

Alternatives to Liberal Democracies and Their Consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe

Radosław Markowski ¹  and Michał Kotnarowski ² 

¹ Center for the Study of Democracy, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poland

² Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

Correspondence: Radosław Markowski (rmarkowski@swps.edu.pl)

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Abstract

This article tentatively examines the rise and impact of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism as alternatives to liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, using data from the 10th European Social Survey. It focuses on the complex relationship between ideologies and political regimes, where citizens’ attitudes act as mediating factors. The task of categorizing anti-liberal and non-democratic regimes is ontologically distinct from analyzing and understanding the essence of anti-liberal or non-democratic ideas. Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of either aspect requires an appreciation of both. Former studies show no strict determinism between regime type and public ideology, though some alignment is usually present. Our findings reveal that populist and illiberal views often reduce political legitimacy, whereas authoritarian attitudes can enhance it. These findings indicate a complex interrelationship between public attitudes, political ideologies, and regimes with political legitimacy, particularly in contexts marked by democratic regression and ascendant authoritarian inclinations. This nuanced interplay suggests divergent paths in democratic evolution across Central and Eastern European regions, with some countries moving toward stable illiberal regimes, while others face contested political climates.

Keywords

alternatives to liberal democracies; authoritarianism; consolidation of illiberal regimes; illiberalism; political legitimacy; populism

1. Introduction

Liberal democracies (LDs) face many rivals today, notably populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. Each of these ideologies challenges LDs on distinct fronts, exhibiting unique characteristics and evolving through specific trajectories.

A discernible shift away from the foundational tenets of the liberal democratic paradigm is evident not only in the global South but in historically stable democracies as well. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the primary focus of our analysis, is not immune to these tendencies (Bakke & Sitter, 2022; Cianetti et al., 2018; Lorenz & Anders, 2021). The region's unique historical trajectory, marked by *longue durée* legacies (Szűcs & Parti, 1983; Walters, 2005), contributes to significant intra-regional heterogeneity, encompassing both culturally backward and advanced sub-regions, such as Bohemia (Chirot, 1991). Their belonging to and legacies of former imperial dominions—Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg—have left an indelible mark on these nations' social structures, political cultures, and governance models. By the twilight of the 20th century, these countries exhibited marked variances in their forms of real-existing socialism (Kitschelt et al., 1999).

Currently, with a few exceptions, most of these nations grapple with challenges to the performance of their democratic systems, especially their liberal components. Disenchantment with and distaste for liberal democracy manifests itself in various forms, including ethnopopulism (Vachudova, 2020), authoritarianism (Bochsler & Juon, 2020), paternalist populism (Enyedi, 2016), technocratic populism (Castaldo & Verzhicelli, 2020; Havlík, 2019), nationalism (Dawson & Hanley, 2019), and Euroscepticism (Markowski & Tucker, 2010; A. L. Pirro & Taggart, 2018). Many scholars point to the ontological peculiarities of polities governed by anti-liberal forces for some time (Enyedi & Whitefield, 2020; A. L. P. Pirro & Stanley, 2022; Sata & Karolewski, 2020). This article will consider the extent of consolidation within anti-liberal regimes. Hungary and, to a lesser degree, Poland till 2023 represent notable European cases where anti-liberal parties have maintained governance for a considerable duration, thereby piquing legitimate interest in their consolidation processes.

To better understand alternatives to liberal democracies (ALDs), we need to consider their historical background and various influences (Deneen, 2018) and analyze how populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism relate to each other; moreover, how these ideologies manifested in peoples' attitudes and preferences interact with regimes they are located in (Lührmann, 2021).

To comprehensively address the research questions presented below, panel studies spanning multiple decades would ideally be required. Unfortunately, such longitudinal studies are unavailable, and the formation period of illiberal democracies, such as Hungary's, spans slightly over a decade. In fact, in Europe, we lack other cases of prolonged decay of formerly LDs, since Poland in 2023 seems to have returned to the liberal democratic camp of European democracies. Therefore, our analyses represent an initial exploration aimed at assessing whether, given the limited timeframe and substantially imperfect empirical data, it is possible to identify the potential existence of the phenomena and mechanisms discussed here.

The crux of this article tests the relationship between sets of ideas, at times considered ideologies, and various types of political regimes, with citizens' attitudes serving as a mediating factor. The task of categorizing anti-liberal regimes is ontologically distinct from analyzing and understanding the essence of

illiberal/non-democratic ideologies. Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of either aspect requires an appreciation of both.

It is evident that no deterministic relationship exists between the type of political regime and the dominant ideologies as coherent sets of ideas manifested among the citizenry (e.g., Poland under communism). However, a complete lack of alignment between the type of regime and the prevalent popular attitudes shaped by these ideologies is equally improbable. And, if such a configuration exists, it certainly points to a deficiency in the regime's consolidation or at least its weak political legitimacy.

Thus, the precise relationship between regimes and ideologies, as mediated by citizens' beliefs, is an empirical question. Our working assumption posits that a positive correlation between the two should be expected. It is essential to consider that contemporary anti-liberal regimes are emerging not through military coups or direct seizure of power, as in the latter half of the 20th century, but through the actions of democratically elected politicians who reject the liberal components of modern democracies—specifically the separation of powers and the principles of the rule of law. This suggests that a segment of the electorate supports populist, illiberal, or authoritarian values, policies, and solutions. The critical question is the extent of this support and whether it is evenly distributed across the supporters of all political parties or disproportionately concentrated among specific parties.

Two contextual factors further complicate this relationship. First, there are cases where populist, illiberal, or authoritarian regimes have successfully transitioned into incumbent governments (e.g., present-day Hungary or Poland between 2015–2023), while in other cases, those seeking to establish anti-liberal regimes remain in opposition. These two scenarios represent qualitatively different situations. Second, a comparison between the level of anti-liberal attitudes among mainstream and radical parties must be accounted for.

A key contribution of our study—and its certain novelty—is the exploration of a relatively uncharted area: the probable consolidation and institutionalization of these ALDs. A discernible skepticism exists within the scholarly discourse regarding the potential for anti-liberal regimes to achieve stability (Vormann & Weinman, 2020).

Given the absence of conventional panel data for temporal comparative analysis, our approach involves scrutinizing specific cases along the liberal democratic–authoritarian continuum, examining them at various junctures of their transition and developmental trajectories. To ascertain the more objective position of each case within this spectrum—whether they gravitate more towards populism, illiberalism, or authoritarianism—we rely on expert evaluations, with the Varieties of Democracies dataset serving as a principal benchmark.

Moreover, to gain insights into the contemporary sentiments of electorates aligned with radical parties opposing liberal democratic tenets, we utilize data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 10, specifically the module on views and evaluations of democracy. The ESS dataset stands as the most comprehensive source for testing our expectations and allows the construction of robust scales measuring populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The literature on alternatives to liberal democracy is intellectually invigorating, yet it remains far from conclusive (Sajó et al., 2022; Tushnet & Bugarcic, 2022; Urbinati, 2019), particularly when endeavoring to comprehend the three alternatives to LDs—populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. The geopolitical region of CEE presents an exemplary milieu for the empirical validation of numerous theoretical conjectures in this domain (Enyedi & Whitefield, 2020; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023). This region includes a spectrum of polities: from distinctly consolidated democracies with negligible challenges to their liberal components (Estonia and Latvia) to nations undergoing significant (Hungary and Poland) or moderate (Croatia, Slovenia, and Slovakia) erosion in the quality of their democratic institutions.

