made for some audience, aiming to achieve change, or at least debate potential changes, which makes them important for the discourse on EU democratisation. Even if the proposals respond to a new development or are provoked as a response to a contrasting proposal, their ambition to add ideas to the public space constitutes part of the discourse on EU democracy.

A broader conception of proposals could search for future-oriented claims also in sources not explicitly presented as having this forward-looking element. An example is analyses that critically reinterpret the country's EU integration history, but refrain from deriving future-oriented implications from such reinterpretation. The challenge with such broader conceptions is that the magnitude of sources complicates qualitative analysis. Moreover, the present conception takes seriously the actors' intention to share their vision for the future, rather than trying to impose such intention where it might not have been present. For example, a political party might feel induced to prepare a manifesto for the EP elections, but it is not obliged to do so in either of the countries under study. Even if a manifesto is prepared, the party might opt not to comment on the future of the EU (this also explains why not all manifestos of all parties in the 2019 EP elections were included in the database of proposals).

This approach provides new evidence reviewing the superficiality of EU-related discourses in the Visegrad countries, noted in other reports (Havlík & Smekal, 2020; Janková, 2021; Kyriazi, 2021; for parliamentary debates, see Góra et al., 2023). The proposals were identified as part of a larger project (Góra & Zgaga, 2023), making use of the researchers' country-specific expertise, and their database was disclosed at the end of the project (EU3D, 2023). The search aimed to capture both state and non-state actors (cf. Blokker, 2024) beyond official governmental reports or well-known think tanks. No source that qualified as a proposal and was found during the data collection using online search engines with a focus on the future of the EU was excluded. The possibility that some sources that would qualify as proposals were omitted remains, but similar ideas tend to appear in more than one proposal in the dataset, which indicates certain saturation of the database. Moreover, this approach prevents the need to analyse only a random selection of

proposals: all proposals identified could be included thanks to the relatively high demand placed on classifying a source as a proposal.

The actors were categorised based on their self-presentation and official legal status. This might make the pool of proposals by non-governmental actors larger than it substantively is because some are *de facto* close to particular governments. General and EP elections and the Conference on the Future of Europe were milestones yielding a relatively larger number of proposals, due to the opportunities they offered to stimulate debates on the EU's future. These reasons prevent robust comparative conclusions on the future-oriented discourse on EU democracy in the three countries and do not aspire to exhaust, in a comparative perspective, all representations of that discourse. Still, they do not undermine the categorisation of the sources as proposals to better understand the discourse on the future of EU democracy.

Effort was made to reach beyond the "usual suspects" of state elites. Nevertheless, the proposals might be skewed in favour of governmental actors due to the latter's visibility granted by their institutional status. Some voices might be silenced or neglected due to structural inequalities and exclusions (e.g., Kantola et al., 2023). Alternative research methods (such as interviews) would be more conducive for their further study.

As the logic of searching was equivalent across the three states, the relative number of proposals remains instructive. The numbers from Czechia (46) and Hungary (49) roughly align, while Slovakia has fewer proposals (36). Slovakia is the smallest state of the three and its linguistic closeness to Czechia implies that Slovak actors may engage with—and even contribute to—proposals that are formally produced in Czechia, in Czech language. The opposite trend is much less common. Furthermore, a non-negligible portion of the proposals is published under the auspices of country offices of foundations of other member states (e.g., Konrad Adenauer Foundation policy briefs), or of organisations with broader, even global reach (GLOBSEC press releases or policy briefs). In Slovakia, there are virtually no think tanks or civil society organisations focusing exclusively on EU affairs, resulting in most proposals in the database originating from governmental or partisan opposition actors. The deterioration of academic freedom and open spaces alongside the rise of government-supported NGOs, as observable in Hungary (e.g., Ziegler, 2025), could shrink the spaces for engaging in particular discourses (e.g., defending the enhancement of supranational competences to advance democracy) while magnify others (e.g., those wishing to strengthen the power of member state governments regardless of their accountability). However, no presumptions can be derived as regards the *number* of proposals, as illiberal funding of spaces promoting particular ideas at the expense of others (cf. Gárdos-Orosz & Szente, 2024, pp. 348–350, 355) might rather encourage these spaces to produce proposals with the ambition to shift the discourses in support of their funders' preferences. In addition, there is resistance against the shrinking open spaces (e.g., Polgári & Nagy, 2021), which can even be amplified vis-à-vis ongoing pressures and generate more innovative or impactful ideas. Vice versa, the absence of such pressure is not necessarily conducive to generating more or more innovative proposals, if incentives to do so are missing. More limited traditions of critical inquiry or the lack of motivation to engage with larger audiences, including those across borders, can impede the generation of new proposals regardless of how much surrounding events or controversies might induce reflections in this form.

Czechia and Hungary generated slightly more proposals from non-governmental actors. These include proposals originating from local branches of foundations from abroad (e.g., Friedrich Ebert Foundation). The conservative Polish think tank Sobieski Institute engages with the future of the EU in a report on the

Conference on the Future of Europe, put together by collaborators from all Visegrad countries and translated into Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak, in addition to the Polish version. Czech think tanks such as Association for International Affairs, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, or Institute for Politics and Society (the latter associated with Andrej Babiš's party ANO) are represented in the database, as well as a few individual actors. In Hungary, some actors formally identified as think tanks (such as the Századvég Foundation, the Barankovics István Foundation, or the Centre of Fundamental Rights) are considered to be affiliated with the government or the parties it is composed of (Buzogány & Varga, 2023; see also Geva & Santos, 2021). This composition of actors is consistent with the observations on the partial "co-optation" of Hungarian civil society, particularly of organisations defending traditional values. Such co-optation aligns with the illiberal government's narrative (Gerő et al., 2023).