During the initial decade of the 21st century, these countries were invited to accede to the EU, purportedly meeting the Copenhagen criteria for democratic governance. This heterogeneity in contemporary democratic quality within the region provides a fertile ground for analytical speculation regarding the degree to which these nations have achieved a level of institutionalization suggestive of political consolidation, whether as embedded democracies or, as is the point of our analysis, their anti-liberal alternatives.

The discourse on non-liberal alternatives to democracy, encompassing populism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism, presents a notable asymmetry in scholarly attention and theoretical development. One can find the expanded version of the discussion presented below elsewhere (Markowski, 2023). The literature on populism (Rooduijn, 2019) dominates both in quantity and theoretical sophistication, although its *conceptual overstretch* of the term “populism” leads to its perceived universality, obscuring its specific contours (Aslanidis, 2016; Laclau, 2007; Mudde, 2004, 2007). Conversely, the discourse on authoritarianism and authoritarian regimes seems predominantly confined to Asian contexts (Lee, 2015; Mauzy & Milne, 2002; Morgenbesser, 2020).

A persistent ambiguity surrounds the delineation of what constitutes the anti-liberal–democratic repertoire. One area of contention among scholars is the necessity of tolerance towards minorities and alternative lifestyles as a defining characteristic of liberal democracy. This debate extends to the conceptualization of illiberalism itself, with opinions diverging on whether resistance to executive oversight or identitarian-cultural opposition to progressive emancipation aligns with illiberalism (Laruelle, 2022). The exploration of populism within public policies typically commences with the identification of political leadership embodying such ideologies (Casullo, 2019; Pappas, 2016). However, the dichotomy is not clear-cut: populist, illiberal, or authoritarian policies may be propagated by actors traditionally aligned with liberal democratic principles and vice versa. Recent data from the ESS, which focuses on democracy, indicates a broad acceptance of its liberal model among Europeans. Those Europeans who normatively have greater expectations of democracies—for example, social-democratic redistributive fairness—or support an outright popular (populist) democracy, support those other models only in addition to the liberal one rather than instead of it (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016). This suggests a “cascade” theory of democracy, where diverse democratic expectations accumulate rather than present mutually exclusive alternatives. Therefore, we must also keep our conceptual apparatus open in this regard.

Another area of concern is the role of vertical and horizontal accountability in the consolidation of illiberal regimes (O’Donnell, 1998; Schedler, 1999). Dan Slater’s (Slater, 2013, p. 730) concept of “democratic

careening” is pivotal here, distinguishing itself from “democratic collapse.” Democratic careening refers to the oscillation between populist and oligarchic politics and underscores the inherent tension between vertical accountability, emphasizing democratic inclusivity, and the constraints of horizontal accountability on executive power, which is essential for democratic constraints to operate.

Empirically-focused political scientists, such as ourselves, recognize the multifaceted nature of anti-liberal phenomena, encompassing populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. These variants of the anti-liberal spectrum really exist and frequently incorporate elements of “thick” ideologies like nationalism and conservatism. Comprehensive analyses that delineate the resemblances and distinctions among these three forms of ALDs are explicated in other works (Markowski, 2023), including graphical representations of their intersecting and unique characteristics. Here, we provide a succinct overview of the primary findings.

Firstly, it is essential to delineate the shared ideological foundations of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. These include a majoritarian interpretation of democracy, a skepticism toward representative institutions, anti-globalization sentiments, and, albeit more tentatively, a Manichean worldview (Blokker, 2022). Secondly, significant divergences emerge among these constructs: populism is primarily characterized by anti-establishment rhetoric, anti-elitism, and a pronounced emphasis on the populace, often referred to as “people-centrism.” These traits are less salient within the frameworks of illiberalism and authoritarianism.

Both illiberalism and authoritarianism manifest a systematic opposition to the core tenets of liberal democracy, including free and independent media, civil society organizations, academic freedom, judicial independence, and, notably, horizontal accountability mechanisms. They exhibit a shared animus toward secularization and frequently establish clientelistic networks that reinforce traditional social and political hierarchies. Furthermore, both ideologies emphasize a “law and order” approach, often prioritizing state authority and social conformity over individual rights and freedoms.

However, the deployment of coercive violence and repression distinctly separates authoritarian regimes from their “anti-liberal democracy” counterparts. While illiberal democracies may restrict avenues for dissent, undermine genuine political participation, and erode the rule of law to consolidate power, they generally avoid overt violent oppression of the populace (Kauth & King, 2020, p. 369). Authoritarian regimes, by contrast, institutionalize and normalize the violent suppression of opposition figures and movements (Boutton, 2019). Additionally, disparities in electoral integrity are significant: illiberal regimes often rely on informal and diffuse anti-democratic practices, whereas authoritarian systems establish formalized, rigid structures with a pronounced tendency toward electoral manipulation and control (Smilova, 2022). In illiberal regimes, freedoms and civil liberties are significantly compromised but remain partially intact, whereas such liberties are systematically absent under authoritarian rule.

Illiberalism’s distinct ideological features merit scrutiny within political science discourse (Berman, 2017; Smilova, 2022). It is characterized by a marked opposition to individual freedoms, an ideological departure from individualism, and a significant disregard for minority rights, particularly in the cultural domain. Although aspects of these characteristics may appear within populist or authoritarian ideologies, they are not typically central to those frameworks.

The above description addresses the distinctions between populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism as regime configurations. However, our primary focus lies in determining whether, at the level of individual attitudes and preferences, we can identify varying intensities of populist, illiberal, and authoritarian traits contingent upon the political system in which they emerge, including its democratic qualities or the lack thereof. Consequently, we are examining the coherence between the attributes of different national political systems and the predominant characteristics of their citizens, particularly identifying subgroups distinguished by party affiliation. In other words, we investigate whether more anti-liberal political regimes have successfully socialized their citizens into supporting such systems by fostering more pronounced populist, illiberal, and authoritarian attitudes.

Current various anti-liberal regimes and their associated ideologies tend to emerge through peaceful and gradual processes, predominantly led by democratically elected politicians spearheading the anti-liberal shift. These new politicians frequently conclude that traditional liberal elements of democracies, such as parliamentary norms, accountability mechanisms, and independent media, do not necessarily align with the perceived best interests of their countries, their supporters, and, ostensibly, their personal ambitions. Both Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński have repeatedly emphasized that the will of the people, of which they claim to have an exclusive and authoritative understanding, and the “national interest,” as defined by them, take precedence over established procedures, values, and norms, even those of a constitutional nature.

While in opposition (time they aspire to incumbency), these individuals often employ populist rhetoric, primarily because such appeals are easily marketable to disillusioned segments of society and represent a low-cost strategy, circumventing the need for formal institutional support, extensive party structures, etc. (Moffitt, 2016). The efficacy of populist communication relies heavily on talented demagogues who utilize plain language, resulting in a phenomenon referred to as simplism (Markowski, 2019). Simplism entails the reduction of complex socio-political realities into overly simplistic narratives that distort fundamental causal relationships and manipulate specific segments of the populace, especially those of lower socio-economic status.

In addressing the anti-liberal phenomena, specifically populism, illiberalism, and authoritarian triad, two critical empirical questions emerge. Firstly, is there a progressive sequential relationship among these three? Secondly, can we affirmatively claim in the most entrenched regimes, like Hungary, their “consolidation” and institutionalization, in line (although *a rebours*) with Linz and Stepan’s (1996) conceptualization of a political system as “the only game in town”? To address the latter query, it is necessary to delineate specific criteria to evaluate the extent of their consolidated status.

To facilitate a comprehensive understanding, albeit preliminary, of the criteria and their manifestations, we account for few key indicators, selected—from a longer list presented elsewhere (Markowski, 2023)—for their relevance to the current analysis: First, the degree of institutionalization of the anti-liberal regime; second, the level of citizen support for or repudiation of a given anti-liberal regime; and third, the functionality of accountability mechanisms and the rule of law quality. Let us first briefly examine populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism regarding these criteria:

Populism is often disjointed and weakly structured. Pro-populist sentiments among citizens are visible but tend to be superficial and unstable, lacking a solid majoritarian base. Populists typically acknowledge constitutional

rules, albeit often in a shallow manner, manipulating them for majoritarian gains and bending them in favor of populist agendas. There are rudimentary efforts to limit horizontal accountability, including challenges to the rule of law norms. This is coupled with actions aimed at establishing a form of a delegative democracy (O'Donnell, 1998), characterized by deliberate infringements on the rights of the parliamentary opposition, a general neglect of political institutions, and an attempt at establishing unconstrained executive dominance.

Illiberalism exhibits a moderate to high degree of institutionalization, surpassing that observed in populism. Support for illiberal regimes tends to be substantial, often approaching or achieving a majoritarian level, with illiberal attitudes being relatively well internalized among parts of the populace (Vormann & Weinman, 2020). This regime type is characterized by overt challenges to constitutional norms and principles, systematic infringements upon the rule of law, and horizontal accountability mechanisms. There is a deliberate facade of vertical accountability, marked by evident manipulations of electoral laws. Furthermore, a broad array of regulations is employed to undermine judicial independence, diminish the autonomy of public administration, and politicize the military and police forces (Kauth & King, 2020).

In contrast, *authoritarianism* features a high level of institutional consolidation (Glasius, 2018). Citizenry engagement is a complex mix of manipulation, indoctrination, selective demobilization, and general apathy, often compounded by pervasive fear of the regime. Authoritarian regimes typically reject liberal constitutional frameworks, instead advocating for constitutions devoid of liberal protections. Institutional changes are successfully implemented, creating façade accountability, both horizontal and vertical. In practice, these changes severely limit the likelihood of holding incumbents accountable or removing them from power.

Three caveats are necessary: Firstly, a distinction must be made between populists in opposition, contesting the mainstream political elite, and those electorally successful populist incumbents. Secondly, the transition from a liberal-democratic order to its alternatives is significantly influenced by three factors: (a) the public's response to initial democratic violations; (b) the mobilizational capacities of illiberal forces; and (c) the international context.

In this article, our ultimate interest resides in sketching tentatively and assessing the degree of consolidation within these ALD regimes. The concept of *political legitimacy* emerges as a pertinent analytical tool in this context. Lipset's (1960, p. 86) seminal definition posits political legitimacy as the "capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society." This notion is further refined by Weatherford (1992), who operationalizes legitimacy through indices derived from factor analysis, encompassing a spectrum of elements from trust in political institutions to assessments of political system fairness and political efficacy.

Studies of political legitimacy use various approaches; this article adopts the micro-level perspective, examining the interplay between institutional structures and public opinion formation, along with the subsequent impact of these public sentiments on institutional functionality.

3. Operationalization

In the empirical Section 5, we engage with Round 10 of the ESS data, which explores attitudes towards democracies and their alternatives, allowing this study to operationalize three distinct yet interconnected

ideological constructs of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism—in a way that is consistent with theoretical discussion presented in the previous section.

Populism is quantified through three variables that measure the degree to which respondents of the ESS align with statements that reflect core normative elements of populism. They include (a) the supremacy of the views of the general populace over the views of political elites; (b) the unstoppable nature of the will of the people; and (c) the ultimate authority of citizens in deciding through direct referendums. Responses were captured on a scale ranging from 0 (*complete insignificance*) to 10 (*utmost importance*). A composite *populism* variable was constructed utilizing factor analysis based on these three indicators, with higher values indicating greater endorsement of a populist vision of democracy.

Illiberalism is operationalized using three indicators that collectively signify a departure from the liberal democratic paradigm of liberal democracy: (a) the necessity of media freedom to criticize governmental actions; (b) the imperative to safeguard minority rights; and (c) the impartiality of judicial processes. An *illiberalism* variable was synthesized similarly to the populism indicators

Authoritarianism is operationalized as a synthetic variable, derived from responses to three pivotal questions: (a) the extent to which respondents find it acceptable for a country to be governed by a strong leader who operates above the law; (b) whether obedience for authority is viewed as the most crucial virtue to be instilled in children; and (c) the degree to which unwavering loyalty towards national leaders is considered a necessity for the country. The first question utilized a response scale from 0 (*utterly unacceptable*) to 10 (*wholly acceptable*), while the latter two employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The *authoritarianism* variable was synthesized using factor analysis, where higher values correlate with stronger agreement with the aforementioned authoritarian principles.

The concept of political legitimacy is operationalized as *trust in non-partisan institutions*, as the degree of trust vested in them, encompassing the legal system, the police, and the parliament. Trust levels were quantified using an 11-point scale, where 0 signifies *no trust* and 10 denotes *complete trust*. A composite *trust* variable was derived through factor analysis, with higher values indicating elevated levels of trust in these non-partisan institutions. In addition, we also account for the more *particular support* for the regime—the level of support for the incumbent government.

The analysis focuses on CEE countries. Utilizing the V-Dem dataset, these countries are ranked based on their deviation from the ideals of liberal democracy (see Table 1). Hungary is notably distinct in this context, classified not only by V-Dem (lowest score of 0.460) but also by other esteemed organizations as veering towards non-free authoritarian regimes. Poland (V-Dem score of 0.617) mirrors this trend with its populist-turned-illiberal government, albeit with some checks and balances like the opposition-controlled Senate and local governments in major cities. Bulgaria's V-Dem score (0.615) locates it close to Poland's. Other CEE nations exhibit varying degrees of democratic backsliding; some are characterized by technocratic populism (Czechia), while others show rising illiberal and nationalist tendencies (Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia). However, a few nations like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania maintain a more stable democratic status (for the exact V-Dem scores, see Table 1). Furthermore, the study provides an in-depth examination of the electorates in each country, mainly focusing on radical right parties in the CEE region, in particular in the three countries we focus on—Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. There are no relevant left-wing radical parties.

4. Research Questions

The foundation of our analytical framework is primarily exploratory, focusing on a set of carefully formulated research questions:

RQ1. Is there a higher prevalence of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism among the mass public in countries identified by expert assessments and international organizations as having malfunctioning democracies compared to countries with consolidated democracies?

RQ2. Are the high levels of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism disproportionately prevalent among supporters of specific (right-wing) parties or are they distributed relatively evenly among the public at large, among all political groups?

RQ3. Does the duration of a non-democratic regime in a country influence the overall and specific degrees of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism, thereby, affecting the level of legitimacy attributed to its political system?

RQ4. Is there a logical correlation between the mass public's perception of political system legitimacy and their political affiliations, notably higher among electorates of radical right parties in countries where they govern and conversely lower among mainstream party supporters?

The research questions presented above are formulated as open-ended, meaning that empirical findings could yield various outcomes, which is characteristic of exploratory research, such as ours. Nevertheless, we have established certain “directional” expectations regarding the potential relationships among our variables, informed by theoretical considerations discussed in this article as well as preliminary results from an ongoing project (entitled *Neo-Authoritarianisms in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response*; see Markowski et al., 2024) explicitly designed to test these relationships.