The analysis of the proposals focused on the representations of "democracy" in the EU (including its member states) without embracing a schematic assessment that merely describes the content of the proposals (Wiesner, 2022). All proposals were read and coded via a pre-determined form (a single survey response per proposal; Góra & Zgaga, 2023, pp. 4–7). This study focuses on those questions which provide insights into the discourses on EU democracy. Hence, it does not serve as a full report of the form responses. Moreover, the concept of democracy was left open to be used by the actors invoking it in the proposals, instead of imposing pre-determined conceptions (e.g., Coppedge et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the analysis was particularly sensitive to the potential connections between the deficits of democracy and dominance (Fossum, 2021), as well as different pathways for reforming the EU to overcome shortcomings of democracy.

5. Overview of the Proposals on the Future of the EU

Government or political party manifestos, parliamentary resolutions, transcripts of leaders' speeches, op-eds, policy briefs, or even academic articles comprise a non-exhaustive list of formats in which proposals on EU democratic reform might appear. All three countries have a broadly similar set of public institutions and there are no specific essential actor types that would exist only in some of the countries as opposed to others. The three countries are each relatively small and with a relatively less extensive public sphere and network of actors focusing specifically on the future of the EU. Thus, the few dozen proposals located via search engines, and scrutiny of unitary and visible actors (such as governments, political parties, or most visible think tanks) can offer insights into how the future of EU is related to democracy and what kinds of futures of EU democracy are envisioned by actors who present proposals on EU democratic reform. In all three countries, most proposals were located from member state governments and political parties (Figure 1), the latter mainly via their election manifestos. Individuals drafting proposals on behalf of public institutions such as executives or legislatures, as well as political parties, think tanks, or civil society actors, may yield disproportionate influence (Kelemen, 2017). This article sticks to the formal identification of the authorship of the proposal as it is presented to the public. In case of parliamentary proposals, even a slim majority endorsement of the proposal provides recognition of the collective authority. Individuals (politicians or intellectuals) are formally recognised as authors if they present a proposal in their individual capacity. There is no doubt about the diverse contexts in which the proposals emerged, with some being part of more "official" practices, such as government manifestos or political party programs, while others being raised more spontaneously, such as proposals by individual public figures (either politicians or intellectuals) reflecting on the future of the EU. The comprehensiveness and impact of the proposals might also differ.

Still, even during the occasions which may prompt proposal generation (such as electoral campaigns), actors are not "forced" to formulate such proposals.

At the level of the governmental proposals, Hungary reacted critically to challenges levelled by EU institutions, notably the budgetary conditionality, which it saw as discriminatory and perpetuating inequalities due to the economic consequences of withholding the funding. Hungary also stands out in proposals prompted by the Conference on the Future of Europe, particularly through pro-Orbán articulations of EU future. For example, in one interview, the former Hungarian Minister of Justice, known advocate of cracking down on the judiciary and the civil society (e.g., Coman, 2022), pleaded for the "public opinion" to prevail over conclusions from "various working groups" of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the former presumed less willing to restrict EU funding for Hungary due to rule of law concerns (Judi, 2022).

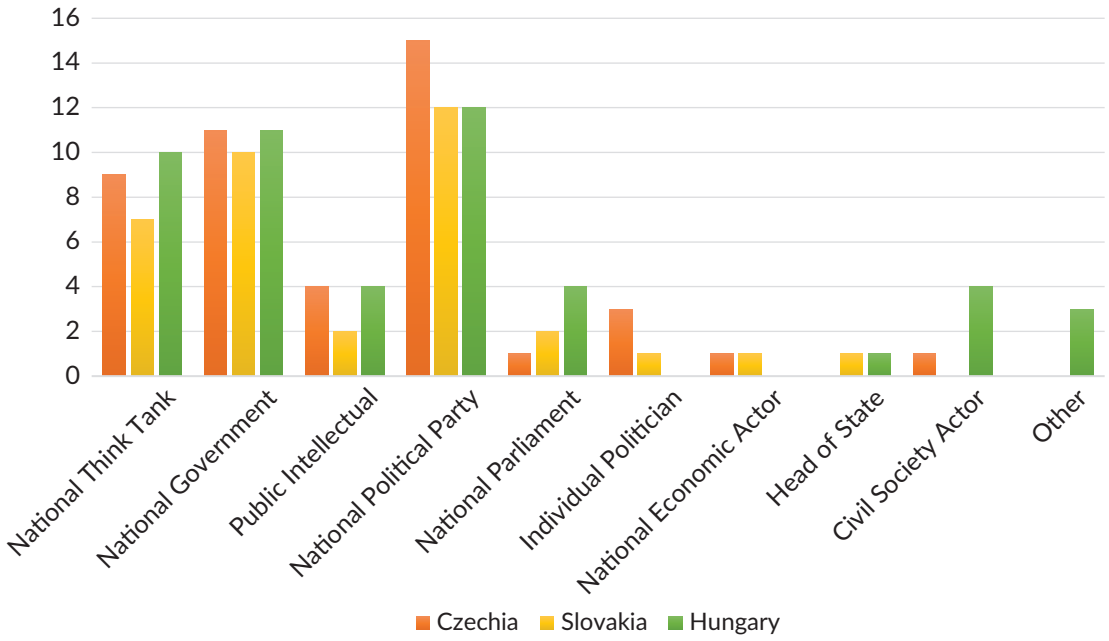

Figure 1. Number of proposals on the future of the EU in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia and types of actors authoring them.