Firstly, in countries classified by experts as malfunctioning democracies, we anticipate elevated aggregate levels of populist, illiberal, and authoritarian attitudes among the general public. Secondly, although political legitimacy is expected to vary across different national contexts, in democracies experiencing backsliding, we hypothesize that substantial levels of populist, illiberal, and authoritarian attitudes within the population will negatively affect political legitimacy. Thirdly, in countries undergoing sustained and significant democratic erosion, authoritarianism, rather than populism or illiberalism, is expected to emerge as the critical determinant influencing political legitimacy. Finally, within countries identified as defective democracies, we guess that the electorates of radical right-wing parties will play a particularly influential role in shaping political legitimacy. This impact is expected to be especially pronounced if these electorates predominantly exhibit authoritarian, as opposed to populist or illiberal, attitudes.

5. Results

Table 1 aggregates the mean values of the factors mentioned in previous Section 3. Table 2 highlights the disparities among three distinct groups of citizens within each country: the electorates of radical-right parties, supporters of other mainstream parties, and non-voters.

1, authoritarianism, trust in institutions, and satisfaction with the government

Country / V-Dem Polyarchy Index 2020	Populism	Illiberalism	Authoritarianism	Trust in institutions	Satisfaction w/government
BG, Bulgaria / 0.615	0.25	0.03	0.29	-0.84	3.13
CZ, Czechia / 0.822	0.08	0.25	0.12	0.14	4.76
HU, Hungary / 0.460	0.23	0.20	0.30	0.06	4.77
PL, Poland / 0.617	0.05	0.00	-0.21	-0.73	2.84
SI, Slovenia / 0.749	0.32	-0.14	0.14	-0.25	3.68
SK, Slovakia / 0.851	0.02	0.44	0.35	-0.46	3.58
HR, Croatia / 0.765	0.29	-0.03	-0.05	-0.72	3.34
EE, Estonia / 0.893	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	0.38	4.73
LV, Latvia / 0.823	-0.07	0.33	-0.05	-0.28	3.14
LT, Lithuania / 0.809	-0.09	0.29	0.15	-0.02	4.32
Min	-3.57	-0.74	-1.77	-2.02	0
Max	1.09	4.77	1.89	1.77	10

5.1. General Findings: Hungary

The data presented in Table 1 in column 1 shows expert assessments categorizing each country on V-Dem's so-called Polyarchy Index, in which Hungary stands out as a singular instance of democratic decline, marked by its classification as a non-free country. The same is reinforced also by other democracy rankings, like Freedom House. The next two malfunctioning democracies as of 2020 are Poland and Bulgaria. On the other hand, the clear non-problematic embedded democracies are those of the Baltic States and Czechia.

Analyzing Table 1, we can conclude that: First, among the mass public, all three attitudes—*populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism*—register high scores in Hungary, surpassing levels observed in other countries (except for Slovakia, as it will be discussed further in this Section 5.3). Notably, the scores of populist, illiberal, and authoritarian indicators in Hungary are among the highest; in no other country are all three that high simultaneously. This finding directly addresses the inquiry posed in RQ1.

Second, and more significantly, alongside Hungary's elevated populist, illiberal, and authoritarian scores, a remarkably high level of *satisfaction* with Orbán's government is visible. Furthermore, the Hungarian populace exhibits positive *trust* levels toward non-partisan institutions, which have been appropriated by the Orbán administration. Notably, among the 10 CEE countries examined, positive *institutional trust* values are observed only in the non-problematic consolidated democracies of Estonia and Czechia. Conversely, in all other countries, particularly those experiencing pronounced democratic backsliding—such as Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, and Croatia—the broader public consistently demonstrates *distrust* toward non-partisan institutions. This combination of high *governmental satisfaction* and *institutional trust* in Hungary thus suggests a prevailing attitude of acceptance toward the democratically malfunctioning regime among the Hungarian populace.

The most telling result from Table 2 is the absence of statistically significant differences between the levels of *populism* and *illiberalism* of the radical right party (Fidesz) voters and opposition electorates in Hungary.

This seems to imply a broader distribution and/or tolerance of these political attitudes across the Hungarian electorate, not just confined to Fidesz supporters. On the other hand—and as expected—we observe statistical differences in *trust* in Orbán-seized institutions and *satisfaction* with Orbán’s government among Fidesz voters compared to the voters of opposition parties and non-voters. These latter differences (between radical-right

Table 2. Difference in scores of *populism, illiberalism, authoritarianism, trust in institutions, and satisfaction with government* between electorates of mainstream parties, radical right parties, and non-voters in CEE (without embedded democracies of the Baltic States).

Country	Parties	Populism	Illiberalism	Authoritarianism	Trust in institutions	Satisfaction w/government
Bulgaria	Mainstream	0.25	0.02	0.41	-0.67	3.57
	Radical right	0.34	-0.01	0.13	-1.01	2.65
	Non-voters	0.22	0.06	0.21	-0.96	2.83
	Significance level	0.08	0.293	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***
Czechia	Mainstream	0.05	0.12	0.00	0.18	2.70
	Radical right	0.16	0.28	0.45	0.31	2.60
	Non-voters	0.06	0.34	0.06	0.02	2.09
	Significance level	0.07	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***
Hungary	Mainstream	0.25	0.18	0.15	-0.20	3.29
	Radical right	0.20	0.24	0.66	0.54	6.89
	Non-voters	0.24	0.18	0.11	-0.15	4.08
	Significance level	0.59	0.48	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***
Poland	Mainstream	0.08	-0.34	-0.46	-0.93	1.02
	Law and justice	0.19	0.29	0.21	-0.42	5.76
	Confederation	-0.09	-0.04	-0.30	-0.81	1.70
	Non-voters	-0.15	0.22	-0.27	-0.74	2.62
	Significance level	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***
Slovenia	Mainstream	0.40	-0.35	-0.12	-0.23	2.89
	Radical right	0.18	0.16	0.55	-0.28	6.36
	Non-voters	0.31	-0.08	0.21	-0.25	3.48
	Significance level	0.01**	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	0.86	< 0.001***
Slovakia	Mainstream	0.16	0.19	0.36	-0.27	4.34
	Radical right	0.02	0.61	0.39	-0.60	2.40
	Non-voters	-0.17	0.68	0.32	-0.64	3.28
	Significance level	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	0.57	< 0.001***	< 0.001***
Croatia	Mainstream	0.32	-0.22	-0.23	-0.87	2.54
	DP & Most	0.47	-0.13	0.02	-0.81	2.91
	HDZ	0.34	0.00	0.25	-0.38	4.88
	Non-voters	0.23	0.07	-0.09	-0.77	3.13
	Significance level	0.06	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***	< 0.001***

Notes: Asterisks indicate significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

voters and other mainstream parties' voters as well as non-voters) are visibly smaller when compared to Poland, for instance. The combination and the “directional” indication of the results for Hungary demonstrate the political legitimacy and consolidation of the illiberal regime is in place.

5.2. General Findings: Poland

Although experts, international courts, and organizations point to Poland (a country governed till 2023 by an illiberal party) as a second (after Hungary) ranked country in its efforts at dismantling its liberal-democratic principles, the Polish political context is markedly different from Hungary's in almost all respects.

In Poland: (a) there is a clear divergence in attitudes between the radical-right and mainstream parties across most dimensions, which indicates a more pluralistic, divided, and polarized political landscape (see Table 2); (b) mean populist, illiberal, and authoritarian scores (see Table 1) are distinctively low, with, on average, non-existent *illiberal*, minimal *populist*, and indeed strong *anti-authoritarian* tendencies—i.e., reverse to the Hungarian ones; and (c) the Polish public shows the highest level of *distrust* in the performance of the then-current institutions and the lowest *satisfaction* with the (PiS) government.