The Czech government focused on growth, convergence, and competitiveness with some regard for environmental commitments and energy efficiency. The cabinet of PM Babiš (replaced by PM Fiala in 2021) acknowledged the impact of the pandemic, but was reluctant to accept any extension of supranational competences. In the plans for the 2022 Czech EU Council Presidency, the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, energy security, and the "refugee crisis" related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine took priority (Government of the Czech Republic, 2022). The Slovak government (2020–2023) supported joint EU action, but was least concrete as regards the nature of such action. The latest entries being from July 2022 preclude comprehensively scrutinising the impact of the open Putinist invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

6. The EU as a Malfunctioning Democracy? Illiberal Concept Hijacks

The logic of hijacking democracy is summarised in a statement of the Renaissance of Europe initiative by the Polish and Hungarian illiberal PMs, supported by Italy's Matteo Salvini (2021). The proposal demands that no

supranational institution can determine the content of being a "democrat" while simultaneously defending national governments' rights unilaterally to do just that. Only EU democracy is portrayed as dysfunctional (Figure 2), due to a "rule of bureaucrats" without sufficient accountability. In Czechia, a similar point is regularly voiced by former President, and ardent critic of EU integration, Václav Klaus. Exceptions occur—for example, the Czech Institute for International Relations in Prague criticised the EU institutions for not doing enough in the context of the Russian invasion, which may undermine the EU's standing as a community as well.

On a few occasions, more participatory instruments or other forms of EU-level democracy (e.g., through the EP) are advocated. Yet, such voices are almost inaudible amidst the majority of the proposals that do not go into detail—in considerable contrast to proposals generated in a more participatory manner (Wiesner & Novak, 2024, pp. 10–13). In one case, that of the 2019 EP election manifesto of the Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia), both positions were advocated simultaneously regardless of their internal contradiction. This party produced a several dozen-page-long manifesto demanding both more "Europe of states" and "Europe of citizens" (cf. van Middelaar, 2013). Simultaneously, it endorsed a considerable weakening of the Euro-Atlantic collaboration and effectively the EU's foreign policy, by opposing sanctions against Russia. Its proposed solution is the reduction of the powers of the European Commission, in particular. In the 2017 general election manifesto, only the former Klaus-type rhetoric is present in relation to the party's EU policy. The potential of participatory instruments at EU level is not recognised. A few proposals (e.g., by the Česká pirátská strana [Czech Pirate Party]) are keener on strengthening EU competences, but are countered, particularly in Hungary, by several pro-government NGOs. The annual speech by Viktor Orbán (2020) includes demands of nothing less than an "illiberal revolution" at the EU level.

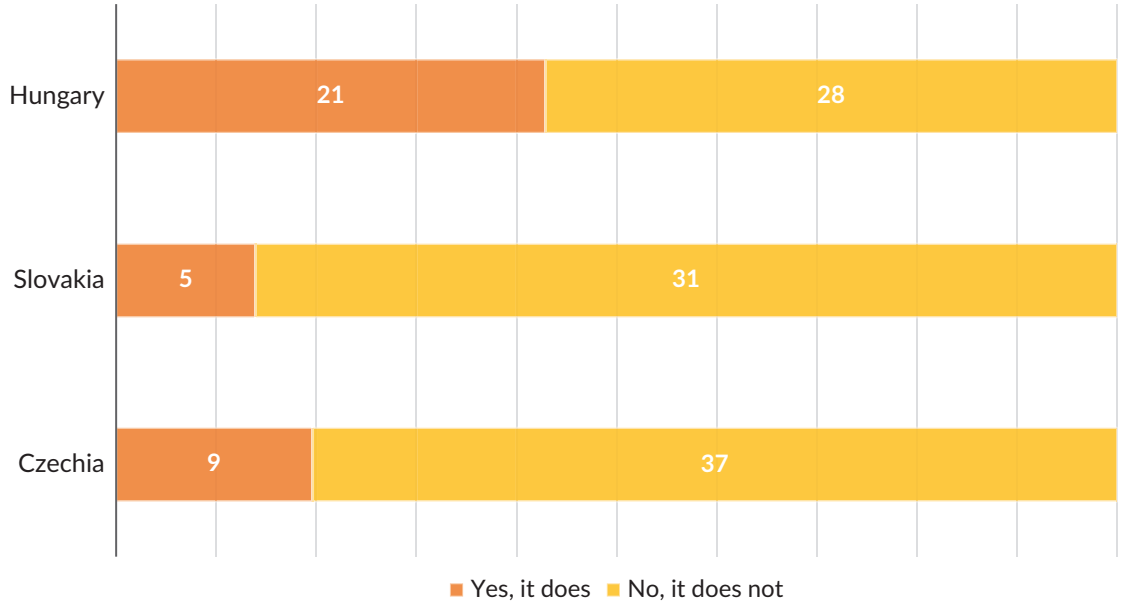

Figure 2. Does the proposal explicitly mention "democratic malfunctioning" of the EU?

References to dominance as an indicator of deficits or failures of democracy remain minimal. Only one proposal, a collaborative output of Visegrad Four think tanks (involved were Institute for Politics and Society—Czechia; F. A. Hayek Foundation—Slovakia; Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade—Hungary; and the Polish Instytut Sobieskiego as coordinator), makes such a reference. The proposal ties domination to the influence of social media companies and proposes more EU regulation as a solution. In Czechia, a policy brief

by the Czech branch of the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation sees the risk of dominance of large states but considers this also as a potential advantage for Czechia. An academic article published in Slovak in a Czech legal journal argues for the reduction of hierarchy and increased transparency. This is to be achieved by making the EP the sole institution influencing the composition of the Commission (Baraník, 2017).

Most references to dominance appear in the Hungarian proposals. Notably, the resolution of the Hungarian Parliament from July 2022 reacts to the Conference on the Future of Europe, which it perceives as an instance of illicit hierarchy due to the perceived lack of control of the member states. While it appreciates Hungarian citizens' involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe, it castigates EU bureaucracy and calls for such Treaty revisions that would strengthen the member states, including national parliaments, and "conservative values."

An even more determined judgment comes from the Hungarian government-affiliated Centre of Fundamental Rights, which issued a proposal titled "The European Commission attacked our country in the back!" Here, it condemns the cuts in EU funding against Hungary, which it links to lobbying of political opponents of Hungary. The proposal decries the alleged influence of left-wing actors and the LGBTQ+ movement. These are meant to shape the practices not only of the Commission, but also of the Court of Justice. In this picture, EU leaders wield the law as a source of oppression of Hungarians (and, to a lesser extent, Poles), and a source of punishment for the 2022 victory of PM Orbán. The commentary titled "It's time to start talking about huxit" by Fricz, a self-identified political scientist, presents the EU as a reference point that is "irredeemable" for Hungarians, and floats the idea of leaving it altogether.

There is greater silence of voices critical of the EU's status quo in Slovakia, which may partially be explained by the country's attempt to limit its association with the Visegrad Four in the early 2020s (Bátora, 2021, p. 9). Nevertheless, the lack of critical engagement with the EU gave relatively more space for actors from other countries, particularly those endorsing the Hungarian government (see Petrović et al., 2023).

As discussed in Section 2, references to identity as a salient concept of depicting the state and future of democracy in the EU were scrutinised as well. Proposals raised by Hungarian government actors referred to identity more frequently than in Czechia or Slovakia, with the focus on national identity in a rather exclusionary manner prevailing considerably over the focus on European identity (Figure 3). In Slovakia, references to identity appeared in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, with the government hoping to see the enhancement of Slovaks' European identity through this endeavour. Hungarian governmental proposals articulated the ambition to not only build Hungarians' national identity, but also to impact the interpretations of European identity, with some NGOs and think tanks (e.g., the Antall József Knowledge Center) presenting contrasting views. Institutional efforts to build illiberal identities (Kovács, 2023b) are illustrated by the Constitutional Court of Hungary (2020) in a press release.

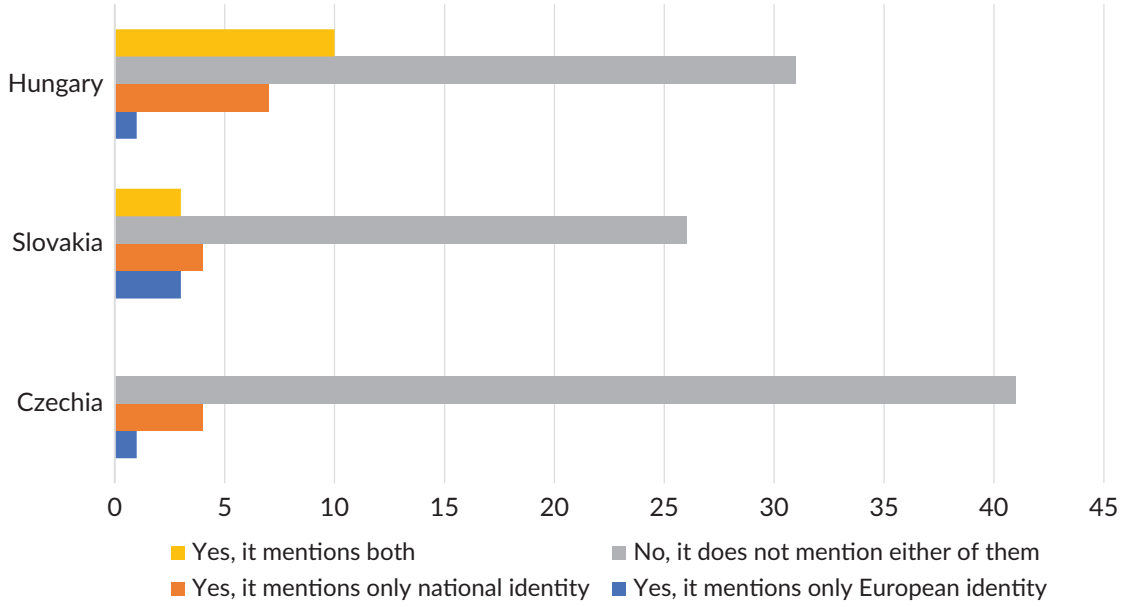

Figure 3. Does the proposal explicitly mention European or national identity?