5.3. General Findings: Slovakia

Experts' assessment of the quality of democracy in Slovakia in the last decade and as of 2022 varies considerably across rankings. Nonetheless, despite them rating it typically higher in democratic quality than Hungary and Poland, Slovaks exhibit (in the ESS Round 10) the highest levels of *illiberalism* and *authoritarianism* (0.44 and 0.35, respectively) among the countries studied.

It appears that specific underlying “hidden” dynamics, which were not initially evident to scholars and experts, particularly at the mass public level, might explain the resurgence of the pro-Kremlin illiberal government formed by Fico in the Autumn of 2023. It is noteworthy that in terms of *authoritarianism*, these elevated scores are relatively uniformly distributed across the electorate (see Table 2), encompassing both radical and mainstream political parties, as well as among non-voters.

In Slovakia, unlike Hungary, these heightened propensities for populist, illiberal, and authoritarian scores coexist with a comparatively low regard for Slovak institutions and a lukewarm evaluation of the government. However, it is important to contextualize that these assessments pertain to the political landscape prior to Fico's incumbency.

These findings highlight the complexity and diversity of political attitudes in CEE countries. As expected, the data suggests a compelling correlation between expert assessments of democracy quality in a country and the populist, illiberal, and authoritarian scores among its citizenry, which provides a persuasive narrative about the state of democracy in these nations, especially in those facing democratic deficiencies.

5.4. A Case Study: Hungarian–Polish Comparison

This research explores the intriguing question of how entrenched malfunctioning democracies, or backsliding democracies, truly are. We submit that the regression of these political systems is not merely a consequence

of contextual factors or sporadic developments. Instead, it is undermining the core principles of liberal democratic meta-values to construct an illiberal democracy, signaling a paradigmatic shift in governance and basic constitutional values.

Thus far, the empirical data available indicate that as of 2021/2022, Hungary, a clear example of democratic backsliding, stands distinctively apart from other cases—including Poland, which initially seemed to follow a similarly successful trajectory towards anti-liberalism, albeit with some delay. The Hungarian–Polish comparison has long been central to transitology literature. However, by 2025—and particularly following Poland’s parliamentary elections in the Autumn of 2023, which saw the removal of the anti-liberal PiS party by the electorate’s democratic decision—this comparison has become even more critical within comparative political science. Consequently, Table 3 specifically addresses the nuanced temporal developments and divergent paths observed within these two societies and their respective political regimes.

Determining the point at which stable illiberal or authoritarian regimes become institutionalized necessitates a comprehensive analysis. In this context, the comparative analysis of Hungary and Poland is particularly enlightening. Let us recall that as of 2022, Orbán’s Hungarian government had been in power for 12 years, a

Table 3. Satisfaction with democracy, importance of democracy, and acceptance to authoritarian rule—comparison of Poland and Hungary.

Electoralates	Electoralates			All respondents		
	Satisfaction with democracy—means	Satisfaction with democracy—standard deviations	N =	Importance of democracy ¹	Acceptance for authoritarian rule ²	N =
Liberal/Democrats	5.5	2.2	704			
PiS	4.1	2.3	325			
other	4.7	2.4	773			
Liberal/Democrats	2.0	2.1	700			
PiS	6.0	2.9	607			
other	3.4	2.5	718			
Liberal/Democrats	3.5	2.3	283			
Fidesz	5.4	2.5	623			
other	4.2	2.4	1,000			
Liberal/Democrats	3.8	2.4	465			
Fidesz	6.9	2.2	559			
other	4.4	2.6	766			

Notes: ¹ ESS question: “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? Choose your answer from this card where 0 is not at all important and 10 is extremely important.” Values indicate the percentage of respondents who answered 0. ² ESS question: “How acceptable for you would it be for [country] to have a strong leader who is above the law? Choose your answer from this card where 0 is not at all acceptable and 10 is completely acceptable.” The value indicates the percentage of respondents who provided a response from 1 to 10 (i.e., no response of 0).

decade following the implementation of the new constitution. Meanwhile, Poland, under Kaczyński's PiS, had been in power for seven years, emulating Orbán's approach by adopting similar objectives and policies.

Table 3 presents crucial data to elucidate this issue. These include the public's satisfaction with the performance of democracy in these countries, the general diffuse attitude towards democracy as a desirable system (measured at two different points: 2012 and 2022), and the endorsement of a key indicator of authoritarianism (measured in 2022 only). Such indicators are vital in understanding the degree to which these regimes have shifted from traditional democratic norms and how these changes are perceived by their citizenry.

Table 3 presents a somewhat paradoxical picture of the political sentiment in Hungary from 2012 to 2022: First, there has been an increase in *satisfaction* with the performance of democracy among all Hungarian electorates, including not only supporters of Fidesz (from 5.4 to 6.9 on an 11-point scale), but opposition parties' followers (from 3.5 to 3.8), as well as non-voters (4.2 to 4.4). This indicates a higher contentment with Orbán's non-liberal regime than a decade ago, which is perceived by the populace at large as democratic, which suggests a broad acceptance of the current regime's form of governance, regardless of political allegiance.

Second, while *satisfaction* with the current state of democracy in Hungary has increased, there has been a noticeable decline in the normative diffuse preference for living in a democracy, dropping by 6 percentage points (from 50 to 44). Accordingly, during the 2012–2022 decade of Orbán's rule, *satisfaction* with the functioning of Hungarian democracy increases (whatever Hungarian population means by this assessment at odds with all expert data), are accompanied by a stark decline in the axiological assessment of democracy as an ideal normative political system in which it is worth to live in.

Third, a significant majority of Hungarians (79%) do not reject the idea that a “strong leader who can operate above the law” is acceptable. This finding seems to indicate a form of motivated reasoning mechanism at work, where individuals rationalize their satisfaction with the democratic credentials of Orbán's regime, while simultaneously allowing (or at least not excluding the possibility of) for authoritarian leadership by a sizeable segment of the society (details in Martini, 2025). This suggests that the Hungarian public is comfortable with a political system that marries elements of democracy with authoritarianism, or they might be reconciling the tangible benefits of the current regime with their understanding of democratic principles.

In sum, the data reflect a complex dynamic in Hungary's political landscape, where increased satisfaction with a non-liberal regime coexists with a decline in the preference for democracy as an abstract ideal and a notable inclination towards authoritarian leadership.

The data regarding Poland presents a contrasting picture compared to Hungary, highlighting significant shifts in public opinion and political culture between 2012 and 2022, at the same time serving as a quintessential explanation of the 2023 parliamentary election results that removed PiS from power.

First, unlike Hungary, the proportion of Poles who believe it is worth living in a democracy has risen significantly, from 42% to 67%, during the last decade, of which most occurred under PiS incumbency.

Second, simultaneously, however, there is a notable increase in polarization concerning satisfaction with the performance of democracy in Poland. Voters of the incumbent PiS party show an increased *satisfaction* with

democracy compared to a decade earlier. In contrast, supporters of opposition parties and non-voters, who are especially indicative of the non-partisan citizens, have become dramatically less satisfied. This polarization is essential as it likely influenced the outcomes of the October 2023 election, reflecting a society deeply divided in its perception of the current state of democracy (see Markowski, 2024).

Finally, in Poland, only 43% of the population does not exclude having a “leader above the law,” a figure substantially lower than the nearly 80% observed in Hungary.

To conclude the comparison, let us reiterate that the dynamics in Poland indicate a society that is increasingly valuing democratic principles, yet is simultaneously experiencing deep divisions in how democracy is perceived and experienced.

Comparing Hungary and Poland reveals two distinct trajectories in the evolution of democratic systems and public sentiment. Hungary appears to have settled into a new political equilibrium, where an openly illiberal and authoritarian-leaning regime is accepted by the majority of its citizens as effectively democratic, leading to increased satisfaction with their type of “democracy.” Poland, on the other hand, in 2022, shows a society that values democratic principles more than before anti-liberals came to power and is deeply divided in its satisfaction with the current state of democracy, reflecting a more contested and dynamic political landscape. These contrasting cases highlight the diverse and complex nature of democratic backsliding in CEE.

5.5. Final Tests of Selected Hypotheses

The final condensed phase of the analysis involves testing the research questions and elaborated tentative expectations proposed through regression model analyses, as presented in Table 4 and corroborated by several figures. This approach allows for a nuanced examination of the relationships between various independent variables and political legitimacy, which is the focus of the study.

In these models, the dependent variable is *political legitimacy*, operationalized as trust in institutions (models 1, 3, and 5). We focus on the effects on *political legitimacy* exerted by the following independent variables: scales of *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism*, as well as *voting for radical parties*. We also included age, gender, number of years of education, place of residence, and religiosity as differently designed variables. Moreover, we have tested numerous models, examining socio-demographic variables both individually, to assess their independent effects on our dependent variable, and as controls within multivariate analyses. Additionally, we have examined the direct impact of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism variables alone on political legitimacy. Due to space constraints, we present only those models that are most insightful and directly relevant to addressing our research questions (other models are available upon request from the authors).

The entries in model 1 show there is a clear indication that stronger *populist* or *illiberal* attitudes correlate with a lower level of *political legitimacy*, as measured by *trust* in institutions. Specifically, the coefficients are -0.11 and -0.13 (model 1 and Figure 1). These findings align with the spirit of our theoretical discussion concerning the impact of anti-liberal attitudes on political legitimacy and line up with the essence of our RQ1.

The relationship between *authoritarian* attitudes and *political legitimacy* presents a different story. Contrary to *populism* and *illiberalism*, authoritarian attitudes are positively related to political legitimacy. The regression

Table 4. Result

	Model 1 DV: Trust	Model 2 DV: Trust	Model 3 DV: Trust
(Intercept)	−0.99*** (0.05)	−0.43*** (0.05)	−0.56*** (0.09)
Populism scale	−0.11*** (0.01)	−0.20*** (0.01)	
Illiberalism scale	−0.13*** (0.01)	−0.15*** (0.01)	
Authoritarianism scale	0.13*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)	
Country: LibDem-problems		−0.19*** (0.02)	−0.17*** (0.03)
Populism scale * Country: LibDem-problems		0.21*** (0.02)	
Illiberalism scale * Country: LibDem-problems		0.10*** (0.02)	
Authoritarianism scale * Country: LibDem-problems		0.28*** (0.02)	
Radical party (dummy)			0.09** (0.04)
Radical party * Country: LibDem-problems			0.41*** (0.05)
<i>Other control variables included in the models (coefficients available upon request)</i>	<i>country dummies, age, gender, years of education, size of residence</i>	<i>age, gender, years of education, size of residence</i>	
N	13,658	13,658	6,020
R2	0.24	0.06	0.04

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Model based on the ESS Round 10 dataset. Countries included in the analyses: BG, CZ, EE, HR, HU, LT, LV, SI, and SK. Libdem problems countries: HU, PL, and SK.

coefficients are 0.13 for *trust* in institutions (model 1 and Figure 1). Our other analyses and computations show almost identical results when the DV—*political legitimacy* is conceived and operationalized as external political efficacy. This suggests that where *authoritarian* attitudes are prevalent, there might be an increased *trust* in institutions and a sense of political efficacy. This finding deviates from our expectations and points that there is no simple answer to our RQ3, indicating a complex and perhaps counterintuitive relationship between *authoritarianism* and *political legitimacy*.

This complexity highlights the multifaceted nature of political beliefs and their impact on the perception of legitimacy in different political systems. An attempt at interpreting these results will be offered in the concluding part.

Model 2 of Table 4 investigates how the relationship between *populism*, *illiberalism*, *authoritarianism*, and *political legitimacy* varies across different country contexts, depending on the level of democratic consolidation or its

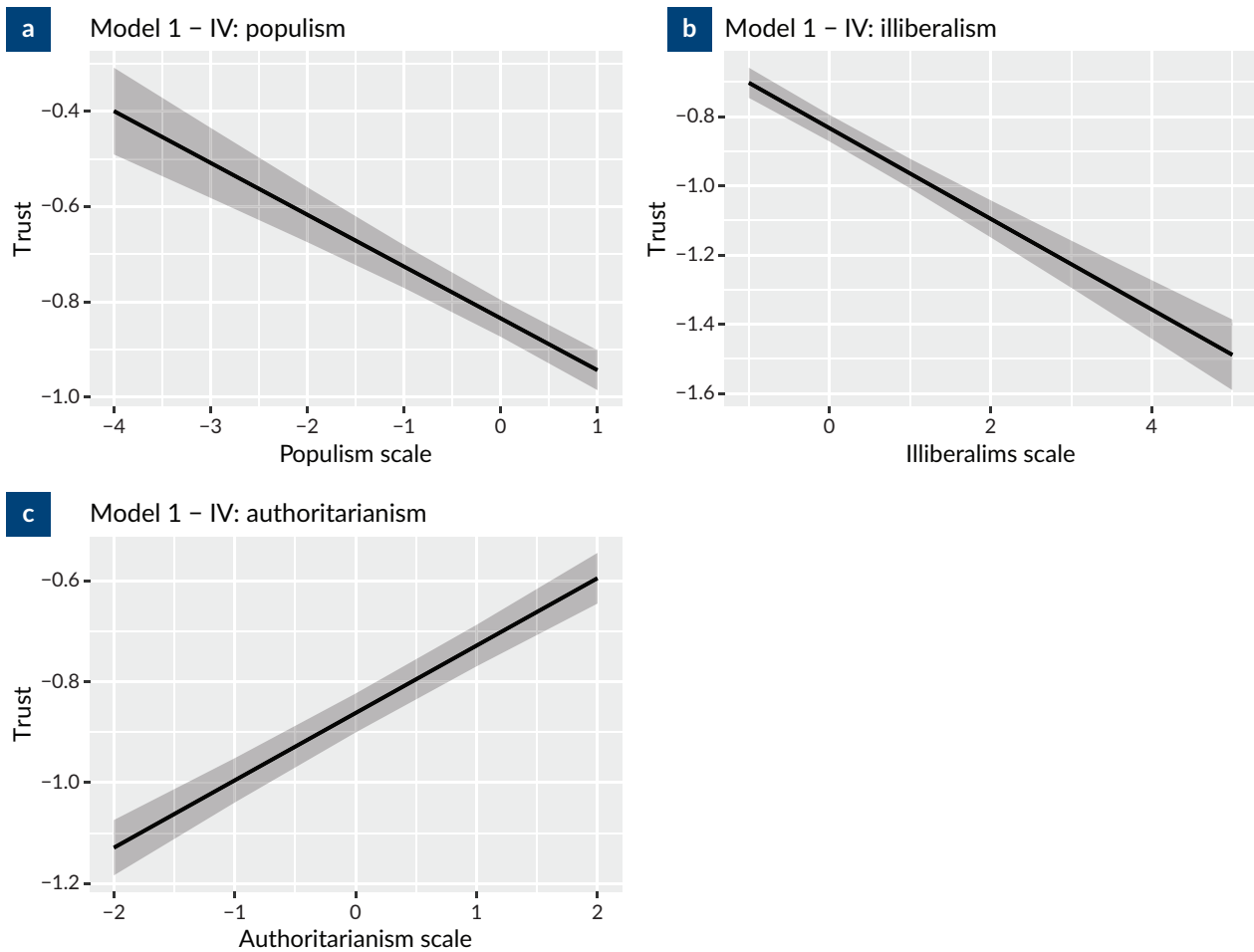


Figure 1. Relationships for *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism* scales in Model 1.

erosion. The analysis categorizes countries into two groups based on their liberal democratic status: Group I—countries with no or moderate problems with liberal democracy; and Group II—countries experiencing major problems with liberal democracy, including Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

The analysis employs an interaction term that combines the scales of *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism* with a binary variable reflecting each country’s assignment to one of the two groups. The group with no or moderate problems with liberal democracy (Group I) serves as the reference category in this comparison. The regression coefficients associated with the interaction term are positive and statistically significant, indicating that differences between the two groups of countries are substantial. In addition, the effects related to *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism* are more potent (or less negative) in countries disclosing democratic backsliding. These interaction coefficients speak more clearly once compared to the entries at the top of model 2; these referred to *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism* for non-problematic CEE democracies (Group I). Finally, the expectation that for political legitimacy it could be authoritarianism rather than populism or illiberalism in the malfunctioning democracies, matters more, turned true—which partly answers our RQ3 and the subsequent articulated expectations in the theoretical part.

More illustratively, the models’ results are presented in Figure 2, in which we observe a negative relationship for *populism* and *illiberalism* in countries of embedded consolidated liberal democracy: The more populist or

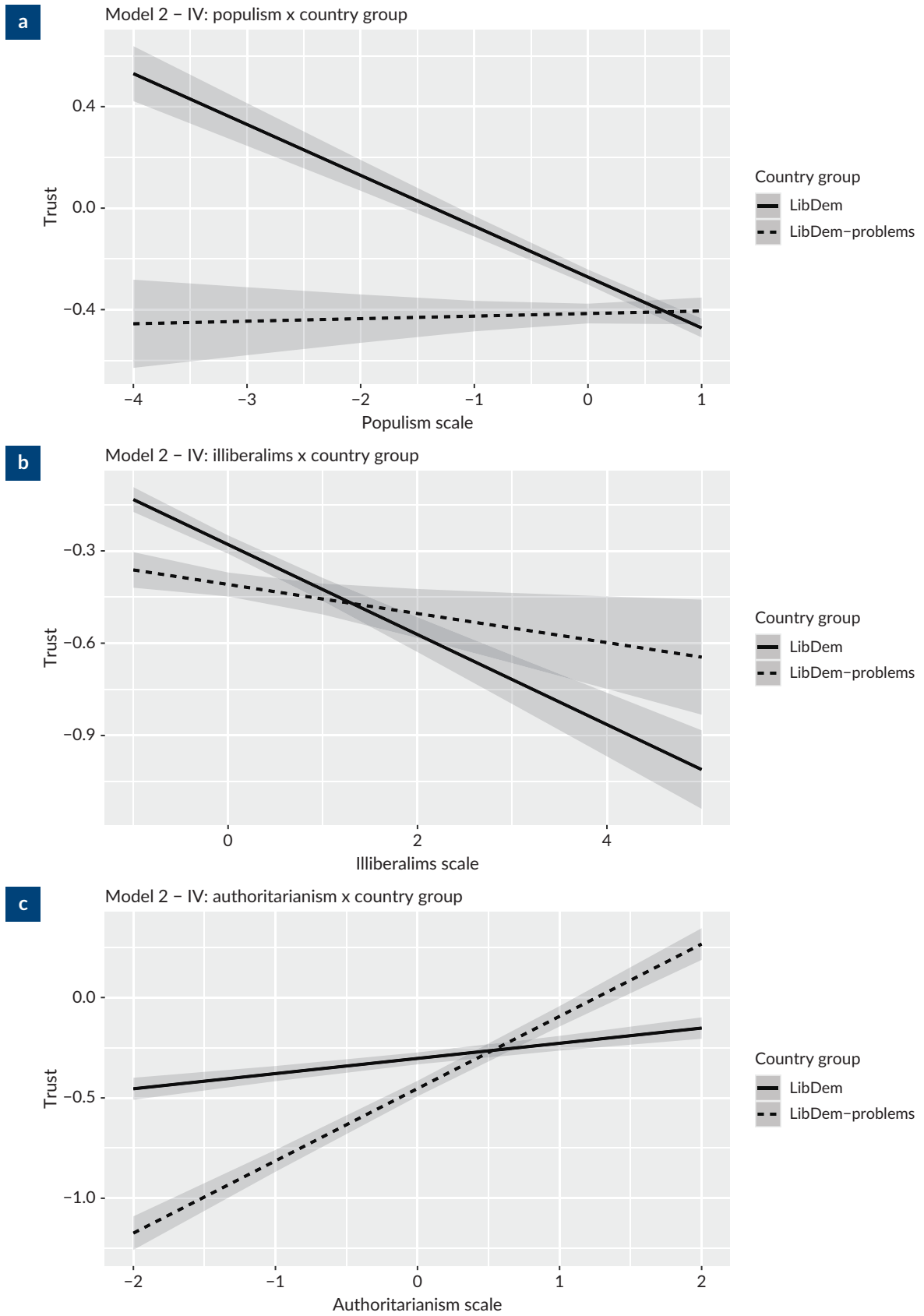


Figure 2. Relationships for *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism* scales in country groups in Model 2.

illiberal citizens are, the less they perceive a political system as legitimate. In contrast, in countries where liberal democracy is in decay, the *trust* in institutions does not depend on populist or illiberal attitudes. That is, the citizens in these countries legitimize the system no matter how populist or illiberal they are.

The analysis of authoritarian attitudes regarding *political legitimacy* reveals a distinct pattern compared to populism and illiberalism. In both groups of countries, there is a positive relationship between authoritarian attitudes and political legitimacy. The strength of the relationship between authoritarianism and political legitimacy is notably greater in countries experiencing problems with liberal democracy, where political legitimacy increasingly depends on the presence of authoritarian attitudes. In countries where liberal democracy is functioning effectively, individuals with populist and illiberal attitudes tend to delegitimize the political system, while in malfunctioning democracies, political legitimacy appears to be independent of populist and illiberal attitudes. This suggests that individuals holding these views are as likely to perceive the political system as legitimate as those without such attitudes. Interestingly, and perversely, this indicates that malfunctioning democracies are, in a sense, more inclusive, encompassing individuals who challenge the tenets of liberal democracy.

In line with research question RQ4, the analysis presented in model 3 explores whether and how the electorates of radical parties contribute to the high political legitimacy observed in defective democracies. In this model, the independent variables are a binary variable dividing respondents from the two groups of countries under scrutiny, a binary variable determining whether respondents voted for any of the radical parties, and an interaction between these variables. Detailed results are shown in Table 4, but Figure 3, where the results are presented graphically, is more telling.

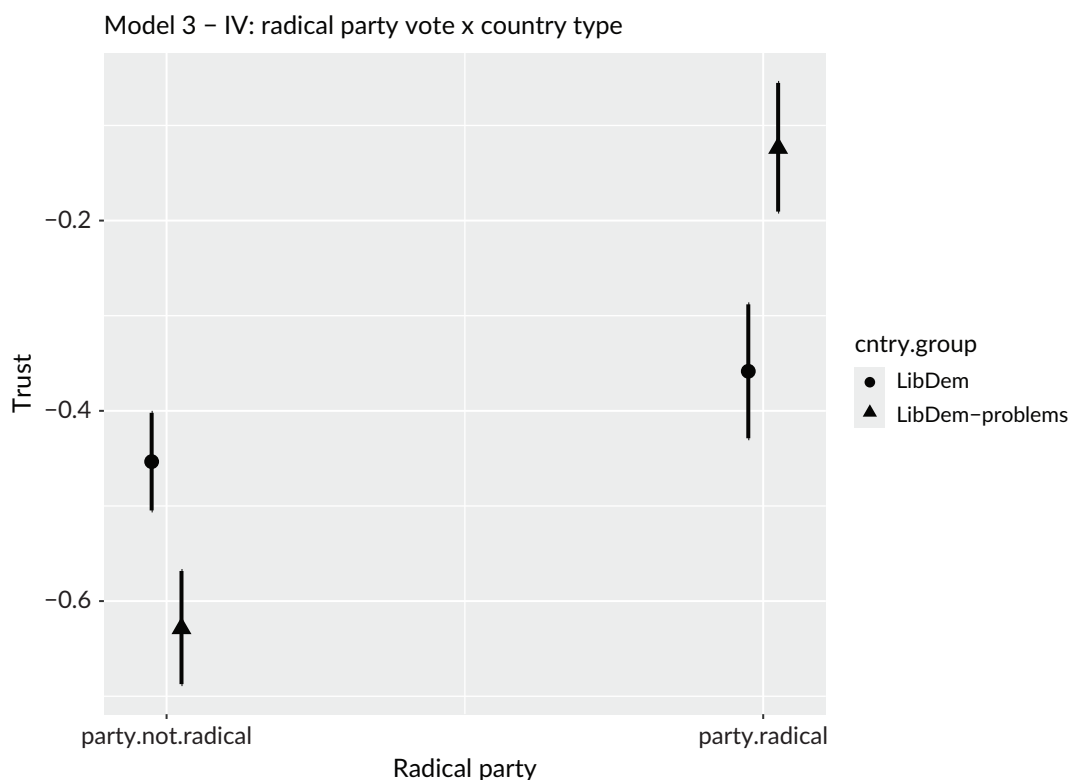


Figure 3. Regression of *trust* on radical party and country group in Model 3.

In stable, embedded LDs, no statistically significant differences in the level of political legitimacy between the electorates of radical and non-radical parties were detected; the confidence intervals plotted in the figure for radical and non-radical parties overlap. Conversely, statistically significant differences occur when one compares political legitimacy levels among electorates of different types of parties in malfunctioning democracies. Voters of radical right parties legitimize the political system more strongly than voters of the other parties. These results corroborate our expectations linked to our curiosity expressed in the RQ4.

6. Conclusions

The study presents insights into the dynamics of democracy and its alternatives in contemporary political landscapes of CEE cases. The key findings confirm our expectations. The research questions and the tentative anticipations proved (mostly) correct. Our essential research question was answered positively: yes, the “objectively” assessed quality of democracy (in terms of V-Dem’s Polyarchy Index) by expert judgments in a given country logically matches the levels of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism demonstrated by that country’s mass public. In directional terms, the more a given democracy malfunctions, the higher the level of these three attitudes among its citizenry.

The most important result illustrates that consolidated anti-liberal regimes, such as the one observed in Hungary, seem to exist and evolve over time. The support for populist, illiberal, and authoritarian attitudes tends to increase in such regimes, indicating a gradual shift in public sentiment. For them to thrive, time is needed. We clearly see how support for initially populist (Croatia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria), subsequently predominantly illiberal (Slovakia), and, ultimately, authoritarian (Hungary) attitudes increases among the mass public in such defective regimes, which are ranked by the degree of their departure from the liberal democratic ideal.

While the scholarly community lacks a classical panel study that would, ideally, thoroughly document the temporal dynamics of democratic deterioration in specific countries, we are able to reliably order the cases examined here according to their relative stages of democratic backsliding. Drawing upon expert assessments and established insights within political science literature, we classify these cases along a continuum ranging from Hungary, where anti-liberal practices have persisted for over a decade, through Poland, where efforts to undermine liberal democratic foundations have significantly progressed toward democratic erosion, and concluding with the Baltic States, whose democracies remain robustly embedded and well-functioning.

Time and effective socialization to specific anti-liberal ideas, along with an elaborate ideology, play crucial roles in the development and sustenance of these regimes. The Hungarian case exemplifies how skillful political entrepreneurship can effectively mold public opinion toward anti-liberal ideals (Magyar, 2016). An important question remains: How stable and durable is this type of regime? More time is needed for this issue to be reliably tested.

The Hungarian–Polish comparison seems to be exceptionally instructive. Apparently, a threshold exists beyond which the public and elites of a given country, the government’s deeds, and the public’s sense of political legitimacy in the system interplay, leading, in the case of successful anti-liberal politicians, to a broad approval of non-democratic solutions, ultimately creating a new (hardly democratic) political equilibrium.

A broader glance at the comprehensive picture of the CEE countries yields several key findings that tentatively illuminate the current state of democratic systems and also reveal how different political attitudes interact with perceptions of political legitimacy. The main conclusions drawn from the study are as follows: First, the influence of populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism on political legitimacy is more pronounced in countries with defective democracies compared to those with well-functioning democratic systems. Second, in embedded democracies, individuals with populist or illiberal views tend to perceive the political system as less legitimate. Conversely, in countries with defective democracies, citizens tend to legitimize the system irrespective of their populist or illiberal inclinations. Third, a unique pattern emerges for authoritarian attitudes. In contexts where liberal democracy faces challenges, a stronger reliance on authoritarianism is observed for higher political legitimacy. This finding warrants further elaboration and should be addressed comprehensively in a separate article.

At this juncture, we briefly indicate that selected analyses suggest authoritarian attitudes that enhance political legitimacy may originate from fundamentally different mechanisms (Markowski & Zagórski, 2025). Firstly, they may arise from a societal demand for decisive and efficient leadership. Secondly, they may reflect the sentiments of a substantial segment of the population experiencing exclusion, economic hardship, or subjective insecurity due to the complexities inherent in globalization and sheer market forces. Lastly, contemporary societies characterized by pronounced individualism, weakened community bonds, and diminished respect for traditionally legitimate authorities—institutions that historically provided social cohesion—may foster a renewed perspective. Specifically, socialization toward obedience and loyalty to overarching macro-structures may no longer be universally regarded as symptomatic of the evil face of authoritarianism, a viewpoint prominent in studies conducted in the post-WWII era and also exemplified by current extensive comparative research, such as the ESS utilized in this study.

Furthermore, in stable, well-established democracies, there is no significant difference in the level of political legitimacy perceived by followers of radical and non-radical mainstream parties. This indicates uniformity in how different political factions perceive the legitimacy of their political systems. In contrast, in democracies facing backsliding or evident decay, voters of radical parties tend to view the political system as more legitimate than supporters of other parties. This finding points to a distinct dynamic in malfunctioning democracies, where radical party supporters play a unique role in legitimizing the (failing) political system.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the results presented in this article, along with the relationships between populist, illiberal, and authoritarian indicators and political legitimacy operationalized as trust in institutions, reveal identical or highly similar dependencies when political legitimacy is operationalized as external political efficacy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used in the article have been obtained from the ESS project and are available free of charge for non-commercial use from: <https://ess.sikt.no/en>

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About the Authors



Radoslaw Markowski is a professor of political science at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Recurring visiting professor at CEU, he was also a visiting professor at Duke, Wisconsin-Madison, and Rutgers University. He has published in several peer-reviewed journals, such as *Electoral Studies*, *Party Politics*, *Political Studies*, *West European Politics*, and *European Union Politics*.



Michał Kotnarowski is an assistant professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His research interests include electoral behaviour, cross-national comparative studies, and social research methodology. Since 2021, he has been the National Coordinator for Poland in the ESS project.