7. Limited Presence of Proposals for Institutional Reform Strengthening Participatory Democracy

If the EU is the object of the "democracy critique," what is proposed to reform it? This section reviews proposals which engage explicitly with the malfunctioning of democracy in the EU. Here, greater critique appears towards the EU institutions' than member state institutions' status quo (Figure 4). The interest in EU democratisation is accompanied by limited (if any) capacity for self-criticality and humility (cf. Keane, 2018) towards deficits of democracy at the member state level.

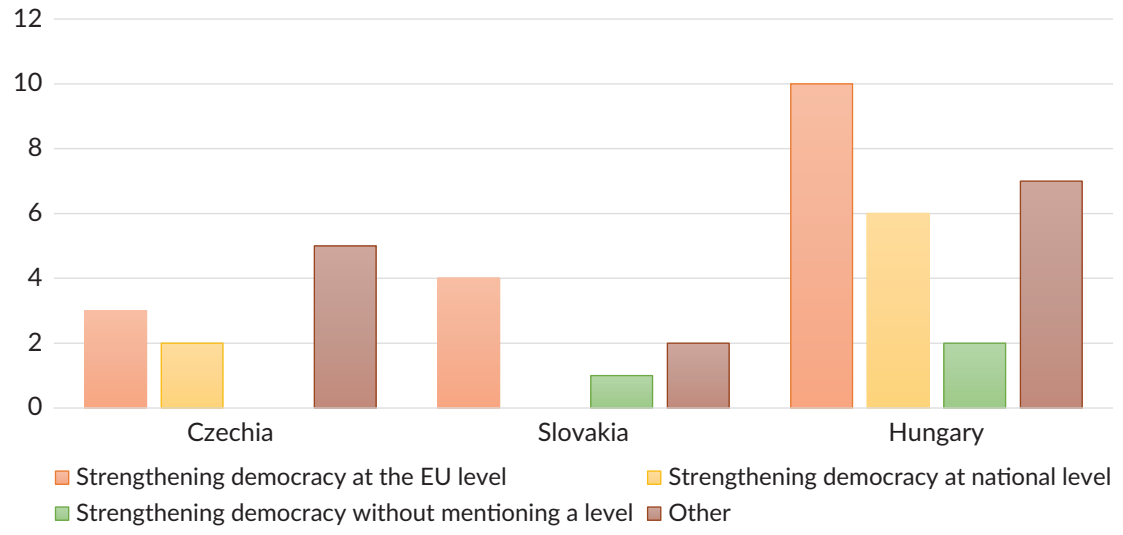

Figure 4. In reference to what level are rectifying measures (improvements) on the functioning of democracy mentioned? Notes: This figure considers only the pool of proposals which did identify "democratic malfunctioning" in the EU (see Figure 2); such proposals could refer to more than one level simultaneously; each such reference was counted once.

This discrepancy becomes visible in the optimal locus of *competences* exercised by democratic decision makers. Here, concept hijacks materialise in the extent to which concrete institutional or policy themes are missing from the proposals. Most proposals offer limited analytical depth and at most ask for clinging to what "belongs" to the member states. They rarely recognise the potential of the member state to *lead* by advancing its policy agenda at the EU level. Figure 5 shows how the tendency to refer to relatively fewer themes is visible in Hungary (111 references) as compared to Czechia (224 references, despite the similar overall number of proposals in the two countries; the 111 references in Slovakia coincide with a smaller overall number of proposals there).

Migration, asylum, and human mobility stand out as a policy area equally across the three countries. In Slovakia, with 15 references, this policy area is represented significantly more than others, while in Czechia (20 references) and Hungary (12 references), it belongs amongst the most prominent ones. The prominence of this area in the collection of proposals between 2015–2022 underscores the linkage between proposals as responses to (perceived or actual) "crises." Issues of the economy are less frequently discussed, indicating that the economic crisis was no longer an immediate concern, prompting (re)thinking of the future of EU democracy. Defence and security-related issues, amplified by the annexation of Crimea, are unequally covered in the three countries, with Czech proposals engaging with them more prominently.

Minimum references are made to improving citizens' participation rights (Figure 6), indicating that the bottom-up, citizen- (and even less so people-)centric view was not a central concern across the spectrum of proposals, despite otherwise sharp disagreements between some of their initiators.

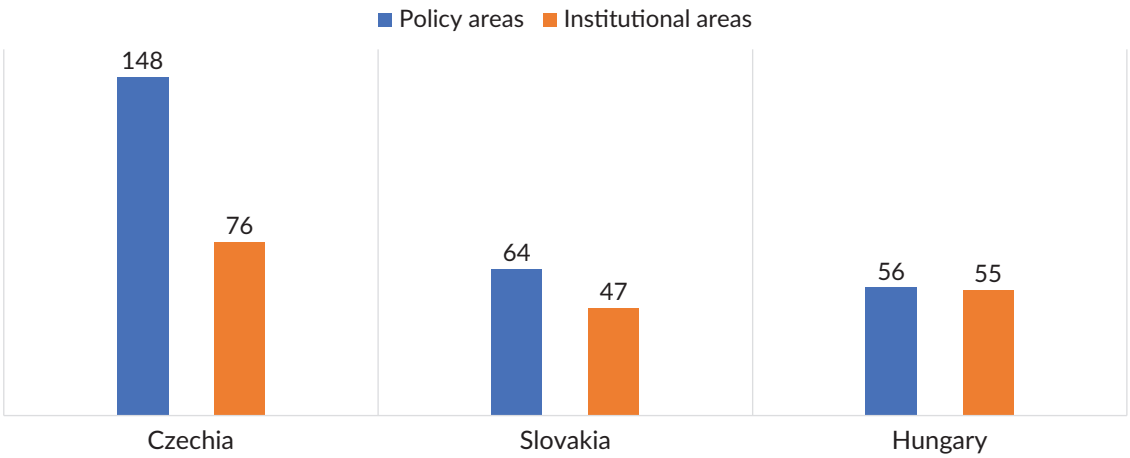

Figure 5. Policy-oriented versus institutional proposals. Notes: Policy areas included were climate and environment protection; defence and security; digital; energy; health and food; migration, asylum, and human mobility; transport; cohesion policy; competitiveness; development policy; multiannual financial framework and EU budget; research and innovation; trade; education and culture; and Common Agricultural Policy. The institutional areas included were institutional issues and reforms; fundamental rights, rule of law, and free press; democracy; enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy; social issues (Social Europe); taxation; Economic and Monetary Union; internal market; EU's global role; multilateralism; differentiation; EU history and heritage; minority protection; civil society. Some categories (such as civil society) may belong to both groups; in this analysis, these were presented as institutional, as it allows a more conservative estimate of the dominance of policy-oriented themes in the proposals. A single proposal might contain any number of policy or institutional areas. The titles of individual categories are retained according to the codebook in the source project (Góra & Zgaga, 2023).

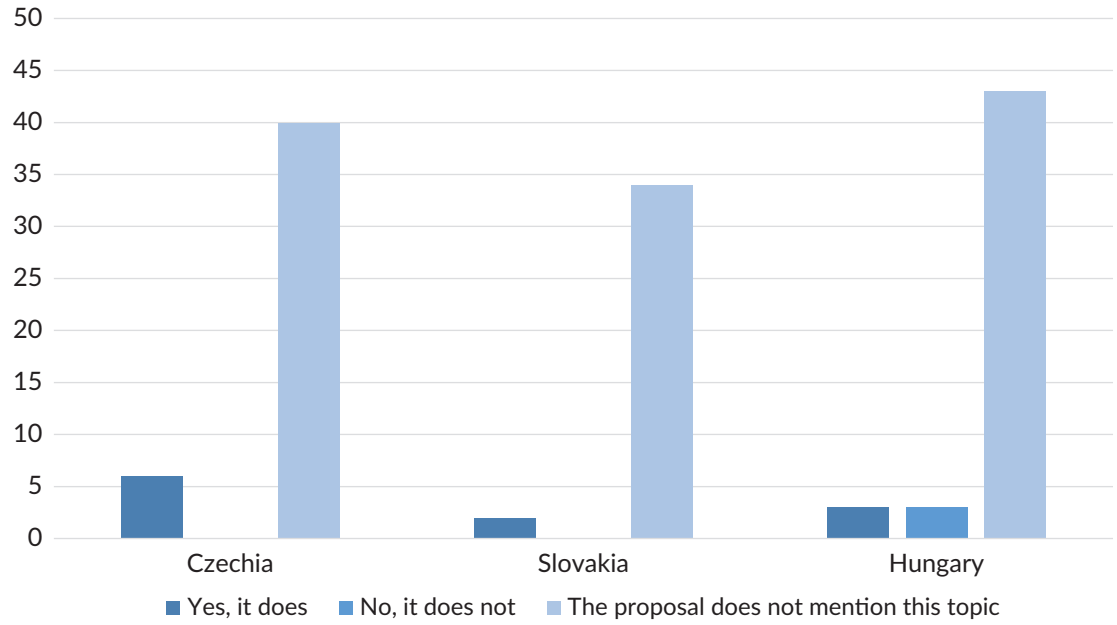

Figure 6. Does the proposal seek to strengthen citizens' participation rights in the EU? Notes: If the proposal "does not" seek to strengthen citizens' participation rights, it means that it makes a reference to the issue, but argues against (an interpretation of) such strengthening, or at least does not recognise this as optimal in the context in which the reference occurs. Such references are very rare.

For instance, in Slovakia, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs officially committed itself to listening to the proposals from the Conference on the Future of Europe. At the same time, it took a stance against the Spitzenkandidaten process with no suggestion for an alternative democratisation mechanism (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2020, p. 3). Besides the executive, the political party Sloboda a solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity) was among the more vocal actors in the dataset. This party played a historical role in the fall of the pro-EU Slovak cabinet of Iveta Radičová in 2011 due to this party's refusal to support the ratification of the European Stability Mechanism (Gould & Malová, 2019). In its "Manifesto of Slovak Eurorealism," it subscribed to the fourth scenario from Juncker's White Paper ("doing less more efficiently"). Sloboda a solidarita defended the transfer of several competences back to the member states and abolishing the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, among others. The proposal is in line with the party's generally Eurosceptic position (e.g., Rybář, 2020, pp. 238–239) and shows little regard for the importance of participatory democracy.

A rare example of a more demanding reform proposal is presented by a Slovak diplomat writing on the need for institutional reform as a condition for the EU to succeed (Ivan, 2022). This proposal includes slightly more specific ideas such as the introduction of a second chamber of the EP and the allocation of the right to legislative initiative to the Council. In a similarly demanding manner, the Hungarian Parliament, in the summer of 2022, asked for the introduction of a Treaty amendment that would require the Commission to be "explicitly ideologically neutral." What exactly ideological neutrality means is not specified. A few concrete proposals were presented by political parties, such as the introduction of transnational party lists (manifesto of the Strana zelených (Green Party) in Czechia or the Momentum mozgalom (Momentum Movement) in Hungary) or the fusion of the positions of the Commission President and the European Council President (KDU-ČSL [Christian and Democratic Union—Czechoslovak People's Party]). Others were less concrete, such as former PM Babiš's party ANO2011 demanding, in the 2019 EP elections manifesto

("We Will Protect Czechia"), the reduction of the Commission's competences. Viktor Orbán, in a 2021 speech at the "Thirty Years Free" conference, adopted the same narrative. Neither of the two actors specified which exact competences should be transferred or removed.

A Hungarian political party (Demokratikus Koalíció [Democratic Coalition]) advocated, in 2019, the right to legislative initiative to the EP and the transformation of the European Council and the Council into a second chamber of the EP more specifically. Referencing Elmar Brok's ideas (Arató, 2020, pp. 119–121), the Magyar Szocialista Párt (Hungarian Socialist Party) also proposed a bicameral EP, which would have supervisory competences over a directly elected Commission President. In contrast, the Hungarian Parliament, when reflecting on the Conference on the Future of Europe, floated the idea of transforming the EP into a chamber consisting of representatives from national parliaments. According to this proposal, national parliaments should have the right to initiate and reject EU legislation.

As visible in these examples, the proposals generally do not support enhancing *the EU institutions' competences* as a solution to the problems with democracy. The few that do prefer strengthening intergovernmental EU institutions. Some selectively "upload" their priorities to the EU level, without clarifying how exactly the EU should address them without more competences. An example is protection of religious rights demanded by the Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement) in Slovakia, or more action against corruption demanded by the Jobbik party in Hungary.

In Slovakia, not only illiberal parties (such as the Slovenská národná strana [Slovak National Party] or Sme rodina [We Are Family]), but also more mainstream parties (notably Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie and Sloboda a solidarita) are reluctant to transfer more competences to the EU. Instead, they, at least nominally, emphasise the principle of subsidiarity as key for democracy. For example, the manifesto of the Slovenská národná strana (2016) argues for treaty reform to return more competences to national institutions, including through the Council Presidency, that would also slow down the "spread" of multiculturalism in the EU. These results offer a less "optimistic" picture of the support towards EU integration among Slovak political parties than an earlier analysis that included media reports and speeches of party leaders as well (Világi et al., 2021, pp. 40–58). In Czechia, some proposals castigate the alleged high levels of EU spending (journalist and historian known for plagiarism scandal Martin Kovář), while others show more openness towards enhanced EU competences—for example, public intellectual Martin Hančl or Charity Czechia, a branch of an EU-wide civil society organisation, who argued for the introduction of humanitarian visas and extended community financing in relation to migration and asylum.

Some calls for more competences in the area of health can be observed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples include Radek Špicar, Vice President of the Confederation of Industry and Transport, or even the Statement of the Czech Republic on the process of economic recovery following the pandemic in relation to the European Green Deal. On a few occasions, proposals explicitly comment on competences as a dimension that *ought not* drive the debate (manifesto of Top 09 party, arguing for "doing things better" and adjusting competences to the way the best solutions can be reached). As a whole, the sentiment of "soft Euroscepticism" (Hloušek & Kaniok, 2020) comes across in the Czech proposals.

In Hungary, references to the lack of effectiveness of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) occasionally occurred, for example, in a series of blogs by Lomnici Zoltán Jr associated with the Századvég Foundation. The motivation to enhance the impact of these institutions by pro-Orbán voices, however, is tied to

strengthening the member states, which could drive proposals contrary to what the supranational institutions advance. This intertwining between the stronger ECI and stronger competence for member state governments also shows the degree of distrust in the potential for bottom-up mobilisation and activism of both local and transnational civil societies. Member states' competence enhancement was also defended in foreign policy, concretely, in separate energy agreements with third countries, such as Russia or China, proposed by PM Orbán.

The claims to have "equal" voice in the EU structures may operate as an effective slogan for gaining public support, particularly when voiced by political parties. Hence, some Hungarian proposals reject EU-wide rule of law enforcement—for example, Resolution 2/2018. (II. 21.) of the National Assembly on supporting Poland against the "pressure of Brussels." In doing so, they signal a lack of concern for developing a joint reading of democracy in the EU, supporting fragmentation instead (Fossum & Bátora, 2024). Defences of double standards occur as well. The Strana maďarskej komunity (Party of the Hungarian Community) in Slovakia, known for its alignment with Orbán's Fidesz, campaigned in the 2019 elections for "saving the European values." It rejected "two-speed Europe" as based on "liberal and leftist ideology" and undercutting equality and solidarity. Yet, Western Balkan countries wishing to accede to the EU are required to meet the conditionality criteria. This demand is mentioned, for example, in a Slovak government manifesto, despite Slovak PM Fico's increasing neglect towards them at the time. In Czechia, some proposals continue to reject or strictly condition the obligation to accede to the Eurozone or else democracy would be undermined (e.g., ANO2011 and Andrej Babiš as its chairman). Hungary's PM, in 2022, voiced opposition against reducing unanimity voting in foreign policy. A few examples in the opposite direction are the endorsement of the enhancement of the European Neighbourhood Policy by the Czech government in 2015, or the need for Hungary to join the European Public Prosecutor's Office to eliminate rule of law violations (defunct Hungarian party Együtt [Together] in its 2018 general election manifesto).

All in all, the proposals indicate a degree of "cluelessness" in how to remedy any problems with democracy that they formulate. Those which raise ideas rarely indicate thinking beyond formal competences—perhaps because such thinking may require awareness of broader, critical, and participatory conceptions of democracy and the potential they can yield for reform.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the discourse in the EU reform proposals in Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia indicates the prevalent fear of their stakeholders of being "left out" of decision making while de facto still required to adhere to legal obligations (see Eriksen & Fossum, 2015). Beneath references to a reformed, different, more democratic EU articulated in the Visegrad Four, there is ideational emptiness. This seems to be partially triggered by the necessity to stick to impoverished conceptions of democracy that allow the executive to amass extensive powers. Such conceptions are not only pursued by those with illiberal leanings. They are also facilitated by the absence of novel ideas and reforms presented by those opposing illiberal positions. Those carrying the banner of democracy at most defend the status quo, with only occasionally and reluctantly showing openness to debates on EU treaty change (see Bárd et al., 2024). As the frequent references to migration and asylum issues as an incentive to rethink democracy in the EU demonstrate, actual or perceived crises can amplify the generation of proposals, particularly when used as an anchor for a position favourable to the actors' already-existing preferences.

Since 2022, new conceptions of democracy may have appeared in the discourse, particularly in response to the full-scale Putinist invasion of Ukraine. The period studied here cannot capture these developments. Nevertheless, a few illustrations can be offered. Statements of post-2023 Slovak illiberal governing elites have increasingly mimicked the Hungarian ones. In Hungary, the mobilisation of the generously funded illiberal pseudo-academia yields fruits in the more rudimentary conceptions from the Hungarian government's materials, accompanied by reports with a more professional appearance, written by pro-government analysts (e.g., Nézőpont Institute, 2024). The latter weave together critiques of the EU's deficit of democracy present in reports without such governmental linkages as well (Grabowska-Moroz et al., 2024) with proposals contradictory to those of the former, consisting of giving the member state governments even more leeway to relativise EU values due to the failure of EU institutions to uphold them. The idea of gutting the supranational dimension of the EU altogether appeared as well (Panyi, 2025).

To a considerable degree, Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak political actors pretend they are not co-responsible for EU's democratisation. This can be explained by the absence of reflection on EU accession that Slovak academic Miroslav Kusý (1931–2019) decried as "boarding a train" and "letting be carried" (Kusý, 2016b, p. 540):

> We are not too bothered about our destination, nor about our fellow travellers, and we continue to chill ("*vegetujeme*") as before. We even try to strengthen the isolation of our carriage, referring to some sort of sacrosanct and untouchable categories of sovereignty, tradition or identity. (Kusý, 2016b, p. 540)

In another essay, Kusý warned against sovereignty being coupled inherently with borders of nation states and called out the "Europhobes" who oppose its potential to contribute to the advancement of fundamental rights guarantees, pivotal for (EU) democracy (Kusý, 2016a, pp. 181–183).

Words might conceal meaning—verbal claims for unity in the name of democracy blend with the support for "separate readings of values," which allows the obfuscation of the advancement of EU democracy. The representation of opposition towards the EU institutions' deciding on behalf of member state communities spills over to claims of antidemocratic conduct. It also demands to reduce existing EU competences. Here, illiberal actors may capitalise on the absence of a "singular hegemonic story" about the EU (Gellwitzki & Houde, 2024, p. 407). They can attract supporters who do not recognise these contradictions. The limited presence of intellectuals in the proposals alone may be an explanatory factor for the impoverished discourses. Future research could more systematically map local scholarship on EU democracy, which can impact the thinking of local elites.

Particularly missing in the dataset of proposals are more deliberative contributions by "critical friends" of the EU (cf. European University Institute, 2021). Even the platforms for such debates seem to be limited: think tanks tend to pursue analyses on specific policy areas rather than offer space for broader visions. In turn, intellectuals might themselves not make enough effort to break from the "ivory tower," and the broader public may be disinterested in their insights. These tendencies are amplified under the conditions of deficits in education for human rights and democracy and the spread of superficial messages on social media. Further research using stakeholder interviews or ethnographic methods could help understand the attitudes and significance of intellectuals in the debates. Such research could also consider typologies of proposals based on combinations of criteria and reflect on the very concept of the proposal and the work proposals for the future of a polity can do to shape the status quo of discourses in that polity.

Ultimately, the lack of comprehensive, thought-through, constructive, and broadly deliberated proposals on the EU's (democratic) future indicates how the small Visegrad Four countries try to pretend that "business as usual" can continue, or even actively propose to solve the deficits of democracy in the EU by abolishing its supranational dimension. The silence—or absence—of advocates of more robust readings of democracy (cf. Alemanno & Nicolaïdis, 2022) de facto empowers the proponents of weakened majoritarian or even only elite-driven conceptions (cf. Urbinati, 2019), where othering and division flourish.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All translations from Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak are the authors', unless indicated otherwise. Some primary sources are accessible via the EU3D database (Góra & Zgaga, 2023).

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About the Author

Max Steuer studies democracy beyond disciplines, as a principal investigator of the HARVEST project at the Comenius University in Bratislava (Department of Political Science), Slovakia; an associate professor at the O.P. Jindal Global University (Jindal Global Law School), India; and a visiting researcher (re:constitution fellow) at the CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary.