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*Academic Editors*

Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University)  
Petra Guasti (Charles University)  
Dean Schafer (Mississippi State University)  
Bálint Mikola (CEU Democracy Institute)

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# Illiberal Politics in Europe: Ideology, Policies, and Impact

Zsolt Enyedi <sup>1,2</sup> , Petra Guasti <sup>3</sup> , Dean Schafer <sup>4</sup> , and Bálint Mikola <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, Central European University, Austria

<sup>2</sup> CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary

<sup>3</sup> Department of Political Science, Charles University, Czechia

<sup>4</sup> Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Mississippi State University, USA

**Correspondence:** Bálint Mikola ([mikolab@ceu.edu](mailto:mikolab@ceu.edu))

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## Abstract

Our thematic issue focuses on the ideological and discursive foundations, policy outputs, and institutional impact of illiberal parties in Europe. The contributions highlight how illiberal actors reshape democratic institutions, popular attitudes, cultural narratives, and welfare policies. They also consider how illiberal ideas spread through mainstream political discourse. Crucially, the issue explores both the diversity of illiberal ideologies and the mechanisms of democratic resilience. Together, these studies show that illiberalism is not merely a rhetorical style but a substantive challenge to liberal democracy that operates through institutional changes, policy, and discourse.

## Keywords

Europe; ideology; illiberalism; policy; politics; polity

## 1. Introduction: Theoretical Framing

If uncertainty in political outcomes constitutes a crisis, then democracy, by definition, exists in a state of permanent crisis. Vigilance over the resilience of democratic institutions is thus not a reaction to exceptional circumstances, but rather a continuous responsibility—both for scholars and, ideally, for citizens.

Yet the nature of the threats facing democracy is not static. At the close of the 20th century, concerns centered on phenomena such as the hollowing out of party politics, the erosion of ideological competition, declining citizen engagement, and the technocratic insulation of decision-making (Crouch, 2000; Mair, 2013). Political scientists observed the rise of radical challengers, but these forces were largely expected to remain marginal,

with mainstream “cartel” parties retaining dominance—thereby stripping democracy of meaningful alternation in power.

Many of the structural problems that preoccupied earlier generations of political scientists—such as low voter turnout, blurred boundaries between political and business elites, and the weakening of accountability—persist today. Others, including widespread distrust in political elites, electoral breakthroughs of radical challengers, and polarization, have intensified. However, the character of the threat to democracy has fundamentally changed. The skeptics of liberal democracy now present viable alternatives, both in terms of ideological visions and governance models. The post-war liberal order is being actively contested. In recent years, several countries have transitioned from democracy to electoral autocracy, with authoritarian incumbents managing to consolidate power.

The concept that some of us use to capture both the ideological modules of de-democratization and the actions that follow from them is illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024a; Kauth & King, 2020; Laruelle, 2022). Ideas justifying power concentration, the rejection of state neutrality, and the replacement of the standards of universality and rationality with the tribal taboos of closed society represent the most prominent arguments against liberal democracy (Enyedi, 2024b).

The democratic setbacks demand a reoriented research agenda. First, it is essential to examine whether different stages of autocratization constitute distinct political regimes and how these phases relate to mass political attitudes (Markowski & Kotnarowski, 2025). While elite preferences can shape regime dynamics independent of shifts in public opinion (Achen & Bartels, 2006), over time one must expect a degree of congruence between regime character and political culture—either because popular resistance compels strategic recalibration by leaders or because elites succeed in reshaping citizen policy preferences and feelings towards political opponents (Gidron et al., 2025). However, elite-driven polarization can prevent (further) democratic decline when it is the result of pro-democracy mobilization assembled against illiberal actors (Guasti & Michal, 2025).

The scenario where governing elites mold public values deserves far more scholarly attention. Illiberal leaders harness state resources, allied business networks, domestic allies, and, frequently, foreign partners to shape the ideological and political landscape. Analyzing the techniques and tools they use requires moving beyond questions of how checks and balances are weakened to analyzing how public policy is deployed to consolidate support (Szabó & Reiff, 2025). Particularly crucial are cultural and educational policies that align societal values with regime objectives (Čufar & Hawlina, 2025; Radó & Mikola, 2025).

Such policies do not exist in a vacuum; they are embedded in evolving discursive frameworks. Since radical constitutional reform is rarely feasible, democratic backsliding today often proceeds through legalism and the transformation of public discourse. This makes the analysis of political texts—speeches, manifestos, interviews, and legislative documents—an indispensable tool for understanding illiberal strategies. Furthermore, to fully grasp the mainstreaming of illiberalism requires expanding the textual analysis corpus to include philosophical writings, literature, and other elite cultural products, given the critical role intellectuals play in creating and legitimizing illiberal alternatives to the status quo (Schir & Laruelle, 2025).

Illiberal actors who succeed in linking their strategic interests to narratives of national or civilizational identity gain a formidable advantage (Özoflu & Gerim, 2025). When radical political entrepreneurs anchor exclusionary narratives in widely held cultural values, they can break free from the political margins. This reframing may bolster their electoral appeal or pressure mainstream actors to adopt similar rhetoric and policies (Cossu & Froio, 2025; Wagner et al., 2025).

It is essential, however, to avoid assuming that all challengers to liberal democracy are inherently populist, nativist, or authoritarian—or that their evolution inevitably leads to radicalization. Alarmism, while seductive, is itself a problematic discursive strategy. But when carefully designed longitudinal studies (Böckmann et al., 2025) document a rise in illiberal values, such changes cannot be dismissed as cheap talk. The task is to assess both rhetorical consistency and the subsequent implementation of policies. Some illiberal promises are fulfilled, others are not, and the difference between the two is not accidental. While illiberal political actors make pledges both on culture and on the economy, they have a more solid record of staying true to their words in the former than in the latter area (Schafer et al., 2025).

Still, we cannot afford to overlook economic and social policies. First, whether illiberal governments reduce or exacerbate inequality is of profound consequence. Second, there is considerable variance among them in what kind of vision they offer for treating the everyday problems of citizens. For instance, anti-immigrant stances may be framed in terms of defending the welfare state, national identity, or traditional family structures. The perceived threat may be immigrants, or alternatively, global elites, progressive activists, or marginalized minorities. Their preferred social policy also varies: some target benefits to middle-class taxpayers; others to vulnerable (yet native) groups like single mothers or the disabled (Szikra & Autischer, 2025).

The world of illiberalism is inherently layered and ideologically diverse. Challenges to liberal democratic norms can emerge from a wide range of perspectives—including authoritarian, populist, traditionalist, religious-fundamentalist, nativist-nationalist, paternalist, libertarian, materialist, left-wing, civilizational, anti-modern, or prejudicial standpoints (Enyedi, 2024b; Halevy & Bušíková, 2025; Özoflu & Gerim, 2025). Given this heterogeneity, defenders of liberal democracy cannot rely on generic counterarguments. Effective responses must be tailored to the specific logic and appeal of each strand of critique.

## **2. Illiberalism and Polity: Impacts, Strategies, and Resistance**

Four contributions in this issue explore the dynamic interplay between illiberalism and democratic polity. Two analytical dimensions structure this inquiry: the impact of illiberalism on democratic institutions and the strategies and tools illiberal actors employ to challenge democratic governance.

### **2.1. Impacts on Democratic Institutions**

Markowski and Kotnarowski (2025) draw on the 10th European Social Survey to highlight the role of citizen attitudes in mediating regime legitimacy. They show that populist and illiberal views tend to erode democratic legitimacy. At the same time, authoritarian attitudes may paradoxically sustain it. They also argue that illiberal regimes systematically reshape democratic institutions by capturing key state organs and altering the normative framework of liberal democracy—developments particularly visible in Hungary and Poland.

Guasti and Michal (2025) demonstrate how different forms of polarization—ideological, affective, intransigent, and partisan—may contribute to both illiberal and pro-democratic mobilization using cross-national data from V-Dem and SYRI. Furthermore, they focus on the case of the 2023 Czech presidential election to show how the different mobilization strategies of each candidate affected each type of polarization. Affective polarization using fear was the best predictor for the vote choice of the illiberal candidate, while partisan sorting around policy towards Ukraine predicted the choice of the democratic candidate.

## **2.2. *Strategies and Tools of Illiberal Contestation***

Halevy and Bušítková (2025) identify deep institutional entrenchment as key to regime durability and document a more ideologically rooted transformation: incorporating religious intermediary organizations into the state's core. Confessional illiberalism, they contend, unlike its prejudicial and reactionary counterparts, draws inspiration from interwar fascist legacies: eroding the secular foundation of liberal democracy by fusing state and church and reshaping both public norms and policy agendas. Halevy and Bušítková (2025) show how the mobilization of socially conservative actors and religious institutions is a core strategy of illiberal transformation.

A further common tactic highlighted by Özoflu and Gerim (2025) is the use of civilizational discourse to legitimize exclusionary and authoritarian policies. Analyzing Erdoğan's speeches, the authors demonstrate how appeals to civilizational identity and distinctness from the West serve to normalize illiberal governance and reinforce the durability of the illiberal regime. In parallel, Schir and Laruelle (2025) trace how cultural narratives and discursive manipulation—via popular novels—embed far-right ideologies in mainstream discourse utilizing social and discursive capital of public intellectuals in the ideological dissemination of illiberal narratives. Across these cases, illiberal actors construct alternative epistemic frameworks and networks that marginalize liberal-democratic norms and actors in order to consolidate and maintain illiberal rule through institutional means, cultural production, and cooptation of ideologically aligned actors.

## **3. Illiberal Policies: What Illiberal Parties Do in Power?**

One of the decisive and currently understudied aspects of illiberal politics focuses on the policy-making processes and outputs of illiberal parties in power. Even though existing literature provides some cues on what constitutes illiberal governance styles (Boda, 2024), these insights have mostly been based on single case studies and have built on earlier studies on populist policy-making (Bartha et al., 2020). This line of work found that rather than sharing specific policy positions, populist parties resemble each other in their ways of policy-making, their relationship with experts, and public opinion. Specifically, they adopt ideologically diverse and heterodox policy measures that challenge mainstream paradigms, disregard minority preferences, sidestep consultative mechanisms, ignore expert opinion, minimize civil society participation, and rely on divisive and emotional discourse. The current thematic issue advances the research agenda by considering the real-world impact of illiberal governing parties across a range of policy areas.

### **3.1. *The Role of Ideas and Culture***

In their article, Radó and Mikola (2025) show how Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland have reshaped educational and cultural policies to consolidate power. The article differentiates between overt ideological



agendas (nationalism, conservatism, and religious identity), that both parties pursue, and hidden clientelistic goals such as elite replacement and centralized control, which are more pronounced in the case of Fidesz. The analysis highlights how the decentralized nature of the Polish education system has served as a safeguard to protect schools' autonomy in matters of curriculum, as well as financial management. The authors highlight that beyond institutional inertia, the ruling party's supermajority in the Hungarian case also facilitated more drastic reforms, while the changes enacted by PiS between 2015 and 2023 have been more subtle due to the party's limited room for manoeuvre. The article fills an important gap in the literature by emphasizing the role of cultural and educational policies as strategic tools in illiberal statecraft.

Focusing more closely on cultural policy, Čufar and Hawlina (2025) zoom in on the 2020–2022 cabinet led by Janez Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party. The article demonstrates how illiberal leaders use cultural policy to reshape national identity and silence dissent. The authors propose a typology of illiberal cultural interventions ranging from politicized appointments and censorship to memory politics and symbolic spatial control, demonstrating how culture becomes a vehicle for ideological consolidation, as well as how it may bolster democratic backsliding. The analysis also stresses how cultural oppression may intensify during crisis periods such as the Covid-19 pandemic, leveraging emergency powers to curtail protest and restructure the cultural sector. The Slovenian case illustrates how illiberalism reconfigures democratic space through targeted cultural interventions, with enduring effects even after political turnover.

### **3.2. How Illiberals Address Redistribution and Inequality**

Another stream of articles within the policy-focused contributions to this thematic issue analyzes how illiberal parties address redistributive conflicts (Szikra & Autischer, 2025), how targeted social transfers may be turned into vote-buying vehicles (Szabó & Reiff, 2025), and what is their impact on social inequalities (Schafer et al., 2025).

In their comparative case study of Hungarian Fidesz, Polish PiS, Austrian FPÖ, and Italian FdI, Szikra and Autischer (2025) demonstrate how illiberal parties use family policy to promote ideological agendas and consolidate power. Despite national differences, these parties employ welfare chauvinism, ethno-nationalist rhetoric, and selective redistribution to reward preferred constituencies while marginalizing others. The key beneficiaries typically include native-born, heterosexual families, at the detriment of immigrants and non-traditional families. The article shows how family policy becomes a strategic instrument of democratic backsliding, allowing illiberal actors to reshape welfare systems in line with authoritarian and exclusionary agendas.

Szabó and Reiff's (2025) study investigates how targeted rural spending has served Fidesz's electoral goals. Combining rich data with a quasi-experimental design, the authors show that funds were strategically allocated to electorally loyal areas, boosting Fidesz's vote share by mobilizing supporters and demobilizing the opposition. These programs reveal how clientelistic redistribution becomes a central tool of competitive authoritarianism: maintaining regime stability, reinforcing rural loyalty, and circumventing democratic accountability through a mix of programmatic and discretionary spending.

Finally, turning the focus from policy instruments to political discourse, and applying an innovative global dataset of 38,000+ political speeches analyzed via machine learning, Schafer et al. (2025) find that illiberal

leaders on the economic right systematically exacerbate income inequality. Although illiberals often campaign on economic grievances, the study shows that only right-leaning illiberal leaders translate their preferences into policy outcomes and these lead to greater inequality. Left-leaning illiberals and liberal leaders, by contrast, have no discernible effect. The findings challenge assumptions about the redistributive potential of strongman rule, revealing that illiberalism tends to amplify rather than mitigate structural inequality, especially when combined with economically conservative agendas.

## **4. Illiberalism and Politics: Mainstreaming the Far-Right**

Illiberal parties have increased their vote share across Europe. In general, however, they do not command a majority and require the cooperation of centrist parties to govern and access power. Therefore, the mainstreaming of illiberal politics—through both the discursive persistence of illiberal parties and the adoption of illiberal positions by centrists—threatens to undermine the cordon sanitaire that has contained far-right illiberal parties. Three articles in this thematic issue contribute to the evidentiary consensus that illiberalism is being normalized.

### ***4.1. The Discursive Persistence of the Illiberal Far-Right***

Central to illiberal parties' influence on European politics is their consistent articulation of alternatives to liberal democracy. Böckmann et al. (2025) demonstrate that far-right MEPs maintained the frequency of illiberal rhetoric in their parliamentary speech from 1999 to 2019 and that the frequency of their illiberal speech has intensified recently. Their work shows that illiberalism provides an ideological framework that combines “unrestrained majority rule, ethnonational anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism” (p. 16). Similarly, Cossu and Froio (2025) show that the National Rally maintained “consistently negative rhetoric” on multiculturalism throughout the 2014–2021 period. That party's position provided a stable ideological anchor that other actors could turn to during periods of heightened political crisis. Wagner et al. (2025, p. 2) document this persistence through their word-embedding analysis across eight European countries, finding that far-right parties “exhibit minimal moderation upon entering government and radicalize when they leave.” This pattern suggests that temporary tactical adjustments mask deeper ideological commitments that remain fundamentally unchanged by institutional participation.

### ***4.2. The Centre Moves Right***

More concerning than far-right persistence is the adoption of illiberal positions by mainstream parties. Cossu and Froio (2025) find evidence of “position contagion” in France on issues such as cultural diversity and Islam, with mainstream parties increasingly adopting negative positions that line up with the far right. This shift follows exclusionary civic frames, with parties across the political spectrum using *laïcité* to justify cultural exclusion while maintaining democratic legitimacy. Wagner et al. (2025) corroborate this pattern across European party systems, finding that conservative mainstream parties respond to and follow illiberal shifts in discourse by far-right parties. Importantly, this rightward drift persists regardless of whether far-right parties hold government office, suggesting that accommodation fundamentally misunderstands the mechanisms through which illiberal ideas spread. Temporary far-right moderation masks longer-term shifts in mainstream political discourse.

## 5. Summary

The main findings of the articles in this thematic issue are summarized in Table 1 below. Collectively, these contributions highlight how illiberalism reshapes politics, policies, and polity by strategically leveraging polarization, cultural diffusion, welfare policies, and rhetorical shifts to consolidate power. The diverse contexts studied emphasize illiberalism's adaptability.

**Table 1.** Summary of illiberals' impact on polity, policy, and politics.

Overarching theoretical dimension	Authors	Focus	Main finding
<i>Polity</i>	Markowski and Kotnarowski	Public attitudes and regime types in CEE	Populist/illiberal views reduce legitimacy; authoritarian ones may bolster it; diverse regime-attitude links exist
	Guasti and Michal	Polarization's effect on democracy in CEE	Mobilization against illiberalism and for democracy furthers polarization but can enable democratic resistance
	Halevy and Buřtková	Typologies of illiberalism	Confessional illiberalism fuses state and religion, entrenching power through deep institutional networks
	Schir and Laruelle	Cultural diffusion of illiberalism via fiction	Social and discursive capital enables far-right ideas to spread through mainstream literature
<i>Policy</i>	Özoflu and Gerim	Civilizational discourse in Turkey	Erdoğan uses civilizational identity to legitimize illiberal rule and distance Turkey from the West
	Radó and Mikola	Education/culture under Fidesz and PiS	Fidesz radically centralized control; PiS pursued subtler ideological reforms due to fewer institutional levers
	Čufar and Hawlina	Cultural policy in Slovenia	Illiberal regimes use cultural policy to consolidate power and suppress dissent, especially in crises
	Szikra and Autischer	Welfare policy under illiberals	Illiberals use welfare chauvinism to reward preferred groups and consolidate authoritarian agendas
	Szabó and Reiff	Rural spending and electoral outcomes in Hungary	Targeted programs increase Fidesz vote share by mobilizing loyalists and demobilizing opposition
	Schafer et al.	Illiberalism and economic inequality	Right-wing illiberal leaders increase inequality; left-wing ones have no significant redistributive effect
<i>Politics</i>	Böckmann et al.	Illiberal rhetoric in EU parliament	Illiberal speech by far-right MEPs has increased since 2017, showing a deepening ideological commitment
	Cossu and Froio	Impact of terror on French political rhetoric	Mainstream parties adopt far-right positions post-attacks, normalizing exclusionary discourse
	Wagner et al.	Far-right influence on party competition	Mainstream parties shift right on immigration; far-right discourse hardens post-government participation

## 6. Conclusions

While illiberalism rises globally and liberal democracy becomes the least frequent regime form, the quality of democracy in Europe remains comparatively high. However, the “cordon sanitaire” is weakened and occasionally broken. Thus, illiberal actors who question, challenge, or disregard liberal democratic norms are no longer confined to the political margins. They now hold public office, influence policy-making, and shape the contours of public discourse. While the extent of their impact varies, their rhetoric, legislative initiatives, and associated cultural expressions signal a departure from the post-war democratic consensus—and even more markedly from the liberalism that gained prominence after 1989. Illiberals exploit the inherent weaknesses of liberal democracy, shortcomings of mainstream politics, and the tensions inherent in multicultural societies; yet, they do not present a unified or coherent alternative to the existing order. Addressing their rise effectively requires a more nuanced understanding of their diverse agendas—ideologies, policies, and impact. The contributions in this thematic issue aim to deepen our understanding of how illiberals reshape democratic polities, policies, and politics.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**Zsolt Enyedi** is a professor at Central European University, that works on party politics, political attitudes, and ideologies. His latest book, with Fernando Casal Bertoa, *Party System Closure*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2021. Currently, he coordinates the Horizon Europe project Neo-Authoritarianism in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response (AUTHLIB).



**Petra Guasti** is an associate professor of democratic theory at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, and a senior research fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences. Her research explores representation, democratization, and populism, with a focus on political polarization. She co-leads the National Institute for Research on the Socio-Economic Impact of Diseases and Systemic Risks (SYRI) and heads Czech teams in the Horizon Europe projects AUTHLIB and INSPIRE.



**Dean Schafer** is an assistant professor at Mississippi State University. His research focuses on the values and incentives that shape coalition building in backsliding democracies. Broadly, his interests include political economy, comparative democracy and autocracy, and data science methods. He scrapes social media data to get leverage on the attitudes, networks, and behavior of political elites, which is especially useful in hard-to-observe settings such as authoritarian countries. His work has been published in *Party Politics*, *South European Society and Politics*, and *Nationalities Papers*, as well as public-facing outlets including *The Democracy Paradox* and *Foreign Policy in Focus*.



**Bálint Mikola** is a postdoctoral research fellow at CEU Democracy Institute, that works on political parties, political communication, digitalization, and cultural policy. He currently works on the ideological and policy profiles of illiberal actors in Europe within the framework of the Neo-Authoritarianisms in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response (AUTHLIB) project and has recently published several articles on illiberal cultural policy.

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

Radosław Markowski <sup>1</sup>  and Michał Kotnarowski <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poland

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

**Correspondence:** Radosław Markowski ([rmarkowski@swps.edu.pl](mailto: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 & Verzichelli, 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 politics: 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 malfunctional 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.

	Poland			Hungary		
	Electorates	ESS Round 6/2012	N =	All respondents	ESS Round 10/2022	N =
	Satisfaction with democracy—means	Satisfaction with democracy—standard deviations		Importance of democracy <sup>1</sup>	Acceptance for authoritarian rule <sup>2</sup>	
Liberals/ Democrats	5.5	2.2	704			
PiS	4.1	2.3	325			
other	4.7	2.4	773			
Liberals/ 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: <sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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**

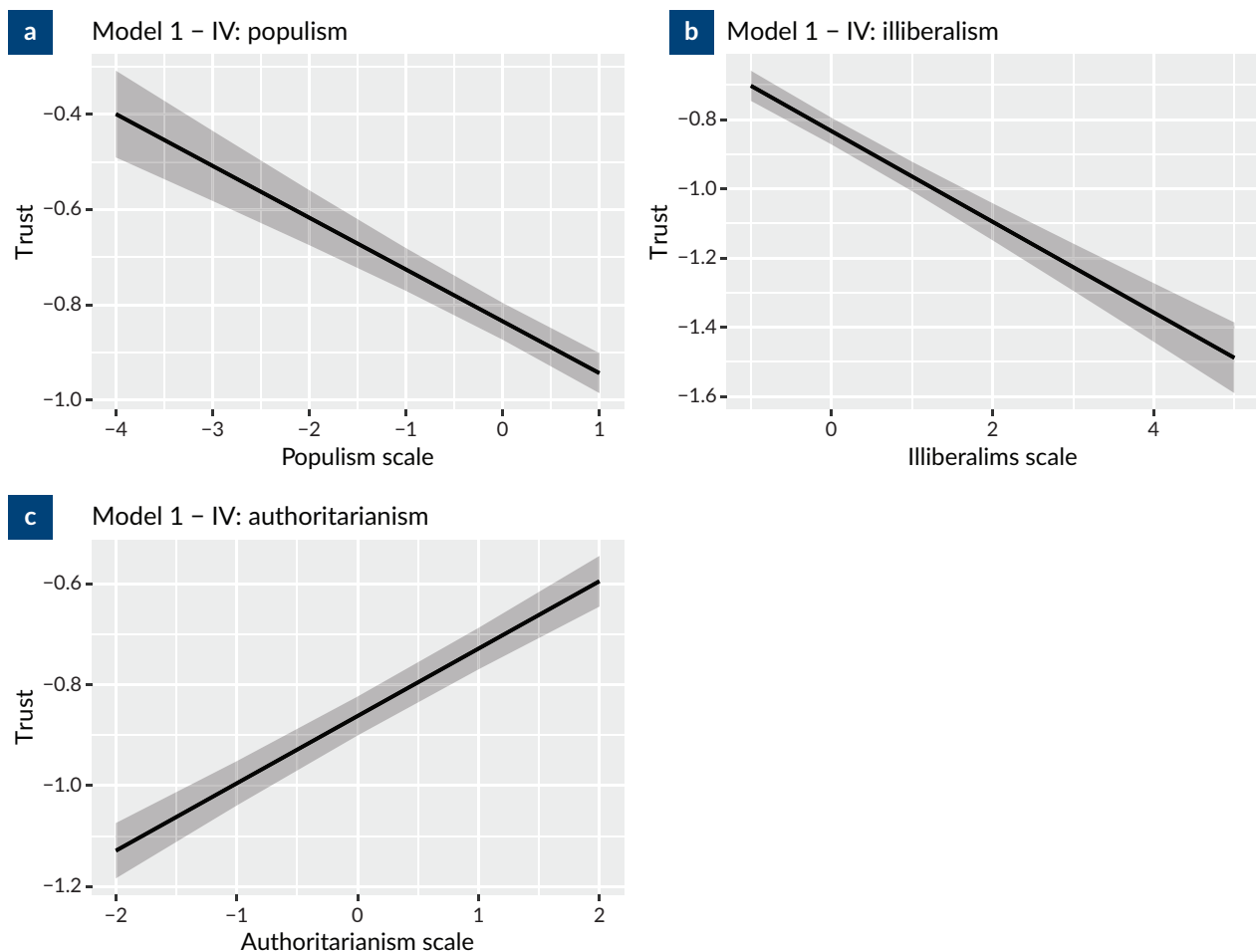
	Model 1 DV: Trust	Model 2 DV: Trust	Model 3 DV: Trust
(Intercept)	−0.99*** (0.05)	−0.43*** (0.05)	−0.56*** (0.09)
Populism scale	−0.11*** (0.01)	−0.20*** (0.01)	
Illiberalism scale	−0.13*** (0.01)	−0.15*** (0.01)	
Authoritarianism scale	0.13*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)	
Country: LibDem-problems		−0.19*** (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

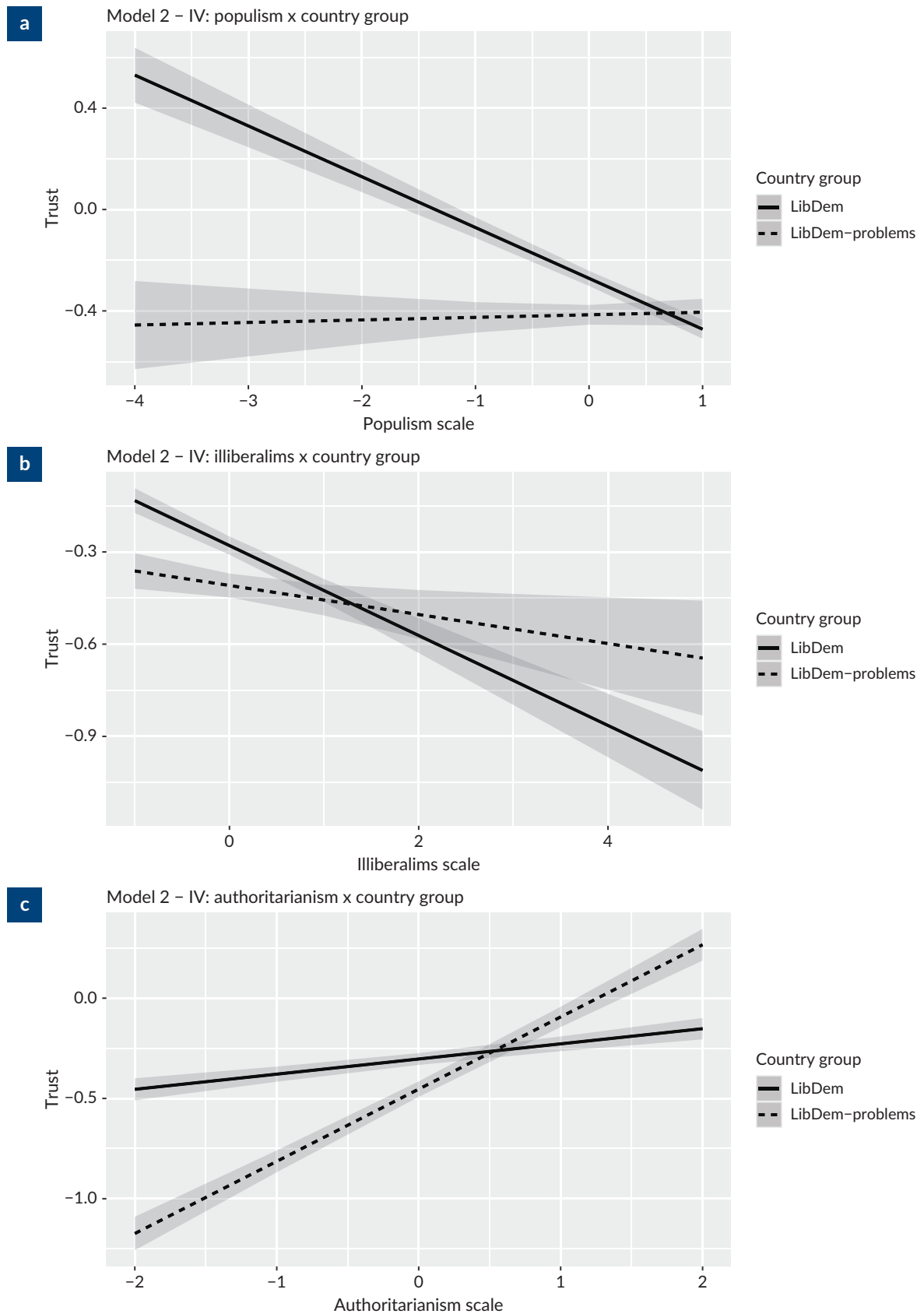


**Figure 1.** Relationships for *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism* scales in Model 1.

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



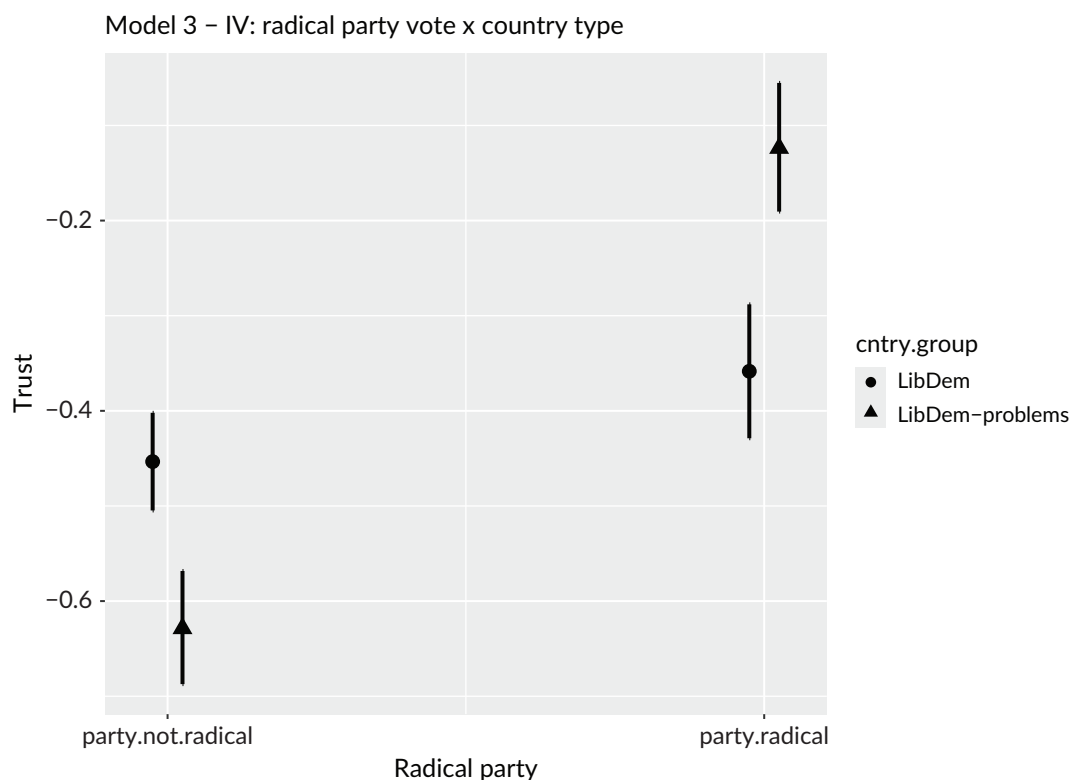
**Figure 2.** Relationships for *populism*, *illiberalism*, and *authoritarianism* scales in country groups in Model 2.



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 publics’ 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



**Radosław 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.



# Polarization and Democracy in Central Europe

Petra Guasti  and Aleš Michal 

Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

**Correspondence:** Petra Guasti ([petra.guasti@soc.cas.cz](mailto:petra.guasti@soc.cas.cz))

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## Abstract

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

## Keywords

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



## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. Polarization and Democracy in the CEE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **3. Data, Cases, and Methods**

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

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

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

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

We showed the effects of polarization at the level of society (*v2smpolsoc*) on two concurrent types of mobilization—for democracy (*v2cademmob*) and autocracy (*v2caaoutmob*). It is relevant to note that the variable on polarization had to overcome a transformation of inversion. While this variable had its real peak (the most polarized) at 0, other variables were reported by a different logic. Accordingly, we transformed this variable by *transformed* = *v2smpolsoc* − 4. As control variables, we utilized the GDP per capita (*e\_gdppc*) and index of liberal democracy (*v2x\_polyarchy*) to cover the as-usual determinants of polarization at the state levels.

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



### 3.1. Data and Operationalization

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 4. Analysis

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

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

Table 1 details the electoral mobilization in three types of elections (presidential, parliamentary, and European) in the studied countries. In all of the countries, populist parties mobilized previously passive voters (Leininger & Meijers, 2021). Furthermore, in Czechia (2021) and Poland (2023), mobilization took

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

Parliamentary elections	
Czechia	
Date:	10/2021
Voter turnout:	65.43%
+/- difference to previous elections	+4.6%
victory (populism/antipopulism)	anti-populism
Poland	
	10/2023
	73%
	+11.3%
	anti-populism
Slovakia	
	09/2023
	68.4%
	+2.6%
	populism
Hungary	
	03/2022
	69.59%
	−0.55%
	populism

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

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

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

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

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

Model 1 (Mobilization for democracy)	Model 2 (Mobilization for autocracy)
–15.63** (4.74)	1.14 (2.74)
1.10*** (0.28)	0.42* (0.16)
4.50 (2.71)	–4.19* (1.56)
0.25*** (0.06)	–0.01 (0.04)
40	40
0.40	0.77

Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ . Source: V-Dem 2024

#### 4.3. Polarization in Czechia

Among the CEE countries, the Czech case did not show the highest polarization, but it did show the most dynamic evolution of polarization over time and represented a case of polarized pluralism (cf. Sartori, 2005). The 2023 Czech presidential election provided a valuable context for exploring how polarization manifests

in electoral politics and its effects on attitudes and voter behavior (cf. Schedler, 2023). Marked as a struggle between illiberalism and democracy, the election offered a unique and insightful case study for exploring the interplay between polarization and mobilization for and against democracy. The competition between Andrej Babiš against retired general Petr Pavel encapsulated not only the ongoing struggle between populist and anti-populist forces (cf. Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022, 2023) but also the role of elites in fostering polarization and the impact of both populist and anti-populist communication on citizens' attitudes.

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

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

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

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

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

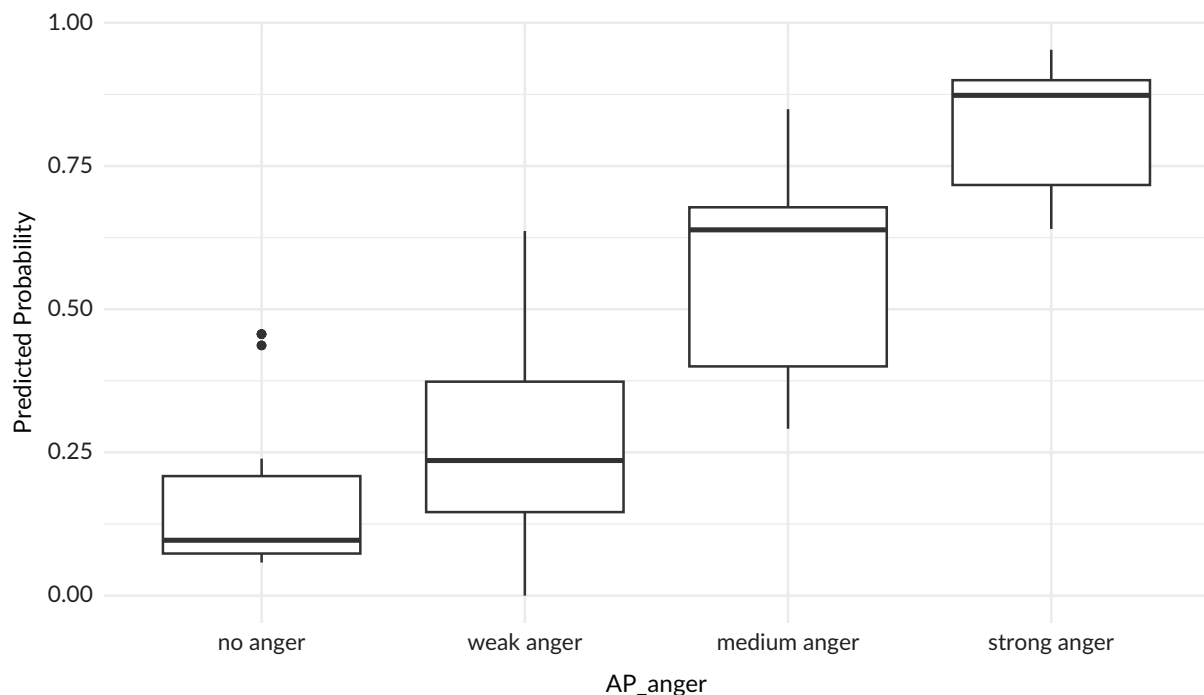
#### **4.5. The Mass Level: Types of Polarization in the Czech Context**

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

##### **4.5.1. Affective Polarization**

Our first hypothesis posited that higher levels of affective polarization (i.e., stronger anger about the state's political situation) correlate with increased support for a populist candidate. This link was confirmed by our analysis, which revealed a nearly flawless linear relationship between rising anger and support for Andrej

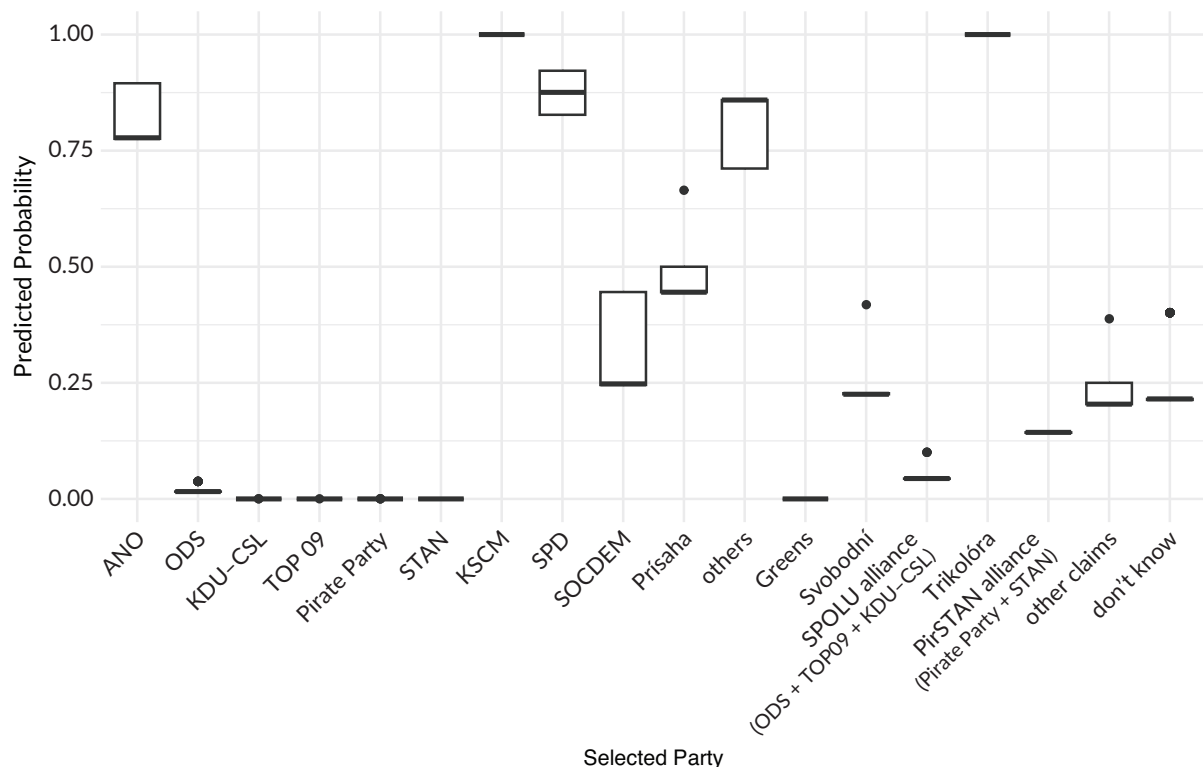
Babiš (Figure 1). The most rapid increase occurred between the second and third ordinal levels: while respondents with mild anger were more likely to vote for the anti-populist candidate, Petr Pavel, those identifying as having *medium anger* increasingly shifted their support to Babiš. The statistical significance of the variables within the model is noteworthy: four of them—*medium anger*, *strong anger*, and both educational categories—demonstrated this characteristic and reported the effect intensity. Thus, higher anger and lower education levels explained the increased willingness to vote for the populist candidate.



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

#### 4.5.2. Ideological Polarization

Testing the second hypothesis required measuring the variance in power between the two ideological camps. We counted this metric based on pre-existing data on the predicted probabilities of voting for either a populist or anti-populist candidate, as reflected in other stages of the research. Although the value of predicted probability 0.1410, as visualized in Figure 2, might appear moderate, it indicated a meaningful dispersion in candidate preferences aligned with party affiliation, thereby demonstrating clear ideological sorting among voters. Figure 2 clearly indicates cleavage between the populist and anti-populist blocs of parties, thereby corresponding to the relevance of the inter-bloc polarization, which was much stronger than the intra-bloc polarization. This analysis highlighted that political preferences were statistically significant in the cases of ODS, the PirSTAN alliance, SOCDEM (Social Democracy; formerly Czech Social Democratic Party [SOCDEM]), and Svobodní. While ODS and PirSTAN supporters were more likely to vote for Petr Pavel, voters of SOCDEM and Svobodní exhibited internal divisions in terms of their candidate preference. However, the varying levels of statistical significance across individual parties suggested that while ideological positions may have reinforced voter support for candidates, this relationship was not consistently statistically significant. SOCDEM and Svobodní had long been oscillating between the populist and anti-populist blocs, with their position settling in the populist bloc after the presidential election.



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

#### 4.5.3. Intransigent Polarization

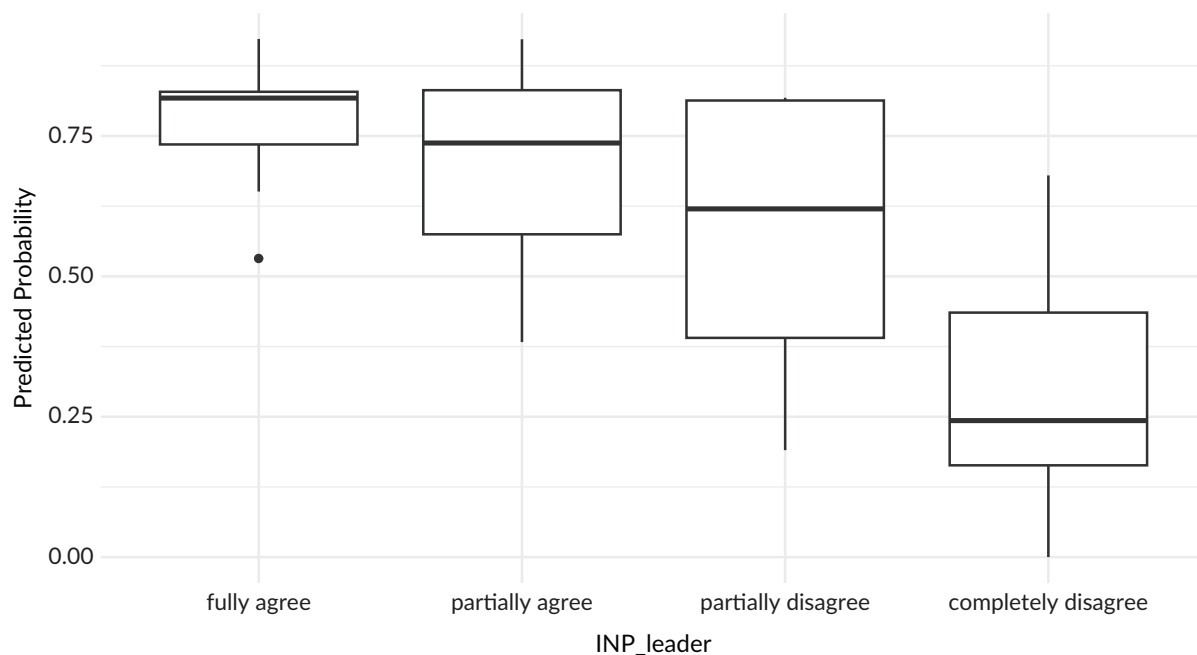
The demand for a strong leader was unsurprisingly tightly linked with voting for a populist candidate. Nonetheless, this connection also lacked statistical significance relative to all of the independent variables. In the data, we observed that the affinity to vote for a populist candidate decreased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

#### 4.5.4. Partisan Sorting

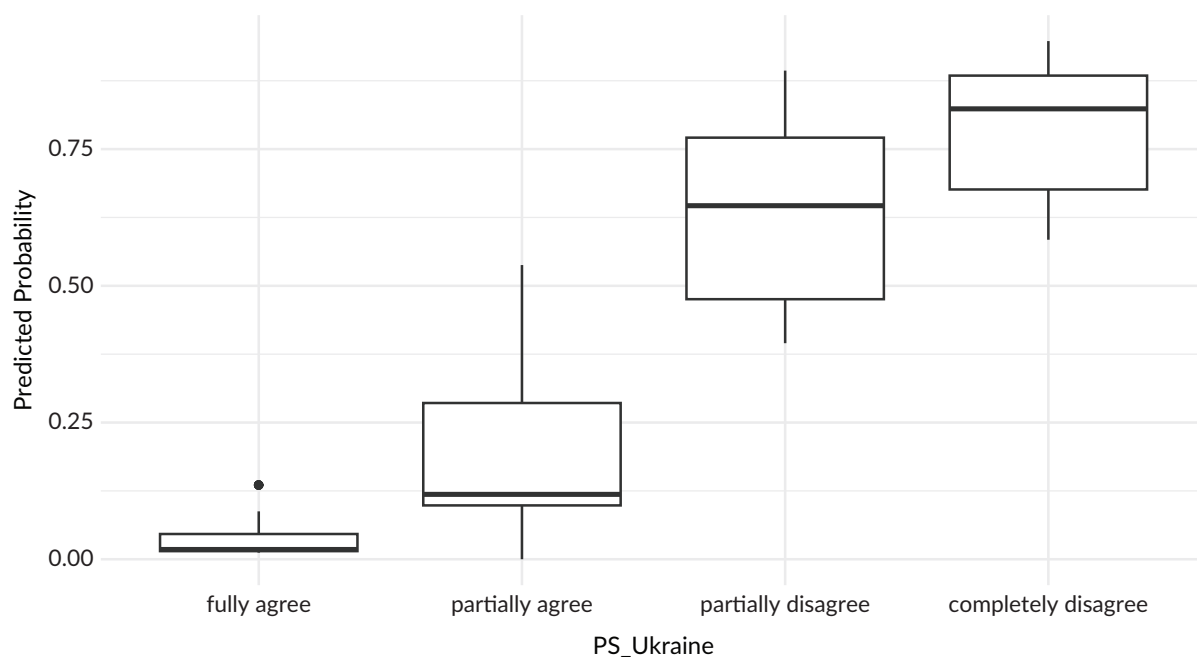
Conversely, the most important determinant of both populist and non-populist voting was found within the “partisan sorting” type of polarization. The effect of this type of polarization was formulated as our fourth hypothesis. All independent variables were statistically significant, thereby providing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

### 4.6. Summary of Models

Which type of polarization best explains the support for populism and anti-populism in the conditions of polarized pluralism? In the literature, affective and ideological polarization are privileged at this stage



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



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

because they are relatively easy to measure and interpret. To confront that dominant research, we suggest that Rostbøll's (2025) nuanced conceptualization of polarization work on descending a ladder of abstraction (Sartori, 1970) can help clarify nuances almost lost in the often-used categories of polarization. A comparative analysis of our four models showed that partisan sorting—with all three independent variables statistically significant and a high pseudo- $R^2$  metric—is the essential polarization subtype found in

the Czech case (although model 2 explains population better potentially, the proportion of its statistically significant units remains well below the meaningful threshold). The partisan sorting model (model 4) archives the second-lowest value of the Akaike Information Criterion, which means a well-supported result. At this point, we consider AIC more fundamental than Bayesian Information Criterion BIC, which only partially accounts for model fit quality and is better suited to less sophisticated models. The second model demonstrating strong explanatory value is affective polarization. In this model, two out of three independent variables showed statistically significant effects, and their associated metrics approached high levels of model quality, highlighting the robustness of affective polarization in explaining support for populism.

## 5. Conclusions

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

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

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

Echoing Sartori's insight that polarization significantly influences democratic stability (Sartori, 2005), our analyses confirmed that polarization not only can destabilize democratic institutions but can also activate pro-democracy societal mobilization under the conditions of polarized pluralism. We found conditions of



polarized pluralism present in Czechia and Poland, absent in Hungary, and to a lesser degree in Slovakia. The dual mobilization for and against democracy observed in Central Europe can be interpreted using Schedler's (2023) conflict-analytical approach. The mobilization against populism in Czechia and Poland exemplified resistance to perceived democratic norm violations, while the mobilization in Hungary and Slovakia reflected a deeper entrenchment of extraordinary conflict, undermining basic democratic trust.

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

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

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

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

Furthermore, this article advances the theoretical understanding of polarization's impact on democracy (cf. Schedler, 2023; Svoboda, 2019) by arguing that intransigent polarization, characterized by an unwillingness

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

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

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

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### Conflict of Interests

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### Data Availability

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

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## About the Authors



**Petra Guasti** is an associate professor of democratic theory at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, and a senior research fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences. Her research explores representation, democratization, and populism, with a focus on political polarization. She co-leads the National Institute for Research on the Socio-Economic Impact of Diseases and Systemic Risks (SYRI) and heads Czech teams in the Horizon Europe projects AUTHLIB and INSPIRE.



**Aleš Michal** is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the Institute of Political Studies, Charles University. His research focuses on populism, political polarization, and protest mobilization in CEE, with particular emphasis on Czechia and Germany. He is a research fellow at SYRI and in the Horizon Europe project AUTHLIB, where he focuses on populist and anti-system actors. The majority of the work on this research article was carried out as part of collaboration on the project National Institute for Research on the Socio-Economic Impact of Diseases and Systemic Risks (SYRI) within an appointment at the Institute of Sociology.

# Confessional Illiberalism in Europe

Lotem Halevy <sup>1</sup>  and Lenka Bušíková <sup>2,3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality,” University of Konstanz, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Center for European Studies, University of Florida, USA

<sup>3</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Florida, USA

**Correspondence:** Lotem Halevy ([lotem.halevy@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:lotem.halevy@uni-konstanz.de))

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## Abstract

This article introduces the concept of confessional illiberalism and situates it alongside two other forms of illiberalism: prejudicial illiberalism and reactionary illiberalism. Confessional illiberalism emerges as a reactionary backlash against secularism and gender equality, drawing ideological inspiration from interwar fascism. It adopts a model of governance that fuses the state with religious intermediary organizations, such as churches and socially conservative advocacy groups. Whereas confessional illiberalism constitutes an epistemic rejection of modernity and aspires to a restoration of conservative traditionalism, prejudicial illiberalism originates at the individual level as a grievance and may escalate into a mass movement. Positioned between individual-level prejudice and state-level redemption offered by confessionalism, reactionary illiberalism entails a policy-based pushback against the advancement of aspirational or ascending minority groups. Confessional illiberalism, by embedding itself within religious intermediary organizations and segments of uncivil society, cultivates a deep-rooted institutional presence that becomes difficult to dislodge once it consolidates power.

## Keywords

democracy; far right; gender; illiberalism; minority rights; policy backlash; populism; prejudice; religion

## 1. Introduction

In Western societies, mothers have unexpectedly become burdened with the expectation of “making nations great again,” a demand that reflects anxieties about national viability. This rhetoric echoes earlier pronatalist campaigns, such as the 19th-century slogan of the Hungarian Association for the Protection of Mother and Infants: “Hungarian mothers, you can make Hungary great!”—a call issued in response to high infant



mortality rates (Hungarian National Stefánia Association for the Protection of Mothers and Infants, 1915). Today, the redemptive vision of womanhood is directed less toward reducing infant deaths and more toward addressing declining birth rates, yet it remains grounded in ideals of fertility, subservience, tradition, and unwavering dedication to family and community. It underpins a wave of recent policy shifts across several European countries: the rollback of abortion rights in Poland and the US; state-sponsored subsidies and child benefits in Hungary, aimed at encouraging procreation among middle-class married couples; and orphaning by decree of same-sex parents in Italy. Together, these developments reflect a broader ideological project that seeks to reassert traditional gender roles under the guise of national renewal.

Many of the challenges associated with the waning dominance of the liberal democratic order in European democracies and beyond have been studied through the lens of populism (Kaltwasser et al., 2017) or interpreted as symptomatic of the rise of illiberalism, a reactionary rejection of market liberalism and social progressivism (Laruelle, 2024). While most literature identifies the divisiveness of anti-LGBTQ+ politics and the assault on reproductive rights as a tool to polarize the electorate by dragging voters into culture wars, it fails to see the redemptive nature of pro-natality politics for illiberal actors. For these actors, the rebirth of the nation can be achieved with reproductive policies tailored to the state's interests aimed at producing a new generation dedicated to traditional values that ensure national survival. To account for this logic, we propose a new concept of confessional illiberalism, which captures the centrality of motherhood for illiberal national rejuvenation.

To justify the introduction of confessional illiberalism, we compare it with two other ideal types of illiberalism in Europe: prejudicial illiberalism and reactionary illiberalism. Prejudicial illiberalism is rooted in bottom-up individual anxieties, manifested through hate, xenophobia, and resentment. Reactionary illiberalism is a form of policy backlash against policy accommodation and expansion of rights afforded to ethnic and sexual minorities, including women. Confessional illiberalism represents a reactionary backlash against secularism and gender equality, drawing ideological inspiration from interwar fascism. It adopts a model of governance that fuses the state with religious intermediary institutions, such as churches and socially conservative advocacy groups.

Whereas confessional illiberalism constitutes an epistemic rejection of modernity and aspires to return to conservative traditionalism, prejudicial illiberalism originates at the individual level as a grievance, which can escalate into a mass movement under politically talented leaders. Positioned between the personal prejudices of individuals and state-driven redemption offered by confessionalism, reactionary illiberalism entails a policy-based pushback against the advancement of aspirational or ascending minority groups. Confessional illiberalism, through its entrenchment in both religious intermediary organizations and segments of uncivil society, achieves a deep-rooted institutional presence that becomes difficult to dislodge once it consolidates power.

Some distinct features of confessional illiberalism are its strategic effort to form alliances with intermediary actors and socially conservative advocacy groups (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023) and its politicization of civil society (Bernhard, 2020; Greskovits, 2020), which leads to divisions translated into electoral gains (Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Our typology of illiberalisms examines the origins of discontent and manifestations of backlash directed at groups targeted by illiberal policies. While the political consequences of illiberalism in contemporary democracies are far-reaching and detrimental to democracy, this article focuses instead on understanding the intertwined social and political origins of illiberalism's exclusionary dimensions.



To understand its roots, we identify groups most frequently subjected to illiberal policies: women, migrants, Muslims, Jews, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Table 1 outlines the major differences between prejudicial, reactionary, and confessional illiberalisms. The grievances driving prejudicial illiberalism stem from emotional responses at the individual level. Reactionary illiberalism operates at the meso-level as it seeks to reverse the policy gains of the aspirational groups. In contrast, confessional illiberalism constitutes a revolt against the modern, secular state (Hanson & Kopstein, 2024). Its main goal is to integrate the state with intermediary advocacy groups and organizations shaped by religious values. Confessional illiberalism emerges through the alignment of state power with either formal religion or religiously inspired (un)civil society actors, all of which promote traditional views of the family tied to the national ingroup. Family becomes a politicized cornerstone of state identity, legitimizing the expansion of state-led regulatory frameworks in the realms of intimacy and reproduction. Through the fusion of state authority with religious and familial ideologies, confessional illiberalism consolidates political power and reshapes social norms to strengthen loyalty to the nation-state and reinforce the patriarchal authority of the national ingroup in private and public domains.

While confessional illiberalism is an epistemic rejection of modernity with the aspiration to return to the traditionalism of the nation's perceived heyday, prejudicial illiberalism manifests itself initially as a grievance at the individual level. It is fueled by personal hate that can escalate to mass resentment against minorities.

**Table 1.** Typology of three illiberalisms in Europe.

	Prejudicial	Reactionary	Confessional
<b>Origin of grievance</b>	Individual emotion	Programmatic policy shift	Episteme of a modern state
<b>Level of change</b>	Micro-level change in prejudicial views of individuals	Meso-level change in the balance of power between the dominant and the aspirational group	Macro-level change driven by efforts to undermine a secular state and fuse it with socially conservative advocacy groups and religious organizations
<b>Vehicles of change</b>	A mass party or a far-right movement party that weaponizes individual prejudice to forge mass resentment through scapegoating	Politicized advocacy for ethnic and sexual minorities leads to backlash against accommodative policies	Religious groups, advocacy groups, and uncivil society facilitate fusion with ruling parties that change the state
<b>Consequence</b>	Intimidation of targets by the hateful core of the far right, party-sponsored violence	Reversal of gains, reversal of minority rights, and accommodative policies	De-secularized state, new social contract, changes in regulatory frameworks of reproduction, sexuality, and minority protection, emphasis on "in-group" motherhood
<b>Illustrative cases</b>	National Socialist German Workers' Party and Alternative for Germany in Germany	Slovak National Party in Slovakia	Unity Party, Fidesz in Hungary; and National Fascist Party (PNF) and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy

The institutional perspective offers incisive analytical tools to pronounce democracy dead or dying (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019), swerving (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017), or re-democratizing (Bill & Stanley, 2025). However, institutional approaches to illiberalism, with their focus on elite-driven divisive politics, neglect the ideational roots of illiberal parties. Additionally, illiberal parties, especially in opposition, can co-exist in liberal democratic regimes without contributing to decay. Laruelle (2021) defines illiberalism as an ideology that is in a permanent situational relationship to liberalism. In her view, illiberalism is a reaction to a contemporary, lived-in experience of liberalism. Ideational approaches to illiberalism have the advantage of seeing linkages between illiberal actors across regimes and seemingly inconsequential power balances between liberals and illiberals within regimes.

Ideational approaches can detect the impact of illiberal transnational socially conservative networks, such as those associated with the European Center for Law and Justice that seek to unite the political influence of evangelicals in the US to Catholics in Europe and Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia (Kopecká, 2024). Within regimes, ideational approaches are better at assessing the buoyance of the breeding ground of illiberalism, for example by monitoring (un)civil society (Bernhard, 2020; Chambers & Kopstein, 2001).

We agree that illiberalism is an ideational backlash against liberalism in the cultural sphere and the political realm of minority protection, and at times is bundled with a revolt against neoliberal economic reforms. However, Enyedi's (2020) study of Orban's leadership underscores the need for viewing illiberalism both as an ideology *and* as a set of institutionally entrenched tools to stay in power, especially when it redefines the state and offers a new social contract between voters and leaders.

## **2. Definitional Boundaries of Confessional Illiberalism: Illiberalism, Fascism, and Populism**

Illiberalism, as an ideological rejection of recent experiences with liberalism, is thin and reactive (Laruelle, 2021). However, it also implies a rejection of liberal democratic values by states, civic organizations, parties, social movements, and ordinary people. The confessional variant of illiberalism can be understood with the help of a historical approach to learn about its appeal, formation, and endurance. While conceptually distinct from both fascism and populism, it represents a “thicker” variant of illiberalism.

The institutional embedding of confessional illiberalism draws its inspiration from inter-war fascism. However, it is less violent and, as it befits all illiberalisms, tends to derive legitimacy from elections, even if the playing field of party competition is tilted (de la Torre, 2025). Griffin and Feldman (2008, p. 42) define interwar fascism as a revolutionary form of populist ultranationalism premised on the myth of national rebirth, which aims to purge decadence: fascism opposed liberalism and was endorsed by church leadership to avert the dangers of Bolshevism.

Fascism and confessional illiberalism are reactive, as both emerged from discontent with the inefficiencies of (parliamentary) liberal democracy. Although historically liberalism as a political system was less hegemonic than today's liberalism, the rise of fascism responded to perceived and fabricated grievances, enacted minority oppression, and, to boost fertility and state loyalty, politicized families (Bosworth, 2007).

Violence is where confessional illiberalism and fascism depart. The militancy of fascism was enabled by the

atrocities of World War I, which rendered the killing of ethnic outgroups and religious minorities to facilitate national rebirth acceptable to the masses. Confessional illiberalism also seeks national rebirth, but through renewing traditional family structures and ingroup communitarianism. The rise of illiberalism coincides with the Covid-19 crisis, which brought two important changes. First, in setting vaccination priorities and the scope of shutdowns, states overtly determined deservingness of the vaccine and care. This broke the premise of liberal societies that all lives are equal. In doing so, states desensitized citizens to indirect state-sanctioned bodily harm through restrictions on care.

Second, as states closed schools and employees started to work from home, many found themselves at home with their children and partners. Closures elevated the power of families. Parenting became political when states shifted educational responsibilities mostly to mothers and empowered parents to intervene in schooling practices set by states. Economic and health crises enhanced the appeal of confessional illiberalism due to its emphasis on reciprocal obligations tied to homophily, communal bonds of national solidarity, and emphasis on traditional families as a primary unit to withstand hardship. For confessional illiberalism, the suppression of “decadent” lifestyles serves to restrict the ability of individuals, particularly women of childbearing age with career ambitions, to opt out of traditional roles and responsibilities, in the name of national preservation.

Is confessional illiberalism populist? The short answer is no. Populism presumes a direct, unmediated relationship between the leadership and the people (cf. Geva, 2024, p. 7). Confessional illiberalism is built around a synergistic triangle of the ruling party (in the ideal case), religious and conservative advocacy groups, and the people. Confessional illiberalism is closest to Enyedi’s (2024) concept of religious illiberalism, which challenges liberal democracy by building collective identification around religious dogmas and symbols. A transformative thick ideology of outgroup exclusion and ingroup growth in cohesion greases the fusion of the state with confessional advocacy groups.

However, illiberalism (without adjectives) and populism share common traits. They are both adaptive thin ideologies that need a thicker host ideology to survive. They both embrace majoritarianism as a disfiguration of democracy (Urbinati, 2014). While not inherently autocratic, illiberalism and populism often rely on elections to derive legitimacy, even when competition is only partially free and fair (de la Torre, 2025). Finally, illiberalism and populism, unlike fascism, do not worship war for national expansion but might selectively weaponize militant groups against target groups.

Populism primarily functions as a political style, pitting the disillusioned masses against a “corrupt” elite. Illiberalism, by contrast, serves as an ideological engine that underpins populist rhetoric. Unlike populism, which rhetorically unites the masses against elites, illiberalism fragments the public by targeting specific social groups rather than elite actors. Illiberalism is manifested through protectionist, chauvinistic, and exclusionary policies. While illiberalism at the state level is often a result of a top-down process of democratic erosion, we emphasize linkages between the state and both uncivil and civil society. Our analysis focuses on three levels: social groups strategically targeted by illiberal parties (at the micro-level), the responses and alignments of other parties (meso-level), and democratic outcomes (macro-level). Table 2 summarizes similarities and major distinctions between confessional illiberalism and other relevant “isms.”

Our typology of three forms of illiberalism draws on both ideational and strategic approaches. While we emphasize the ideational foundations of all three forms as well as identify the specific social groups that

to derive legitimacy, even when competition is only partially free and fair (de la Torre, 2025). Finally, illiberalism and populism, unlike fascism, do not worship war for national expansion but might selectively weaponize militant groups against target groups.

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Our typology of three forms of illiberalism draws on both ideational and strategic approaches. While we emphasize the ideational foundations of all three forms as well as identify the specific social groups that they target, we also examine the strategic alliances forged between illiberal leaders and societal actors. These alliances explain the persistence and entrenchment of illiberalism(s) as well as their varying propensities to inflict democratic decay. By integrating three levels of analysis—the state, the party, and the people—we provide an account of the origins, mechanisms, and democratic implications of illiberalism(s), assessing threats to liberal democratic principles.

**Table 2.** Confessional illiberalism and other “-isms.”

	Confessional Illiberalism	
	Similarities	Differences
<b>Populism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thin ideology</li> <li>• Majoritarianism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct linkage between leaders and the masses is not necessary</li> <li>• Leaders claim moral authority</li> <li>• Forms deliberate linkages with intermediary non-state organizations</li> </ul>
<b>Fascism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communitarianism</li> <li>• Ingroup motherhood</li> <li>• Ingroup redemption</li> <li>• Linkages with (un)civil organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-revolutionary, but seeks a new social contract</li> <li>• Revisionist approach to support heteronormative hierarchies and families</li> <li>• Non-violent, yet uses intimidation</li> <li>• Linkages formed to shape public opinion and to steer support for policy</li> </ul>
<b>Nationalism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exclusionary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of religious rhetoric and religious symbols as a political strategy to subdue political opposition and justify changes in policy</li> <li>• No ethnic foundation, but uses religious rhetoric and symbolism to delineate the boundaries of the nation</li> </ul>
<b>Authoritarianism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undercuts free and fair elections as needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Derives legitimacy from elections, even if measures are taken to weaken procedural legitimacy</li> <li>• Derives moral legitimacy from religious symbolism</li> </ul>

perceived, enabled the Nazi party to scapegoat economic and cultural groups, fueling its ascent. The NSDAP consolidated power by altering democratic institutions as they channeled scapegoating propaganda through media and education (Koonz, 2005; Lewy, 2001; Steinweis, 2008; Voigtländer & Voth, 2015, pp. 7935 and Appendix 8).

Political sociologists relying on prior work by historians pioneered theories of how hateful illiberal ideologies spread beyond a core group of ideologues in prewar Nazi Germany. The NSDAP mobilized disillusioned voters across demographics through civil networks, channeling resentment against the Weimar regime into scapegoating ideologies (Berman, 1997; Brustein, 1996; Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, pp. 845–848; Hamilton, 1982; Riley, 2010; Satyanath et al., 2017). The NSDAP’s “hate groups are the ideological nurseries of ideas that can form the core of much more pernicious larger associations”; they attract both nationalist ideologues and sway disaffected ingroup members (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, p. 844).

Meanwhile, political scientists highlight the governing conservatives’ failure to neutralize Hitler’s far-right faction (Ziblatt, 2017). Hamilton (1982) and Berman (2019) link hate, resentment, and elite miscalculations, showing how the NSDAP exploited antisemitism while capitalizing on economic downturns and political failures (Berman, 2019). In other words, the convergence of factors—resentment fueled by macro-level conditions and the organizational failures of dominant political parties—was crucial in facilitating the rise of the NSDAP.

### 3.2. *AfD*

Today, prejudicial illiberal parties, particularly in Germany, are constrained by domestic and international democratic safeguards (Capoccia, 2013, p. 211). However, as Ziblatt (2017) and Berman (2019) observe, these parties exploit societal fractures marked by resentment and risk to gain influence (Betz, 2023, pp. 61–64; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). The NSDAP and AfD’s years of bottom-up mobilization before achieving large-scale parliamentary gains underscore the essential groundwork these parties must lay before ascending to power. During this period, widespread resentment toward economic and cultural shifts facilitated the parties’ alignment with hate-driven movements, amplifying grievances and normalizing exclusion as a precursor to political power (Valentim, 2024).

In the 2025 German federal election, the AfD achieved a historic breakthrough, securing 20.8% of the vote and becoming the second-largest party in the Bundestag. This grants the AfD substantial legislative influence with the potential to reshape Germany’s political landscape to further propagate exclusionary policies (not just narratives) by normalizing far-right nativist views within mainstream politics. The party’s rhetoric, which frames racialized migrants, Jews, Romani, and other marginalized groups as threats to European, not just German, identity, has been linked to a rise in xenophobic and antisemitic violence (Dancygier, 2023).

### 3.3. *Targets of Prejudice-Based Illiberal Parties: Migrants, Jews, and Romani*

Antisemitism is an ideology rooted in conspiratorial narratives of Jewish power; its usually insidious hate is targeted at Jews, an ethno-religious group racialized in the 19th century by European nationalist socialists. While the content of the messaging adapts to the context, antisemitism, or Jew-hate (*Judenhass*), is derived

from the conspiracy theory that Jews control the state. In contrast, racism is based on the conspiracy theory and fear that racial outgroups burden the state and its resources. Overt scapegoating narratives generalize to groups that pose a threat to the nativist vision of prejudicial illiberal parties, with economic concerns often veiling prejudicial and exclusionary rhetoric and policy. The AfD has made anti-immigration policy central to its platform, depicting migrants as economic burdens and an existential threat to German, though not Judeo-Christian culture, even in areas with low migration rates (Entorf & Lange, 2023; Wagner et al., 2020). During the 2015 migrant crisis, the 2013-founded AfD profited from the economic and cultural scapegoating of migrants as it rose to prominence, eventually becoming mainstream during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dilling, 2018; Volk & Weisskircher, 2024). The party portrays migrants as criminals and invaders, echoing the antisemitic conspiracy of cultural Bolshevism (*Kulturbolschewismus*) peddled during Nazi Germany.

Despite Germany's legal protections against antisemitism, the AfD manipulates Nazi memory for political gain, fostering an environment where hate and violence against outgroups thrive (Dancygier, 2023; Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024; Entorf & Lange, 2023). In the rare cases where the party acknowledges German culpability for World War II, this admission serves to excuse its antisemitism to justify anti-immigration policies for the sake of curbing "imported" antisemitism, another instance of scapegoating (Dilling & Krawatzek, 2024, p. 1310).

Prejudicial illiberal parties perpetuate stereotypes and scapegoats to embolden and justify far-right illiberal ideologies, where rights are earned, not given. This contributes to increased violence by far-right networks, including neo-Nazi groups, which the AfD tacitly enables (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Klikauer, 2019, p. 244; Volk & Weisskircher, 2024). Although migration patterns have shifted since the pre-war era, long-established communities like the Romani remain targets, as the AfD portrays them as welfare abusers and criminals, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes with historic roots (Geva, 2024, p. 19). In short, the AfD, often through affiliated hate groups, spreads conspiratorial narratives portraying Jews as state puppeteers, Romani as societal leeches, and migrants as cultural interlopers, reinforcing long-standing stereotypes about the burdens and controllers of the state, which turn economic and social anxieties into prejudicial resentment.

#### 4. Reactionary Illiberalism: Policy Backlash

Reactionary illiberalism is a form of policy backlash that seeks to reverse gains of ascending minorities via programmatic policy contestation. The aspirational ascent of groups, driven by policy changes enacted by mainstream parties, often in coalitions with progressive and ethnic parties, creates an "extreme reaction" and impetus to reverse gains (Bustikova, 2020). This form of illiberalism is reactionary because it targets specific groups—ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, career-driven women, refugees, guest workers, and religious minorities. These real or imagined grievances stem from changes in the *policy* landscape (Bustikova, 2020; Dancygier, 2010).

In a comparative study of post-communist democracies, Bustikova (2020) demonstrates that contestation over language rights and the expansion of ethnic minority rights fuel radical right mobilization. Similarly, in Latin America, the rise of the far right can be understood as a socially conservative backlash triggered by "the shift in the status quo concerning majority-minority relations...linked to issues of gender and sexual identity" (Kaltwasser et al., 2024, p. 11). In the US, affirmative action policies and executive orders aimed at improving the standing of undocumented children of migrants have been linked to policy backlash against the Obama

administration and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Major et al., 2016; Mutz, 2018).

Reactionary illiberalism is flimsy; it waxes and wanes with accommodation and, paradoxically, when rights are reversed, it can subside. It is not rooted in a particular cleavage structure or responsive to articulations, prejudice, or structural grievances. It is facilitated by the ability of (mostly) small groups to engage in collective action for policy concessions from the state and the majority. As such, the presence of small minority groups and the political advocates who fight on their behalf fuel reactionary illiberalism.

Reactionary illiberalism is derived from programmatic competition between parties that anchor policy “extremes” on both sides of the political spectrum, such as far-right parties and ethnic parties, or progressive parties that advocate for expanding minority rights of ethnic and sexual groups, including gender. Competition over policy in the identity domain, such as migration policies, welfare allocations to asylum seekers, or regulations of minority instruction in schools, requires the administrative capacity to expand and shrink public goods provision. Reactionary illiberalism ideally resides in a party system based on programmatic competition (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018) over policies that regulate majority–minority relations. This is important given that policy backlash, more than prejudice, has been shown to drive far-right voting (Rydgren, 2008).

One example of a reactionary illiberal party is the Slovak National Party (SNS), established in 1871, one of Europe’s most electorally successful far-right parties and the oldest party in Slovakia. It served in six governing coalitions with the aim of curbing the rights of the Hungarian ethnic minority. This exemplifies the logic of the policy backlash. The SNS spearheaded restrictive language laws, policies, and regulatory measures in the 1990s and early 2000s that reduced funds for the schooling of Hungarian children and imposed fines on the usage of the Hungarian language in public domains.

The SNS’s direct competitor was the party that defended the rights and aspirations of the Hungarian minority. As the political representatives in parliament and governments pushed for more rights for the Hungarians, the SNS was ready to reverse those gains at every window of opportunity, especially when they became junior partners in governing coalitions. Pushback against the expansion of rights, not prejudice towards the Hungarian minority, was the driving force of contestation. Bustikova (2020) has shown that the voters of the SNS were no more or less prejudicial towards Hungarians, an ethnic minority with formidable political backing, than voters of other parties. What distinguished their voters was an opposition to the expansion of Hungarian language rights and the political assertiveness of a small ethnic group that comprises about 8% of the Slovak population.

After Slovakia gained independence in 1993, Slovak identity politics oscillated between these two poles, nationalists and advocates for outgroup Hungarians, until the elections of 2016. Then, Prime Minister Fico emerged weaker than expected from the elections and was forced to form a coalition with both the SNS and representatives of the ethnic Hungarian party. Competitive language wars between the two parties ceased for an extended period. The status quo was broken in November 2024, when the SNS, yet again a coalition partner of Fico, but without the Hungarian party, resurrected the issue of language rights and proposed laws to (yet again) impose steep fines on using the Hungarian language in the public domain (Szalay, 2024).

These efforts are not driven by the surge of anti-Hungarian sentiments but represent an effort of the SNS to



revamp its appeal in the face of declining vote shares. Voters over the years have signaled a preference for independent candidates running on the SNS party list and for more extreme groups advocating to suppress the rights of the Hungarian minority. Therefore, the seemingly calm status quo between the Hungarian minority party and the Slovak majority party that was in place between 2016 and 2024 has been disrupted by the electoral calculus of SNS, aiming to return to its glory days marked by incessant language law wars and reliable vote shares.

## 5. Confessional Illiberalism

Reactionary illiberalism emerges as a policy-driven response to processes of liberalization. In contrast, a characteristic of confessional illiberalism is its fusion of religious authority with party politics (Geva, 2024). Whereas prejudice-based illiberalism mobilizes from below through scapegoating narratives, and reactionary illiberalism advances programmatic policies from above, confessional illiberal parties leverage religious and civil organizations to mediate state-society relations (Greskovits, 2020; Grzymala-Busse, 2016; Wittenberg, 2006).

Confessional illiberalism derives its ideological foundation from a strategic alliance between religious organizations and political parties—an alliance that may or may not have risen to power through reactionary means. While many confessionally illiberal parties advance seemingly progressive social policy, the ideological or functional fusion of religion and party politics necessarily denies certain social groups the agency and autonomy afforded to others. The rejection of liberalism results in policies that institutionalize and deepen political inequalities, privileging Christian versus “non-Christian” values, heterosexuality versus homosexuality, and traditional gender roles versus women’s autonomy.

Confessional illiberal parties in the interwar period targeted ethno-religious minorities—including Jews and Roma—through legal restrictions on education, civil marriage, and military enrollment. In addition to religious outgroups, these parties also sought to suppress leftist political factions associated with the working class, such as socialists, communists, and Christian socialists (Pollard, 2007, pp. 437–439). In contemporary politics, the resurgence of confessional illiberalism has primarily targeted the exclusion of ethno-religious groups such as Arab Muslims and Jews, and groups that threaten natalist policy, such as working women and LGBTQ+ communities.

Contemporary confessional illiberal parties mirror some of their interwar fascist predecessors, particularly in their strategic alignment with religion. The illustrative cases of the Italian PNF after 1929 and Hungary under the Unity Party (Egységes Párt) illustrate the mechanisms through which political elites co-opt religion for political gains. The alliance is rarely driven by genuine theological commitment. Instead, it is a calculated political strategy designed to unify a diverse (Christian) ingroup under an illiberal and nationalist framework. Through forging alliances with organizations rooted in moral authority, confessionally illiberal parties effectively mobilize support while reinforcing exclusionary illiberal policy.

### 5.1. PNF: A Strategic Alliance Between an Ideological Church and an Opportunistic Party

Starting in the late 1920s, institutionalized through the 1929 Lateran Accords, Benito Mussolini’s PNF pursued a strategic alliance with the Catholic Church. Despite tensions between Mussolini and Pope Pius XI,



both opposed parliamentary liberalism, the appropriation of Church property (capitalism), and “godless” communism. The Church’s accommodation of the PNF became central to fascist consolidation, even as tensions boiled between Mussolini and the Church.

#### 5.1.1. Cause for the Alliance: Shared Enemies

During the interwar period, Christian organizations—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—aligned with illiberal parties, including fascist movements, mainly in reaction to parliamentarization and liberalism, which they saw as fostering secularism (Pollard, 2007, p. 434). In Italy, the Catholic Church viewed liberal democracy as hostile to Christian traditions, while both Mussolini’s PNF and the Church feared communism. To the PNF, liberalism and communism threatened political stability; for the Church, Soviet-style atheism and secular reforms—such as divorce, abortion, and decriminalized homosexuality—undermined its moral authority (Stehle, 1982).

Despite Pope Pius XI’s wariness of Mussolini and Mussolini’s distaste for religion, the Church–Party alliance formed out of the need to suppress shared enemies (Webster, 1961). Yet, while the Church’s support for the PNF was ideological, the PNF’s support of the Church was strategic. Following the Lateran Accords, many Catholic People’s Party members joined the PNF, eliminating the remaining clerical opposition (Pollard, 2007, p. 436). The Church backed PNF policies, including its answer for “heartless capitalism”—corporatism—and its pronatalist policies implemented during the “Battle for Births” (1925–1938; De Grand, 1976, p. 957; Lyttelton, 2004; Pollard, 2007, p. 436). Though tensions persisted as evidenced by Pope Pius XI’s 1931 critique of Mussolini’s nationalist (over Catholic) implementation of corporatism, the alliance endured, bound not through mutual admiration but by linkages forged through shared enemies (Pollard, 2007, p. 172).

### 5.2. *The Hungarian Case: A Pluralist, yet Christian, Society*

Like Italy, interwar Hungary was deeply religious, but unlike Italy, it was far from homogenously Catholic; two-thirds of the population identified as Catholic, while about 25% belonged to organized Protestant churches (Fazekas, 2004, p. 163). Despite its religious diversity, the ruling Unity Party (*Egységes Párt*) allied with organized Christianity, leveraging religious linkages to mobilize and consolidate power.

#### 5.2.1. Causes Behind the Alliance: Christian Nationalism

Hungary, though nominally democratic, functioned as an autocracy under regent Miklós Horthy and the governing Unity Party. The party capitalized on disillusionment with the parliamentary liberalism of the Dualist period (1867–1918), socialism, and communism, particularly after the Treaty of Trianon and the brief 133-day communist regime of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919). It framed Hungary’s territorial losses and decline as the result of “godless” ideologies that disrupted the nation’s traditional social order (Fazekas, 2004, p. 162). This narrative, which continued from the pre-war period, positioned the Unity Party as the defender of Hungary’s Christian and cultural heritage, lionizing motherhood and framing rampant issues of infant mortality, venereal disease, and abortions as issues of national survival in the face of diversity (Gál, 2023; Svégel, 2023).

Unlike the PNF, the Unity Party did not privilege a single denomination through a formal institutional alliance. Instead, it selectively and rhetorically embraced Christian identity as the foundation of Hungarian nationalism.

The party:

Favoured agrarian over urban interests [without any land reform or state-led liberalization] and was coloured by an antisemitism that derived primarily from its religious and moral views. Its tendency to exclude was manifested by the common use of the adjective “Christian.” This ideology did not seek so much to determine who was a Christian as to determine who was not. (Fazekas, 2004, p. 164)

The party mobilized support for the regime through activating linkages established by Hungary’s vast network of churches, mirroring the post-World War II Christian Democratic movements elsewhere (Kalyvas, 1996; Lorwin, 1971; van Kersbergen, 2003; see also Wittenberg, 2006). For religious organizations, the embrace of confessional illiberalism offered a chance to regain authority lost during the secular reforms of the Dualist period and following the collapse of the Christian Socialist movement. While Christian Socialists promoted social and economic reforms, Unity’s emphasis on traditional hierarchies and chauvinistic nationalism resonated more broadly (Fazekas, 2004, p. 165; Halevy, 2024). Catholic and Protestant organizations set aside theological differences in favour of a shared nationalist agenda, prioritizing national identity over religious doctrine. Confessional illiberalism enabled the party to harness the Church’s moral authority and organizational linkages to everyday people, securing support from Hungary’s conservative rural electorate amid rising electoral competition while concealing “the class dictatorship” of the regime (Kardos, 1967, p. 444).

### **5.3. Targets of Confessional Illiberalism**

In the interwar period, confessional illiberal parties targeted socialists, Romani, Jews, and other national minorities while promoting pronatalist policies. Party alliances with religious organizations legitimized exclusionary policies against perceived outgroups (Finke et al., 2017). Before examining how the policies of confessional illiberal parties target specific groups, we distinguish the relevance of the mechanisms unearthed from the historical cases to contemporary politics. In Italy and Hungary, nationalist parties successfully aligned with religion in the absence of democracy following a period of liberalization.

Today, confessional illiberal parties initially maintain alliances with religion within democratic frameworks and can use these linkages to subvert democratic norms and institutions after rising to power through democratic means (Kövér, 2015; Scheppele, 2022). Yet, we argue that the conceptual targets of confessional illiberalism remain consistent despite shifting demographics in Europe due to migration from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. These targets fall into two non-mutually exclusive categories: those who challenge the “Christian” homogeneity of the nation and those who threaten traditional family norms.

#### **5.3.1. Historical Exclusion: Racialization of an Ethnic Group**

As evidenced by the Hungarian and Italian cases, confessional ideas can be activated by illiberal opportunistic parties in the absence of parties’ ideological convictions to religious nativism. Historically, Jews were the primary targets as the largest politicized religious outgroup in much of Europe, particularly as racial antisemitism gained momentum in the 19th century. Today, Muslim migrants and other religious minorities, especially non-white ethno-religious minorities, face exclusionary policies under modern confessional illiberal regimes.

In Italy, the PNF did not initially target Jews. However, after the 1938 Racial Laws (Leggi Razziali) and the Manifesto of Race (Manifesto della Razza), Jews were stripped of citizenship, banned from intermarriage, public schools, the armed forces, and public employment (Livingston, 2014, p. 2). While the Catholic Church initially opposed racial antisemitism, it later justified discriminatory laws as protecting Italy's Catholic culture (Pollard, 2007, p. 438). Antisemitism was not originally central to PNF policy but became integral once the party fully aligned with the Church in defense of Italy's Catholic *and* national identity (Pollard, 2007, p. 438). This religious alliance weakened the dependence on the PNF's civil infrastructure, which initially integrated Italy's Jewish communities in support of the PNF (Pollard, 2007, p. 438).

On the other hand, Hungary was the first interwar European state to impose Jewish quotas in higher education, enacting *numerus clausus* in 1920, prior to the formation of the Unity Party (Kovács, 2023). Public and professional organizations followed, yet only after the regime "politicized religion" to build "a nation" (Turbucz, 2023). By the late 1930s, Jews and later Romani populations faced restrictions from schools, the military, unions, and cooperatives, all under the pretense of preserving Hungary's Christian identity (Patai, 1996, pp. 544–547).

Initially, the Unity Party embraced aspects of racial antisemitism but distanced itself from the idea's source, German National Socialism, by 1933. However, the Great Depression and the lackluster success of austerity measures strengthened fascist factions within the party and with it racial Jew-hate in sectors both dominated by the Jewish middle class (industry) and devoid of Jews (agriculture).

Unlike in Italy, far-right representatives of various Christian denominations in the party, not the Church, led the push for antisemitic laws, citing Christianity as a defining characteristic of the Hungarian nation-state (Kovács, 2023, pp. 24, 82–84; Patai, 1996, p. 545). Despite Miklós Horthy's antisemitism, he initially delayed exclusion due to economic reliance on Jewish communities. In an October 14, 1940, letter, he admitted:

As regards the Jewish problem, I have been an anti-Semite throughout my life....However, since one of the most essential tasks of the government is to raise the standard of living...it is impossible, in a year or two, to replace the Jews....This requires a generation at least. (Patai, 1996, p. 546)

In 1938, the First Jewish Law capped Jewish participation in commercial trade, medicine, engineering, law, and the press at 20% following mobilization from student groups and professional associations (Ungváry, 2012). The Second Jewish Law (1939) further reduced it to 6%, defining "Jew" by racial criteria, thereby extending restrictions to converts and those of partial Jewish descent (Kovács, 2023). Political expediency ultimately overrode economic concerns, aligning Hungary's policies with fascist and Nazi racial exclusion, all in the name of maintaining the homogeneity of Hungary as "Christian."

In other words, the transition from clerical Jew-hate to racial antisemitism was not driven by international National Socialist alliances, but by the activation of religious linkages by either party-affiliated associations (Italy) or non-party-affiliated associations (Hungary), as they aligned with the party's nationalist interests.

#### 5.4. Modern Confessional Illiberalism: Exclusion of Muslims and Misuse of Philosemitism

Confessional illiberal parties in contemporary Europe strategically weaponize religion to justify exclusionary policies. Due to historical reasons, Jews no longer comprise the second-largest ethno-religious outgroup in Europe, and therefore, these policies are mainly targeted at racialized Arab and Black Muslim migrants. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán frames the Fidesz government as the defender of “Christian Europe,” using this rhetoric to implement strict, yet selective, anti-migrant policies (Kövér, 2015, p. 142). Orbán’s education policy further *de facto* deters the integration of migrants from religious outgroups (Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education), mirroring interwar Hungary’s use of Christianity as an exclusionary nationalist marker in policy domains. The use of religious doctrine for exclusionary purposes results in the exclusion of more than just racialized migrants, but religious outgroups at large. Brubaker (2017, pp. 1193–1194, 1198) argues that far-right parties in Northern and Western Europe adopt philosemitism as a rhetorical tool against Islam, selectively activating liberal values such as women’s and LGBTQ+ rights, to justify exclusion (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1202). Philosemitism tokenizes Jews, reinforcing rather than countering antisemitism (Kowner et al., 2023, p. 117). It also mischaracterizes similarities between Jewish and Islamic traditions, both of which face exclusion under Christian-inspired policies in the long run.

Unlike Orbán’s autocratic Fidesz, Italy’s ruling party, Fratelli d’Italia (Fdi), can be classified as a democratic confessional illiberal party—not necessarily undemocratic, but operating within democratic frameworks while selectively and rhetorically embracing Christian identity as the basis of Italian nationalism. It leverages its alliance with religious authority to gradually subvert liberal democratic norms as it redefines the boundaries of Italian national identity through rhetoric and exclusionary policy. Unlike Fidesz, the Fdi has yet to subvert democratic institutions, though it must be highlighted that Orbán’s autocratization was initially procedurally democratic and enabled by winning a super-majority in 2010, partially due to the mobilization of Christian Civic Circles (Greskovits, 2020).

To secure power, Orbán consolidated party politics on the political *and* religious right. The ruling party, Fidesz, subsumed its early coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People’s Party (Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt). The Christian Democratic People’s Party, which has not been able to pass the electoral threshold without an electoral coalition since 1994, once embraced the interwar variations of political Catholicism, yet today its presence in politics is purely symbolic and an ode to the Christian nature of the governing Fidesz party. Yet, under Orbán, Fidesz’s linkages with organizations do not stop with defunct parties. Orbán, a political Christian governing one of the least religious countries in Europe with only 17% church attendance (Mitchell, 2018), is supported and financially supports conservative policy think tanks such as the Danube Institute and the Századvég Foundation.

In its mission statement, the Danube Institute writes that it “has been committed from its foundation to three philosophical loyalties: a respectful conservatism in cultural, *religious*, and social life, the broad classical liberal tradition in economics, and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy” (Danube Institute, n.d., emphasis added). These think tanks discuss little theology and instead, like in the interwar period, religion is used as a tool of legitimization and as an exclusionary marker; it does “not seek so much to determine who was a Christian as to determine who was not” (Fazekas, 2004, p. 164).

As the absorption of the Hungarian Christian Democrats illustrates, the electoral success of confessional illiberalism is also determined by the presence or absence of moderate conservative parties in the political system and whether they collude, are absorbed, or compete with an illiberal confessional party. Elite commitment to democracy is key. As Weitz (2024, p. 158) teaches us:

Hitler and the Nazis were saved from oblivion by a small clique of powerful men around President Hindenburg....This deal marked the ultimate alliance of the traditional and radical right. The traditionalists shared with the Nazis a visceral hatred, not just of Socialism and Communism, but of democracy itself. They both wanted to destroy the left and rebuild Germany's great power status.

As we show above, autocratization and confessional illiberalism are related but conceptually distinct (Table 2). Fdl seeks to reinforce Christian cultural dominance through restrictive and punitive immigration policies and by introducing policy measures that limit Islamic religious practices, such as tightening bureaucratic barriers to the construction of mosques and Islamic cultural centers. In 2023, following the closure of a Milan school for Eid al-Fitr, accommodating 40% of its student body, Fdl proposed legislation restricting non-Christian holidays in schools, and Fdl Senator La Russa defended the proposal to uphold “majority” Christian traditions. European confessional illiberal parties are rhetorically religious while fundamentally nationalist, using Christianity as a veneer to justify policies that disproportionately target and tokenize racialized ethno-religious outgroups (though the elements of these groups change through time). Their alliances with religion are opportunistic and socially conservative (Geva, 2024) yet lack a genuine theological commitment.

Like Weitz (2024), we expect that competitive pressures from moderate-right-wing parties or pro-democratic Christian democratic parties will likely curb the ability of confessional illiberal parties to lock in realignment and accelerate democratic decay. A large body of literature shows that an open electoral system with a garden variety of right-wing parties paired with an elite commitment to democracy can diffuse and tame extremism (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Kalyvas, 1996; Minkenberg, 2002; Ziblatt, 2017).

#### 5.4.1. Pronatalism: The War on Reproductive Rights and the LGBTQ+ Community

The reconstruction of post-war Europe was a natalist nationalist project; the “sovereignty of the nation was symbolically located in women’s bodies and in the bodies of children” (Zahra, 2011, p. 334). Contemporary nationalist parties are less overt than their fascist predecessors, who experimented with programs like Mussolini’s “Battle for Births,” but promote similar goals under the guise of Christian values packaged with confessional illiberalism. Women and sexual minorities remain key targets of modern confessional illiberal parties’ pronatalist agendas.

Parties like Hungary’s Fidesz and Italy’s Fdl use family policy to enforce traditional, heterosexual norms in the name of a Christian Hungary or Catholic Italy. As Sata (2023) shows, Viktor Orbán’s rhetoric increasingly centers on women’s reproductive roles, invoking 19th-century social conservatism to contest gender equality. Since 2015, Christianity has been reframed from a symbol of Hungarian cultural identity to a racialized marker, aligned with “replacement” theories that depict migrants as demographic as well as cultural threats. In this context, pronatalist measures—such as lifelong tax exemptions for women with four or more children, large forgivable loans, and vehicle subsidies for heterosexual couples—reinforce a narrow Christian family model (Geva, 2024, p. 16; Serdült, 2019, p. 12).

In April 2024, the Italian parliament approved legislation allowing anti-abortion groups' access to abortion facilities to discourage women from terminating pregnancies. This move aligns with broader efforts to reinforce traditional gender roles and restrict reproductive autonomy. Both governments have also introduced anti-transgender legislation. In 2020, Hungary banned legal gender recognition by requiring gender to be fixed at birth in official documents, creating institutional barriers to access for transgender individuals (Amnesty International, 2020). In 2021, Hungary passed a law modeled on Russia's 2013 legislation, restricting the depiction of LGBTQ+ identities in educational materials and media accessible to minors (Geva, 2024, p. 16). The Fdi under Giorgia Meloni has similarly targeted LGBTQ+ families, including bans on parental recognition for same-sex couples and restrictions on overseas adoption and surrogacy. These policies idealize a narrow, heteronormative family model and form part of a broader strategy to shape a culturally homogeneous national identity.

In the postwar and especially post-Communist eras, churches in Hungary and Italy lost the mass mobilizing power they once held, and cultural identity eclipsed religious faith amid declining religiosity. Yet, the strategic alliance between organized religion and nationalist parties has allowed confessional illiberal actors to translate cultural conservatism into law through legal and parental advocacy groups, shaping the nation through the construction of "the right kind of" family in the name of the Christian nation.

## 6. Conclusion

This article defines confessional illiberalism in relation to two other illiberalisms, all ideal types: prejudicial and reactionary. Prejudicial illiberalism originates in individual-level resentment, reactionary illiberalism in policy backlash, and confessional illiberalism in epistemic revolt against modernity. Pronatalist policies, state endorsement of traditional family values, and heteronormative sexuality geared towards protecting the ingroup Christian nation are defining features of confessional illiberalism—a model of governance that merges the state with illiberal socially conservative parties, religiously infused advocacy networks, churches, and affiliated organizations.

While its historical roots trace back to interwar fascism, confessional illiberalism is less overtly violent and militant. Rather than pursuing national rebirth in the fascist sense, it is primarily concerned with the numerical preservation of the nation through ingroup birth and outgroup expulsion, in response to post-World War II fertility declines.

In the interwar period, religion became a powerful ally of illiberal parties that seized states. Confessional illiberalism is not based on religious theology. Rather, religious rhetoric serves as a strategic political instrument that rests on a fusion of religious and party interests to promote a thick ideology rooted in moral, spiritual, and national belonging. Unlike in the past, it does not require the cooperation of religious leadership. Confessional linkages are formed between political parties and intermediary actors, such as advocacy groups and (un)civil society organizations, with religious rhetoric employed as a strategic instrument of political mobilization.

Confessional illiberalism exhibits several ideological affinities with fascism, including a rejection of modernity, an opposition to Karl Popper's principle of scientific falsifiability, and a disdain for lifestyles perceived as decadent. Like fascism, it repudiates the modern secular and liberal state (Hanson & Kopstein, 2024). Despite differences, both confessional illiberalism and fascism are driven by a vision of national

rejuvenation, framed in contemporary discourse as a promise to make the nation “great again.” This hinges on conserving traditional family roles through the deliberate commitment to increase fertility rates of the national ingroup, while excluding racialized ethno-religious groups from national membership.

Whereas fascism openly embraced authoritarianism, contemporary illiberalism seeks to legitimize itself through ostensibly democratic processes while manipulating representative institutions. Elections play a pivotal role in illiberal regimes; however, short electoral cycles threaten a long-term conservative agenda. Illiberal parties’ fear of being ousted can lead to electoral manipulation and autocratization. To entrench confessional illiberalism, ruling parties, with the help of advocacy groups, overhaul reproductive regulatory frameworks and policy that eventually alter personal preferences about child-rearing and motherhood as communal obligations and commitment to national growth. When hearts change, minds follow at the ballot box (Green et al., 2004).

Confessional illiberalism molds policies to form a polity. It construes a homogenous and exclusionary national identity grounded in traditional religious narratives, supported by intermediary religious (un)civil organizations. An important distinction with nationalism is the strategic use of religious rhetoric and symbols to delineate the nation’s boundaries to exclude political adversaries. Nationalist mobilization demarcates ethnic boundaries (for a discussion, see Mylonas & Tudor, 2023, pp. 6–7). Confessional illiberalism, a form of religious nationalism (Gorski, 2022), targets ethno-religious minorities *but also* women and LGBTQ+ groups through exclusionary legal frameworks. The cornerstone of confessional illiberalism is a regulation of reproduction as a physical foundation of the “Christian” nation.



Confessional illiberalism has a global appeal that rests on offering a longstanding social contract that upholds state support for ingroup traditional heterosexual families and asserts moral authority. Confessional illiberal parties today form more institutionalized “alliances” not with religion but with religious civil organizations through vehicles such as industry-funded religious lobbying groups and legal advocacy organizations (Wuest & Last, 2024). Some of these organizations coordinate activities via transnational advocacy networks that offer scripts to parties to instill elements of illiberalism globally. Socially conservative activists without borders also offer guidelines and templates to embed conservative policies into the regulatory and legislative frameworks (Bustikova & Guasti, 2024; Curanović, 2021; Desperak, 2023; Fábián & Korolczuk, 2017; Southworth, 2024).

State interventions in reproductive policies have long been a subject of political and ideological significance. For instance, Nazi Germany’s *Lebensborn* program was involved in the abduction of children with Aryan features from Eastern Europe to increase the population of Germany. In March 2025, President Donald Trump referred to himself as a “fertilization President” to celebrate Women’s History Month while promoting efforts to expand access to in vitro fertilization treatments (Sheth, 2025). Already in his first term as president, he reinforced the religious tint to his nationalism by elevating Paula White, a controversial televangelist and Christian nationalist, to a leadership role within the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Originally established in 2001 by President George W. Bush, the Faith Office was designed to facilitate collaboration between the government and religious or community organizations in addressing social issues.

Confessional illiberalism is strategic, not theocratic. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan strategically employs religion to consolidate political power, but he does not seek to transform the country into an Islamist state. Erdoğan’s primary objective is to preserve a conservative social order while suppressing the rights of minority groups, particularly the Kurds. Erdoğan has utilized Sunni Islam, the dominant sect among Turks, as a unifying force to strengthen the national ingroup (Karaveli, 2016). He has also leveraged this religious affiliation to justify actions aimed at curbing dissent, including cracking down on the media, altering education curricula to align with conservative values, and prosecuting political opponents.

Israel, a state that considers itself the only liberal democracy in the Middle East, has recently embraced a dangerous form of confessional illiberalism as Benjamin Netanyahu sought to form a governing coalition in 2022, amidst corruption charges and an impending trial. The coalition was formed not out of the religious convictions of either Netanyahu or his governing party, but the nationalist interests of the party and self-interest on behalf of its leader. Netanyahu’s party, Likud, aligned with far-right religious nationalist parties and ultra-Orthodox interests in 2022 in favor of continued state support for natalist policy, religious education, welfare (including child benefits), conscription exemptions to ultra-Orthodox, and subversions to the rule of law for the non-Jewish. Therefore, confessional illiberalism can thrive in various denominations. Further research that compares the manifestation of confessional illiberalism across regions and regimes is therefore warranted.

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## About the Authors



**Lotem Halevy** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Cluster of Excellence, “The Politics of Inequality,” at the University of Konstanz.



**Lenka Bušířková** is director of the Center for European Studies and Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She serves as the editor of *East European Politics* and as the editor of *Cambridge Elements: Politics and Society from Central Europe to Central Asia*.



# Legitimizing Illiberalism: The Construction of Civilizational Identity by the Justice and Development Party in Türkiye

Melek Aylin Özoflu <sup>1</sup>  and Giray Gerim <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of International Relations, Özyeğin University, Türkiye

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Political Sciences, İstanbul University, Türkiye

**Correspondence:** Melek Aylin Özoflu (melekaylinzoflu@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

Since its establishment, Türkiye has equated modernization with Westernization. However, following the second AKP victory in the June 2007 parliamentary elections, relations with the West began to deteriorate. In 2016, the illiberal turn taken by the government on the grounds that Türkiye was facing an existential threat after the failed coup attempt led to a serious rupture with Europe. The Turkish government began to counter criticism from Western actors by referring to historical antagonistic relations between the West and the East, signifying a firm estrangement from Western civilization. It highlighted Türkiye's differences from the West by making frequent references to the glorious past of the country, the collective memory of the Ottoman legacy, religious identity, and strong ties with the Islamic civilization. This study investigates AKP's increased emphasis on civilizational identity by utilizing a two-step methodological approach that combines textual analysis and critical discourse analysis applied to President Erdoğan's speeches. The time frame of the research covers the period between the June 2016 and May 2023 general elections. The study argues that AKP instrumentalizes civilizational discourse in its quest for legitimizing illiberal policies.

## Keywords

civilizational identity; illiberalism; Justice and Development Party; Türkiye

## 1. Introduction

Against the prevailing winds in favor of liberal democracy in the 1990s, Zakaria (1997) argued that democratic systems that were critical of the fundamental principles of constitutional liberalism, such as separation of powers, rule of law, and protection of basic liberties, were on the rise, saying, “Democracy is flourishing; constitutional liberalism is not” (p. 23). In the decades that followed, leaders at odds with the fundamental principles of liberal democracy came to power through electoral victories in many countries, and we witnessed liberal democracy losing its momentum (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Urbinati, 2019; Weinman & Vormann, 2021). The use of illiberal democracy as a positive concept by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2014 also signaled that a new threshold had been crossed (Nyyssönen & Metsälä, 2021). As a reflection of this, a large body of literature has emerged over the last two decades discussing the worldwide rise of illiberalism.

In his work that conducts a theoretical examination of the concept, Enyedi (2024) explains illiberalism as the negation of the three principles of liberal democracy, which he lists as limited power, a neutral state, and an open society, and states that there are different routes to illiberalism depending on how these three are promoted. We have also recently observed that populist and authoritarian leaders end up in illiberalism in most cases, and the literature has accordingly expanded with studies on the relationship between populism and illiberalism (Blokke, 2021; Pappas, 2019). However, since it is based on gaining and maintaining power by polarizing society into antagonistic groups and eliminating democratic compromise grounds, it has been argued that contemporary populism can be equated with democratic illiberalism, which emphasizes democracy in the sense of popular will but is critical of fundamental liberal democratic principles (Pappas, 2019).

In recent decades, populist and far-right politics in the Western world have produced a civilizational discourse that perceives other civilizations and cultures, especially Islam, as other and dangerous and has an emphasis on defending the “West” or “Christianity” (Brubaker, 2017; Cerrone, 2023). On the other hand, outside the West, incorporating religion and civilizational identities into politics, a variation of populism based on civilizational discourse has emerged (Shakil & I. Yilmaz, 2021; I. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023a). The discourses of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP), which has been in power in Türkiye since 2002, and its leader Erdoğan are also frequently the subject of debate in this context.

Although the democratization steps, that can be regarded as a continuation of the steps taken by previous governments towards EU membership, taken by the AKP governments (such as progress in negotiations with the EU, openings on the Kurdish question, and steps towards saving politics from military tutelage) were partially welcomed, Erdoğan was frequently criticized after this initial period due to his drift towards authoritarianism and illiberal tendencies. The AKP and its leader responded to these criticisms from the Western world, especially the EU and the USA, with increasingly harsher tones. Immediately after the failed coup attempt by the Gülenists, a former ally of the government, in July 2016, tensions with the West reached their peak. From this point on, references to the Islamic civilization and the West as its “enemy” became more salient in the discourse of the party and Erdoğan. All these developments have created a significant body of literature focusing on democratic backsliding and authoritarianism in Türkiye during the consecutive AKP governments. However, only a few of them focused on the interaction of the AKP’s civilizational discourse with the illiberal democracy it built in the country (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Çınar, 2018; Duran, 2013) and these were generally not based on empirical data. Therefore, this study aims to clarify how

civilizational and illiberal discourses interlink to foster democratic backsliding by conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) on a large corpus of Erdoğan's speeches between 2016–2023. In this way, it will uncover the relationship between the party's civilizational discourse and illiberalism and thus contribute to filling the gap in the relevant literature. Examining the discourses on civilizational identity and illiberalism empirically provides critical insights into democratic backsliding by revealing how rhetoric legitimizes actions that undermine democratic values and norms. This is achieved through appeals to “cultural essentialism,” “moral revival,” and a romanticized “golden past,” which reinforce exclusionary inter-group dynamics, undermine pluralism, and make illiberalism more compelling and resistant to accountability. Therefore, in this study, we conceptualize illiberalism as a discourse rather than solely as a set of practices or strategies, focusing on its embeddedness within the civilizational identity rhetoric. This approach allows us to uncover the rhetorical tools and mechanisms that sustain anti-democratic tendencies. The theoretical framework of civilizational identity, on the other hand, is preferred on the grounds that its ability to integrate historical, political, cultural, and ideological ethe and narratives into the study of illiberalism provides a wider framework for understanding how identity is constructed and utilized as a tool for legitimizing power and positioning political leaders' governance as part of a larger, almost existential, civilizational project.

Regarding the study's outline, the theoretical section, which draws on existing literature, examines the two central concepts—illiberalism and civilizational discourse—and discusses them in an interconnected manner. Background information on Turkish politics is given in the following section, with particular attention to the AKP's policies that changed from liberal to illiberal following the formation of the ruling party system. In the following section, the research methodology—which combines textual analysis and CDA—is explained, along with how it is used to illuminate the connection between illiberalism and civilizational discourse in the context of Türkiye. The results of the analysis are presented and discussed in depth in the last section.

## **2. A Theoretical Debate on the Relationship Between Civilizational Discourse and Illiberalism**

The backlash against the post-Cold War triumph of liberalism and globalization triggered by multiple crises led to the decline of Western appeal and liberal democratic ethos. Accordingly, illiberal practices and actors emerged where democratically (re)elected regimes suppressed their citizens' basic freedoms and human rights by overriding their constitutional rights (Zakaria, 1997). Through his differentiation between liberal democracy—as referring to the existence of free and fair elections—and constitutional liberalism—as referring to civil liberties, i.e., the existence of the rule of law, separation of powers, and freedom of speech, Zakaria (1997) suggests that these countries present a new species of democracy where liberal democracy is flourishing while constitutional liberalism is falling behind. He asserts that while liberal democracy and constitutional liberalism feed each other in the West, democracy and civil liberties hardly overlap in the countries subject to the third wave of democratization. As a result, democracy without constitutional liberalism generates centralized regimes where civil liberties are eroded or oppressed. Moreover, political leaders in these regimes show counter-hegemonic reactions to liberal civilizational standards and reject universal norms of liberalism (Çınar, 2020) through the construction of alternative civilizational imaginaries and cultural demonization (Sparke, 2020), which in turn generates the antagonism of the “West versus the rest.” Pappas (2019) proposes that characteristics of illiberal governance include adversarial politics, political polarization, majoritarianism, charismatic leadership, and restrictions on media freedom, rule of law, minority rights, and individual liberties (Pappas, 2019 as cited in Enyedi, 2024, p. 2).

It is in this context that civilizational discourse provides a ground for illiberal actors to articulate the nation-specific ethe of civilization imaginaries. These imaginaries include shared norms and values that accommodate a sense of ontological security constituting a collective identity. This, in turn, helps reject liberal civilized standards which empower alternative—non (fully) liberal—ways of governance in global politics (Bettiza et al., 2023). In this respect, civilizations are meaningful social constructs (Hale & Laruelle, 2021) that are fed from the stable holistic cultural and historical formation of common traditions, values, socio-political development, behavioral motivations, and lifestyle characteristics existing within a clear-cut geographical habitation (Volodin, 2022). Accordingly, civilizational identity discourses resonate with individuals by helping them locate the self in relation to others, make sense of the world, and establish boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (O'Hagan, 2007). Thus, they are employed to evaluate norms, practices, and values, thereby enhancing positive self-esteem vis-à-vis outgroups and establishing inter-group hierarchies at local, national, and global levels (O'Hagan, 2007).

In this regard, much of the critical work focuses on examining how civilizational identity is perceived, articulated, and imagined by the political elites (Katzenstein & Weygandt, 2017) in different case studies (Acharya, 2020) including India (Acharya, 2020; Chatterjee & Das, 2023; Mawdsley, 2023; Srivastava, 2023), China (Acharya, 2020; Katzenstein, 2013; Zhang, 2012), Türkiye (Acharya, 2020; Çınar, 2020; Duran, 2013), and Russia (Blackburn, 2021; Hale, 2019; Hale & Laruelle, 2020; Linde, 2016; Mezhuev, 2020; Naydenova, 2016; Pantin, 2009; Raskin, 2009; Tsygankov, 2016; Werning Rivera & Bryan, 2019).

On the other hand, very limited research investigates how illiberal political actors utilize civilizational imaginaries to unleash inter-group discrimination and hostility between the West and the East (Haynes, 2021b). Examples include European right-wing parties' securitization of migration and anti-Muslim rhetoric (Kaya & Tecmen, 2021; Stübner, 2021), Trump's anti-immigration stance during his presidential election campaigns (Acharya, 2020; Haynes, 2017, 2021a), the civilizational idea used by Putin to justify intervention in Ukraine (Lewicki, 2023), and Xi Jinping's anti-Western rhetoric in constructing China as a civilizational state (Bettiza et al., 2023; Egedy, 2021). While few studies have examined the interaction between the AKP's civilizational discourse and illiberalism, they have not been based on empirical data (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Çınar, 2018; Duran, 2013). Yet the multiple ways in which political actors make sense of world politics and define their social realities in civilizational terms can only be enlightened through discourse analysis and interpretation of the meaning-making processes and strategies (Bettiza, 2014). Thus, our research conducts CDA of President Erdoğan's speeches to investigate the interplay between the AKP's civilizational discourse and illiberalism and contributes to the burgeoning literature empirically.

For our case, we specifically focus on three dimensions of the above-mentioned characteristics of illiberalism, namely, adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and restriction on the rule of law and media freedom. This is because we argue that they are particularly salient in revealing how Erdoğan frames politics as a zero-sum conflict depicted as an existential struggle between "us" versus "others" (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2024), which closely aligns with adversarial politics. Majoritarianism, in return, further reinforces the adversarial politics by equating electoral majority with the national will, thereby dismissing the dissenting voices and providing the party a ground to legitimize its policies. Therefore, adversarial politics and majoritarianism are crucial in examining how civilizational identity is leveraged to consolidate power and delegitimize political rivals. Restriction on the rule of law and media freedom, on the other hand, complements these dimensions by allowing the government to put control over the dissemination of its

narratives, which heavily influences public perception and reinforces its civilizational rhetoric while suppressing counter-discourses. In sum, these dimensions capture the interplay between civilizational discourse and legitimization of illiberal policies, paving the way for democratic backsliding by severely decreasing the ground for pluralism and democratization, and curbing dissent.

### **3. Historical Background: Anti-Westernism, Illiberal Turn in Turkish Politics, and the AKP Governments**

Following a period of political instability and coalition governments that characterized the 1990s, Turkish politics underwent a significant transformation in the November 2002 elections, with all parties in the previous parliament failing to meet the election threshold (Ayan Musil, 2015). The AKP, established less than a year prior to the election, secured a solitary victory with 34.28% of the vote, while the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Partisi; CHP) emerged as the sole opposition party to enter parliament with 19.39%. The AKP would subsequently maintain its dominance in every ensuing general election. These electoral outcomes predominantly reflected a cleavage in Turkish politics, specifically the conservative–secular or center–periphery divide (Mardin, 2006; Özbudun, 2013), which became evident with the transition to multi-party politics. The AKP appealed to the conservative faction of this cleavage and dominated the center-right from 2002 onwards.

The newly established political party garnered predominantly favorable reactions both domestically and internationally during its inaugural two terms, attributed to the democratization measures undertaken within the context of full EU membership, the endeavor to mitigate institutional influences over civilian governance, and the cultivation of amicable relations with neighboring states and the Western bloc, which collectively contributed to this positive atmosphere (Lord, 2018). Nonetheless, substantial challenges and a profound power struggle emerged in the context of relations with military and judicial institutions, culminating in a closure case for the party in 2008. The party's triumph in the June 2011 elections, securing 49.83% of the electorate's votes, indicated a sustained level of public support. However, this success simultaneously engendered concerns regarding Türkiye's potential transition towards a dominant-party system. In this context, the relations with the EU also experienced deterioration, and as a consequence, Erdoğan's rhetoric increasingly characterized the Union as an "unwanted intruder" interfering in Türkiye's domestic matters (Aydın-Düzgit, 2016). Specific developments have been instrumental in fostering criticism of the government concerning authoritarian tendencies and democratic regression. Arguably, the foremost of these was the government's unyielding response to the Gezi Park protests, which commenced as an environmental initiative and escalated into widespread anti-government demonstrations due to the police's harsh interventions (Öniş, 2015). Another significant event was the failure of the initiative known as the Kurdish Opening, which was initiated in 2013 to address the Kurdish issue, resulting in its collapse in the summer of 2015. Throughout these years, the conflict that initially arose with the erstwhile ally Gülenists in 2013 escalated into hostilities, and by 2015, this organization was designated as a terrorist entity by the Turkish state (Cagaptay, 2017). The Gülenist organization, which had infiltrated numerous state institutions and had been entrenched within the state apparatus, was in the process of being extricated from these bodies. In response, the Gülenists mobilized their forces within the military in July 2016 and attempted a coup d'état. This coup attempt was thwarted by the resistance demonstrated by the government, opposition, a substantial segment of the military, and the citizenry. Subsequently, Erdoğan asserted that Türkiye was engaged in a struggle for survival and proclaimed a state of emergency that conferred extraordinary powers

upon the government for a duration of three months, which was subsequently extended seven times and ultimately concluded in July 2018. The government initiated sweeping purges targeting individuals suspected of affiliations with the Gülenists within both the civilian and security bureaucracies, and the purges allegedly also targeted other oppositional groups (Esen & Gumuscu, 2017). Following the failed coup attempt, the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; MHP) ceased its oppositional political activities and discourse, subsequently extending unconditional support to the government and President Erdoğan post-July 2016 (Gerim, 2023). Consequently, as a result of the referendum conducted with this backing, modifications were implemented in the constitution, leading Türkiye to adopt a distinctive presidential system that curtailed the legislative powers of the parliament while simultaneously augmenting the authority of the ruling party-affiliated president. Shortly thereafter, the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı), primarily constituted by these two parties, was established, whereas the Good Party and CHP, which diverged from the MHP largely due to its transformative shift, united under the banner of the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı). Nevertheless, Erdoğan successfully secured victory in the June 2018 elections with 52.59% of the votes in the initial round, and in the May 2023 elections with 49.52% in the first round and 52.18% in the subsequent round, thereby perpetuating his presidency within the new system.

Erdoğan's narrative of success has faced considerable critique for ostensibly relegating democracy to a mere expression of majoritarianism while simultaneously marginalizing and criminalizing specific social groups that exist beyond this majority (Arslantaş & Arslantaş, 2024). Furthermore, criticisms regarding the inequity inherent in democratic competition within a dominant-party regime, the erosion of the principle of separation of powers, and the pervasive governmental oversight of media were recurrently articulated (Ayan Musil, 2024; Esen & Gumuscu, 2016). Conversely, it is widely acknowledged that Erdoğan has adeptly preserved the requisite support to maintain his authority by fostering societal polarization predicated upon cultural and religious values, with the Islamic undertone and anti-Western sentiments prevalent in his rhetoric playing a crucial role in this dynamic (Somer, 2019; Yabancı, 2023). Nevertheless, here it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that anti-Western sentiments and narratives have been evident in various sectors both prior to and during the tenure of the AKP government. A moderate form of Euroscepticism and anti-Western attitudes have been intermittently observed among parties situated both in the center-left and center-right of Turkish politics. The anti-Western rhetoric within these parties tends to be situational, influenced by domestic and international trends and events (Çolakoğlu, 2019; H. Yilmaz, 2011). While the center-left occasionally critiques the West on security matters, it predominantly aligns with the pro-Western Kemalist ideology. Conversely, the center-right recognizes the economic significance of Western integration while also adopting pragmatic policies and rhetoric aimed at resonating with nationalist and conservative constituents (Dikici Bilgin, 2017). More pronounced anti-Western discourse and policies are found within the nationalist faction, chiefly represented by the MHP, as well as in parties emerging from the Islamist tradition (H. Yilmaz, 2011). For nationalists, the apprehension that Western-imposed regulations, framed within a liberal context, and demands concerning minority rights may foster cultural fragmentation in the nation is paramount. For Islamists, the West is perceived as a civilization rooted in Christian values, inherently regarded as an "other" that one should not be aligned with. Nonetheless, the boundaries among these perspectives are not always clearly set. For instance, the coalition government that preceded the AKP's rise to power in November 2002 undertook significant democratization initiatives aimed at EU membership, and the MHP was one of the members of this coalition alongside the center-left Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti) and the center-right Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi; H. Yilmaz, 2011).



An additional point of significance is that, following the Cold War, there was a notable rise in criticism of Türkiye's pro-Western foreign policy from secular nationalist and Kemalist factions. These groups began to articulate an anti-Western narrative that advocated for a Eurasianist alternative to the existing orientation (Akçali & Perinçek, 2009). The decline in the relations between the AKP governments and the liberal world accompanied by an increasing suspicion towards the West reflected the Islamic tradition's perspective on the Western world. According to some, after 2011, this situation fostered a coalition, albeit partial and unofficial, among nationalist, Eurasianist, and Islamist elements in Türkiye in opposition to the West (Çolakoğlu, 2019).

#### 4. Method and Data

We have collected the data consisting of press releases, speeches, statements, and addresses delivered by President Erdoğan between July 2016, when tensions with the West were at their peak, and May 2023, the date of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Türkiye. All data were publicly available on the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye (<https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en>). The total number of analyzed texts is 1,222. In our analysis, we utilized a two-step analytical process. First, we conducted a textual analysis of the collected data using MAXQDA 24 and then applied CDA to the thematically selected texts.

CDA regards discourse as a form of social action and ideological work constituting history, society, and culture (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). As Fairclough argues, there is a dialectical relation between the structure of discourse and macro-social structures through which the discursive practices are formed (Fairclough, 1992). In this respect, the meanings embedded in discourse are socially mediated and constitutive of actors' identities (Wodak, 2011). As such, each incident of language use shapes the context which in return contributes to the transformation of the culture and society. Moreover, CDA regards power relations as discursive, and it aims to reveal the transparent or hidden relations of dominance, power, and discrimination (Wodak, 2009). To this end, it mainly addresses the covert discursive tactics and focuses on political issues and social problems to analyze how discourses justify or contest power. While examining the language use and linguistic features of social and cultural processes, it primarily concentrates on the social, political, economic, and cultural settings (Fairclough, 2013). In this way, it interlinks textual and sociocultural analysis. Therefore, we prefer CDA because of its critical importance in illuminating how discursive practices convey meaning to civilizational identity discourses through both communicative action and contestation (Carta & Wodak, 2015). CDA is particularly suited for analyzing the interplay between language, power, and ideology, which makes it an effective tool for understanding how President Erdoğan frames illiberal politics in civilizational terms. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how civilizational identity is employed as a point of reference in his framing of social actions and political discourses. Unlike other text analysis methods, such as sentiment analysis or topic modeling, CDA goes beyond surface-level patterns or statistical insights by focusing on the underlying power structures and ideological constructs embedded in the discourse. This makes CDA the most appropriate framework for exploring the nuanced ways in which Erdoğan legitimizes illiberal tendencies through civilizational rhetoric.

Our analysis is based on the three fundamental characteristics of illiberal states/leaders—adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and the restriction of media freedoms (Pappas, 2019, pp. 35–37)—and how these are carried out and legitimized in association with civilizational identity. Adversarial politics refers to the strategy where leaders develop an antagonistic dichotomy between “the people” and “elites,” who are perceived and



portrayed as enemies of the people. This approach leads to deep political polarization, dividing society into two opposing camps. Within this highly polarized context, opposition groups are delegitimized and/or oppressed by being depicted as illegitimate actors and existential threats to the people. On the other hand, majoritarianism provides leeway for the curtailment of the rule of law which is legitimized by being propounded as in the name of the people/the will of the people, constructing a “moralistic view” against liberal democratic values and norms leading to eventual enfeebled checks and balances and institutional legality. In this context, these illiberal practices are transmitted to the media landscape and to individual liberties, leading to their restriction (Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). The generated control over media allows the domination and articulation of single-sided government discourse, thereby reinforcing the political power of the illiberal actor. Therefore, these three core characteristics of illiberal governance are chosen as points of reference in the operationalization of civilizational identity discourse and illiberalism.

The elements of the civilizational identity discourse, as the code categories, are determined by regarding the fact that political actors secure legitimacy often by othering “the civilizational other” through essentialist and culturalist labels (Bradley, 2018; Grillo, 2003). Based on the literature, we observe that the Turkish civilizational discourse is constructed predominantly through anti-Westernism, the Ottoman past, the dichotomy between the East and the West, cultural essentialism, and religious values (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Uzer, 2020). Therefore, these code categories were deductively generated. During the coding process, the overlap of codes was carefully considered. Where codes overlapped or intersected within a statement, they were coded under all applicable categories to avoid one-sided categorization. In this way, we systematically addressed overlaps and used them to ensure that the context of each statement was interpreted in a nuanced understanding of the discourse, revealing the interconnectedness of the prevalent code categories and thereby enriching the analysis. The utilized codebook along with the examples from the speeches is in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Utilized codes and their descriptions.

Codes	Description
Civilizational identity	Collective identity around shared cultural, historical, religious, traditional, and ideological elements, as well as values and behavioral motivations associated with a particular civilization
Anti-Westernism	Opposing the Western cultural/political influence and dominance

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the analysis revealed the high-level co-occurrence of codes. Therefore, we found out that the civilizational identity discourse employed by President Erdoğan operates through an integrative narrative, where cultural, political, historical, and religious dimensions are interdependent. In this respect, the intersected usage of code categories reflects intentional discursive choices utilized to strengthen the civilizational basis for illiberal tendencies. Thus, in our analysis, we utilize a visual illustration of the co-occurrence of different codes to offer an insight into their interconnectedness and the complexity of Erdoğan's civilizational identity

**Table 1. (Cont.) Utilized codes and their descriptions.**

Codes	Description
Religious values	Moral principles and ethical guidelines derived from religious teachings and traditions
Ottoman past	Historical, political, and cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire
Cultural essentialism	Cultural characteristics shared by members of a particular in-group leading to binary oppositions
Dichotomy between the East and West	Binary contrasts between the “East” and the “West” as opposing cultural, political, or civilizational entities
Majoritarianism	Political principle where the majority’s decisions and preferences are given primacy, often at the expense of minority rights or dissenting voices
Adversarial politics	Political polarization and confrontation between the government and the opposition
Restriction of rule of law and media freedom	Actions taken by governments to limit, control, or suppress the freedom of the press and media outlets

discourse. Firstly, we focused on President Erdoğan’s definitional stance regarding civilizational identity. Later, we examined how he interlinks this civilizational identity with illiberal ethe.

In Figure 1, we see the intersection frequency of the construction of President Erdoğan’s civilizational identity discourse with the categories we have deductively determined: anti-Westernism, Ottoman past, dichotomy between East and West, cultural essentialism, and religious values (Bacik & Seker, 2023; Uzer, 2020). Each number indicates how frequently the respective codes co-occur with one another (overlaps), helping to identify patterns in the dataset. The prominent finding of Figure 1 is that civilizational identity ( $n = 129$ ) is mostly defined through cultural essentialism ( $n = 37$ ) and the Ottoman past ( $n = 32$ ), followed by religious values ( $n = 22$ ), anti-Westernism ( $n = 19$ ), and the dichotomy between East and West ( $n = 19$ ). The revealed high level of interconnectedness of civilizational identity–cultural essentialism–Ottoman past shows that President Erdoğan’s discourses mostly rely on the cultural essentialist ethos and historical legacy of the Ottoman past in defining civilizational identity, with religious values and anti-Western rhetoric providing complementary frameworks.

His in-group construction is based on “a vision of civilization and a taste for culture and art, today as in every period of history” (Erdoğan, 2023i), and references to the Ottoman past are often utilized to legitimize political actions. This is because, for Erdoğan, these civilizational values come from the “greatness of the legacy left to

Code System	Civilizational identity	Anti-westernism	Religious values	Ottoman past	Cultural essentialism	Dichotomy between East and West	SUM
✓ Civilizational identity		19	23	32	41	20	135
• Anti-westernism	19		22	5	9	17	72
• Religious values	23	22		6	7	13	71
• Ottoman past	32	5	6		8	3	54
• Cultural essentialism	41	9	7	8		9	74
• Dichotomy between East and West	20	17	13	3	9		62
Σ SUM	135	72	71	54	74	62	468

**Figure 1.** Civilizational identity code intersection matrix with its sub-codes.

the Republic by the Ottoman Empire, which was a settled civilization in the founding histories of most of our important institutions today” (Erdoğan, 2022d). Therefore, his envisagement of the civilizational identity often evokes a populist nostalgia (Elçi, 2022) referring to “civilizational values which were built by our ancestors with thousands of hours of labor” (Erdoğan, 2020d) and also:

Cultural depth...a deep-rooted accumulation of nearly a thousand years, including nearly a quarter of a thousand years of Seljuk, more than 600 years of Ottoman and a century of the Republic...and Anatolian lands, which have been the cradle of civilizations, offer us a treasure that is unique in the world with its cultural heritage. (Erdoğan, 2023j)

Through such statements, President Erdoğan constructs an in-group identity through a civilizational rhetoric that emphasizes historical continuity (“every period of history”) and cultural superiority, producing an in-group favoritism and self-enhancement by embedding appeals to cultural and artistic values while simultaneously building a temporal bridge of the in-group identity tied to the glorified past and the inheritance of a civilizational tradition.

In this vein, he frequently points out the glorious and strong days of the Ottoman Empire and legitimizes his political stance by defining it as “the responsibility imposed on us by our civilization and history” (Erdoğan, 2020c). He asserts that his government is the “bridge built from the past to the future” (Erdoğan, 2023c). He also highlights that the country is now the “New Türkiye” that has reached an era of “Resurrection once again” (Erdoğan, 2019d) with him and the AKP. He legitimizes his stance as the “journey of work and service...relying on the help of Allah and the support of our [Turkish] nation” (Erdoğan, 2023g). He underlines that during this journey “we [Erdoğan and his party] have regarded our heritage of civilization and history as a guide that sheds light on us” (Erdoğan, 2023h). In this respect, President Erdoğan strategically utilizes religious and historical rhetoric to construct a civilizational continuity of the Ottoman legacy and. In this way, he draws an alternative identity construction to the Kemalist legacy, which is referred to as the “New Türkiye,” leading to a juxtaposition between the “old” (implied to be inauthentic/Westernist) and the “new” (implied to be authentic, conservative).

Based on such vision of civilizational identity, Erdoğan generated his critical stance towards Western civilization that “invaded the world mainly through its art, culture...soft power elements” (Erdoğan, 2022c). Such construction of the anti-Westernist stance aligns well with the discourses of other illiberal leaders such as Xi Jinping, Putin, or Orban who similarly embrace a civilizational discourse drawing on their own civilizational heritage to promote an alternative to the Western liberal order and express a dissatisfaction with the dominance of the West (İ. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023b). These leaders emphasize civilizational heritage in a way that focuses on historical grandeur and the greatness of cultural and national identity. This

way, they aim to form a legitimate basis for their governments (I. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024). In addition, through such ethe, they seek international political and economic dominance as well as cultural and ideological legitimacy (I. Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024) within the multi-polar world order. In this respect, Erdoğan's narrative mirrors these patterns, showing his rhetoric is instrumentalized both as a quest for domestic legitimacy and as a part of the broader global trend among illiberal leaders.

Erdoğan emphasizes Western values as “imposed and exposed” (Erdoğan, 2022c) by both international and national actors, whom he portrays as “the others” against “the people” (Erdoğan, 2023h). Yet, for him:

No power, no government, no structure that is not born out of the dynamics of our civilization and culture, whose sole purpose is not to serve the Ummah, the nation and humanity, can give us the revival we have been longing for for two centuries. A tree without strong roots, a branch that is not firmly attached to the trunk, a leaf that does not hold on to it strongly cannot survive. (Erdoğan, 2019d)

As the excerpts show, President Erdoğan utilizes an interplay between civilizational discourse, legitimacy, and national identity—the revival of this last one he embeds on the reconnection with the nation's roots neglected for “two centuries” (an implicit critique of the secularization policies of the early Republican era). Such historical framing provides a ground for his governance as the representation of this restoration process towards the historical legacy of authentic Turkish civilization.

In Figure 2, we see how the above-explained three characteristics of illiberalism, i.e., adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and restriction of the rule of law and media freedom, are infiltrated into the civilizational discourse by President Erdoğan.

Code System	Civilizational identity	Majoritarianism	Adversarial Politics	Restriction of rule of law and media freedom	SUM
Civilizational identity		34	58	27	119
Majoritarianism	34		50	39	123
Adversarial Politics	58	50		37	145
Restriction of rule of law and media freedom	27	39	37		103
SUM	119	123	145	103	490

**Figure 2.** Code intersection matrix of civilizational identity with adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and restriction of the rule of law and media freedom.

The prominent finding of Figure 2 is that civilizational identity is mostly utilized within President Erdoğan's narratives of adversarial politics ( $n = 58$ ), followed by majoritarianism ( $n = 34$ ) and the restriction of the rule of law and media freedom ( $n = 27$ ). Accordingly, this shows that President Erdoğan utilizes the ethos of civilizational identity to marginalize his political opponents as well as “the West” and any other perceived adversaries. This discourse is further reinforced through a close intersection of adversarial politics and majoritarianism, suggesting that civilizational identity is mainly constructed in opposition to perceived “enemies” of the people, aligning closely with a majority-rule perspective. Such discursive act is embedded within his composite “repertoire” of values and cultural and ideological narratives that target various social, political, and economic issues ranging from the global domination of the West, liberal values, economic liberalism, and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

While Erdoğan antagonizes the West by describing it as “imperialists” (Erdoğan, 2021b) and “threats against our country...[that] emerged in the form of efforts to separate our nation from its civilization, history, culture and

values” (Erdoğan, 2021a), he simultaneously marginalizes the opposition actors who are blamed to collaborate with the West by combining adversarial politics with the majoritarianism mantra:

They [the opposition] joined the sanctions against Russia, the biggest economic partner of our country, and said that we will do whatever the West wants. Mr. Kemal, we do not do what the West wants, we do what Türkiye wants. What are we standing for? We will do whatever the West wants, look at the words, look at the understanding....Such a thing is never in our political book. (Erdoğan, 2023h)

To this end, he utilizes terms such as “Mr.” (bay) to identify the main opposition leader with Western culture and civilization. In Turkish, the traditional address used to refer to a man with respect is “bey,” which is added to the end of the first name. “Bay” has a more Western sound and is placed at the beginning of the name, as in Western languages such as French and English. Erdoğan uses the expression “Bay Kemal” instead of “Kemal Bey,” associating the main opposition leader with the Western cultural sphere. Thus, the address “bay” contains implications and references such as the elite of the Republic turning its face towards the West, breaking away from the values of the country and the nation, and becoming the bearer of the values of another civilization. On the contrary, as the “national and native,” Erdoğan evokes a sense of national unity between himself and the “people,” “who do not prostrate ourselves [themselves] in front of the imperialists or their hitmen” (Erdoğan, 2023b).

The religious standpoint of his conception of Turkish civilization is also accommodated and employed against the opposition. As an example, after an *iftar* program at a restaurant, Kılıçdaroğlu, the then-main opposition leader of CHP, took a photo with the guests upon their request. However, in the photos, he was seen standing on a prayer rug. He then stated that he had not seen the prayer rug, that he was very sorry, and apologized to everyone he had unknowingly hurt. Nevertheless, the fact that he stepped on the prayer rug with his shoe drew reaction from conservative groups. Erdoğan, on the other hand, used this as a reference to the main opposition leader’s alienation from the beliefs and religious practices of the people:

We bow down in *ruku* only in the presence of Allah and prostrate ourselves only for Him. Mr. Kemal, remember, you walk on the prayer rug with your shoes. We know prostration, we know the prayer rug you walk on with your shoes, we know the *qibla*, we know the *Kaaba* very well. (Erdoğan, 2023b)

Did not Mr. Kemal call the headscarf a 1-square-meter piece of cloth? What can I say to that? (Erdoğan, 2023f)

Via such referrals of religious imagery, Erdoğan embeds the concept of civilizational identity within his construction of “constituting others”—foremostly the West and the opposition, which have “no respect to beliefs, history, culture and heartaches of the people” (Erdoğan, 2020a). In this way, President Erdoğan delegitimizes the West and the opposition while legitimizing his illiberal stance of turning away from liberal values on the grounds that “we cannot build a much more advanced civilization for ourselves by simply following the dominant intellectual understanding and de facto order in the world” (Erdoğan, 2023g).

While the portrayed “authentic” civilizational essence rooted in Islamic values demonizes the opposition, it simultaneously informs and shapes the conservative social norms (e.g., restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights, conservative family policies) in return. Accordingly, Erdoğan defines the opposition who support LGBTQ+

rights as a threat to family values culminating in the othering of the LGBTQ+ community, which he describes as “the perverted movements targeting our family institution and the future of our children” (Erdoğan, 2023h). In this way, he combines the social with the political enemies, contributing to polarization:

They [the opposition] will give way to LGBT....Is this CHP LGBTist? Are their partners People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) LGBTist? Is the İYİ Party LGBTist? Are the others LGBTist? Well, can LGBT infiltrate the AKP? Can LGBT infiltrate the MHP? Can LGBT infiltrate the People's Alliance? Because we believe in the sanctity of the family, we can never dishonor our family institution....Would such things suit an Anatolian? Anatolian people are chivalrous, brave, honest, loyal, self-sacrificing, and they want to see their politicians as themselves. (Erdoğan, 2023h)

The excerpt above shows Erdoğan featuring a dichotomy between Anatolians and others. Anatolians are represented as native and national, praising the value of the family, and thus homosexuality is regarded as opposed to Turkish and/or Islamic beliefs and values. While the AKP is constructed as the representative of this authentic identity, the opposition is identified with LGBT (which implies a culture rooted outside the country and incompatible with Anatolian identity). Such a hostile portrayal of LGBT people and the opposition as an example of adversarial politics and majoritarianism serves the purpose of legitimizing Erdoğan's policies that curtail basic democratic rights and freedoms, while positioning himself on the side of the people.

This is often observed in Erdoğan's statements about the rule of law and media freedom as well. By representing the political act through the majoritarianism thesis of “the common will,” he endeavors to legitimize bypassing democratic debates and criticisms: “Democracy derives its power from the people; if there are people, there is democracy; if there are no people, there is no democracy” (Erdoğan, 2018b).

Accordingly, Erdoğan reduces democracy to a simple equation hinged on the existence of the people, which reflects the majoritarian understanding of democracy as merely the exercise of the majority's will. Through such rhetoric, he sidelines and disregards key democratic pillars such as representative institutions, civil society, free speech, pluralism, constitutional law, and independent media, which are necessary elements for balancing power in a functioning democracy. Instead, he promotes the people as the sole decision-making entity, to whom “the word, the decision, and the future belong” (Erdoğan, 2023d), referring to a populist-majoritarian standpoint that emphasizes the absolute implementation of the will of the “righteous people,” who have been “pariah (*parya*) in their own homelands” (Erdoğan, 2016) and “marginalized and ignored because of their beliefs, the way they dressed, their appearance” (Erdoğan, 2023e).

By utilizing such victimhood narratives, Erdoğan brands himself as the man on a mission who “fought very hard to get and protect what is rightfully ours, to say that we exist in this country too...and transformed Türkiye from being a country of only the elites and the whites” (Erdoğan, 2023i). In this respect, he legitimizes his stance by illustrating it as reclaiming the genuine identity, religion, culture, and values of the people, laying the basis for the illiberal political agenda of the restricted democracy.

While he pursues majoritarianism, the multicultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire and religious morality limit Erdoğan's ability to marginalize certain minority groups (e.g., non-Muslim communities), evident in his civilizational rhetoric:

We allocated a budget for the construction of new churches. We provided the opportunity for the allocation of places of worship such as churches and synagogues under the management of the General Directorate of Foundations to minority foundations free of charge. As a result of our efforts, the Sacred Heart Church in Taksim, Istanbul, was allocated to the Syriac Catholic Church Foundation free of charge for 49 years. In addition, the Mar Yuhanna Church in Hatay was given to the Arsuz Greek Orthodox Church Foundation, also free of charge. Apart from these, we have taken many historical steps to protect the rights and laws of our non-Muslim citizens and expand their freedom of worship. Behind every regulation we make, every reform we implement, there is an effort to make people of other faiths feel and show that they are first-class citizens of this country, we never seek exploitation or hypocrisy. In this way, we actually fulfill the requirements of our own faith. Because our faith requires respecting and even supporting people of other faiths on common humanitarian grounds. It is possible to come across countless examples of this understanding in our history, from our Prophet to Hazrat Omar, from the Seljuks to the Ottomans. (Erdoğan, 2022e)

This excerpt demonstrates the inclusive discourse presented for non-Muslim citizens. Yet the basis of this inclusiveness is not a modern approach of equal citizenship, but dhimmitude in Islamic law. Dhimmis are non-Muslims who accept the sovereignty of the Islamic state. They pay a special tax (*jizya*) while the state ensures their freedom of life, property, and belief. In this respect, it represents an example of how Erdoğan connects inclusive efforts to the moral imperatives of Islam and the enduring civilizational legacy of figures like the Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat Omar, and the Seljuks. This connection reinforces his identity as a leader guided by faith while aligning contemporary actions with historical precedents, framing them as part of a timeless tradition rather than mere modern political decisions. In addition, it evokes a “populist nostalgia” narrative in which Türkiye, under Islamic rule, was a beacon of justice and coexistence, thereby further strengthening Erdoğan’s civilizational discourse. Therefore, the interaction between civilizational discourse and illiberalism is dialectical. Erdoğan’s rhetoric both enables and limits his policy options, forcing him to navigate the expectations created by the civilizational framework he employs, which might not easily align with illiberalism in other case-study countries.

His vision of illiberalism has also targeted the free and independent media as one of the cornerstones of the liberal public sphere (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016) to generate an illiberal public sphere (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). As an extension of his above-mentioned majoritarianist-populist understanding of democracy, Erdoğan undermines the fourth estate status of independent media in liberal democracies, through statements such as “democracy is not set through the media” (Erdoğan, 2018a), underplaying the importance of media institutions as the checks on power in democratic regimes. In this line, to diminish the role of both democracy and independent press, he frequently shifts the focus from the media to the people and elaborates on this point through statements such as: “We will act not according to the headlines of the media, but according to the headlines of our nation” (Erdoğan, 2019c).

Moreover, Erdoğan draws on adversarial politics against the media by marginalizing and blaming the media institutions that “always acted together with the tutelage, coup plotters and mandate holders in our country...and stand on the side of the marginals instead of standing on the side of the nation” (Erdoğan, 2018b). Media is also presented as antagonistic to the nation and its majoritarian sentiments and civilizational identity elements by being portrayed as being a “triggerman of every attack on the values, sacredness and honor of the nation” (Erdoğan, 2020b). In this respect, Erdoğan’s rhetoric strongly draws on



a sense of civilizational identity and thereby constructs an “us vs. them” dichotomy between the media and the people.

In parallel with the practices of other illiberal states (Özoflu & Arató, 2023; Polyák, 2019), Erdoğan’s attempt to create an illiberal public sphere is completed with the design of anti-pluralistic media as a necessity of an illiberal democracy. This is conveyed through the juxtaposition of the above-mentioned media institutions with which he calls the “Anatolian media,” which “reflects the cultural richness of Türkiye,” and “the representatives of millions of people whose voices have been ignored for decades” (Erdoğan, 2023e). Accordingly, Anatolian media is depicted as being closely aligned with the nation’s civilizational values and cultures of the people through the populist nuances in civilizational discourse. Moreover, it is heroized against the “globalist” free press:

The more effective and widespread the Anatolian media, the stronger our democracy will be. The louder the voice of Anatolian media, the more the demands and expectations of our nation will be heard. Anatolian media took a very clear stance in favor of national will and democracy in every critical period we experienced, from the Gezi events to the 17–25 December attempt, from terrorist attacks to the 15 July betrayal. We have personally seen and experienced the support of our native media in every move to remove the shadow of tutelage over Turkish democracy. You courageously defended our democracy while those who talk about a free press applauded the coup plotters. You have again shown how the native and national press should be in the face of the pencil pushers who unite with the focal points representing the distortions of the global system and fix politics. (Erdoğan, 2023a)

The excerpt above emphasizes “Anatolianism” constructed as an antithesis of the Westernist modernization paradigm of the early Republic, as a carrier of national and spiritual values, referring to his often-recurring declaration that “AKP came to power through an Anatolian revolution” against Westernist and secularist elites that do not belong to this civilization. Accordingly, Erdoğan combines adversarial politics, majoritarianism, and civilizational identity within his illiberal stance, granting a selective and controlled form of media support. His narrative presents that the defense of the “true” democracy and the nation’s will are guarded by the Anatolian media, drawing a clear distinction between “the native” and “the globalist media” portrayed as the foreign influence and distorted system. This exemplifies the adversarial politics constructing a sharp “us” (native and national media as the guardian of the will of the people) versus “them” (free press supporting the coup plotters) dichotomy. Drawing on such dichotomy, he utilizes discriminatory rhetoric and an antagonistic manner towards the free press, through which he discredits and delegitimizes the free/critical media outlets. This, in return, serves him as a justified basis to exclude all criticisms of public affairs within the public sphere. In this way, civilizational identity is constructed in opposition to internal others as the “enemies,” while majoritarianism is used to justify undemocratic actions under the guise of defending national sovereignty and democracy.

## 6. Conclusion

In scholarly discourse, the concepts of illiberalism and democratic backsliding are frequently examined in tandem. Indeed, the classification of illiberal democracy as a valid variant of democracy remains a subject of significant debate, as illiberalism inherently subverts and distorts the established foundational principles

of democracy in its contemporary context. Nevertheless, it is apparent that leaders who promote illiberal doctrines and strategies receive considerable public support across numerous nations. Türkiye exemplifies this trend, particularly over the last decade. As a result, this study has illuminated the rhetoric utilized by the nation's president Erdoğan to justify his illiberal policies.

Through an extensive discourse analysis, the article has delineated how Erdoğan rationalizes his majoritarian and adversarial political strategies, alongside his legislative actions that curtail rights and freedoms, by utilizing a civilizational discourse. By accentuating civilizational divergences and antagonisms, Erdoğan has dismissed the universality of liberal democracy's values and norms, associating them with the Western paradigm and challenging their obligatory character. In this manner, he has constructed a protective barrier grounded in civilizational identity to counter the critiques of democratic regression that arise from both domestic and international spheres, particularly from the West.

Moreover, this analysis suggests that civilizational identity discourse is not merely instrumental but constitutive—it shapes the range of possible actions by embedding Erdoğan's policies within a broader ideological framework. However, it also constrains him by creating expectations tied to historical, religious, and cultural narratives, which may not apply to other illiberal practices in different contexts. Therefore, these dual roles of civilizational discourse underscore the need for future research to explore how identity-based appeals both expand and limit the policy choices of illiberal leaders. In this respect, it is prudent to acknowledge that investigations concentrating on the interplay between civilizational discourse and illiberalism across diverse countries as well as specific policy areas (e.g., education, foreign policy, or economy) may unveil distinct dimensions and implications of this relationship.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**Melek Aylin Özoflu** is a PhD research fellow at the Department of International Relations, Özyeğin University, İstanbul, Türkiye. She earned her PhD in political science and international relations from Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary. Her most recent work, “Populist Securitization of Migration: The Anti-Immigrant Zafer Party Example in Türkiye,” was published in *Mediterranean Politics*.



**Giray Gerim** holds a PhD degree in sociology from Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), with a special focus on political sociology and nationalism. He is currently an assistant professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences of Istanbul University. His research interests include political sociology, political ideologies, party politics, populism, nationalism, and ethnic conflicts. He has published studies in these fields.

# Social and Discursive Capital as Illiberal Enabler: A Tale of Two Far-Right Fictions in France

Périne Schir <sup>1</sup>  and Marlène Laruelle <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> ERIAC, University of Rouen Normandy, France

<sup>2</sup> Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, USA

**Correspondence:** Périne Schir ([perine.schir@univ-rouen.fr](mailto:perine.schir@univ-rouen.fr))

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## Abstract

There is a growing body of scholarship examining the circulation of illiberal ideas. While the majority of approaches have centered on political culture, we instead explore how such ideas manifest themselves in domains not traditionally viewed as overtly political, such as novels and works of fiction. We take two examples from the French literary scene: *The Camp of the Saints*, written by Jean Raspail in 1973, and *Submission*, written by Michel Houellebecq in 2015. Both works incorporate great replacement theory into their narratives, but while Raspail's novel generally belongs to fringe far-right literature, Houellebecq's has achieved widespread media and commercial success, establishing the author as a leading figure in contemporary French literature. We hypothesise that this discrepancy can be explained through the differing levels of social and discursive capital employed by the two authors. We argue that practices of illiberal diffusion encompass the entirety of the author's “posture,” which includes both rhetorical or intra-textual practices (that is, how ideas are formulated within the text to align with prevailing norms), as well as instrumental or extra-textual practices (that is, how authors secure favorable reception by controlling external factors, such as media coverage or institutional networks). This broader lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how political ideas circulate within society.

## Keywords

cultural circulation; France; great replacement theory; illiberalism; Jean Raspail; Michel Houellebecq

## 1. Introduction

There is a growing body of scholarship examining the circulation of illiberal ideas—between Central and Western Europe, to and from Russia, and across the Atlantic (Behr, 2021; Laruelle, 2015, 2018). Works in

this vein predominantly focus on how illiberal ideas and narratives travel within political arenas—between political parties, political leaders, and think tanks, among others. In this article, we shift the cursor of illiberal diffusion to consider where else these ideas might spread within society. While previous approaches have centered on political culture, we instead explore how such ideas manifest themselves in domains not traditionally viewed as overtly political, such as novels and works of fiction.

We take two novels from the French literary scene: *The Camp of the Saints* (*Le Camp des saints*), written by Jean Raspail in 1973, and *Submission* (*Soumission*), written by Michel Houellebecq in 2015. Both works incorporate great replacement theory into their narratives, but while Raspail's book generally belongs to fringe far-right literature, Houellebecq's has achieved widespread media and commercial success, establishing him as a leading figure in contemporary French literature. In this article, we examine why such a divergence occurred and, more importantly, how Houellebecq has managed to gain mainstream public acceptance and bypass gatekeepers despite engaging with the same range of ideas as Raspail.

Putting aside intrinsic literary value, which we do not comment on here, we hypothesise that this discrepancy can be explained through the differing levels of social and discursive capital employed by the two authors. French sociologist Bourdieu (1986) advanced the concept of social capital to describe “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247). We argue that Houellebecq's significantly greater social capital accounts for this mainstream acceptance, while Raspail's comparatively lower social capital has relegated his work to the margins.

What we refer to as discursive capital is a revised version of Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital: i.e., a mastery of the legitimate language recognized and valued by institutions, such as schools, universities, and the media (Bourdieu, 1982). Discursive capital is a writer's ability to reformulate a particular type of idea—such as those deemed socially unacceptable, like racist or sexist ideas—into expressions that are more palatable or at least tolerated within the boundaries of mainstream discourse. It implies an understanding of the implicit rules governing what can and cannot be said in a particular context, thereby encompassing both linguistic and ideological resources. Here again, Houellebecq demonstrates a remarkable use of discursive capital that Raspail lacks.

We consider this strategic manipulation of discursive and social capital as a practice of illiberal promotion and diffusion. By employing the concept of practice, we shift the focus away from the ideas diffused in a given novel—content such as great replacement theory—and toward the practices involved in content diffusion. We argue that these practices of illiberal diffusion encompass the entirety of the author's “posture,” as defined by Jérôme Meizoz's sociological approach to literature. This includes both rhetorical or intra-textual practices—i.e., how ideas are formulated within the text to align with prevailing norms—as well as active or extra-textual practices—i.e., how authors secure favorable reception by controlling external factors such as media coverage or institutional networks (Meizoz, 2011).

We use the term “illiberal” here in the sense defined by Laruelle (2023), who describes it as a response to the major socio-cultural transformations that have taken place in the Global North, including Western Europe. The first transformation, from the 1960s to 1970s, saw the rise of cultural progressivism as the dominant ideology, promoting the recognition of diverse identities but also leading to the fragmentation of collective

identities. The second, from the 1980s to the 1990s, saw the rise of neoliberalism, leading to the technocratization of politics and the depoliticization of public decisions. Illiberalism thus emerges as a solution to these impasses, advocating for a revival of collective identities based on racial and sexual criteria, and repoliticizing debates by shifting them to the moral and cultural realms, while defending authoritarian and anti-egalitarian solutions.

In this light, while conservatism opposes liberal ideas of progress, illiberalism opposes a certain type of progress, that which is represented by the liberal-progressive consensus. Whereas conservatism seeks to slow down or reverse social changes to preserve traditional values, illiberalism rejects the inclusive model of liberalism, which it sees as a threat to collective identity, advocating for a hierarchical vision that is often ethnically or religiously marked.

This article is grounded in the social history of political ideas (Matonti, 2023), which aims to define political ideas much more broadly to include representations, attitudes, beliefs, and narratives within a dynamic and fragmented social structure. This approach enables us to detect politics in unexpected places (Gaboriaux & Skornicki, 2017, p. 13)—in this case, within works of fiction such as novels. The central tenet of the social history of political ideas is that such ideas are not limited to political programs, leaders' speeches, or political essays, they can also be expressed through everyday actions and attitudes, including those of fictional characters. This broader lens provides a more nuanced understanding of how political ideas circulate within society.

## 2. Far-Right Fiction in Parallel

Both *Submission* and *The Camp of the Saints* share similar narratives. Houellebecq's *Submission*, written in 2015, is set in 2022 against the backdrop of a "collapsing Western world" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 13). The political scene is marked by a "declining social democracy" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 15) and a potential "civil war between Muslim immigrants and the native population" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 59). In Houellebecq's projection of the 2022 political landscape, two forces oppose each other: on one side, the far right, and on the other, a fictional Muslim Brotherhood Party led by a "moderate Muslim" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 161)—although what is depicted looks more like a fundamentalist Islam. In the second round of the presidential elections, the left and mainstream right rally behind the Muslim candidate to prevent the extreme right from winning. The result is a government led by "Islamism" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 289)—a portmanteau expressing the supposed alliance of leftist multiculturalism and Islamism, implying that the French radical left, both in the political realm and in the intellectual and academic world, has defended positions close to those of Islamism (Taguieff, 2024)—with the new Muslim president described as possessing a "hypnotic magic" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 221) over the population. This leads to minimal political resistance and France ultimately coming under Sharia law.

Raspail's (1985) *Camp of the Saints* tells the story of "800,000 Indian migrants peacefully besieging the West" (Raspail, 1985, p. 19), with the narrator recounting this tale for his grandchildren and seeking to tell them "the truth" about the "incompatibility of races" (Raspail, 1985, pp. 363–364). The novel builds tension through the slow arrival of migrants, describing their invasion as a "peaceful conquest of the West" (Raspail, 1985, p. 80)—even though the description makes it look pretty violent—that leads to the "destruction of the white race" (Raspail, 1985, p. 215). The migrants are aided in their project by "the well-intentioned left" (*la gauche*

*bien-pensante*; Raspail, 1985, p. 72), who are presented as “accomplices of the invader” (Raspail, 1985, p. 227). They indeed instill a sense of “remorse, self-accusation, and self-loathing” in the white race (Raspail, 1985, p. 87), which then became “emasculated from its instinct for self-preservation” (Raspail, 1985, p. 104).

Houellebecq’s *Submission* and Raspail’s *Camp of the Saints* both engage with the so-called great replacement theory (Taguieff, 2022), albeit in different ways. In Raspail’s account, this takes shape through a dramatic influx of immigrants from Asia and Africa, accompanied by racial mixing, which he depicts as an existential threat to France’s white Christian identity. While *Submission* does not explicitly adopt the theory’s framework of a deliberate and coordinated replacement, it envisions a gradual transformation of France’s demographic and cultural identity, ultimately leading to similar anxieties about the displacement of the white race and its traditional culture. Their narratives extend this invasion beyond the borders of France, suggesting that all of Europe will be overtaken. Both novels blame left-liberal parties for facilitating the invasion. Additionally, the two works overtly engage with racial themes, with Raspail frequently evoking the idea of a white race while Houellebecq focuses more on Western civilization. While both authors address similar anxieties, our analysis seeks primarily to explain the diffusion and reception of Houellebecq’s ideas. Raspail serves more as a counterpoint, illustrating the differences in approach that have allowed Houellebecq to bypass cultural gatekeepers and achieve mainstream success, rather than a subject of an equally in-depth examination. Despite these narrative and thematic similarities, the two books have faced substantially different public reception. This asymmetry stems from differences in their respective levels of social and discursive capital, as well as the distinct positioning of their works within the literary and political fields.

Houellebecq has achieved widespread acclaim, winning an array of prestigious literary prizes, including the Goncourt in 2010, France’s most renowned literary award, and being considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2022 (Corty, 2022). He has also garnered significant recognition in academia: several influential professors of literature consider themselves to be Houellebecq specialists, numerous colloquia on his writings have been organized in France and abroad, and many doctoral theses use Houellebecq’s texts as a corpus for research. He is often seen as a voice for his generation, capturing the spirit of the age with a deep understanding of human nature. Ben Jeffery (Harper-Schmidt Fellow, University of Chicago) highlights Houellebecq’s ability to articulate unspoken thoughts, while Agathe Novak-Lechevalier (Paris X Nanterre) notes that his works provide a comforting refuge from contemporary anxieties (Jeffery, 2011; Novak-Lechevalier, 2018). However, other academics present a more circumspect view. Denis (2007), for example, has critically examined the limitations and contradictions in Houellebecq’s portrayal of modernity, noting that his works often reflect a highly subjective perspective rather than a universal zeitgeist.

Like the author himself, *Submission* has enjoyed immense commercial success, a phenomenon involuntarily amplified by its seemingly prophetic dimension, as the novel was released in bookstores on the day of the deadly terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo on January 7, 2015 (Lapaque, 2016). Within five days of its publication, the book sold 120,000 copies, a figure that rose to 800,000 within three months (Bajos, 2019). It also topped sales charts in Italy and Germany during the first half of 2015 (“Houellebecq numéro un,” 2015).

In contrast, Raspail has remained a relatively fringe author, predominantly associated with far-right ideologies. Raspail has been quoted by well-known far-right political figures like Marine Le Pen in France (Albertini, 2015), Steve Bannon in the US (Blumenthal, 2017), and Tom Van Grieken of the far-right Vlaams Belang party in

Belgium (Arnoudt, 2018). His novels are also among the favorites of white nationalists in the US (Peltier & Kulish, 2019). The book experienced a resurgence in sales during its eighth edition in 2011, selling 20,000 copies between February and April of that year (Dupuis, 2011). This resurgence was driven by the inclusion of a new preface and a promotional interview in the French far-right weekly *Valeurs Actuelles* (de Cessole, 2011).

### 3. Discursive Capital in Intra-Textual Practices

We now turn to specific examples in which Houellebecq leverages discursive practices and intertextual strategies to navigate and stretch the boundaries of acceptable mainstream discourse, ultimately promoting illiberal ideas within cultural circles—an approach Raspail was unable to achieve.

#### 3.1. The Use of Far-Right Interdiscourse

Foucault's notion of interdiscourse posits that any discourse inherently contains traces of other discourses. As he states, these "words have already been spoken elsewhere, as they are part of a repertoire of socially shared symbolic forms" (Foucault, 1969, p. 71). Each new work is informed by a corpus of pre-existing texts and circulating doxa, engaging in dialogue with them. In *Submission*, Houellebecq reproduces the same cognitive structures first articulated and disseminated by the far right, but avoids using politically charged terms such as "invasion," "replacement," or "death of the white race," as doing so would make him legally liable and hinder his books from bypassing liberal gatekeepers and achieving a wide circulation. Although Houellebecq does not directly cite far-right theories, his statements align with and evoke ideas that have already been articulated within these circles. This indirect referencing draws on notions and arguments initially formulated and popularized by the far right, making them recognizable even when they are not explicitly mentioned.

In the case of replacement narratives, the narrator of *Submission*, François, refers to a fictional document given to him by a colleague, titled "PREPARING FOR CIVIL WAR" (in all caps), which describes the "atheistic humanism" underlying the concept of living together (*vivre ensemble*) between peoples as "doomed," with a growing percentage of the population becoming monotheistic, especially Muslim. For "European identitarians," a civil war between Muslims and the rest of the population is considered "inevitable" (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 74–75). In these passages, the foundational ideas of replacement narratives—the death of European civilization and its replacement with Muslim culture, or what the far right would call "Islamization"—are present but implicitly expressed. Houellebecq avoids using the overly polemical idea of a forceful "grand remplacement," preferring instead to create an atmosphere of gradual "submission," whereby societal changes unfold through conformism, fatigue, or personal opportunism. He, therefore, does not directly reference far-right discourse but rather far-right interdiscourse.

Additional far-right themes in this interdiscourse include the concept of so-called "Islamism-leftism." In another passage, a colleague of the narrator, Robert Rediger, exposes Islamism-leftism as "a desperate attempt by decomposing, decaying Marxists, in a state of clinical death, to climb out of the trash of history by clinging to the rising forces of Islam" (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 289). Here again, the passage repeats all the commonplaces of the far right, particularly the criticism of a progressive intelligentsia that is accused of complacency towards Islamism. Interestingly, the author even takes the liberty of using the neologism "islamogauchisme," which, while widely used in far-right conspiracy rhetoric, did not originate there (Taguieff,



2002). These two examples clearly demonstrate Houellebecq's mastery of discursive capital and his knowledge of the stigma and potential social and legal repercussions of using each term.

However, Houellebecq's strategy in *Submission* extends beyond merely avoiding ideologically charged terms. For instance, he presents the Islamist political party as "moderate," despite its fundamentalist nature, which is evident in its promotion of gender segregation, the imposition of Islamic law in schools, and the relegation of women to traditional roles. This framing seems designed to make the reader believe that practices already implemented today, such as halal certification requirements in public institutions or the normalization of wearing the Islamic veil, are themselves signs of creeping fundamentalism that society naively chooses to overlook. However, this interpretation is deeply problematic and reductive, as it conflates cultural or religious practices with extremism, erasing important nuances. Similarly, the protagonist's eventual conversion to Islam in the final chapter—whose narration is entirely written in the conditional tense in French, likely to protect the author—appears crafted to suggest the inevitability of Islam's dominance. Houellebecq thus employs these narrative strategies to lead the reader toward politically charged conclusions that would demand critical examination rather than uncritical acceptance.

According to Raphaël Baroni, "the text thus provides form, but the thought seems like an epiphany to the reader, who feels they could be the author, or at least, could assume responsibility for the statement, as it resonates with their world" (Baroni, 2022, p. 50). Indeed, Houellebecq's novels transcend individual perspectives because they import an already ubiquitous far-right ideology embedded in political and media contexts. Readers rooted in such contexts find Houellebecq's works to be an extension of their own echo chambers (Sunstein, 2002); they encounter in the writer a like-minded individual who reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. Houellebecq does not simplify an otherwise complex world; rather, by reinforcing pre-existing views, he lends them greater legitimacy, granting readers a sense of political competence.

By contrast, Raspail lacked the opportunity to draw upon an already ubiquitous far-right ideology embedded in political and media contexts. When he published *The Camp of the Saints* in 1973, immigration had begun to emerge as a theme in far-right discourse, particularly through the newly founded National Front party (the predecessor of the current National Rally). While immigration became a central pillar of the party's platform in the 1980s, particularly during the 1983 municipal elections in Dreux, it was already an important component of its nationalist rhetoric in the early 1970s (Mayer & Perrineau, 1996).

At the same time, racism during this period was deeply intertwined with colonial issues, especially in the aftermath of the bloody decolonization war with Algeria. These themes permeate *The Camp of the Saints*, with immigrants symbolizing the "Third World" (Raspail, 1985, pp. 113, 309) and the author referencing far-right opposition to Algerian independence, specifically mentioning the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS). He also evokes Edith Piaf's song *Non, Rien de Rien*, which served as the anthem for the 1st Foreign Parachute Regiment, involved in the 1961 Algiers coup that rejected de Gaulle's proposal for Algeria's independence (Raspail, 1985, p. 332). These references unmistakably align with far-right discourse, which—alongside the many direct racial implications—prevented Raspail from achieving broader recognition.

### 3.2. Depoliticizing Racism

Another example of the use of discursive capital is the strategic depoliticization of racism. In *Submission*, the character Rediger speaks of “his former traditionalist and identitarian comrades” and their “irrational hostility toward Islam” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 290). The expression “irrational hostility” supposes that Islamophobia (Geisser, 2003; Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013) is an emotional, individual, and even excusable phenomenon (a fear of the unknown). This is an example of the psychologization of racism, which tends to minimize the social structures and power dynamics that perpetuate it on a larger scale. Such a framing tends to obscure the political dimension of racism, rendering invisible the influence of institutions in the reproduction of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Feagin, 2006; Lipsitz, 1995; Omi, 2014).

*Submission*’s banalization of racism echoes the psychologization of racism present in Houellebecq’s media appearances following the trial related to his earlier book *Platform* (2001), for which he was sued by several Muslim and antiracist associations. One of the incriminating passages in *Platform* featured the narrator, Michel, who, after his companion died in a terrorist attack, expressed his hatred of Palestinians:

Islam had broken my life, and Islam was certainly something I could hate; in the following days, I committed myself to hating Muslims...every time I heard about a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child, or a pregnant Palestinian woman being shot in Gaza, I felt a thrill of enthusiasm at the thought that there was one less Muslim. (Houellebecq, 2001, p. 338)

In an interview with Lire, Houellebecq responded:

Revenge is a feeling I have never had the opportunity to experience. But in the situation he finds himself in, it is normal that Michel [the grieving character] would want as many Muslims killed as possible...yes, yes, revenge exists. Islam is a dangerous religion, and it has been since its inception. (Sénécal, 2001)

Here, Houellebecq asserts that Michel’s violent statements should be interpreted within the context of the fictional events surrounding his narrative—i.e., the desire for revenge grows out of grief, which, in turn, justifies racism. In the novel’s logic, Islam is largely equated with Arab identity, making the hostility toward Muslims inseparable from racialized assumptions. Using grief to excuse racism reduces racism to an individual problem rather than seeing it as a system of institutional and historical discrimination. Psychologization frames it as a set of individual behaviors stemming from factors such as personal suffering. This perspective focuses on the psychological or emotional dimensions of individuals rather than on the systemic, cultural, or historical aspects of racism. In doing so, Houellebecq suggests that racism is a natural and inevitable behavior we have to accept.

This psychologization is also accompanied by a trivialization and normalization of racism (Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991). In the first part of *Submission*, the author describes the existence of an “extreme right” marked by “antisemitism” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 55), which brings “a forgotten thrill of fascism” into debates (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 54–55), and even mentions “far-right militants” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 58) who have committed violent acts. However, this label seems reserved solely for the most extreme elements of the far-right movement and not for the National Front, despite its official classification as part of the extreme right by the French Constitutional Council—a body that reviews the legality of

elections and political designations in France (Libération & AFP, 2024). In *Submission*, Marine Le Pen is referred to only as the “national candidate” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 117) or “the national leader” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 121), National Front supporters are called “national activists” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 127), and Identitarians are described as being “neither racist nor fascist” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 268).

Another example of the banalization of racism is Houellebecq’s deliberate choice to attribute a positive ethos to a character clearly aligned with the far right. A former member of the Identitarians and the author of a philosophy thesis titled “Guénon, Reader of Nietzsche” (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 258, 268), Rediger is consistently portrayed in a positive light, as a figure “of good taste [and] extremely reassuring” (Houellebecq, 2015, pp. 254–255), making him ideologically reliable.

Houellebecq’s banalization of racism is also evident beyond his texts. In a 1999 interview promoting *Platform*, the writer told the Austrian magazine *Profil* that: “It’s not so bad to be racist...everyone is racist” (Krug, 2023, p. 99). In 2002, he wrote a short text, “Europe Endless,” and sent it to Les Amis de Michel Houellebecq, his fan club, to be published on their website. In this text, he writes: “There is nothing easier to combat than racism,” and “the real goal [of the French ‘moral left’] is not to ‘fight against racism’ but to create a new kind of racism...anti-white racism” (Krug, 2023, p. 97). The notion of anti-white racism shifts the focus of conversations about discrimination, creating an equivalence between the systemic racism faced by racialized groups and the frustrations or grievances that some white individuals may experience.

Conversely, in Raspail’s *Camp of the Saints*, racism is not trivialized but rather assumed and legitimized as a necessary measure to protect the “white race,” given its “extreme vulnerability” (Raspail, 1985, p. 112), from “destruction” (Raspail, 1985, p. 315). Raspail evokes the notion of “a Western lifestyle among people of the same race” (Raspail, 1985, p. 364), which he argues would be under threat from an “inexorable racial war that nothing could stop” (Raspail, 1985, p. 173). He also addresses the theme of antiracism, particularly denouncing the decolonizing mindset within French society and the exposure of the racist foundations of France’s colonial policy. Raspail describes this as a “racial problem” that has been “created out of nothing in the heart [of] the white world to subjugate this white world to the will of ‘moral leaders’” (Raspail, 1985, p. 42). This reflects a familiar tactic of denying accusations of racism, but in Raspail’s view, it serves to amplify the power of these left-wing moral leaders, which further intensifies the conspiratorial tone of his remarks. Whereas Houellebecq implicitly denies the societal and systemic nature of racism, Raspail outright denies the existence of a “racial problem” (Raspail, 1985, p. 42) altogether.

### 3.3. Political Gaslighting

By presenting himself—and being presented by critics—as an author who has most successfully captured the zeitgeist of an era, Houellebecq veils any explicit critique of political or social structures behind general reflections on the human condition. By focusing on what are presented as universal themes, he deflects attention from the political implications of his work, encouraging readers to view his insights as timeless truths rather than commentary on specific societal issues. In doing so, Houellebecq leverages his discursive capital to engage in a form of political gaslighting (Beerbohm & Davis, 2023; Rietdijk, 2024), denying any political agenda in his works and thus destabilizing readers’ perception of his texts’ implicit political messages.

His statements in the media, such as “I am not an ideologue” (Kaprièlian, 2021), or describing *Submission* as mere “speculative fiction” (Lancelin, 2015) rather than a critique of societal transformations, reinforce this apolitical guise. Through these disclaimers, Houellebecq manipulates public perception, prompting readers to question whether they are overinterpreting any potential political undertones. This tactic exemplifies political gaslighting: by disavowing a political stance, Houellebecq encourages readers to dismiss critical interpretations as personal misreadings rather than deliberate commentary. This strategy is further embedded within *Submission*, wherein the narrator denies political alignment altogether. In response to a question on patriarchy, the narrator states: “I am not for anything at all” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 43), and even likens his level of political engagement to that of a “towel” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 54)—a blatant declaration of indifference. Houellebecq also absolves himself of any responsibility for the impact of his words, saying: “In France, intellectuals are not meant to be responsible” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 286).

This rhetorical strategy that hinges on provocation to maintain ambiguity can be compared with another well-known tactic common in far-right circles: online trolling. Through ambiguity, Houellebecq forces readers to grapple with moral complexity, questioning whether he is endorsing or critiquing his character’s viewpoints. His narratives often unfold in morally ambiguous worlds where readers must continuously reassess their interpretations. This ambiguity keeps readers engaged, leaving them unsure whether Houellebecq is serious or satirical. Similarly, ambiguity is a central strategy in far-right trolling. Common phrases like “just joking” (Miller-Idriss, 2020; W. Phillips, 2015) or “playing devil’s advocate” allow trolls to maintain plausible deniability (Hochschild & Panetta, 2021). When challenged, trolls may claim their offensive statements were satirical or ironic, shielding themselves from criticism and keeping their true intentions opaque.

In contrast to Houellebecq’s denials, which seek to obscure the political nature of his work and shift responsibility for interpretation onto the reader, Raspail’s statements clarify his intent, ensuring that the audience perceives his critique as explicitly political. His effort to politicize his book and tie it to contemporary political events is especially evident in the updated prefaces of various editions. For instance, in the preface to the 2011 edition, he declares, “This prophecy, we are now living its beginnings” (Raspail, 2011, p. 11). This explicit connection to current events extends to his public statements, such as his interview with the center-right weekly *Le Point* in September 2015 during the height of the European migrant crisis, when he asserted that his book is “inherently part of what is happening” (Mahrane, 2015). Raspail leaves no room for ambiguity, positioning his work within the current political reality and rejecting any claim of neutrality.

Through this juxtaposition, we observe how political gaslighting functions in literature: Houellebecq destabilizes his readers’ interpretations by blurring the lines between description and critique, while Raspail’s openness leaves no room for ambiguity, positioning his work as an unequivocal political statement. This parallel highlights contrasting uses of political messaging in literature. Houellebecq’s subtle evasion complicates readers’ interpretations, effectively dissociating his texts from specific ideologies, while Raspail reinforces his intended message. This divergence underscores the interplay between authorial intent and public perception, suggesting that writers’ extra-textual actions and self-representations can shape the political readings of their works.

This double-coded communication resonates with Houellebecq’s tactic of leaving his readers uncertain about his true stance. However, unlike internet trolls, whose aim is to maintain doubt about the

interpretation of their discourse, Houellebecq has an additional tool to guide this interpretation: his social capital in literary circles. The role of this academic network is to impose a tacit norm regarding the correct interpretation of Houellebecq's works, which almost achieves the status of exegesis. This univocal interpretation can be summed up as follows: Houellebecq's controversial statements and themes are provocations meant to disturb rather than convey any particular political agenda, thereby questioning the separation of his provocations from their social and political implications.

## 4. Social Capital in Extra-Textual Practices

Houellebecq has indeed carefully crafted his public image, strategically managing his media presence to obscure his political leanings. This tactic has enabled him to maintain a sense of ambiguity between left and right-wing ideologies, which has been crucial for his commercial success and intellectual credibility. He has further bolstered his legitimacy through active engagement in influential circles, such as the media, public intellectual networks, and political spheres, playing an ambivalent game of a supposed "marginalized" voice that is simultaneously welcome in many influential media circles (Harris, 2022).

### 4.1. The Use of Political Ambiguity

On October 9, 1991, Houellebecq published his first article in the far-right journal *L'Idiot International*, ultimately contributing five press reviews to the publication by February 1992—though these pieces went largely unnoticed at the time. Later, after becoming a more celebrated author, he published several collections of his articles from the 1990s under the title *Interventions*. These collections included his contributions to the communist literary journal *Les Lettres Françaises*, the left-wing cultural weekly *Les Inrockuptibles*, the women's magazine *20 Ans*, and the mainstream celebrity-focused magazine *Paris Match*; however, as Krug (2023, p. 41) points out, *Interventions* makes no mention of his contributions to *L'Idiot International*.

Houellebecq's first essay and collection of poetry were published by Éditions du Rocher, a publisher primarily associated with right-wing and far-right authors. In 1991, at a cocktail party held in honor of Marc-Édouard Nabe's anti-semitic book *Au Régat des Vermines*, Houellebecq met Dominique Noguez, who would become a close friend and a key supporter. With Noguez's assistance (Krug, 2023, p. 15), Houellebecq published his first novel in 1994 with Maurice Nadeau, who was known for publishing left-wing authors. Once Houellebecq had one foot out of right-wing circles, he was picked up by Raphaël Sorin of Flammarion, with whom he published *Les Particules Élémentaires* in 1998. After this initial critical success, Sorin promised him commercial success.

From then on, Houellebecq's public image underwent a radical transformation, thanks to the meticulous marketing strategy implemented by Sorin and Flammarion. The media promotion of Houellebecq's subsequent books adhered to a strict formula: prioritizing extensive interviews in left-wing media while limiting appearances in right-wing media to an absolute minimum. The promotion of *Submission* followed the same rule, with Flammarion engaging several left-wing outlets, such as public radio broadcaster France Inter's morning show, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and interviews in *Les Inrockuptibles*, and only one right-wing press outlet, *Le Figaro Magazine* (Krug, 2023, p. 179).

Sorin himself was adept at navigating murky waters, successfully publishing both leftist authors and, later, those associated with far-right ideologies. Since 2012, he has served as the literary director of Le Ring, a far-right website-turned-publishing-house, which has sparked controversy over its far-right authors, such as the racist and sexist comic strip Marsault and the far-right YouTuber Papacito. Through this strategic choice of publishers and media appearances, Houellebecq has managed to shape his perception among different segments of the public.

The left-wing literary magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* has played a key role in shaping Houellebecq's public image, acting as a useful ally by offering him a leftist stamp of approval, often without reading between the lines. The editors saw in Houellebecq only what they wanted to see—primarily his critique of economic liberalism and global capitalism. It was this economically anti-liberal Houellebecq that initially captivated left-wing readers, especially at *Les Inrockuptibles*. Houellebecq long maintained this aura of a left-wing author (Cruikshank, 2009), even after publishing the translation of what was intended to be his last interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, framed as “Houellebecq's Final Confession,” in the far-right weekly *Valeurs Actuelles*.

Houellebecq's ambiguous aura was further diminished after receiving the Oswald Spengler Prize in 2018. The prize was given by David Engels, a regular contributor to *The European Conservative* (Engels, 2019), a journal associated with the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament, which is led by far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and includes both ultranationalist and mainstream conservative elements. Since 2021, *The European Conservative* has been published with support from the Fidesz-funded Batthyány Lajos Foundation (Rivera, 2024, p. 8). The Oswald Spengler Society lists Max Otte as its treasurer, who made headlines in 2022 when he was named as the AfD candidate for the German presidential election while still a member of the mainstream CDU party (“Germany: AfD nominates member,” 2022), which led to his expulsion from the latter (“Max Otte nach AfD,” 2022). During a trip on which Houellebecq met both Engels and Otte, he was accompanied by *Valeurs Actuelles* editor Geoffroy Lejeune, who later recounted their trip in a special issue. This issue served as an informal interview, even though Houellebecq had already claimed he would no longer speak to the press (d'Ornellas, 2017).

To maintain his ambiguous political positioning despite his increasingly visible far-right connections after 2017, Houellebecq sent mixed signals when he appeared with *Valeurs Actuelles*. For instance, in 2018, the magazine organized a European debate in which Houellebecq appeared alongside the far-right, sovereigntist (a European political stance advocating national sovereignty over supranational governance, somewhat analogous to the “states' rights” position in American federalism), and monarchist figures Philippe de Villiers and Éric Zemmour, the latter being the leader of the far-right Reconquête party. At the event, Houellebecq remarked: “Nationalism isn't my thing,” and confessed that he would have preferred desertion over fighting for France, adding with a smile to the audience, “Sorry, that's not very right-wing of me” (Krug, 2023, pp. 189–190).

However, Houellebecq's political positioning has shifted more dramatically in recent years. His participation in the royalist far-right Action Française-affiliated Cercle de Flore in July 2022 (Krug, 2023, p. 215) and his interview for a special issue of the far-right-leaning revue *Front Populaire* in December of that year demonstrated this shift. The virulence of his statements in the interview was described as “a further step in his radicalization towards the far right” (Bherer, 2022). Following this publication, the Grand Mosque of Paris announced its intent to file a lawsuit against Houellebecq for “incitement to hatred against Muslims,” which



led to his retraction and the reformulation of those passages that might have exposed him to legal liability. The shift culminated in January 2023, when the left-wing magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, which had long supported Houellebecq's political ambiguity, finally disavowed him (Kaprièlian, 2023). This repudiation by a former left-wing support base, combined with the backlash from the *Front Populaire* controversy, has clarified his political positioning and sparked a debate regarding the relevance of his previously held left-wing label.

In contrast to Houellebecq, Raspail has perpetually maintained an openly far-right stance. He notably served for several years on the National Committee of the Party of New Forces (PFN), a minor offshoot of the National Front (Charpier, 2005). In 2013, he was listed as an honorary member of *Secours de France*, an association created in 1961 to support OAS detainees, alongside other members such as Jacques Isorni (Marshall Pétain's lawyer), Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour (a far-right figure and lawyer for OAS militants), and Georges Bidault and Pierre Sergent (two OAS leaders). That same year, *Secours de France* also helped organize the far-right "Manif pour tous" demonstrations in opposition to gay marriage (Mestre & Monnot, 2013b).

Raspail has also been associated with the TV Libertés project, a French far-right web TV channel launched in 2014 by Martial Bild, a former senior member of the National Front who, like Raspail, was also a member of the PFN (Mestre & Monnot, 2013a). At Raspail's funeral in June 2020, attendees included Philippe de Villiers, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen (the niece of Marine Le Pen who was closely aligned with Zemmour at the time), businessman Charles Beigbeder (brother of the author Frédéric Beigbeder and patron of the far-right Identitarian movement), former PFN members such as Jean-Pax Méfret, Anne Méaux of the far-right Catholic journal *Présent*, and a delegation from *Valeurs Actuelles* (Krug, 2023, p. 81). Unlike Houellebecq, Raspail never attempted to craft a nonpartisan identity or align himself with left-wing ideas or circles.

## 4.2. Gaining Academic Recognition

Academic networks have played a critical role in building Houellebecq's legitimacy by interpreting his political statements as evidence of his status as a welcome troublemaker and the "bad boy" of French literature. He has been the subject of numerous conferences and colloquia, as well as special issues of respected journals such as *Études Littéraires* and *Revue des Sciences Humaines*. Several scholars have specialized in his work, including Novak-Lechevalier (2018) and Viard (2008), a professor at Aix-Marseille University. Scholars outside of France have also specialized in Houellebecq's work, such as Ruth Cruickshank of the Royal Holloway University of London, who has celebrated his "aesthetic of crisis" (Sweeney, 2011) and John McCann of the University of Ulster, who considers Houellebecq to be the "author of our time" (McCann, 2010). Scholars have even compared Houellebecq to other renowned writers, such as van Wesemael (2014) at the University of Amsterdam, who has compared him to Marcel Proust, and Morrey (2013) at the University of Warwick, who has likened him to Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

The way Houellebecq's work is interpreted seems to emerge as a collaborative construction between the author and his academic critics. In 2012, Bruno Viard organized the first French colloquium dedicated to Houellebecq's writings, with Houellebecq engaging in what Viard described as "active participation" in the three-day analysis of his work (Viard, 2013, p. 8). The creation of an exegesis of Houellebecq's work thus appears to involve an ongoing dialogue between him and his critics, with each party often taking up the arguments of the other. Commentators attempting to address Houellebecq's racist, sexist, or Islamophobic underpinnings have been accused of imposing moral judgements or politicizing literary art, thereby reinforcing



the idea that literature lies beyond ideological scrutiny. This framing creates a polarized reception: readers are implicitly positioned to either admire Houellebecq's worldview or risk being dismissed as proponents of political correctness (Fassin, 2009, p. 267).

Houellebecq's academic supporters often claim that his stark portrayals of Western society are not endorsements but analyses of societal undercurrents: he is not advocating but merely exploring. For instance, Novak-Lechevalier (2018, p. 52) has interpreted Houellebecq's literature as a "metaphysical questioning," and Viard (2013, p. 83) has called it an "existential critique by a philosophical moralist," rather than a prescriptive ideological stance. According to Novak-Lechevalier (2018, p. 52), an ideological reading of Houellebecq would therefore "obliterate the frontier between political discourse and fiction." However, even when Houellebecq's works are framed as explorations, the repeated portrayal of racist, sexist, or Islamophobic perspectives is never neutral; they are depicted as valid responses to societal issues rather than views to be interrogated.

Houellebecq's academic defenders have also contextualized his provocations within a tradition of French literary transgression, drawing comparisons to predecessors like Baudelaire (Noguez, 2003), Céline (Alves, 2018; Bardolle, 2004; Bellanger, 2012; Chourrout, 2022), and Genet (Mbina, 2017), who were notorious for challenging societal and literary norms. But while they were challenging prevailing norms, Houellebecq's provocations focus disproportionately on socially vulnerable rather than dominant targets—women, Muslims, and queer people—which positions his work less as an avant-garde challenge to dominant taboos and more as an attack on marginalized groups that transcends mere transgression. From this perspective, Houellebecq's shock tactics are seen as a form of literary (Demonpion, 2005)—or even marketing (Patricola & Vebret, 2005)—performance, integral to his constructed artistic persona rather than as serious ideological stances. However, such arguments overlook the fact that literature can both challenge norms and be politically impactful and they dismiss the responsibility an author holds as a public figure.

On January 6, 2015, following the publication of *Submission*, Houellebecq appeared on national television to be interviewed by famous news anchor David Pujadas. During the interview, Pujadas repeatedly questioned Houellebecq with lines like: "Do you agree? Do you share this view? Do you feel this personally?"—a clear attempt to push the author into admitting that the narrator's voice was his own. Pujadas' insistence on interrogating Houellebecq rather than exploring the novel itself highlights a problematic approach. By focusing on the author's personal stance rather than examining the polyphonic complexity of the text, this line of questioning overlooks a crucial point: the importance lies not in authorial intent but in critically engaging with the universal "truths" Houellebecq suggests within his work.

Houellebecq's strategic deployment of political ambiguity exemplifies how controversial rhetoric can gain legitimacy within mainstream discourse. His approach, often downplayed by his defenders as either provocative or ironic, has facilitated the mainstreaming (Mondon, 2022; Mondon & Winter, 2020, 2024) of exclusionary ideas through a careful blending of self-distancing irony, selective media engagement, and the tacit endorsement of an intellectual network. By presenting his ideologically charged narratives under the guise of satire, Houellebecq has crafted a literary persona that claims freedom from accountability while simultaneously asserting insights into societal issues. This ambiguity has enabled him to deflect criticisms that focus on the problematic content of his work, leading to a whitewashing of his far-right rhetoric under a veil of intellectualism and cultural commentary.

In Raspail's work, however, there is little room for ambiguity in interpretation. Although there are rare passages that call for irony, these serve primarily to emphasize the paradoxical nature of an avoidable catastrophe, as exemplified by the line: "women raped [by the immigrants]...amidst the white sheets they had spread out as a sign of welcome" (Raspail, 1985, p. 321). This irony is meant to highlight the naivety of these women, which parallels a broader naivety about the existence of a "universal conscience" (Raspail, 1985, p. 41) and an assumed natural solidarity between all people, a belief that is upheld by "the Western left" (Raspail, 1985, p. 72).

Such language ultimately reinforces the notion that the catastrophe at the heart of *The Camp of the Saints* could have been avoided if others—those aware of the "incompatibility of races" (Raspail, 1985, p. 364)—had been in power; in other words, if the far right had maintained control, which further reinforces the political interpretation of the text. This unambiguous political framing is the reason why Raspail is considered a far-right author, excluded from mainstream literature, and thus frequently overlooked in academic circles. For example, 24 doctoral theses on Houellebecq were defended between 2004 and 2024, compared to none on Raspail; there are also numerous academic articles and books on Houellebecq, compared to just one academic article on Raspail (Moura, 1988).

#### 4.3. Celebrity Networks to Bypass Political Correctness

To deal with the scandalous atmosphere that has surrounded the publication of *Submission*, Houellebecq has relied on his extensive connections in media and literary circles to ensure that his work is received, commented on, and appreciated in a way that aligns with his own objectives. By making strategic media appearances, he has shaped the public narrative surrounding his novels and influenced how his books are discussed. The cultural reception of a book depends on how effectively the author can manipulate these forms of capital to gain legitimacy from key gatekeepers, such as publishers, critics, media outlets, and academic institutions.

Within these networks, several distinct spheres of influence can be identified. Literary circles themselves play a crucial role, particularly through prestigious literary prizes like the Goncourt, which Houellebecq received for *La Carte et le Territoire*. His publisher, Flammarion, has been instrumental in creating sophisticated marketing campaigns to promote him. He has regularly appeared on television, including notable appearances on *La Grande Librairie* on France 5, a major program devoted to literature that reaches a broad audience. He has also benefited from the support of fellow writer Frédéric Beigbeder, who founded the literary Prix de Flore that Houellebecq won in 1994, and who has regularly invited Houellebecq to *Le Cercle* on Canal+, which he anchors (Harris, 2022).

The media world has followed. Figures like Franz-Olivier Giesbert, former director of *Le Point* (a center-right publication) and *Figaro Magazine* (a right-wing one), have publicly supported Houellebecq on several occasions, writing articles about him and giving him a platform to express his views. Publications such as *Le Monde* (which is center-left) or even *Libération* (which is leftist) have also devoted numerous articles to him, and even when they are critical, they have consolidated Houellebecq's status as a leading figure of contemporary French literature. Houellebecq has also benefited from the support of Philippe Sollers, a writer and literary critic: both men have published their epistolary exchanges, positioning Houellebecq as an unavoidable figure within the French cultural field.

Even ideologically opposed figures, such as Bernard-Henri Lévy—a public philosopher known for his advocacy of hawkish liberal interventionism—have engaged with Houellebecq in intellectual exchanges. Despite their differences, both men have published their epistolary exchanges in *Ennemis Publics* (2008), in which Houellebecq states that his novels primarily aim to express “a general human truth” (Houellebecq & Lévy, 2008, p. 233), addressing “human issues—some universal, others specific to Western societies” (Houellebecq & Lévy, 2008, p. 241). This degree of recognition by Lévy thus suggests that Houellebecq is not only a writer but a figure whose works reflect a broader political and philosophical worldview.

Houellebecq has also been supported by a wide range of conservative public thinkers, such as Alain Finkielkraut, a philosopher critical of modernity and known for his long-running weekly radio show *Répliques*, which first aired in 1985. Michel Onfray, another public intellectual who founded the sovereigntist and anti-liberal quarterly *Front Populaire*, has also given Houellebecq a platform to disseminate his ideas on several occasions. For instance, in November 2022, in an interview with Onfray in *Front Populaire*, Houellebecq stated that the great replacement was “not a theory but a fact” (Houellebecq & Onfray, 2022, p. 40) and that “the only chance for survival” would be for “white supremacism to become ‘fashionable’ in the US” (Houellebecq & Onfray, 2022, p. 30). He then went on to declare: “What the native French population hopes for, as we said, is not that Muslims assimilate but that they stop stealing and attacking. Or, another solution would be, that they leave” (Houellebecq & Onfray, 2022, p. 31). This interview—even though he retracted some of its formulations later once the ensuing scandal erupted—sounded the death knell of Houellebecq’s two decades of political ambiguity, confirming his transformation into a beacon of far-right thinking.

Houellebecq has also benefited from direct political support, particularly from right-wing politicians, such as Éric Ciotti, the former president of Les Républicains (LR) and leader of the far-right party Union des Droites pour la République, who has cited Houellebecq as a key reference for his own critiques of France’s social decline (Sulzer & Laurent, 2023). Additionally, the rise of French tycoon Vincent Bolloré, who has transformed his commercial empire into a far-right-leaning media powerhouse similar to Rupert Murdoch’s in the US, has also played a significant role in mainstreaming Houellebecq’s worldview and promoting the far-right agenda more broadly (Lévrier, 2024).

Last but not least, Houellebecq has become acquainted with former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) and his wife, Carla Bruni. Sarkozy expressed his admiration for Houellebecq, seeing him as one of the leading poets of our time and an author with lucid insight into today’s world (Chassagnon, 2018). Bruni wrote a song based on a poem by Houellebecq, confirming how much France’s jet-set elite, of which she has been a central figure, has been drawn to provocative figures such as him (K, 2008). Another key figure in Houellebecq’s integration into these circles has been Geoffroy Lejeune, who left *Valeurs Actuelles* to become editor-in-chief of the formerly more centrist weekly, *Le Journal du Dimanche*. It was Lejeune who put Houellebecq in touch with Bruno-Roger Petit, an advisor on memory policy to President Emmanuel Macron. It was through this connection, along with his relationship with the Sarkozy couple, that Houellebecq was awarded his membership in the prestigious Légion d’honneur by President Emmanuel Macron in 2019. This award was largely attributed to his novel *Sérotonine*, which explores the suffering of rural France and resonated widely in the context of the Yellow Vests protest movement. Sarkozy, as well as several of Houellebecq’s literary friends, attended the ceremony (Faye, 2019).

## 5. Conclusion

These two tales of Houellebecq's and Raspail's divergent public reception reveal several changes in context. First, in the 1970s, the impermeability between the mainstream right, which was largely supportive of the liberal-democratic status quo, and the far right, which was still very much a fringe element, meant that Raspail's work was unable to reach a broad audience. In contrast, today's permeability between a weakened mainstream right and a far right that is now fully normalized has allowed Houellebecq to easily transcend the boundaries of what is politically acceptable. A second change in context relates to the boundaries between politics, media, and culture: in the 1970s, these realms were less fluid than today, a time when they have been largely blended, thus rendering France, like all other developed Western democracies, a "mediacracy" (K. Phillips, 1975). Third, the two authors did not wield the same kind of discursive and social capital: Houellebecq has mastered the fluidity and hybridity of language and public positioning, unlike Raspail, whose far-right language and stances were more rigid and explicit.

Obviously, the ideological effects of literature, particularly that produced by a single author, are difficult to conclusively prove and can only be postulated. The deflection of criticism through the use of a public persona may complicate accountability and Houellebecq has excellent skills in writing in a polyphonic way, with characters embodying different ideological stances. Whatever the author's goal, readers are never passive recipients of ideology but active interpreters of a text. As Barthes (1977) argues in *The Death of the Author*, the meaning of a text is shaped as much by the reader's interpretation as by the author's intent, thus emphasizing the active role of readers in deriving meaning from literature and therefore the role of the social and cultural context in which books circulate.

Houellebecq's successful manipulation of social and discursive capital highlights a significant mechanism through which illiberal ideas can permeate mainstream discourse while evading widespread criticism. By using his influential position and rephrasing controversial views in a more palatable language, Houellebecq has succeeded in diffusing racist, sexist, or Islamophobic perspectives that reinforce negative stereotypes without incurring the full brunt of public backlash. In contrast, figures like Jean Raspail have experienced markedly less tolerance for disseminating comparable ideas, underscoring how social and discursive capital can serve as powerful shields for controversial ideologies.

Though the Houellebecq case is far from unique, it reveals the ability of illiberal values to circulate in infra-political spaces such as the literary realm, as well as media and public intellectual circles, which act as powerbrokers between politics and culture. While the majority of academic research on Houellebecq has focused on his artistic intent—a domain wherein normative judgement is unwelcome—an approach that moves away from intent-based accusations and instead analyzes the ideologies literary works propagate appears more heuristic. Ultimately, Houellebecq's case illustrates how far-right ideas can be normalized because the boundaries between fiction and ideological commentary are inherently blurry, inviting scholarship to explore in greater depth the role of cultural ecosystems in promoting illiberalism.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**Périne Schir** is a research fellow at the Illiberalism Studies Program and the Transnational History of the Far Right Project at George Washington University. She is a PhD student in political philosophy at the University of Rouen Normandy. Her research explores the diffusion of illiberal ideas in France through literature and their legitimization beyond traditional political spaces. By examining how these ideas permeate cultural spheres, she analyzes their role in the broader rightward shift of public discourse and the mainstreaming of far-right narratives.



**Marlène Laruelle** (PhD) is a research professor of international affairs and political science at the Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University, where she is also the director of the Illiberalism Studies Program and the former director of the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies. Trained in political theory, she explores the notion of illiberalism and how nationalism and conservative values are becoming mainstream in different cultural contexts. She has recently edited the *Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

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

Péter Radó<sup>1,2</sup> and Bálint Mikola<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

**Correspondence:** Bálint Mikola ([mikolab@ceu.edu](mailto:mikolab@ceu.edu))

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## Abstract

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

## Keywords

cultural policy; education policy; Hungary; illiberalism; Poland

## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Case Selection and Methods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 6. Educational and Cultural Policymaking

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

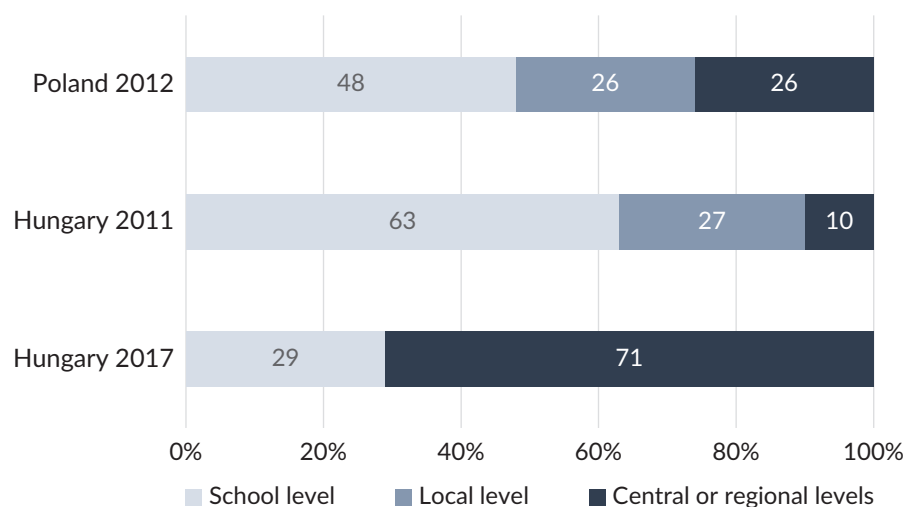
The instruments employed in educational and cultural policymaking by illiberal governments largely depend on the governance context (Rindzevičiūtė, 2021). This may be influenced by stakeholder involvement in the policymaking process, rent-seeking dynamics, decision-making structures, policy implementation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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## 6.2. Framing Illiberal Educational and Cultural Policy Narratives

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### **6.3. The Outcomes of Educational and Cultural Policies**

#### **6.3.1. Educational Policies**

Despite similar ideological orientations, the educational policies of Hungary's Fidesz government and Poland's PiS government have had markedly different impacts on educational quality. While the Fidesz administration has caused substantial harm, PiS's policies have been comparatively less damaging. However, neither government has demonstrated a commitment to improving educational performance as measured by international standards.

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

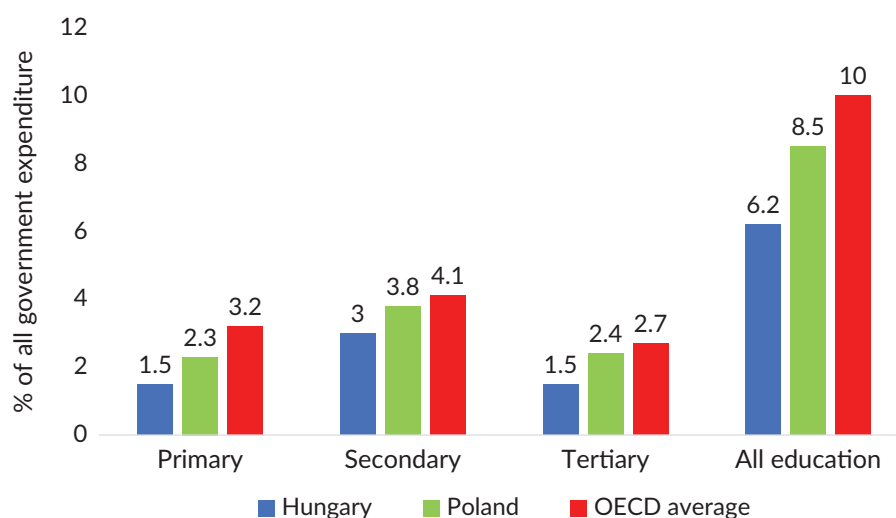
PiS, as reflected in government funding levels.

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

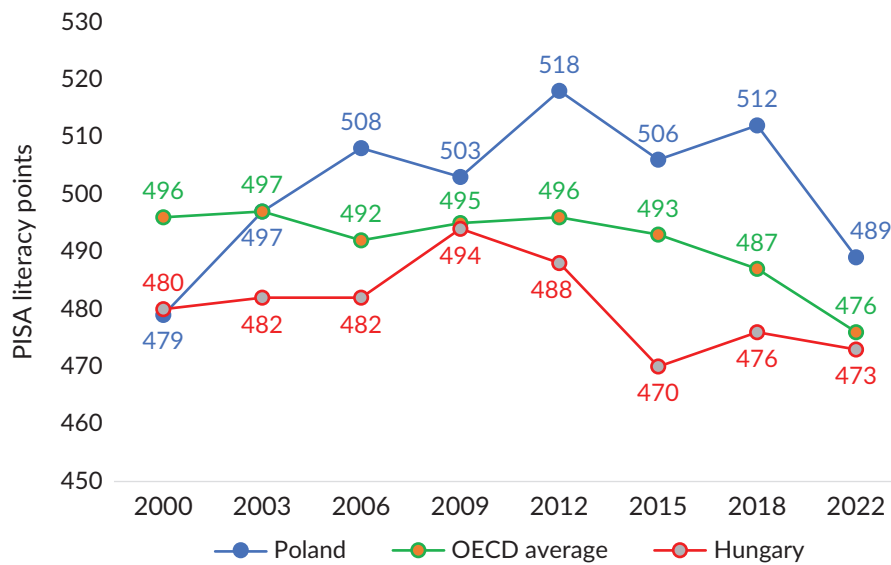
A wide range of indicators can be applied to assess educational policy outcomes internationally. One significant indicator is the change in average reading literacy performance among 15-year-old students, as recorded by the OECD PISA surveys. Despite being only one of the OECD's many indicators of educational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

At the turn of the century, both Poland and Hungary performed below OECD averages. As shown in Figure 3, Poland experienced a sharp improvement following a successful education reform in 1998, eventually aligning with Scandinavian countries in key performance criteria. However, the 2022 PISA results revealed a sharp decline in Polish students' reading performance, with scores dropping by 23 points. This decline is largely attributed to the impact of Covid-19 school closures, making it difficult to assess the extent of PiS's responsibility for the drop. Notably, the increasing social selectivity of Polish education reflects the policies implemented by PiS, as they reinstated a pre-reform school structure.

In contrast, Hungary experienced a slower improvement in educational performance until 2009, followed by a "transformational recession" (Kornai, 1993) due to the Fidesz government's radical restructuring efforts



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

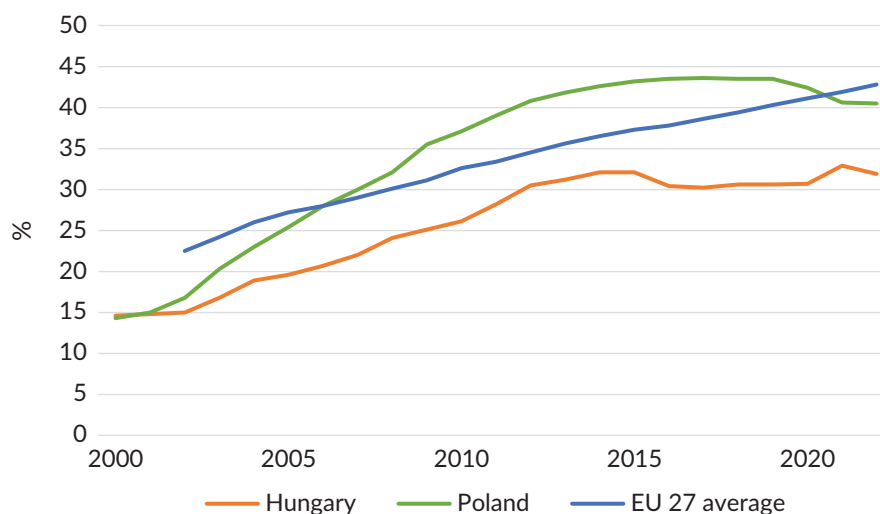


**Figure 3.** The change in reading literacy performance of 15-year-old students in Hungary and Poland between 2000 and 2022. Source: OECD (2022).

between 2011 and 2015. The almost complete education system reshuffle has significantly hindered educational outcomes, placing Hungary's education system far below the OECD average by 2015. Furthermore, according to the 2022 PISA results, Hungary now operates the most selective education system in Europe (Horn et al., 2016) and, even in global comparisons, demonstrates a severely diminished capacity to compensate for social disadvantages effectively.

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

The effects of educational policies can also be assessed in relation to the ideological objectives of the ruling parties. While data for a precise evaluation remain scarce, existing research suggests that the influence of government-issued curricula on teaching content is often overestimated in Central and Eastern Europe (Halász, 2020). Likewise, the extent to which indoctrination shapes students' values and identities tends to be exaggerated. Although the suppression of critical thinking has been found to affect individuals' sense of agency (Costa-Font et al., 2024) and respect for authority (Diwan & Vartanova, 2020), these effects are significant only when comparing across different political regimes—i.e., between autocracies and democracies. Even though both Poland and Hungary experienced democratic backsliding during the observed period (Coppedge et al., 2024), it is unlikely that the limited policy instruments employed by their illiberal governments had a substantial impact on children's socialisation within this timespan.



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

### 6.3.2. Cultural Policies

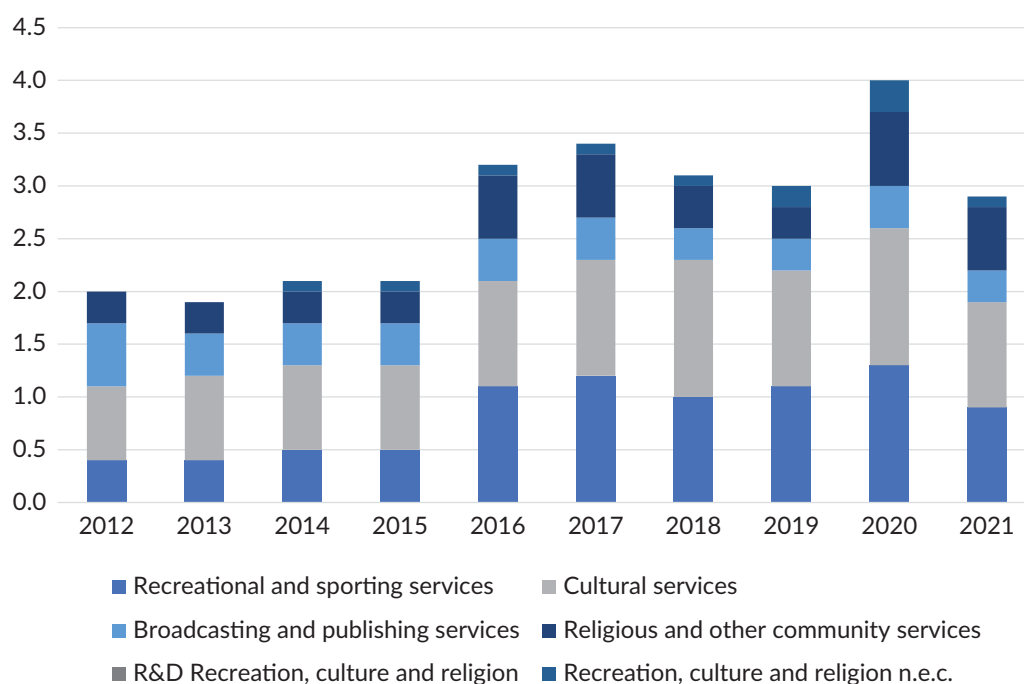
In contrast to education, there are fewer universally accepted indicators for assessing the effectiveness of cultural policies, as cultural performance is less quantifiable and more directly influenced by values. This section evaluates illiberal cultural policies using objective measures, including overall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

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

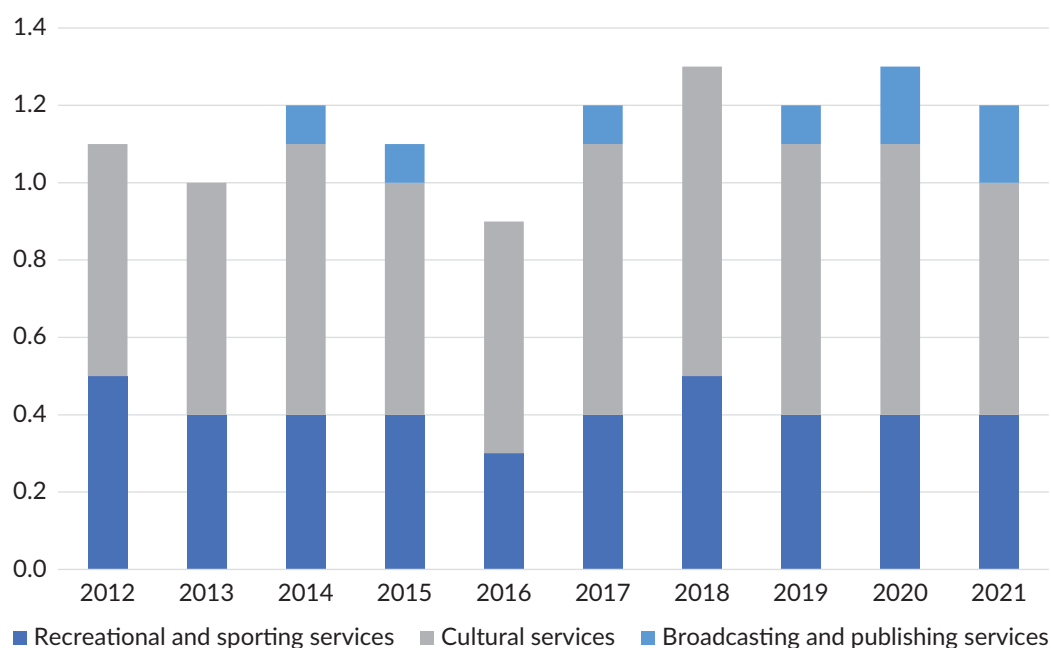
This suggests that the Fidesz government had greater latitude to implement its ideological agenda than PiS. However, the picture becomes more complex when examining subcategories of cultural expenditure. In Hungary, spending on “recreational and sporting services” grew significantly, almost tripling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

Despite these disparities, Hungary consistently allocated more resources to cultural services—such as theatre, film, music, literature, and fine arts—than Poland. Although both countries maintained relatively high levels of cultural expenditure compared to the European Union average (see Figure 7), Fidesz’s substantial investment facilitated a more radical restructuring of cultural institutions. In contrast, in Poland, public broadcasting was the only area with considerable spending increases.

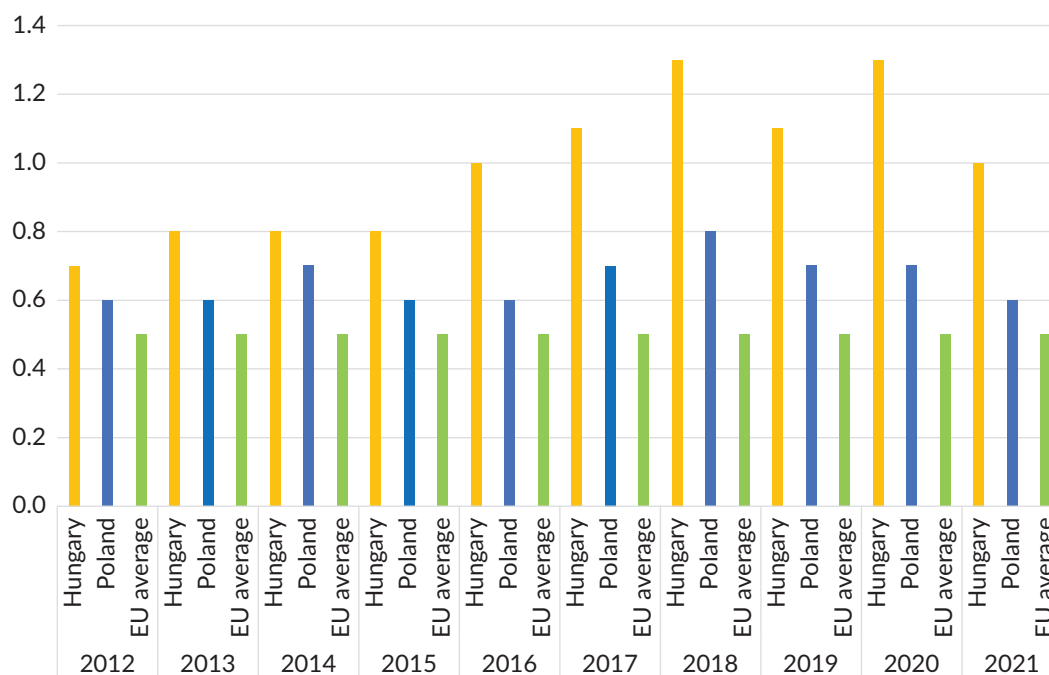
However, government spending alone does not adequately measure the effectiveness of cultural policies, particularly in terms of accessibility, popularity, and inclusivity. Limited evidence suggests that cultural event



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



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



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

attendance increased significantly in Hungary between 2010 and 2018, indicating that cultural consumption may correlate more closely with economic cycles than political agendas (R. E. Barna et al., 2019). As a cultural journalist explained, the most popular artists remained vocally critical of the government, which the government could only mitigate through arbitrary funding decisions:

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

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

Another indicator of cultural output could be the integration of national cultural scenes into international networks, as reflected by touring artists and major international events. Experts interviewed for this study agreed that demand for such events is driven largely by commercial rather than ideological factors, suggesting no significant signs of a “cultural boycott” against Hungary or Poland despite their illiberal tendencies. Moreover, Hungary’s political relevance in international conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine (Wagner et al., 2024), and the government’s anti-LGBTQ rhetoric may have even attracted artists to perform in the country as a form of resistance. This was exemplified by the various demonstrations of pro-LGBTQ solidarity at the 2021 MTV EMA Awards held in Budapest (Gallagher, 2021).

In conclusion, the reallocation of public resources and the institutional takeover for ideological indoctrination have had a limited impact on cultural output and consumption in Hungary and Poland. However, developments



such as the 2023 takeover of Hungary's largest book publisher by a pro-government think-tank merit close scrutiny, as a concentrated market share could facilitate a more significant push for an illiberal narrative in popular culture.

## 7. Conclusions

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

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

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

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

Despite similarities in ideological foundations, the Fidesz and PiS governments have differed markedly in their governance structures for education. Hungary's autocratic-style governance, bolstered by a parliamentary supermajority, has enabled significant systemic institutional changes, whereas PiS largely operated within an inherited decentralised system, making only incremental adjustments. However, the cultural policy environments in both countries are relatively similar, shaped more by artistic freedom and market dynamics, with efforts to channel public funds toward ideologically aligned institutions.

Regarding dominant policy narratives, both governments have shifted away from international norms, instead appealing to the emotions and beliefs of their constituencies. This shift has led to the prioritisation

of propaganda over evidence-based analysis, as both parties have exercised varying degrees of control over media narratives.

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

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

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### Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University), Petra Guasti (Charles University), and Dean Schafer (Mississippi State University).

### Supplementary Material

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

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## About the Authors



**Péter Radó** is an expert on educational policy analysis, planning and evaluation, educational governance, and equity in education. He teaches related courses at Eötvös Loránd University. He led a project on the adaptivity of Central European education systems at CEU Democracy Institute (2019–2021). Péter has over 100 publications, including six books.



**Bálint Mikola** is a researcher at CEU Democracy Institute, focusing on the cultural policies of illiberal parties, political communication, and party organisation. Earlier, he served as head of communications and research at Transparency International Hungary. He has published several papers on intra-party democracy, and has taught at Eötvös Loránd University, CEU, and Milestone Institute.

# Weaponizing Culture: The Role of Illiberal Cultural Policy in Slovenia's Democratic Backsliding

Kristina Čufar <sup>1,2</sup>  and Hana Hawlina <sup>1,3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law Ljubljana, Slovenia

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

**Correspondence:** Kristina Čufar ([kristina.cufar@pf.uni-lj.si](mailto:kristina.cufar@pf.uni-lj.si))

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## Abstract

The weaponization of cultural policy is one of the crucial, yet underexplored strategies of illiberal political actors. This article investigates the multifaceted illiberal cultural policy measures employed to polarize society, influence the interpretation of history, consolidate so-called traditional values and ethnonationalism, and normalize political corruption and increasingly authoritarian political practices. The analysis and typology of illiberal cultural policy measures are based on the case study of a period of extreme illiberalization in Slovenia between 2020 and 2022, which was characterized by overt and frequent political interventions in the artistic and cultural sphere. Rather than treating them as isolated incidents, the article traces their cumulative desired and actual effects, as well as the resistance they provoked. Based on the analysis of the Slovenian case, we propose a typology of illiberal cultural policy measures that is applicable to other contexts experiencing democratic backsliding. Illiberal political actors recognize the significance of art and culture as either the means of reinforcing illiberal ideology and political aims or the site of democratic resistance. By targeting the cultural sphere, illiberal political actors pursue the double goal of amplifying expedient narratives and silencing dissent. Increasing political control over cultural production thus curtails the space for democratic deliberation and permanently reshapes the socio-political landscape. Considering illiberal cultural policy as a pivotal strategy for the indelible transformation of political ideology and practice reveals an important dimension of democratic backsliding and the success of illiberal politics in Europe and beyond.

## Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic; cultural policy; democratic backsliding; illiberalism; memory politics; resistance; Slovenia

## 1. Introduction

Weaponization of cultural policy is one of the crucial strategies of illiberal political actors in their attempts to radically reshape the political landscape. The role of cultural policy in the ideological consolidation of illiberalism has so far received relatively little attention in academic literature, even if cultural politics is foundational for the better-understood illiberal strategies to take root (such as undermining the rule of law, civil liberties, press freedom, and dismantling constitutional checks and balances). This article spotlights the function of cultural policy in democratic backsliding through a case study of illiberal cultural governance of the 14th government of independent Slovenia (henceforth referred to as 14SiGov) between 2020–2022. Based on the case study of systematic suppression of the cultural sphere and its consequences in Slovenia, we construct a typology of illiberal cultural policy measures that can serve as a model for understanding and studying similar tactics in other illiberalizing countries, revealing how illiberalism weaponizes culture to achieve lasting political and ideological transformations.

To contextualize our analysis, we explain our use of terminology and the points of departure through a literature review on illiberal cultural policy in general and in independent Slovenia in particular (Section 2) and proceed by outlining the embedded case study methodology (Section 3), followed by an analysis of key events that illustrate the implementation of illiberal cultural policy in Slovenia (Section 4). The identified measures are organized into a typology that allows for an understanding of the wider ramifications of the crackdown on the cultural sphere in Slovenia and beyond (Section 5). In Section 6, we discuss the broader implications and contributions of our analysis, concluding with a synthesis of the main findings (Section 7).

The effects of illiberal cultural policy in Slovenia persisted even after a change of government, underscoring the need for political imagination that goes beyond the reductive and often corrosive dialectics of liberal and illiberal politics. Art and culture serve as vital arenas for critical reflection and collective engagement with the past, present, and future, making them essential to a democratic society. During the studied period in Slovenia, civil society's creative forms of resistance provided significant opposition to illiberal governance. Nevertheless, illiberal policies intentionally fueled polarization and curtailed the space for meaningful public discussion on societal challenges, limiting the scope of civil activism through a combination of calculated misuse of pandemic measures and cultural interventions. Art and culture, albeit often brushed aside as self-indulgent, provide a crucial yet vulnerable democratic forum; whoever desires to control the cultural script endeavors to suppress dissent and ultimately enforce monolithic consensus.

## 2. Illiberalism and Illiberal Cultural Policy

### 2.1. *Illiberalism: Contested Theories and the Cultural Turn*

The terminology to conceptualize and discuss illiberal cultural policy is still in the process of consolidation, as the trend of illiberal governance has emerged over the past two decades, assuming unique expressions with each iteration. Accordingly, “illiberalism” is a polysemic concept related to (a) democratic backsliding or gradual degradation of previously established democratic standards due to a variety of causes, not necessarily illiberal governance (Waldner & Lust, 2018); (b) authoritarianism or overt sabotage of political accountability through attacks on instruments such as free and fair elections, checks and balances, etc. (Glasius, 2018); and (c) populism or ideologically flexible political rhetoric that juxtaposes the establishment

elites with the people (Müller, 2017). Illiberalism is fueled by populist majoritarian rhetoric, contributes to democratic backsliding, and is often hard to distinguish from outright authoritarianism, yet illiberalism is a distinct political practice and ideology. While hollowing out democratic institutions, illiberalism typically functions within a formally democratic framework and promotes a distinct ideology centered around traditional hierarchies and cultural hegemony (Laruelle, 2022). Illiberal strategies have become increasingly significant in understanding how political power is consolidated through ideological interventions, moving beyond the typical focus on political institutions.

Right-wing ideology is not always recognized as a key feature of illiberalism (Eklundh, 2024), yet our analysis demonstrates that illiberalism builds on shared ideological foundations, adapted to specific contexts. It exists in dialectical relation with liberalism—a political movement grounded in the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment—establishing itself through a critique and rejection of liberal values (e.g., pluralism, universalism, equality, individual autonomy). Instead, illiberalism centers on ethnonationalism, traditionalist conceptions of gender and sexuality, and strongman leadership (Laruelle, 2022, 2024; Smilova, 2021). Beyond merely challenging liberal values, illiberalism actively undermines the principles of political liberalism instituted to prevent excessive majoritarianism via the protection of minorities, checks and balances, and the like (Wagrandl, 2021). It is not merely a rejection of individual rights and freedoms—core tenets of liberalism (cf. Sajó & Uitz, 2021)—but rather emerges from liberalism’s internal contradictions and its failures to realize the declarative ideals of equality and full political participation (Kauth & King, 2020). Illiberal actors, relying on fearmongering and strongmen leadership style, deftly manipulate popular disenchantment with liberal policies and concentrate power in the executive branch (Weinman & Vormann, 2020).

The term illiberal democracy is widely used both in political (Boyle, 2016; Sata & Karolewski, 2023) and academic discourse (Kim, 2023; Wagrandl, 2021; Zakaria, 1997) to describe the transition from constrained liberal democracy to unrestrained but formally democratic governance. Nevertheless, illiberal democracy is criticized as conceptually flawed and insufficient to describe a multitude of neither fully democratic nor conventionally authoritarian “hybrid regimes” (Bogaards, 2009; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Merkel & Croissant, 2004; Møller, 2008; Ottaway, 2009; Schedler, 2006). Exploiting the inner inconsistencies of the liberal democracy framework, populist illiberal actors sway the entire political spectrum towards a new style of political practice (Curran, 2004), normalizing illiberal ideology. Illiberalization was initially perceived as an issue of democratizing countries, yet the rise of illiberalism is also prominent in longstanding democracies of the West (Esposito, 2019; Smilova, 2021; Vachudova, 2021).

In this article, we do not dwell on regime typologies, but discuss illiberalism as a specific political practice and ideology gaining ground across the globe. Focusing on illiberal cultural policy—a set of norms and strategies implemented by the government to regulate and promote specific cultural activities—our study illustrates the critical role of ideology and, thereby, the artistic and cultural sectors in advancing illiberal politics. Based on the Slovenian case, we propose a typology of illiberal cultural measures and their aims, which can be used to analyze illiberalizing processes across the globe (Section 5). A cultural policy aimed at national identity building, social control, and imposing right-wing ideological hegemony undermines the resilience of civil society (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). Though not all right-wing political actors are illiberal and not all left-wing actors liberal (Scheppele, 2018), illiberals often proudly identify as illiberal, conflate liberalism with the political left, and use the term liberal as a slur. This friction may be conceived as a culture war, successfully instrumentalized by illiberal actors to deepen social polarization and consolidate power (Hesová, 2021). Cultural policy becomes a

tool for suppressing opposition and amplifying ideologically conforming voices in a culture war setting. Thus, illiberal political actors weaponize culture to accelerate democratic backsliding.

Illiberal political actors act opportunistically, eschew accountability, and are thus prone to engage in high levels of corruption and cronyism, expressed not only in the misuse of public power and illicit financial gains but also in the widening economic inequalities and the impunity of the powerful (Goldstein & Drybread, 2022). Corruptive illiberal practices drain public resources, leading to public discontent (Shattuck, 2018), which in turn increases the reliance of illiberal actors on establishing ideological and cultural dominance to pacify the populace. Cultural policy is thus a central, albeit often overlooked dimension of illiberal consolidation of power. Through interventions in the cultural sphere, illiberal regimes aim to reshape collective memory, morality, and national identity (Hesová, 2021). This resonates with Anderson's (2006) concept of a nation as an "imagined community" constructed through shared narratives, primarily disseminated and consolidated via cultural outputs. The imaginary of the nation requires constant ideological reinforcement through everyday practices (Billig, 1995, 2017), observable in illiberal attempts to control cultural production. Arts and cultural sectors are critical arenas for both reinforcing and challenging the expansion of illiberal ideologies, and organizations like the Council of Europe (Whyatt, 2023) and Freemuse (Purser, 2022) observe growing political pressures on artistic freedom well beyond the East-Central European context.

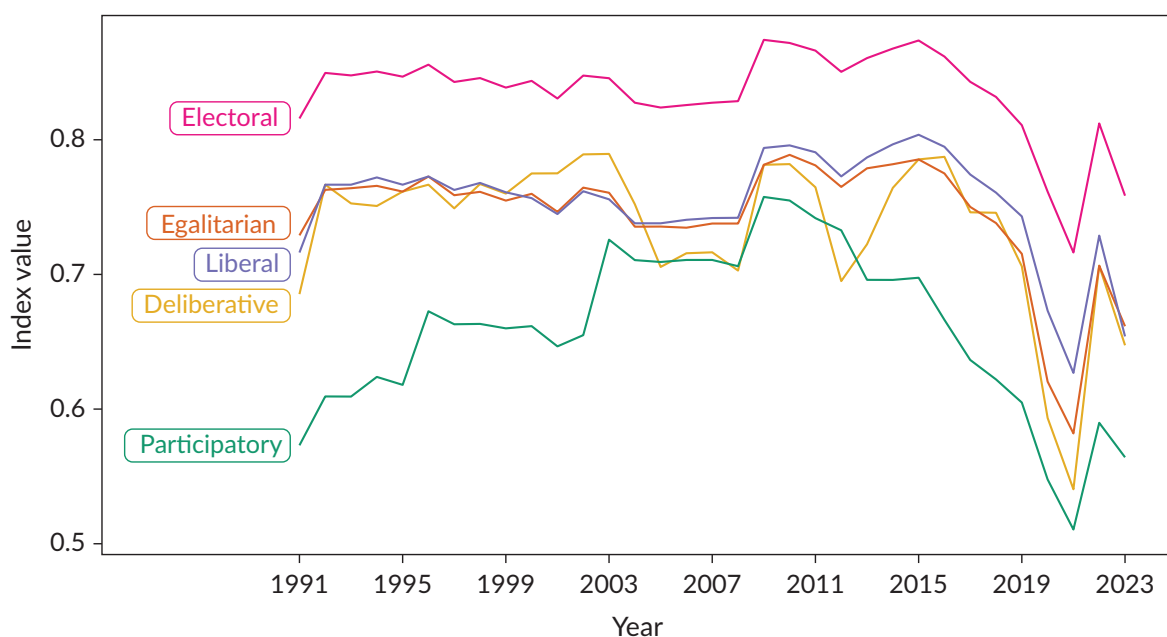
Despite the importance of cultural policy, literature in the field remains scarce and limited. It nonetheless serves as a fruitful point of departure to explore the Slovenian case, as it allows for comparing different contexts and identifying crucial policy measures typified in our analysis. Similar to the results of our investigation of 14SiGov's policy, Polish and Hungarian illiberal governments have used public discourse, political appointments, clientelism, and selective financing to promote ethnonationalism, traditionalist values, and historic revisionism through artistic and cultural expression (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). The ideological takeover of the cultural sphere in Hungary was achieved through institutional and financial changes intended to transform cultural production by creating new, loyal cultural elites (Kristóf, 2017). In Poland, cultural institutions headed by illiberal-affiliated directors systematically propagate illiberal ideologies (Kubik, 2024). Memory politics stand out as a central pillar of illiberal cultural policy: In striving for hegemony and dominance, the Hungarian government used public space management and the rearrangement of statues to establish narratives about the country's 20th-century history and the greatness of the Hungarian nation (Erőss, 2022). Monument displacement without prior public discussion bred novel forms of civic artistic memory activism in Hungary. While these acts of resistance importantly challenged public discourse on historic traumas, their success is limited due to the extreme political polarization of society furthered by illiberal cultural policy (Deim, 2022).

Although academic literature mainly focuses on Poland and Hungary, the phenomenon is not limited to East-Central European democracies; similar illiberal interventions in cultural institutions are taking place in the West as well (e.g., Italy: de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2024; US: Bumiller, 2025). Our analysis focuses on the case of Slovenia, yet it does not conceptualize illiberal cultural policy merely as an East-Central European anomaly, but as a strategy increasingly implemented across the globe, and provides a transferable typology of illiberal cultural policy measures (Section 5).

## 2.2. Illiberalism and Cultural Policy in Independent Slovenia

To provide some context for our case study, this section outlines the political developments in independent Slovenia, emphasizing the rise of political illiberalism and the trends in Slovenian cultural policy. Like Poland and Hungary (Krastev, 2020), Slovenia was considered a “success story” of transition from socialism to a liberal democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, the liberal democratic façade was obscuring structural issues that accelerated democratic backsliding, most obviously in the periods following the 2008 economic crisis and the 2020 Covid-19 crisis (Fink-Hafner, 2024). Figure 1 illustrates a relatively short but intense period of illiberalization during the term of 14SiGov; however, despite a slight improvement after the change of government in 2022, democratic indices remain below pre-pandemic levels. Once the rule of law and civil rights are compromised, it takes significant effort and political will to reinstate them. First, strategic political appointments and policy changes are difficult to uproot, ensuring that illiberal policies and ideology persist even when a nominally liberal government takes office. Second, the change of government does not automatically reverse pernicious illiberal trends. During the term of 14SiGov, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem; Coppedge et al., 2024) indices recorded dramatic drops in the rule of law and civil liberties, along with unprecedented levels of political corruption. The 15th Slovenian government did not ameliorate these trends but benefited from them by continuing the illiberal legacy on several fronts: adopting omnibus legislative packages, resorting to untransparent political appointments, cronyism, eschewing political accountability, etc.

During 14SiGov’s 2020–2022 term, V-Dem indices for the freedom of artistic and cultural expression experienced a sharp drop. At the time, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights issued a memorandum regarding the situation in Slovenia that warned about the deterioration of freedom of expression, listing concerns like hostility and polarization in public discourse, the rise of hate speech, intimidation of civil society actors, and political stigmatization of critical voices and NGOs (Council of



**Figure 1.** Values of five high-level democracy indices for Slovenia. Source: Based on V-Dem indices (Coppedge et al., 2024).

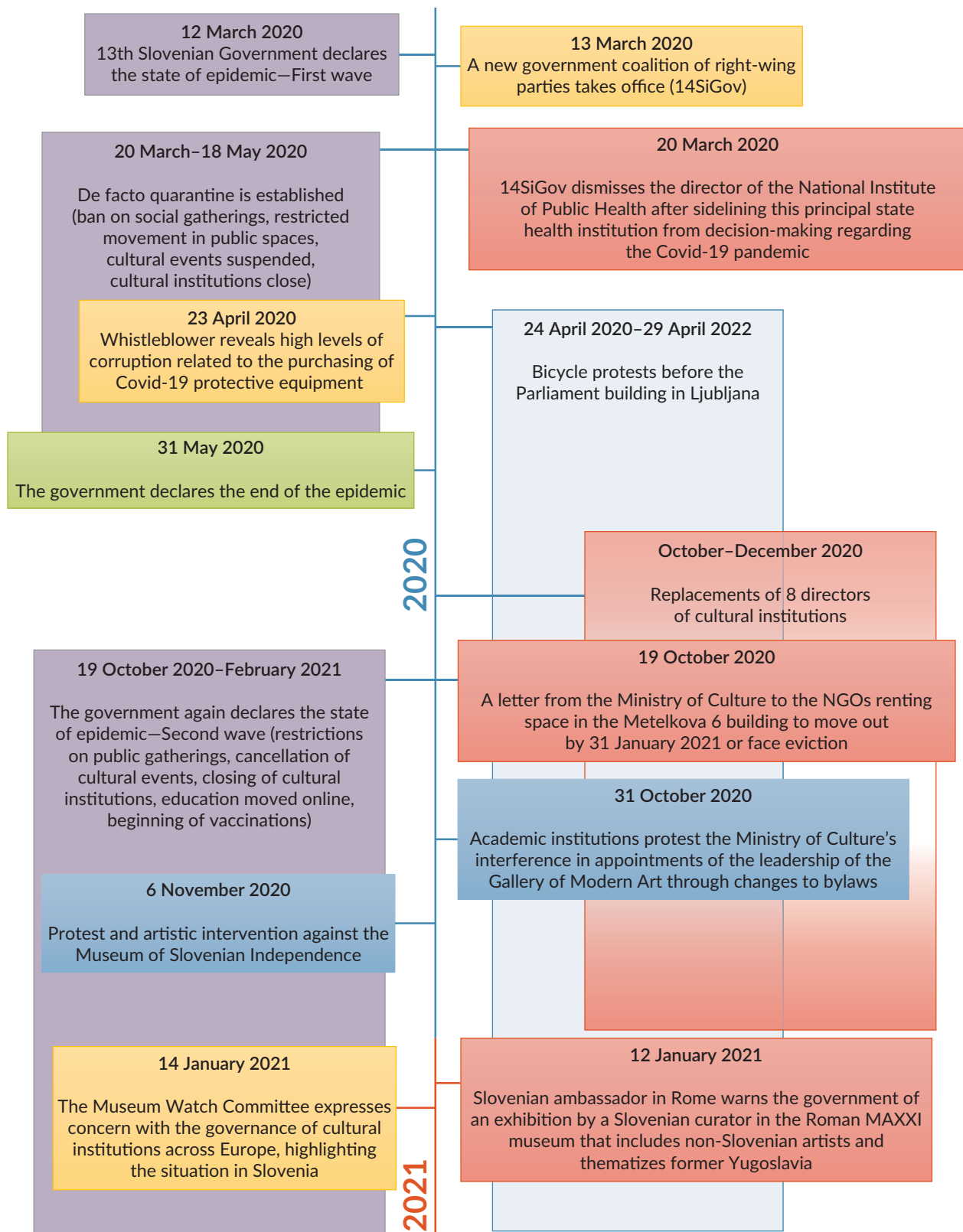
Europe, 2021). While the Commissioner mainly focused on the attacks on journalists and media institutions, cultural institutions and cultural workers also experienced a crackdown.

The 14SiGov coalition, with Prime Minister Janez Janša, was sworn in in 2020, following the mid-term resignation of liberal Prime Minister Marjan Šarec (see the timeline in Figure 2). 14SiGov was voted out of office in the February 2022 regular elections and replaced by a government led by Prime Minister Robert Golob. We use the abbreviation 14SiGov instead of referring to “Janša’s government,” as such simplification would only play into the illiberal fascination with strongman leaders. The 14SiGov coalition included the socially and fiscally conservative Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS; 26 MPs), the New Slovenia Christian Democrats (NSi; 7 MPs), and a fiscally conservative one-term-wonder Konkretno (8–5 MPs). 14SiGov embraced values like Slovenian ethnonationalism, an anti-migration stance, the heteronormative nuclear family, adherence to traditional gender roles, hatred of “communism” broadly interpreted as any socially liberal or economically redistributive ideas, and a fiscally conservative stance, coinciding with Hendrikse’s (2018) “neo-illiberalism.” While the intensity of 14SiGov’s illiberal strategies stands out as extreme, such developments were not entirely unprecedented or unexpected.

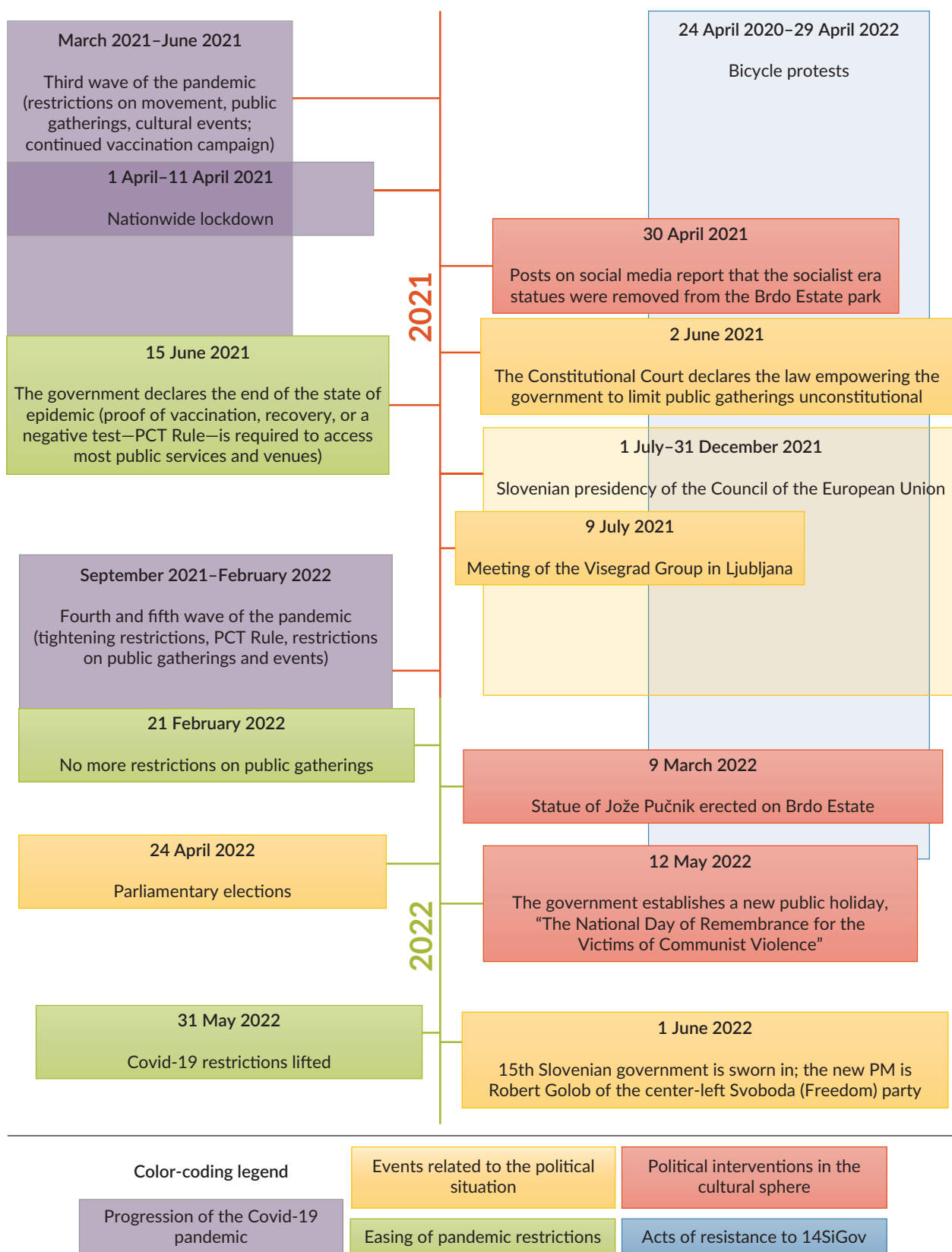
Right-wing populism and hatemongering against marginalized groups have been gaining ground since the 1990s (Rizman, 1999) and the differentiation between liberal and illiberal Slovenian political parties has always been based on cultural issues (Pintarič, 2013). Slovenia diligently harmonized its legal order with the EU, but its rule of law institutions remained politicized and ridden with clientelism and corruption (Bugarič, 2015). Increasing neo-liberalization of the economic sphere, high levels of perceived corruption, and never-ending political affairs contributed to the steady decline of the citizens’ satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions (Kmet Zupančič, 2021). SDS party members and cronies have been involved in countless affairs and corruption scandals since the 1990s and deflected them as conspiracies (Hribar, 1996; Pajnik, 2019; Vidmar Horvat, 2021). This strategy included continuous attacks on the judiciary, media, intellectuals, and political opponents, as well as the dissemination of party propaganda through social media and private news organizations (Delić, 2020; Fink-Hafner, 2023; Pajnik, 2019). Zealous to enact the “Second Republic,” a program inspired by Orbán’s self-proclaimed illiberal democracy (Fink-Hafner, 2024), 14SiGov seized the opportunity presented by a public health emergency to implement its vision of the Slovenian state, society, and culture.

While political appointments in state-owned companies and state institutions are habitual in Slovenian politics regardless of ideological positioning, the political class largely neglected the arts and culture until 2020. A private cultural sector hardly exists in Slovenia, and the state primarily funds the cultural sphere (Murovec et al., 2022). Since the 1990s, state-run cultural institutions and freelance cultural workers have had to adapt to neo-liberalization and meager funding (Grafenauer, 2021). The directors of major state cultural institutions have experienced pressures from politicians of all orientations, and political appointments in cultural institutions have occurred, yet an attempt at a complete ideological takeover of cultural institutions in 2020–2022 represents an unprecedented level of political interference (Badovinac, 2021; Grafenauer, 2021). Illiberal cultural policy, in concert with the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on public gatherings, further deteriorated cultural workers’ financial stability and confidence in the state (Matjaž et al., 2020). In 2021, over half of cultural workers were considering leaving the cultural sector, and the majority believed that 14SiGov was using the pandemic to establish authoritarian governance (Matjaž et al., 2021). They were frustrated that cultural institutions were closed longer than other sectors of the economy





**Figure 2.** Timeline of significant events related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the political situation, and cultural interventions in Slovenia (2020–2022).



**Figure 2. (Cont.)** Timeline of significant events related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the political situation, and cultural interventions in Slovenia (2020–2022).

during the pandemic and deemed the state aid inadequate (Uršič, 2021). Many believed that 14SiGov either did not understand or was intentionally trying to destroy the cultural sphere (Matjaž et al., 2021).

To provide more context for our case study of illiberal suppression of the cultural sphere in Slovenia, we constructed a timeline highlighting key events that illustrate the developments in the Slovenian cultural sphere and politics between 2020 and 2022. The timeline is based on the analysis of media reporting, official documents related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovenia, and interviews with figures from the cultural sector. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the 14SiGov term nearly perfectly coincided with the timeframe of the Covid-19 pandemic.

During 2020–2022, the harshest restrictions on movement, public gatherings, and cultural events overlapped with overt political interventions in the cultural sphere. Illiberal cultural policy measures were strategically launched when the ability of the public to organize and protest was severely limited. Despite this, Slovenian citizens persisted, and the “Friday Bicycle Protests” against the government occurred weekly from April 2020 to April 2022, with protesters finding innovative ways to mobilize while complying with health measures (Fidler et al., 2023). Furthermore, Slovenia’s presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2021 provided 14SiGov with an additional platform to reshape Slovenia’s national image, both domestically and internationally. These efforts coincided with intensified cultural suppression, further promoting a nationalist narrative and disparaging Slovenia’s socialist past while glorifying its independence and ancient statehood.

### 3. Methodology: An Embedded Case Study of Illiberal Cultural Policies in Slovenia

This study employs an embedded single-case study design (Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2009, 2012) to analyze Slovenia’s illiberal cultural policies between 2020 and 2022. This method is particularly suitable for capturing the complexities of political and ideological interventions in the cultural sphere, providing in-depth analysis while allowing for broader theory-building and generalization (Gerring, 2016; Gerring & Cojocar, 2016; Yin, 2012; Zittoun, 2017; Zittoun et al., 2023). The embedded case study approach is particularly well-suited for examining dynamic and multi-layered political interventions, as it facilitates the identification of mechanisms across interrelated subunits while preserving the depth of single-case research (Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2012). Given the study’s aim to trace multiple forms of political intervention in the cultural sphere, this design allows for systematic scrutiny of how various cultural policy measures interact within a broader ideological project. While the main unit of analysis is Slovenian cultural governance under 14SiGov, multiple subunits—specific illiberal interventions—are examined to determine how they function as coordinated elements within a broader ideological strategy. An embedded framework enables analytical coherence across different policy tools and events, ensuring that individual interventions are not viewed in isolation but as part of a strategic and cumulative effort to reshape governance (Yin, 2009, 2012).

Slovenia provides a compelling case for gleaning insights into the role of cultural policy in democratic backsliding, particularly because it has been regarded as a stable liberal democracy rather than an archetypal illiberal regime, making the rapid and overt shift in cultural policy under 14SiGov all the more conspicuous. While much of the literature on illiberalism and cultural governance focuses on Hungary and Poland, where illiberal regimes have been more entrenched (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021; Kristóf, 2017; Kubik, 2024), Slovenia could be read as an unlikely case of radical cultural policy shifts (Gerring & Cojocar, 2016), yet as

we demonstrate, the perceived stability of liberalism is much more tenuous and contingent. Thus, it can be conceptualized as an influential case (Eckstein, 1975; Gerring, 2016), illustrating how cultural governance contributes to broader patterns of democratic erosion. This framing situates Slovenia within a larger exploration of cultural policy as a tool for illiberal consolidation, demonstrating that such interventions are not limited to post-communist authoritarian regimes but can manifest in diverse political environments (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). Rather than treating Slovenia as an isolated example, it provides a model for understanding how illiberal actors can instrumentalize cultural governance in other democracies.

### **3.1. *Embedded Case Study Design***

Within this single-case framework, the study employs an embedded design, analyzing multiple subunits of analysis—specific illiberal interventions in cultural policy. These subunits allow for a systematic examination of mechanisms through which cultural policy is weaponized to achieve ideological goals. The selection criteria for the interventions were:

1. **Salience:** The events garnered significant attention from the media and civil society in Slovenia and internationally.
2. **Diversity of strategies:** The interventions in the cultural sphere exemplify a range of cultural policy measures employed by illiberal actors to suppress dissenting voices while amplifying government-aligned narratives.
3. **Short-term impact:** These measures extended beyond the cultural sector, provoking immediate responses from political institutions, civil society organizations, and the broader public.
4. **Long-term impact:** The consequences of illiberal cultural policy measures persist beyond the 14SiGov term, contributing to structural shifts in governance and Slovenia's ideological landscape.

The subunits analyzed include: (a) public discourse manipulation, such as government-led smear campaigns against progressive cultural workers (Pajnik, 2019; Simonič, 2019); (b) financial coercion, exemplified by the attempted eviction of artists and NGOs from Metelkova 6 (Vladislavjevic, 2020); (c) politicized institutional restructuring, including the appointment of ideologically aligned directors in cultural institutions (Badovinac, 2021; International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, 2021); (d) symbolic interventions in public space, such as the removal of socialist-era statues at Brdo Estate (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, 2021); (e) establishing new cultural institutions, including the Museum of Slovenian Independence (Specialists in Central and Southeast Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020; Združenje Sever, 2020); and (f) memory politics and national mythology, including the promotion of nationalist symbolism (Kovačič, 2024).

This embedded approach enables identifying patterns across illiberal strategies, their comparative analysis, and developing a typology that reveals their interconnected nature. By situating these interventions within a unified analytical framework, the study highlights how they function collectively to reshape governance structures while maintaining the depth and contextual sensitivity essential for single-case research (Elman, 2005; Gerring, 2016; Scholz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2012).

### 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed a multi-source data collection strategy that integrated various forms of documentary and media materials. First, official government documents, including parliamentary debates and decrees, provided insights into the formal mechanisms of cultural policy interventions. Second, we drew on media reporting from a range of Slovenian mainstream outlets, including RTV Slovenia, 24ur, Delo, and Dnevnik, as well as more ideologically aligned platforms such as the liberal Mladina and Necenzurirano and the illiberal Družina and Nova24. Third, public statements, petitions, and open letters from cultural workers and civil society organizations resisting illiberal policies offer a perspective on grassroots opposition and its impact (e.g., Mirovni inštitut, 2020; Specialists in Central and Southeast Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020). Finally, international reports on artistic freedom and cultural governance, such as those by the Council of Europe (2021) and Freemuse (Purser, 2022), contextualize Slovenia's case within broader European trends.

Each subunit of analysis is examined through key analytical dimensions: the targets of suppression, the strategies employed, which values and publics were silenced and which promoted, the intended and actual effects, and the forms of resistance they provoked. This framework ensures consistency and comparability, highlighting how illiberal cultural policy measures systematically silence critical voices while amplifying state-aligned ideological narratives. The findings are integrated into a typology of illiberal cultural policy measures (Table 1), which facilitates comparative studies by offering a framework for understanding how cultural governance can be weaponized in diverse contexts. Overall, this approach contributes to a multi-level understanding of the connections between disparate events and broader illiberal trends (Kubik, 2024; Laruelle, 2022), while also highlighting the potential for resistance, illustrating the dynamic interplay between suppressive governance and democratic resilience (Arslanalp & Erkmén, 2020; Fidler et al., 2023; Jafarova & Buckner, 2024).

## 4. Analysis of Illiberal Cultural Policy Measures

In this section, we present analyses of key events that illustrate different tactics used by 14SiGov to achieve its twofold aim: to silence critical voices in the cultural sphere and to consolidate the desired narratives. The selected interventions represent the subunits of the case study exploring the suppression of government-unaligned and the promotion of government-aligned narratives in Slovenian cultural policy.

### 4.1. Public Discourse

Various forms of artistic expression and folklore have historically served as political anchors of Slovenian collective identity (Kočevár, 2022; Tratnik, 2022; Urbanc et al., 2020). Janša's disdain for socially progressive artists and cultural workers was already apparent in the 1990s: He reproached them for failing to appreciate Slovenian independence, engaging in artistic elitism, celebrating socialist ideology, and disregarding the Catholic Church (Simonič, 2019). When Janša was prime minister, he excluded formally trained artists and members of the Slovenian partisan resistance from their traditional participation in the preparations of official state celebrations; when in the opposition, he organized alternative statehood celebrations (Simonič, 2019).

The politicization of the Slovenian cultural holiday Prešeren Day provides a case in point. On Prešeren Day, Slovenian art and cultural heritage are celebrated, and the Prešeren Awards, the most prestigious national awards in Slovenia, are presented for outstanding achievements in arts and culture. Prešeren Day generates a fair amount of political scandals, often connected to the personae and work of the Prešeren Award recipients. In 2018, multimedia artist Maja Smrekar and dramatist Simona Semenič were among the recipients. Janša, at the time the self-declared opposition leader, posted images of their performances (one depicting Semenič wrapped in a Slovenian flag with the coat of arms cut out to reveal her pregnant belly, and another Smrekar's performance of nursing a dog) on social media. The images were juxtaposed with images of factory workers, a tactic also used by the Soviets (Groys, 1994), and accompanied by text decrying the misuse of working people's money on degenerate leftist art that mocks the Slovenian state and family (Pirc, 2018), a tactic previously used by the Nazi regime to smear modernist art (Grasskamp, 1994). Janša's post was followed by an intense public backlash, online troll activism, and incendiary articles in SDS-aligned media ("Nagrajenki Prešernovega sklada," 2018).

On Prešeren Day 2021, roughly a year into 14SiGov's term and the pandemic, the prime minister's 2021 holiday address rebuked cultural workers for criticizing the government. According to Janša, culture should assume a "state-affirming stance" and "cheer Slovenians on" ("Janša v poslanici," 2021). On Prešeren Day 2022, an SDS member rejoiced at the fact that 14SiGov "normalized" the Prešeren Awards by recognizing "real artists," reminding the readers of past degeneracy (Jeraj, 2022). Janša's formal address on Prešeren Day 2022 stressed the importance of culture for the Slovenian nation and state, boasting about an unprecedented budget for culture in 2021 which included ambitious projects like the new Museum of Slovenian Independence discussed below (Janša, 2022).

Once 14SiGov and its narrative were somewhat consolidated, verbal attacks on social media, government-affiliated media, and political speeches were supplemented by official political communication. The Slovenian ambassador in Rome took issue with a 2021 exhibition, *Bigger Than Myself/Heroic Voices* from Former Yugoslavia, organized by the Roman MAXXI museum and the Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana. In a formal dispatch, the ambassador problematized the topic of the exhibition and the inclusion of artists from former Yugoslavia instead of promoting Slovenia and its artists, especially in the year of the 30th anniversary of Slovenia's independence and Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union (Šašek, 2021). Several Slovenian artists signed a statement supporting the curator and the featured artists, concerned that the dispatch would lead to the cancellation of the exhibition ("Umetnice in umetniki," 2021). The Left Party's demand to recall the ambassador was met with the government's response that the ambassador's concerns were legitimate and his performance exemplary ("Vlada na poziv," 2021). The exhibition in question finally took place, but the surrounding political scandal illustrates the ideological underpinnings of 14SiGov's cultural policy and its prioritization of nationalist narratives along with the distancing from Slovenia's socialist past and ties with other nations of former Yugoslavia.

## 4.2. Financial Pressures

Financial pressures on cultural workers are an effective tool for silencing critique and fostering self-censorship. A case in point is the threat of eviction of 18 artistic, cultural, and human rights NGOs at the height of the pandemic, one of many funding cuts and limitations of the nongovernmental sector in the analyzed period ("Slovenia: Government uses the Covid-19 pandemic," 2020). In late October 2020, the art

studios, library, and NGOs active in the Metelkova 6 building owned by the Ministry of Culture were informed they should leave the space by 31 January 2021 (“Pet ur razpravljali,” 2020). The government cited that the building—used rent-free by artists and NGOs since 1997—needs renovation before it can be reallocated to the Slovenian Museum of Natural History (Vrečar, 2020). SDS members have long publicly expressed disdain for the NGO and cultural sector as a waste of public funds, and Janša has declared war against “Soros-funded” NGOs (“Janša: Najprej Slovenija,” 2018). Interpretations that the eviction was politically motivated were based on the government’s accusations that Metelkova 6 users were involved in the organization of the weekly bicycle protests against the government (see Figure 2), though they denied direct involvement (Vladisavljevic, 2020).

The threat of eviction of Metelkova 6 was met with heated parliamentary debate, as renovations were only planned in 2023 and the notice period was extremely short (“Pet ur razpravljali,” 2020). Furthermore, the Slovenian Ombudsman of Human Rights supported the Metelkova 6 community and its role in a democratic society, urging the government to help rather than illegally restrict civil society and cultural organizations and to respect the freedom of association and expression (“Varuh ministrstvo za kulturo pozval,” 2020). Metelkova 6 users stressed the role of civil society in Slovenia’s independence process and received support from hundreds of NGOs and thousands of petition signatories (Vladisavljevic, 2020). In an open letter to the minister of culture and the government, Metelkova 6 users refused to leave. They decried a politically motivated crackdown on democracy and artistic freedom, condemning the increasing smear campaigns by political actors (Mirovni inštitut, 2020). The Ministry of Culture began legal procedures to evict them, but all court proceedings were halted in 2022, soon after a new government was sworn in (“Nevladne organizacije ostajajo,” 2022).

An alleged corruption scandal can also illustrate financial pressures and reallocations of funds favoring civil society organizations aligned with illiberal values. The 2021 tender for funding NGOs to assist vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic resulted in awarding grants to several NGOs related to the Catholic Church, most controversially to Zavod Iskreni—an NGO promoting the traditional family and rejecting homosexuality, contraception, abortion, and mandatory vaccinations (Cirman et al., 2021a, 2021b). The responsible minister, Janez Cigler Kralj (NSi party), who is also one of the founders of Zavod Iskreni, appointed members from his immediate team to the tender committee and approved their decision (“Tarča: Je financiranje,” 2021). The generous funding of Zavod Iskreni, favored even over less radical church-affiliated humanitarian NGOs, caused a scandal, yet the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption of the Republic of Slovenia detected no illegality and merely identified significant corruption risks (“KPK pri podelitvi,” 2021).

#### **4.3. Political Appointments in Cultural Institutions**

Because Slovenian cultural policy has been neglected for decades, cultural institutions entered the Covid-19 crisis vulnerable to various forms of political interference (Grafenauer, 2021; Pureber, 2021). In 2020, the government appointed eight new directors of major cultural institutions. The directors of the Slovenian Book Agency, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, National Museum of Slovenia, Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana, National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia, Museum of Architecture and Design, and Slovenian Cinematheque were swiftly replaced (Figure 2). The new appointments were criticized extensively for favoring political alliances over professional competence (Grafenauer, 2021). The changes of directors under the guise of pluralizing the purportedly left-leaning cultural scene were interpreted by some as Janša’s revenge for the



role cultural workers played in the revolt against his previous government in 2012 (Pureber, 2021); however, less ideological forms of political corruption and cronyism were also at play.

The minister of culture, Vasko Simoniti (SDS party), used several tactics to replace the existing directors with his preferred candidates: (a) repeating tenders to allow preferred candidates to apply; (b) changing the bylaws of several cultural institutions to lower the required education and work experience of their directors; (c) changing the functioning of the ministry expert groups (intended to protect the selection process from political interference); (d) attempting to influence the expert groups by letting them know which candidate is preferred; (e) personally overruling the expert groups' decisions when the preferred candidate was not selected; and (f) using harsh and degrading language when challenged by journalists (Badovinac, 2021; Marovt, 2020; Pureber, 2021).

To no avail, the changes of directors were challenged by public intellectuals, academics, artists, employees of cultural institutions, and the engaged public. Numerous letters of support for the replaced directors, petitions, and protest actions occurred throughout 2020 and 2021. The intensity of Slovenian culture wars was reported in major international news organizations, which rarely spotlight Slovenian affairs (Marshall, 2021). An open letter addressed to Janša and his European People's Party group, urging against the stifling of academic and cultural freedom in Slovenia, was signed by 175 academics and cultural workers from various notable institutions in Europe, the US, and beyond (Specialists in Central and Southeast Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020). The signatories drew parallels with similar attacks on the cultural sphere in Poland, Hungary, and Russia, stressing the Slovenian government's breaches of the International Council of Museums' Code of Ethics. Concern was also expressed by the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, which warned of the spreading "illiberal political model" (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, 2021). This Committee declared the appointments of unqualified and unprofessional individuals to key positions in cultural institutions a systemic issue, illustrating the point by referring to the 2020 events in Slovenia.

#### **4.4. Public Space Management**

In 2021, the controversially appointed new director of the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia organized the removal of socialist-era statues from Brdo Estate, the venue for the meetings of the Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2021 (Figure 2). The national heritage status sculptures were part of a memorial park representing art from the late 1940s depicting partisan resistance against Nazi-Fascist occupation during the Second World War (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, 2021). The relocation of the statues caused much controversy, as it occurred unannounced and without expert consultation. Slovenian media reported speculations about attempts to erase the socialist past in the wake of the Council of the European Union presidency, but the official response was that the statues were being restored (Volk, 2021).

However, there was no proof of conservatory works, and experts in the field responded with demands for explanation and return of the statues, stressing the breach of cultural heritage protection laws (Academy of Fine Arts and Design, 2021). After the removal of socialist art, a new statue of Jože Pučnik, Janša's predecessor as the president of the SDS party, was erected in Brdo Estate ("Na Brdu pri," 2022). Pučnik's quote, "Yugoslavia is gone; it's about Slovenia now," is engraved on the base of the new statue, reinforcing the idea that Slovenian

independence is a crucial event that merits remembrance. In 2022, the new government took the reins and began to plan the return of the socialist statues to Brdo Estate. In 2024, the return of the statues was still planned (Vrečko, 2024).

#### 4.5. *New Cultural Institutions*

In 2021, the government established a new Museum of Slovenian Independence, interpreted by some as an attempt to develop a particular myth of Slovenian independence that lionizes the role of Janša and his allies while downplaying the role of civil society. The decision was controversial since the state budget presented in 2020 revealed that a new museum was planned, and diverse organizations of the Slovenian War of Independence veterans protested the decision (Združenje Sever, 2020). The veterans urged the government to appoint an expert group of curators and protested against political actors' appropriation of Slovenian independence. The planned museum was also questioned by a public letter signed by 175 international academics as an attempt to control an entire scholarly field, indicating a possible propaganda institution (Specialists in Central and South East Europe and Others Interested in the Culture and Politics of the Region, 2020).

When the new museum was established, it had neither a collection nor a permanent exhibition space. The government decided that the 4 million euro project would eventually be situated in the building of the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, despite the lack of space the Archives have been lamenting for years ("Sprejet sklep o ustanovitvi Muzeja," 2021). The avalanche of critiques problematized the fact that three state museums already covered the independence process and that contemporary history experts were excluded from designing the project (Rak, 2021). Furthermore, many historians and museum professionals expressed concerns about the ideological agenda, pointing towards the Museum of Slovenian Independence's bylaws, which required lower education and experience for the museum's director than for the director's assistant, indicating a possible political appointment ("Sprejet sklep o ustanovitvi Muzeja," 2021). The veterans expressed their outrage once again after the museum opened, demanding that the independence process be represented objectively and contextualized as a part of Slovenia's 20th-century history (Združenje Sever, 2022).

With the change of government in 2022, the Museum of Slovenian Independence was merged with the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia. The 15th Slovenian government justified the merger with a more transparent and expert-based management of the institution, which triggered counter-protests: Many notable right-wing political personalities protested the ideologically motivated move and a rewriting of history (Porenta, 2023). The saga around the Museum of Slovenian Independence illustrates that memory and cultural politics are not exclusively illiberal undertakings but an ongoing dialectical struggle through which the self-identified liberal and illiberal camps establish themselves and communicate with their voters.

A very similar dynamic can be observed in the case of a new national holiday, the National Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Communist Violence, decreed without a preceding public debate during the final month of 14SiGov's term ("Vlada 17. maj," 2022). On the eve of the holiday in 2023, the 15th Slovenian government abolished the holiday with an explanation that it was only instituted to sow divisions, which provoked protest actions and public outrage ("Vlada ukinila dan," 2023). The controversy around the hastily instituted and equally hastily abolished holiday illustrates the mutual dependence of the self-styled illiberal

and liberal political actors and their reliance on historical trauma to mobilize their voting base. While illiberal actors are the first to push, their liberal successors are left in a difficult predicament: Either consent to the continued ideological influence of the new institutions or employ a similar aggressive cultural policy that further intensifies the culture wars.

#### 4.6. Political Mythology

Illiberal actors are not interested only in influencing recent historical narratives but also in mythologizing the glorious ancient history of the Slovenian nation. 14SiGov caused a scandal by including a set of cufflinks with a Carantanian Panther symbol among the gifts for the Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union (Krajnc, 2021). The Carantanian Panther is a disputed symbol representing the 8th-century Slavic state of Carantania used by Slovenian nationalist far-right groups (Bajt, 2015). The use of the emblem triggered a protest from historians, archaeologists, and ethnologists who warned that the symbol of a black panther emerged in the 1980s and is not present in historical records (Krajnc, 2021).

Janša is fond of the symbol and had previously caused a stir for wearing a Carantanian Panther badge to EU meetings (“Karantanski panter na Janševem suknjiču,” 2008). The Carantanian Panther also features on the cover of Janša’s 2014 historical fiction novel written during his imprisonment for corruption during a legal process that ended due to the statute of limitation. The book frames Carantania as a re-establishment of an even more ancient 3rd-century-BC Kingdom of Noricum, which Janša proposes as the origin of Slovenian statehood (Žužek, 2014). Janša framed his novel as a proposal to rethink the origin of Slovenians, who are not, according to Janša, genetically related to other South Slavic nations (Žužek, 2014). The Carantanian Panther thus represents a myth of the ancient lost Slovenian state and its second coming with the independence of Slovenia.

### 5. Typology of Illiberal Cultural Policy Measures

The embedded case study of illiberal cultural governance in Slovenia during 2020–2022 reveals a host of diverse policy measures that work in concert to transform the national cultural script. We identified and classified crucial illiberal strategies in order to make the intentional multilevel weaponization of cultural policy explicit and provide a framework for studying the broader implications of cultural suppression in democratic backsliding (Table 1). While our case study analyzes specific events, the patterns observed and typified facilitate comparative analysis with developments in other contexts marked by illiberal transformations. Our findings reveal similarities to the studied instances of illiberal cultural governance in Poland and Hungary (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021; Deim, 2022; Eröss, 2022; Kristóf, 2017; Kubik, 2024) and offer a framework for a holistic observation of the effects of a multitude of illiberal cultural measures, which span from less to more formal interventions in the fields of memory politics, promotion of traditional and nationalistic values, and entrenchment of illiberal cultural and political elites. Our typology presents a useful analytical tool for understanding how illiberal regimes systematically target the cultural sector to silence dissenting voices while amplifying ideologically compliant narratives.

**Table 1.** Typology of illiberal cultural policy measures.

Cultural policy measure	Events	Targets	Strategies	Silencing	Promoting	Resistance	Effects
Public discourse	Public attacks on artists and curators (Prešeren Day, MAXXI exhibition)	Socially and politically engaged cultural workers Non-Slovenian artists	Smear campaigns Inciting public backlash in traditional and social media Use of official state communication channels	Critique of nationalism, traditional family structures, gender roles Interpretation of Slovenia's present as linked to ex-Yugoslavia and socialism	State-affirming art Nationalism Art and artists promoting traditional values	Media outrage Letters of support from artists and academics The Left Party demands the recall of the ambassador in Rome	Lowering standards of public expression Hateful rhetoric online Resentment towards the cultural sector as parasitic on taxpayers
Financial pressure	Threat of eviction (Metelkova 6) Reallocation of public funding (Zavod Iskreni)	Progressive NGOs, artists, and cultural workers	Demand relocation under the guise of renovation and more worthwhile use of the property Redirecting funds to preferred NGOs	Socially and politically disruptive NGOs and cultural workers	NGOs promoting traditional values	Public statements by intellectuals and leftist politicians Letters of support from artists and academics Petitions	Diverting NGOs and cultural workers from their work to to fight for the preservation of their organizations and their own financial security
Political appointments	Change of (often internationally acclaimed) directors of major cultural institutions	Directors of state cultural institutions	Tender manipulation Changing institutional bylaws Interference with, attempting to influence, and overruling expert groups Degrading public discourse	Perceived allegiance to progressive values Perceived allegiance to political rivals Interpretation of historical events and featuring artists that clash with the government's vision	Loyal cultural elites Nationalist and traditionalist cultural production Political corruption and cronyism	Letters of support Petitions Media outrage Protest actions Criticism from experts, international institutions, and cultural associations	Permanent changes to cultural governance

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Typology of illiberal cultural policy measures.

Cultural policy measure	Events	Targets	Strategies	Silencing	Promoting	Resistance	Effects
Public space management	Removing and erecting statues (Brdo Estate)	Public commemoration of partisan resistance	Removing statues Erecting statues	Identification with the values of partisan resistance and the socialist regime in parts of the population Narratives conceiving partisan resistance and the Slovenian independence process as nonexclusive	Celebration of the (government's interpretation of) Slovenian independence movement and its key actors Narratives juxtaposing Slovenian independence and democracy with the partisan resistance movement	Letters of protest from academics Media outrage Social media outrage	Permanent changes in public space Plan to reinstate statues by the new, 15th government coalition
New cultural institutions	Museum of Slovenian Independence National Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Communist Violence	Perceived insufficient emphasis and errant interpretation of Slovenian independence National holidays celebrating partisan resistance	Hasty establishment of new cultural intuitions Redirecting public funding to institutions promoting a preferred historical narrative	Celebration of partisan resistance and socialist Yugoslavia	Decontextualized and politically controlled interpretation of Slovenian independence Human rights violations in former Yugoslavia	Protest actions Artistic intervention Letters of protest from Slovenian independence veteran organizations	Outrage and controversy Intensification of culture wars 15th Slovenian government abolished both analyzed institutions
Political mythology	Carantanian Panther	Lack of national pride	Use of historically dubious symbols in national and international discourse	Idea that Slovenian people are culturally and genetically related to other South Slavs	Scientifically dubious theories about Slovenian statehood Slovenian nation as ancient and unique	Media outrage Expert outrage	Normalization of historically questionable symbols used by nationalist far-right organizations

## 6. Discussion

Analysis of 14SiGov's cultural policy fleshes out an important yet often overlooked dimension of illiberal strategies to permanently alter state institutions and society. The main insights of our analysis discussed in this section are: (a) crises present an opportune situation for the acceleration and consolidation of illiberal regimes; (b) illiberal cultural policy consists of a variety of measures that range from informal practices to legislative changes; (c) illiberal cultural policy permanently impacts the cultural sphere and the governance style of nominally liberal political actors; and (d) art and culture provide crucial forums for political imagination and practice. The autonomy of the cultural sphere and the freedom of artistic expression are crucial in challenging democratic backsliding and exploring novel models of societal organization.

The unprecedented attempt to radically redefine the Slovenian cultural narrative analyzed in this article occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. 14SiGov managed the pandemic through unlawful decrees and abused the public health emergency to erode the separation of powers and checks and balances (Kovačič, 2024), as was eventually confirmed by several rulings of the Slovenian Constitutional Court (Šugman Stubbs, 2024). During the most intense pandemic periods, movement and gatherings were severely limited or prohibited, and most businesses and institutions were physically closed. Illiberal cultural policy measures were most intensely deployed during severe pandemic restrictions, which impeded protest actions and organizing. The loss of income due to Covid-19 preventive measures significantly affected cultural workers, who became increasingly dependent on state financial aid and thus liable to self-censorship. Nevertheless, civil society and the cultural sector vocally resisted attempts at political takeover and received much public support in Slovenia and abroad. Advocacy for the autonomy of the cultural sphere and critique of illiberal measures were expressed through open letters, petitions, memorandums, creative forms of protest, and provocative public art (Grafenauer & Tepina, 2022). While civil society proved crucial in the eventual fall of 14SiGov, its illiberal cultural policy bears permanent consequences for Slovenian society and politics.

Illiberal cultural policy simultaneously targets the narratives produced by cultural institutions and the broader cultural milieu in order to radicalize public discourse and entrench traditional and ethnonationalist values. Based on an embedded case study of key events (Section 4), we constructed a typology of cultural policy measures used to achieve illiberal goals (Section 5): incendiary public discourse, financial pressures, political appointments, public space management, new cultural institutions, and political mythology. These measures are not mutually exclusive but often work in concert. For example, defunding cultural workers might be legitimized through smear campaigns, or political mythology used to justify the founding of new cultural institutions. Illiberal cultural policy measures encompass a broad spectrum of strategies ranging from the less official measures that illiberal actors implement to polarize and transform public opinion even when in opposition (e.g., derogatory public discourse), to more official measures available to illiberal governments (e.g., political appointments). Working across several registers, illiberal cultural policy measures contribute to the likelihood of self-censorship and permanent changes in cultural narratives, public perceptions of the cultural sphere, and cultural governance in general. Deployment of illiberal cultural policy deepens societal polarization and conflict with lasting effects: Redirecting cultural narratives shrinks the space for legitimate democratic critique of the government.

The Slovenian cultural and academic spheres loudly protested 14SiGov's cultural governance and aligned with the nominally liberal political actors to avoid another illiberal term. Nevertheless, the change in government

did not restore the pre-pandemic status quo. First, the effects of illiberal measures persisted regardless of the new government's attempts to undo them. Changes to public perceptions, public spaces, narratives of cultural institutions, etc., are difficult to uproot. Second, as the Slovenian liberal and illiberal camps both embrace the neo-liberal political economy, culture wars are instrumental to their differentiation. Both camps exploit social issues like gender, sexuality, migration, and historical trauma to mobilize their intended voters. Our analysis shows that memory politics regarding the Slovenian independence process and 20th-century history stand out as crucial: Slovenian liberal actors align with the partisan resistance against Nazi-Fascism, while their illiberal counterparts concentrate on highlighting the violence of partisan forces and decrying the human rights violations in former Yugoslavia. Our analysis observes that liberal parties quickly adopted the measures of their illiberal predecessors to reinstate their preferred version of history and the cultural management that supports it. The liberal continuation of illiberal cultural policy is mainly reactive, attempting to "undo" the effects of illiberal governance. This shows that illiberal actors are effectively running the show, illiberalizing politics and transforming liberalism through, among other, the successful normalization of state interference in the cultural sphere. Once certain forms of interventions in the cultural sector are established as acceptable, the recovery to previous levels of autonomy of the cultural sphere becomes extremely difficult.

The use of illiberal measures by liberal actors brings us to the final point of our analysis. Illiberalism is not an antithesis of liberalism but its ever-present bastard child. Inner contradictions have always plagued liberalism: Liberal narratives of equality were consistently complicated by arbitrary exclusions of entire social groups, for example, women and people of color, from political participation (Čufar, 2023; Kauth & King, 2020). In this sense, illiberalism is a return to the origins, not an unthinkable perversion of classical liberalism. Our analysis shows that illiberalism is exceptionally successful at transforming established political practices, building on preexisting cracks in the workings of liberal democracy such as the normalization of political corruption and clientelism. While many ideals connected with the liberal democratic model, like pluralism, individual rights and freedoms, protection of minorities, limitation of the executive power, political accountability, etc., are worth fighting for, we might do well to explore alternatives to the liberal/illiberal model and create a space for political imagination that goes beyond merely conserving the eroding liberal status quo. Art and culture are crucial in this process, as they provide the space in which political communities can criticize, debate, explore, imagine, and experiment with various ideas and approaches to collective pasts, presents, and futures (Duncombe, 2007; Hawlina et al., 2020). If the cultural sphere is transformed into a machinery that serves the interests and ideologies of political actors, an important forum for public deliberation and activation is lost. It is thus imperative to pay attention to the intentional hollowing of the autonomy of the cultural sphere and illiberal threats to artistic freedom observed in Slovenia and beyond.

## 7. Conclusions

The case study of the weaponization of cultural policy by Slovenian illiberal political actors highlights the critical role of art and culture in consolidating illiberal ideology. Our analysis identified the strategies of illiberal cultural policy that can be observed well beyond the studied context of Slovenia. Furthermore, illiberal cultural policy is not limited to the "new" post-communist democracies, but is alarmingly obvious even in the self-identified beacon and global exporter of liberal democracy, the US. With the onset of the new administration in 2025, illiberal cultural policy measures corresponding to our typology may be observed in the US, signaling a galvanization of the illiberal movement in democracies across the globe. While an analysis of the ongoing events in the US is well beyond the scope of this article, the typology of



illiberal cultural policy measures based on our case study demonstrates that political actors recognize art and culture's enormous potential for achieving political goals and underscores the crucial role of ideology in the phenomenon of illiberalism. Illiberal ideology, forged through a backlash to socially progressive ideas associated with liberalism, is centered around a construct of traditional social values and hierarchies, ethnonationalism, and majoritarianism. Illiberal political actors utilize societal disagreements to mask authoritarian tendencies and political corruption, portraying themselves as the champions of traditional values and the honest, hardworking people. Systematic deployment of a host of illiberal cultural policy measures is targeted and intentional: It contributes to social polarization, normalizes incendiary political discourse, diverts attention from corruption and cronyism, and diminishes space for resistance and critical appraisals of illiberal governments. Our research emphasizes that cultural policy, sometimes overlooked in discussions of illiberalism, is a vital battleground for both authoritarian control and democratic resistance. Furthermore, the enduring effects of illiberal cultural policies highlight the vulnerability of democratic institutions and the long-term risks posed by the capture of cultural narratives, as well as the inner contradictions and limitations of liberalism. Our findings call for greater attention to cultural policy in discussions of democratic backsliding and suggest that safeguarding cultural autonomy is essential for resisting the illiberal turn and exploring possible futures beyond the liberal/illiberal dichotomy.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors

**Kristina Čufar** is a research associate at the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law, Ljubljana, and an assistant professor in sociology of law at the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana. Her research focuses on social inequalities and dynamics of power in relation to legal regulation, drawing on critical legal and political theory, socio-legal studies, and criminology.

**Hana Hawlina** is a researcher at the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law, Ljubljana, and an assistant lecturer in social psychology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. She teaches courses on the psychology of power, influence, and social change. Her research interests also include social movement studies, political psychology, and studying conflicting imaginaries of collective futures.



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

Dorottya Szikra <sup>1</sup>  and Lauritz Autischer <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Sociology, HUN-REN Center for Social Sciences, Hungary

<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science, Central European University, Austria

**Correspondence:** Dorottya Szikra ([szikra.dorottya@tk.hu](mailto:szikra.dorottya@tk.hu))

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## Abstract

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

## Keywords

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

## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Illiberalism, Authoritarianism, and Populism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Case Selection and Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Social Policy Ideas and Discourses of Illiberal Parties

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

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



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

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



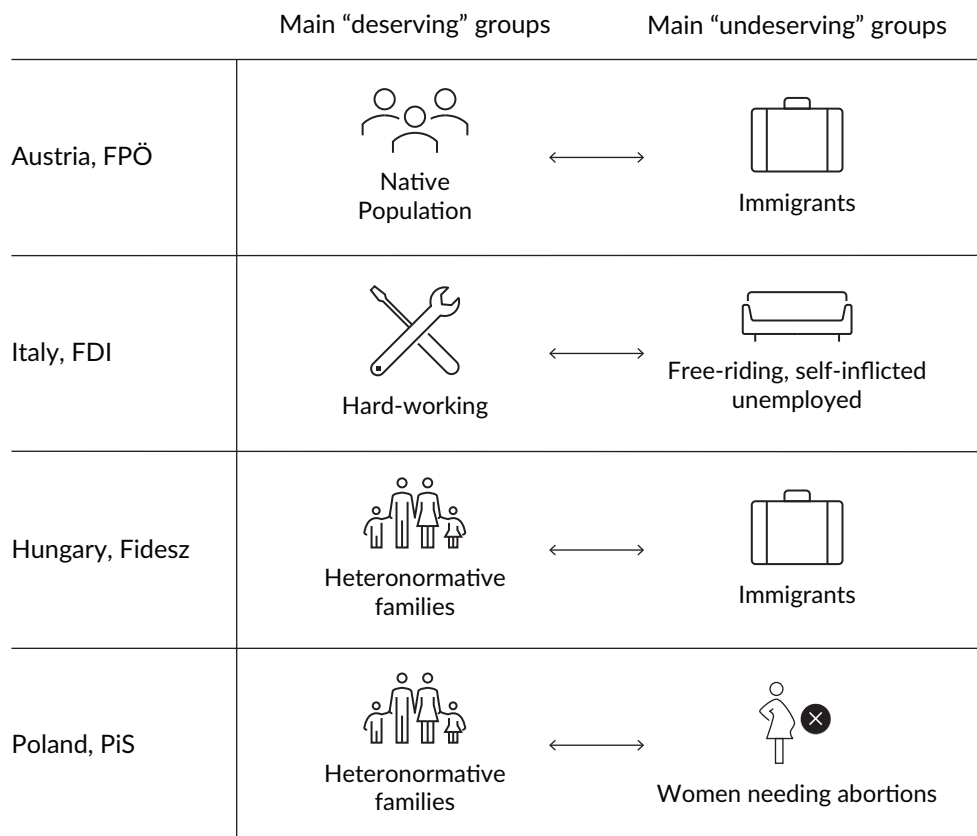
agenda. Simultaneously, illiberal parties strongly promote support to the elderly in return for those “who have given a lifetime of service (to build up society), whether at work or within the family” (FPÖ, 2013). The “undeserving” are defined as those who would be able to work but, instead, “free-ride” on social assistance. The strongest cases are Hungary where Viktor Orbán proclaimed the “work-based society” as an alternative to the “declining” Western welfare state (Orbán, 2014); and Italy, where this division is present in all the main areas of welfare, and featured high on the agenda in Georgia Meloni’s election campaigns (Meloni, 2022). Surprisingly, poverty is mostly missing from illiberal parties’ programs. Instead, they talk about people “being treated unfairly by the system,” especially in Austria. All the parties target workers, particularly those who appear to be the losers of globalization and are forgotten by mainstream parties. In this way, illiberals appeal to the populist idea of the “dysfunctionality” of the welfare state arrangement that is presented as targeting the “wrong kind” of beneficiaries.

Second, illiberal actors are nativist when delineating the population eligible for social support, and sharply frame immigrants as exploiting welfare state arrangements. For FPÖ, this discourse is there in nearly all welfare ideas. This party went as far as requiring knowledge of the German language for social security rights and pursued the direct exclusion of immigrants from social rights. In Hungary, the anti-immigration discourse was linked to pro-natalist family policies. In Italy and Poland, social policies were the least connected to the issue of immigration. Notwithstanding their focus on merit, in neither of the countries can we imagine a discourse about the “hard-working immigrant” deserving of benefits (see Figure 1).

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

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

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



**Figure 2.** Narratives of illiberal parties about the main “deserving” and “undeserving” groups.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **4.2. Illiberal Social Policy Reforms**

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

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

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

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

#### 4.2.1. Social Assistance Reforms

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.2.2. Social Insurance Reforms

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.2.3. Family Policies

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

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



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

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

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

## 5. Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**Dorottya Szikra** is a research professor and head of department at the Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, and visiting professor at the Department of Gender Studies, CEU, Vienna. Szikra's main research field is autocratizing and the welfare state. Since 2024, she has acted as the country lead of the ERC project WelfareExperiences.



**Lauritz Autischer** is a research assistant at the EU Horizon project Neo-Authoritarianism in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response (AUTHLIB). He holds an undergraduate degree from Central European University in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and will continue his studies with an MSc in Comparative Social Policy at Oxford University in 2025/2026.



# Mobilizing Rural Support: Targeted Government Spending and Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

Krisztina Szabó <sup>1,2,3</sup>  and Ádám Reiff <sup>3,4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, Central European University, Austria

<sup>2</sup> Department of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy, Royal Holloway University of London, UK

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Economics, HUN-REN Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Hungary

<sup>4</sup> Department of Economics and Business, Central European University, Austria

**Correspondence:** Krisztina Szabó (szabok@ceu.edu)

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## Abstract

The spread of democratic backsliding has drawn scholarly attention to the strategies and approaches characteristic of these regimes. However, our understanding of targeted government spending programs designed to favor specific segments of society to build and reinforce a loyal support base remains largely limited. We explore a major targeted government spending initiative directed at rural settlements in Hungary, one of the most notable cases of democratic backsliding today. In particular, we analyze the electoral and mobilization effects of targeted policies and the government's resource allocation strategy, focusing on two initiatives: the Rural Family Housing Allowance Program (Rural CSOK), which provides housing subsidies to individuals in eligible settlements, and the Hungarian Village Program, which funds local governments in eligible settlements to invest in essential infrastructure, public services, and community spaces. Using highly detailed observational data and leveraging the quasi-random assignment of program eligibility, we show that the government directs Hungarian Village Program funds to reward electorally strong core settlements. We also find that both eligibility and subsidy amounts increase government vote share by mobilizing core and inactive voters while discouraging opposition participation.

## Keywords

democratic backsliding; electoral mobilization; Hungary; targeted spending; voting behavior

## 1. Introduction

The widespread phenomenon of democratic backsliding has intensified interest in the tools and strategies common to these regimes. Hungary, as a prominent case of democratic backsliding, has been extensively studied, with growing evidence on how the Fidesz–KDNP alliance has consolidated power at both national and local levels since its 2010 landslide victory (in this article, “Fidesz” refers to the Fidesz–KDNP alliance). Strategies such as restricted media freedom, extended government control over the judiciary, weakened constitutional protections for minorities, manipulated electoral laws, reduced local capacity for institutional resilience, and pre-election subsidies have been widely studied as contributors to Hungary’s democratic decline (Benczes, 2024; Enyedi, 2020; Greskovits, 2015; Jakli & Stenberg, 2021; Pepinsky et al., 2025). Yet, one significant strategy remains largely unexplored: the effects of targeted rural spending programs—direct financial benefits allocated to rural families and settlements—despite the government’s substantial financial investment and solid support base in these areas.

This article investigates the electoral impact of a major government spending program targeted at rural areas in Hungary. We examine whether these funds have been strategically allocated to reward certain settlements and assess the extent to which they have helped the government secure political support. Specifically, we explore whether electoral gains stem from mobilizing disengaged voters, demobilizing opposition supporters, or persuading former opposition voters to switch allegiance. The program channels substantial financial resources into rural settlements through two key components: the Rural Family Housing Allowance Program (Rural CSOK), a programmatic policy that provides housing subsidies to individuals in eligible settlements, and the Hungarian Village Program (HVP), a non-programmatic, discretionary policy that allocates funds to local governments for infrastructure, public services, and community development. Together, these programs represent significant fiscal commitments; in 2019 alone, HUF 65 billion (ca. USD 220 million) was allocated to the HVP. Both programs offer substantial benefits to potential voters: On average, HVP-funded settlements received HUF 45,555 (ca. USD 150) per capita (approximately half the minimum wage in 2019), while Rural CSOK provided about HUF 15,500 (ca. USD 50) per capita (roughly 15% of the 2019 minimum wage) in eligible settlements. Fidesz’s electoral strategy in Hungary reflects a broader trend in democratic backsliding, where ruling parties use a mix of programmatic (Rural CSOK) and non-programmatic (HVP) policies to consolidate support. As elections remain a cornerstone in competitive authoritarian regimes and a key source of legitimacy, the government faces continuous electoral pressure, making the strategic allocation of both programmatic and discretionary funds essential for vote consolidation and regime stability.

Leveraging highly granular observational data, we begin with a descriptive analysis to examine the government’s targeting strategy, highlighting how allocation patterns may align with strategic electoral objectives. We then exploit the quasi-random assignment of program eligibility to assess both the electoral impact and mobilizational effects of policy eligibility and transfer receipt. Specifically, by utilizing the quasi-random threshold of policy eligibility, we compare average changes in settlement-level vote shares and turnout rates between eligible and non-eligible settlements across six elections, before and after policy implementation. We use data from five elections preceding the policies, with the latest in May 2019, and from an election shortly after implementation in October 2019, allowing us to attribute changes to the two policies due to the short time span.

Our first finding suggests that the government strategically allocated HVP subsidies to reward core settlements where Fidesz outperformed its expected vote share in previous elections, with these areas showing a significantly higher likelihood of receiving HVP funding.

Second, examining the electoral and mobilizational impact of these targeted programs, we observe that the mere eligibility for subsidies increased Fidesz's vote share in eligible rural settlements by at least 1.7 percentage points. This substantial and statistically significant effect likely stems from a combination of residents who received subsidies, those planning to apply, and individuals who favor being part of a prioritized group. Our analysis shows that these effects are primarily driven by mobilizing core or previously non-voting supporters as well as by demobilizing opposition voters.

A key theoretical and normative question is whether this effect is driven by individuals who have already benefited from the subsidies—specifically, how the actual size of subsidies shapes voter preferences. Isolating the impact of disbursed funds poses a methodological challenge, as HVP subsidies were strategically allocated before the October 2019 local elections, making funding decisions endogenous to both vote share and turnout. Additionally, lobbying and informal mayor–government ties may influence both electoral outcomes and subsidy amounts. While the government did not control Rural CSOK disbursement, applicants likely skew toward more skilled and educated individuals, whose ability to navigate the complex administrative process may correlate with party affiliation and political engagement. Attuned to these inferential challenges, we instrument endogenous per capita subsidy amounts with plausibly exogenous program eligibility.

Our third main finding is that the per capita amount of disbursed subsidies positively impacts Fidesz's vote share, primarily by mobilizing core or previously unengaged voters, with additional effects from demobilizing opposition supporters. Specifically, we find that each additional HUF 10,000 (ca. USD 33 in 2019) of per capita subsidy increases Fidesz's vote share by approximately 1.6 percentage points. These effects are quantitatively similar to those of eligibility alone, likely reflecting the short period since the policy's implementation and the anticipation of subsidies among eligible, yet untreated, individuals.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides policy background and an overview of the Hungarian election system. Section 3 describes the data and definitions. Sections 4 and 5 present findings on the government's allocation strategy and the programs' electoral and mobilizational effects. Section 6 discusses the broader implications of our findings.

## 2. The Hungarian Context

### 2.1. *Democratic Backsliding in Hungary*

The literature on illiberalism identifies multiple pathways of democratic backsliding. Defined as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5), democratic backsliding describes the erosion of democratic quality, including institutions that ensure representation and electoral competition. The term “backsliding” implies a gradual process, weakened political accountability through incremental institutional constraints, and restrictions on political participation (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Hungary is central to the democratic backsliding literature. The Fidesz government

has systematically entrenched its power by packing the Constitutional Court, curbing judicial independence, restricting media through state control and private sector co-optation, and gerrymandering electoral districts to consolidate parliamentary dominance (Greskovits, 2015; Jakli & Stenberg, 2021; Kelemen, 2017).

Despite the deterioration of democratic conditions in Hungary, elections remain a central mechanism for maintaining the regime's popular legitimacy. Regularly scheduled and conducted according to established institutional rules, these elections are actively contested by opposition parties. While the ruling Fidesz party has leveraged its parliamentary supermajority to reshape the political playing field in its favor, electoral victories remain crucial for sustaining the regime's legitimacy (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

Under sustained electoral pressure, the Fidesz government has consistently allocated substantial resources to maintain its popularity in the lead-up to elections. Over time, this has included targeted government spending programs (Pepinsky et al., 2025), public work programs with clientelistic elements (Gáspár et al., 2023), and various practices including policy favors, policy coercion, economic coercion, and vote buying (Mares & Young, 2019). As part of its long-term strategy to cultivate a loyal voter base, the Hungarian government has specifically targeted rural areas (Mares & Young, 2019).

## **2.2. Policy Background, Mechanisms, and Targeting Strategy**

In July 2019, to secure electoral support from rural communities, the government launched two spending programs specifically targeted at the rural population, focusing on housing (Rural CSOK) and settlement development (HVP).

The first program was launched on July 1, 2019, when the government introduced Rural CSOK, a targeted initiative aimed at supporting housing for rural populations (further policy details are provided in Appendix A in the Supplementary File). Individuals residing in settlements with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants and facing population decline (2,479 settlements with an average population of 820) are eligible for Rural CSOK.

The program's primary aim is to support families with children and to counter demographic decline, a critical issue in small rural areas. Rural CSOK offers a non-refundable state subsidy for purchasing, renovating, or expanding a house or flat, as well as an optional capped-interest loan to supplement the subsidy. Subsidy amounts range from HUF 600,000 (USD 2,000) to HUF 10 million (USD 34,000), based on property type and family size. For married couples with three or more children, the maximum benefit—combining a grant, tax deductions, and a capped-interest loan—totals between USD 50,000 and USD 80,000, a substantial amount in the Hungarian context (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). This program extends the existing Family Housing Allowance Program (CSOK), introduced on July 1, 2015, which has since been periodically expanded (Appendix B in the Supplementary File outlines the main elements of CSOK and its comparison to Rural CSOK. Figure A1 in the Supplementary File shows that, prior to Rural CSOK's introduction, per capita CSOK funding was consistently lower in Rural CSOK-eligible settlements, suggesting that individuals from wealthier areas were more likely to access funds for purchasing homes).

The distribution criteria for Rural CSOK are public, with formal requirements shaping resource allocation. Eligibility targets married couples with children residing in small, rural settlements. With decisions managed by commercial banks, the program ensures an objective evaluation process, while the public goods nature of

Rural CSOK guarantees that eligible individuals within the beneficiary class cannot be excluded. In October 2019, just two days before the local elections, the government disclosed basic statistics on Rural CSOK applications. Between July and October 2019, commercial banks approved 1,500 applications, totaling HUF 8 billion, with HUF 1.8 billion already disbursed to beneficiaries. Of these, 72% were submitted by families with three or more children for purchasing and renovating homes, with an average subsidy of HUF 9.4 million per family (Prime Minister's Office, 2019a).

The second program targeting rural populations is the HVP, which primarily aims to develop rural areas through targeted investments in essential infrastructure, public services, and community spaces. Settlements with fewer than 5,000 residents are eligible to apply, amounting to 2,885 communities with an average of 880 voters each. The program supports a wide range of local projects, from the renovation of mayoral offices and medical centers to the improvement of roads, public spaces, and facilities for health workers and educators and provisions for preserving cultural heritage (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). Applications were managed by local governments and mayors, but the allocation of funds was ultimately at the discretion of the Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, with no publicly specified criteria guiding the distribution process.

According to the official Hungarian government website, HUF 65 billion was allocated to the HVP in 2019, with 97.4% of eligible settlements submitting applications and 86% receiving funding (Prime Minister's Office, 2019b). These figures were slightly lower in October 2019, when, according to an announcement from the Prime Minister's Office, 10,713 applications were submitted. From July to October 2019, 96% of eligible settlements applied for HVP funding, and 55% received support (Prime Minister's Office, 2019c). Five days before local elections, the government reported that HUF 21 billion was allocated to 1,454 HVP beneficiaries between July and October 2019, covering HUF 6 billion for local government-owned community spaces, HUF 7 billion for church-owned community spaces, HUF 4 billion for medical centers in 186 settlements, and HUF 2 billion for medical equipment in 778 settlements (Prime Minister's Office, 2019c).

The combination of programmatic (Rural CSOK) and discretionary, non-programmatic (HVP) targeted policies is a key element of Fidesz's electoral strategy. Rather than relying on a single linkage strategy, this mixed approach reflects a broader trend in democratic backsliding countries, where ruling parties compete in electoral environments that include both non-programmatic and programmatic elements. This so-called portfolio diversification approach to electoral investment (Bulut, 2020; Magaloni et al., 2007; Weitz-Shapiro, 2014) allows regimes to appeal to different segments of the electorate through multiple strategies. The mixed approach aligns with the broader political objective identified by Krekó and Enyedi (2018)—to polarize and divide the electorate while consolidating support among the largest voter base, namely the rural population.

The effectiveness of these initiatives is largely mediated by the extent to which politicians can successfully claim credit for them. The literature on the electoral effects of public policies emphasizes that policy salience and credit-claiming play a crucial role in shaping voter perceptions (Huet-Vaughn, 2019). In Hungary, credit-claiming is an explicit element of these initiatives. Each village receiving funding from the HVP is required to display a "support sign" alongside its name at the village border and on funded buildings. These signs feature the project logo, a description of the development, the funding amount, and the Hungarian government's logo. Moreover, visitors to the program's official website are greeted by a personal letter from

the prime minister, accompanied by his photograph, reinforcing the association between these initiatives and the government. By making the programs more salient, these strategies encourage voters to update their political preferences in favor of the government.

Ensuring that voters clearly link these policies to the government serves two informational functions (Mares & Young, 2019). First, they signal party competence by demonstrating the government's ability to implement and manage policy effectively, thereby reinforcing its electoral viability and reputation as a reliable provider of tangible benefits (Kramon, 2016). This notion is echoed by Alpár Gyopáros, the government commissioner for modern settlement development, who emphasized that "not even one euro cent has been spent on the HVP; this program was not financed by the European Union" (Önkormányzati Klub, 2019). His assertion underscores the government's capacity to implement large-scale initiatives independently, reinforcing perceptions of state effectiveness and autonomy by highlighting its ability to execute the program without external EU funding. This aligns with broader studies on clientelism, which suggest that voters assess a candidate's credibility, generosity, and electoral strength based on their ability to distribute material benefits (Mares & Young, 2019). For example, Lindberg's study on clientelism in Ghana emphasizes that cash handouts are not merely a form of vote-buying but rather an institutionalized practice that signals a candidate's commitment to taking care of their constituents (Lindberg, 2003). Similarly, the Hungarian government frames its rural development policies as a demonstration of its dedication to rural communities, as Gyopáros himself puts it: "People living in small settlements can continue to count on us because there is no strong Hungary without a strong countryside" (Magyar Falu Program, 2019a).

Second, these strategies provide insight into the policy positions of the government. Policies that rely on positive inducements serve as clear signals of a party's approach to redistribution (Mares & Young, 2019). The framing of these policies centers on highlighting the importance of rural communities, a sentiment echoed in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's statement: "With the Hungarian Village Program, we first sent the message that villages matter, villages are important, and the people living there are important...living in a village is a good thing...villagers can count on us" (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, 2024). Additionally, the HVP website reinforces this framing:

For the national government, the countryside is a value. Revitalizing our villages and strengthening rural Hungary is in the common interest of all of us. The Hungarian Village Program is the key to building a strong Hungary. That is why the government continues to support it with increasing financial resources. (Magyar Falu Program, 2019b)

Ensuring the salience of the policy and effectively communicating the government's competence, generosity, and strong policy stance in favor of rural communities are key mechanisms linking policy implementation to vote choice. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the HVP was subsequently used in clientelistic exchanges, where benefits were distributed in return for political support. Notably, in their study of Hungary, Mares and Young (2018) argue that politicians frequently politicize economic and administrative resources at the local level in the lead-up to electoral campaigns. Social policies, in particular, constitute the most significant tool during this pre-electoral phase. Additionally, research shows that even ostensibly universal benefit programs, as well as forbearance—the selective nonenforcement of laws—can be exploited to cultivate political dependency, especially when partisan-aligned bureaucrats condition access on political loyalty (Holland, 2016). Indeed, existing literature provides evidence that settlement mayors in Hungary,

who were responsible for submitting HVP subsidy applications in 2019, often function as political brokers. Beyond mayors, several other groups—including state employees, local employers with substantial economic influence, tenant farmers, moneylenders, members of local officials' extended families, and party activists—are documented as intermediaries between political candidates and voters (Mares & Young, 2019).

To comprehensively analyze these mechanisms, a survey or interview-based approach would provide valuable insights into how affected individuals perceive these benefits, how these perceptions vary across different socioeconomic backgrounds, and whether there is any contingency—that is, whether benefits are provided in exchange for political support. However, our analysis relies on observational, settlement-level data, which, although unaffected by sampling error or survey response biases, does not capture individual-level attitudes and behaviors.

Given the nonprogrammatic and discretionary nature of the HVP, its allocation is likely influenced by political considerations. However, it remains unclear whether these funds are primarily directed toward core settlements—those with a historically high Fidesz vote share—or swing settlements, which lack strong and predictable partisan attachments (Cox & McCubbins, 1986; Dixit & Londregan, 1996; Golden & Picci, 2008; Lindbeck & Weibull, 1987).

While we cannot directly observe the flow of HVP funds or access individual-level data on beneficiaries, distribution channels, and the extent to which benefits are provided in exchange for votes, we argue that if the program is politically motivated, core settlements should receive a greater allocation of funds. This expectation is based on three key factors. First, the embeddedness of core settlements within partisan networks facilitates the politically motivated allocation of resources, as mayors who are either formally affiliated with Fidesz or politically aligned with the party are more likely to cooperate in distributing funds in line with electoral considerations. Second, if the HVP operates within a clientelist framework, core settlements may be prioritized due to the government's limited capacity to fully monitor brokers and local officials at the settlement level (Stokes et al., 2013). Finally, given that ballot secrecy is strongly protected in Hungary, parties cannot directly monitor vote choices, only electoral turnout. Therefore, the less observable individual votes are, the stronger the incentive for parties to prioritize mobilizing known supporters, making settlements with a high concentration of potential voters particularly strategic targets (Gans-Morse et al., 2014). These dynamics align with Mares and Young's (2018) argument that clientelist inducements in Hungary are primarily distributed during the pre-election period, disproportionately targeting core supporters through a combination of pre-electoral benefits and election-time threats—a phenomenon referred to as the core voters' curse.

### 2.3. Elections

In this study, we examine changes in vote share and turnout rates across various Hungarian elections, comparing periods before and after the introduction of the targeted government programs. We cover European Parliamentary, national, and local elections, beginning with an overview of each to highlight distinctions in voting systems, turnout patterns, and seat distribution across electoral contexts.

We begin by examining electoral patterns in European Parliamentary elections held on May 25, 2014, and May 26, 2019. In these elections, only parties—not individual candidates—compete for seats, and parties



must gather 20,000 signatures from eligible voters to qualify for the ballot. In both years, Hungarian voters elected 21 MEPs for five-year terms. These 21 mandates are allocated proportionally using the d'Hondt method among parties that receive at least 5% of valid votes, allowing voters to express their genuine party preferences without strategic voting considerations.

In the May 2019 elections, five party lists surpassed the 5% threshold, with Fidesz securing 52.5% of the vote and winning 13 of the 21 mandates. The Democratic Coalition followed with 16.1% (4 seats), while Momentum gained 9.9% (2 seats). The Hungarian Socialist Party and Jobbik each secured a single seat with 6.6% and 6.4% of the vote, respectively. In 2014, a more fragmented party landscape saw eight parties competing, six of which crossed the 5% threshold. Fidesz led with 51.48% of the vote, securing 12 mandates, followed by Jobbik with 3 seats, while the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Democratic Coalition each secured 2 mandates. Együtt-PM and LMP also entered the European Parliament with one seat each.

Then, we examine the national elections held on April 6, 2014, and April 8, 2018. Hungarian national elections employ a single-round, two-ballot system to elect 199 members of the National Assembly for four-year terms. Of these seats, 106 MPs are elected through a first-past-the-post system in individual constituencies, while the remaining 93 are filled from national party lists. Voters with a registered Hungarian address cast one vote for a party list and another for a candidate in their constituency. Seats on the national party list are allocated using d'Hondt proportional representation, incorporating both list votes and “fragment votes” (votes from unsuccessful or surplus individual candidate ballots).

In 2014, Fidesz secured 44.11% of individual constituency votes (96 seats of 106 in a first-past-the-post system) and 44.87% of party list votes (37 seats of 93 in a proportional system), totaling 133 seats in the National Assembly and retaining a two-thirds majority. Fidesz won 96 out of 106 constituencies with only 44.11% of the vote due to opposition fragmentation. In 2018, Fidesz secured another landslide victory with 47.89% of individual votes (winning 91 out of 106 constituencies) and 49.27% of party list votes (42 out of 93 seats), once again totaling 133 seats. Despite increasing its vote share compared to 2014, Fidesz won fewer individual constituencies due to improved opposition coordination.

Finally, we analyze the local elections held on October 12, 2014, and October 13, 2019. In Hungary, mayors and assembly members serve five-year terms, with electoral rules varying by settlement size. Our focus is on settlements with fewer than 10,000 residents, where voters cast three ballots. First, they elect a mayor via a first-past-the-post system. Second, they vote for assembly members using a plurality-at-large system, where the number of assembly members varies by settlement size. Finally, voters elect members for their county assembly in one of Hungary's 19 counties. Similar to European Parliamentary and national elections, county assembly seats are allocated proportionally via the d'Hondt method among parties receiving at least 5% of the votes (a summary of election results and turnout rates is provided in Table A6 in the Supplementary File).

Although these elections share common features—such as a one-round format that minimizes strategic voting—differences in rules and regulations may impact our outcomes of interest *across election types*. First, European Parliamentary elections are generally seen as second-order elections, which affects turnout and vote shares, especially in smaller settlements (Kostelka et al., 2019; Kouba et al., 2021). Turnout rates in Hungary for national and local elections ranged from 56–71% and 43–53%, respectively, in 1990–2019, whereas European Parliamentary elections had significantly lower participation, with turnout varying

between 29% and 43% (43% in 2019). Second, while only Hungarian citizens can vote in European Parliamentary and national elections, local elections allow non-citizen residents with a registered address to participate. Third, specific factors in local elections, such as the number of mayoral candidates, election competitiveness, the ethnicity of candidates (e.g., Roma candidates), and whether a candidate has Fidesz support, vary across settlements and election cycles. Appendix C in the Supplementary File provides details on these local election factors and their potential impact on turnout rates and vote share. Importantly, our analysis accounts for both cross-election differences and local election-specific factors related to turnout and vote shares by including election-type dummies in all specifications.

### 3. Data

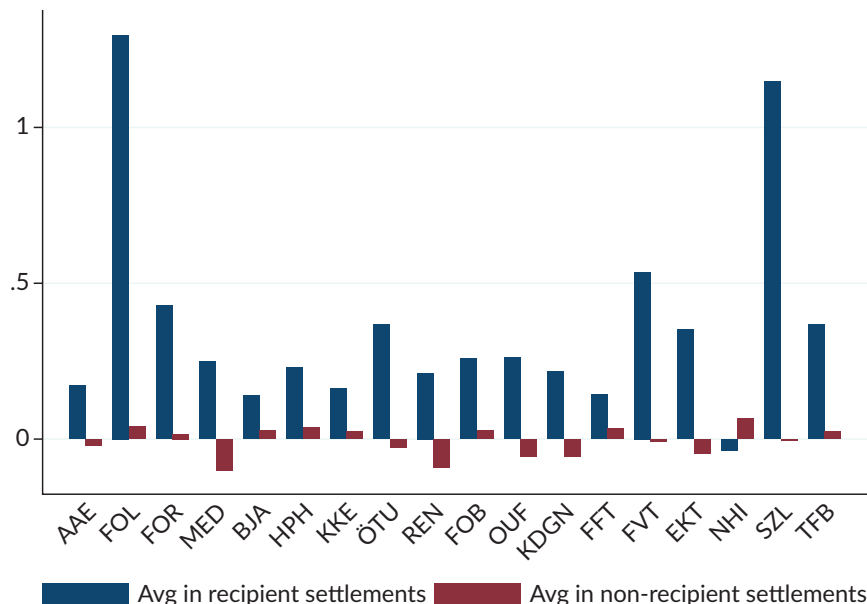
Our empirical analysis draws on several settlement-level data sources, as settlements represent the smallest administrative units in Hungary. The country has 3,177 settlements, including the 23 districts of Budapest. First, we use polling-station data from the National Election Office on votes, eligible voters, and candidate information, aggregating approximately 10,200 polling stations per election to calculate Fidesz and opposition vote shares at the settlement level. Second, we employ contract-level data from the Hungarian State Treasury on CSOK and Rural CSOK subsidies, including subsidy type, date, amount, and settlement, which we aggregate by settlement and year or quarter. Third, we collect data from the Hungarian government's website on HVP beneficiaries, detailing subsidy types and amounts by settlement. Finally, we use administrative data from T-STAR (Hungarian Statistical Office) and a dataset from the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, which include various settlement-level demographic and economic variables. Appendix D in the Supplementary File defines the variables, and Table A7 presents the descriptive statistics.

### 4. Political Determinants of Subsidy Allocation

This section explores whether the Hungarian government utilizes targeted spending programs for strategic electoral purposes. The HVP is particularly relevant to this inquiry, as the criteria for its funding allocations were not publicly disclosed. In contrast, the Rural CSOK program had objective selection criteria that were, by design, unrelated to party support and exogenous to the selection process. We investigate whether such allocations are used to reward core settlements or punish opposition-leaning ones to better understand how the government may use these funds as an electoral strategy. Additionally, we assess whether resource distribution is driven by genuine need, with subsidies directed toward settlements facing the most significant infrastructural deficiencies.

For each of the 15 HVP sub-programs, in Figure 1 we classify settlements into recipients (blue bars) and non-recipients (red bars; the horizontal axis of the figure displays the 15 sub-programs along with three aggregated categories—MED, REN, and KDGN—representing subsidies for medical, renovation, and kindergarten projects, respectively). Next, we assess Fidesz's electoral performance in the 2018 parliamentary elections—one year before the subsidy program—in both recipient and non-recipient settlements across each sub-program. We estimate a regression model of Fidesz vote share with only settlement and election fixed effects and take the difference between the actual Fidesz vote share in 2018 and the vote share predicted by this simple model. Thus, we are using the residuals of the estimated model as a measure of the recent electoral performance of Fidesz, with positive and negative values representing better-than-expected and worse-than-expected vote shares. The population-weighted averages of these

residuals in recipient (blue bars) versus non-recipient (red bars) settlements, shown in Figure 1, reveal that Fidesz outperformed expectations in recipient settlements for 14 of the 15 sub-programs—suggesting that settlements where Fidesz had a better-than-expected performance in 2018 had higher likelihood of receiving HVP subsidies in 2019.



**Figure 1.** HVP recipients versus non-recipients: Relative popularity of Fidesz in 2018 national elections. Note: The horizontal axis of the figure displays the 15 sub-programs of the HVP, along with three aggregated categories—MED, REN, and KDGN—while the vertical axis represents the deviation (in percentage points) of Fidesz's vote share in the April 2018 election from its expected level based on prior electoral performance. The abbreviations used on the horizontal axis correspond to issue areas detailed in Table A2 of the Supplementary File.

Importantly, these results remain robust across alternative measures of Fidesz's performance, including estimations using settlement fixed effects to assess Fidesz's popularity. Additionally, the findings hold in a multivariate regression setting (in Appendix E in the Supplementary File, we present cross-sectional linear probability regressions, with the dummy of receiving a specific type of HVP as the dependent variable, Fidesz's performance in past elections as the primary explanatory variable, and additional control variables corresponding to the specific issue areas of each HVP program).

Figure 2, meanwhile, examines the per capita amount of total HVP subsidies received by each eligible settlement. Each dot represents one eligible settlement; the horizontal axis shows settlement-level Fidesz support, estimated by settlement fixed effects from a simple fixed effects regression on Fidesz vote share, while the vertical axis displays per capita HVP subsidy (in HUF 10,000) from July to October 2019. The estimated regression line indicates a strong positive correlation ( $t$ -value = 3.79) between Fidesz support and per capita HVP subsidies, suggesting that more HVP funds were allocated as a reward to settlements where Fidesz performed strongly. Unfortunately, we lack data on settlements that applied but did not receive HVP subsidies, which leaves open the possibility of self-selection at the application stage. This data would enable us to analyze the settlements that chose not to apply (potentially those with lower-than-average Fidesz support). However, anecdotal reports of rejected applications from opposition-supported mayors, combined with the low application cost, suggest that most mayors—



**Figure 2.** Correlation between per capita HVP funding (vertical axis, measured in 10,000 Hungarian forints) and settlement-level Fidesz vote share (horizontal axis, expressed in percentage points deviation between estimated settlement-fixed effects and the national average vote share).

regardless of political affiliation—had strong incentives to apply. Indeed, they did so in large numbers: By October 2019, 96% of eligible settlements had submitted at least one application, indicating that self-selection at the application stage was minimal.

Our findings indicate a strong correlation between both the likelihood and amount of HVP funding and Fidesz support, suggesting a potential political motive behind the program. The targeted allocation of resources to core settlements aligns with theories on partisan networks, clientelism, and ballot secrecy constraints (see Section 2), highlighting the program’s political intent.

In contrast, our analysis of Rural CSOK distribution finds no significant relationship between Fidesz’s performance and either the likelihood or per capita amount of subsidies allocated. This suggests that, unlike HVP, Rural CSOK allocation is exogenous to settlement-level Fidesz support, as it is managed by independent agents using objective selection criteria.

## 5. Electoral and Turnout Effects of Subsidies

To assess the political impact of subsidies, we begin by presenting the number of eligible versus non-eligible settlements. The rows of Table 1 display eligibility counts for the Rural CSOK (top panel) and the HVP (bottom panel). Among the 3,000 settlements with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, 2,878 (95.9%) were eligible for HVP subsidies, while 2,479 (82.6%) qualified for Rural CSOK subsidies (population-weighted eligibility rates, provided in Appendix F in the Supplementary File, indicate 78.7% eligibility for HVP and 63.3% for Rural CSOK).

**Table 1.** Number of eligible versus non-eligible settlements.

	Rural CSOK	Total
	Rural CSOK recipients	
Non-eligible settlements	4	
Eligible settlements	1,418	
Total	1,422	
Proportion (%)	47.4%	
	HVP	Total
	HVP recipients	
Non-eligible settlements	0	
Eligible settlements	2,322	
Total	2,322	
Proportion (%)	77.4%	

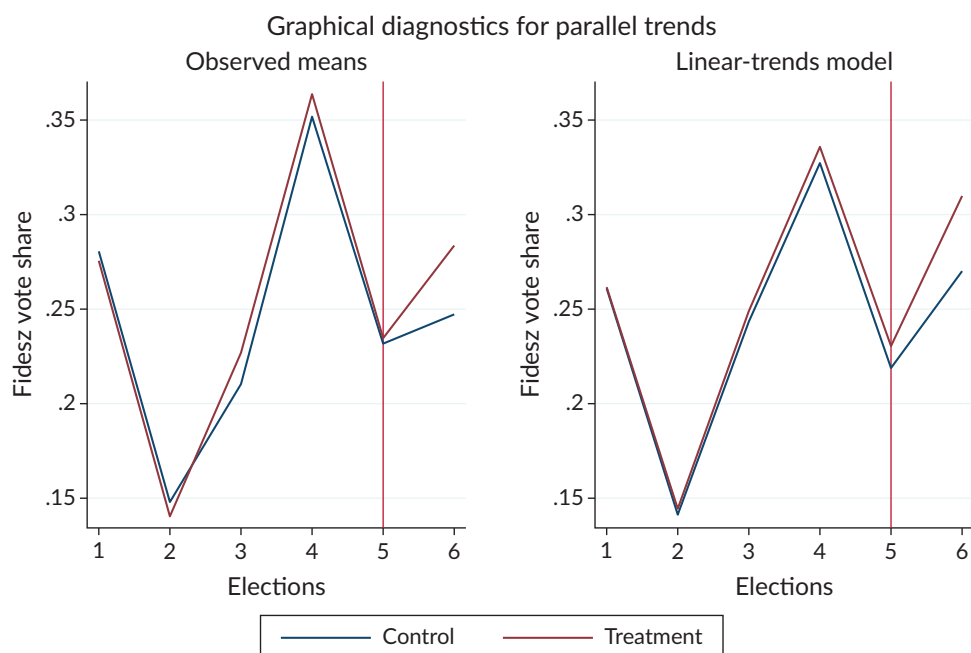
Sources: Data for Rural CSOK are from the Hungarian State Treasury website.

We estimate the causal effect of policy eligibility on the incumbent government's electoral success using a difference-in-differences design. This approach compares average changes in vote share before and after the policy introduction between eligible and non-eligible settlements. Given that Rural CSOK-eligible settlements are a subset of HVP-eligible ones, we define one control group (non-eligible for either program) and two treatment groups: (a) settlements eligible only for HVP and (b) those eligible for both HVP and Rural CSOK subsidies. To ensure internal validity, we assume—and provide evidence in Figures 3 and 4—that eligible and non-eligible settlements followed parallel trends before the policies' introduction. This assumption is crucial for identification, as it implies that, without subsidies, differences in Fidesz vote share between the two groups would have remained stable. In this case, non-eligible settlements serve as a counterfactual for the trend that eligible settlements would have followed absent the subsidy treatment.

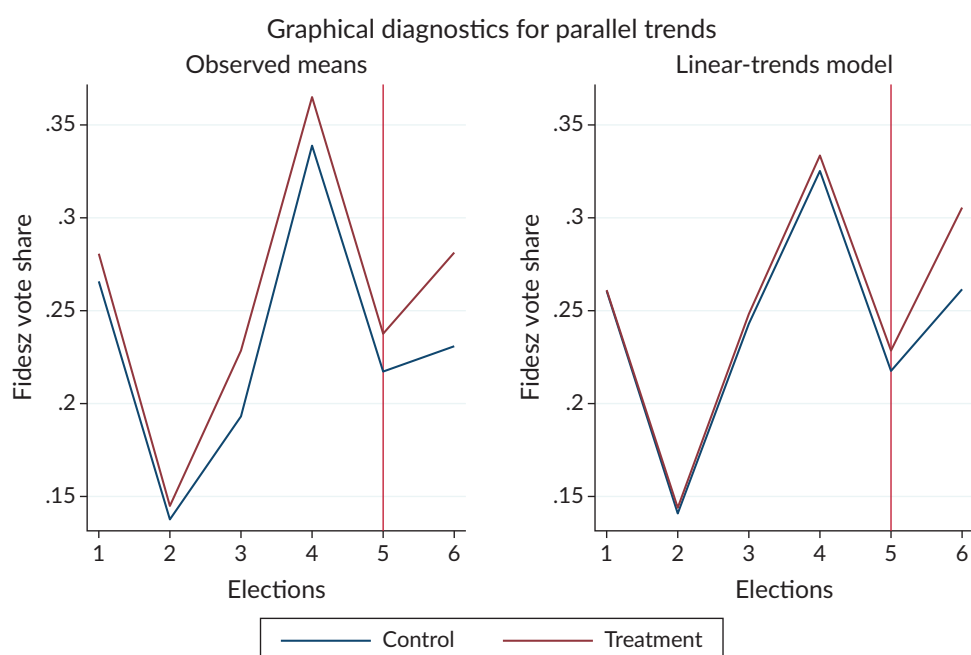
Figure 3 presents the average Fidesz vote share in Rural CSOK-eligible and non-eligible settlements across five elections before and immediately after the introduction of the Rural CSOK policy, while Figure 4 depicts the same by HVP eligibility. Both figures show that differences in Fidesz's vote share between treated and untreated settlements remained constant across pre-policy elections, indicating similar trends in eligible and non-eligible settlements—in Figures 3 and 4, Fidesz's vote share is adjusted for the impact of Public Work programs, which were key government policy tools, particularly before the October 2014 local elections (Gáspár et al., 2023); additional details are provided in Appendix G in the Supplementary File.

Since eligibility criteria for both programs rely solely on objective measures, such as population size and dynamics, we argue that eligibility—given our comprehensive set of control variables—is plausibly exogenous to Fidesz support. Further, we find it unlikely that settlements or voters themselves would engage in strategic self-selection into the pool of eligible settlements after the introduction of policies. This is partly due to the difficulty of manipulating a settlement's population size or dynamics and partly due to administrative constraints that make residency changes impractical. This supports the assumption that any observed electoral effects are causally linked to policy eligibility rather than demographic shifts.

To further assess the parallel-trends assumption, we test whether linear trends in Fidesz vote share were parallel between control and treatment groups in the pre-treatment period. We fit a Granger-type causality



**Figure 3.** Average Fidesz vote share in Rural CSOK-eligible versus non-eligible settlements, before and after the introduction of the Rural CSOK program in July 2019. Elections 1–5 are between April 2014 and May 2019 (before the policy), while election 6 is in October 2019 (after the policy).



**Figure 4.** Average Fidesz vote share in HVP-eligible versus non-eligible settlements, before and after the introduction of the HVP in July 2019. Elections 1–5 are between April 2014 and May 2019 (before the policy), while election 6 is in October 2019 (after the policy).

model, adding dummies for each period to test for any anticipatory effects. The test statistic fails to reject the null hypothesis of parallel trends, and our graphical analysis further supports this assumption, indicating that changes in Fidesz support following the policy's introduction were likely driven by the policy itself.

To empirically assess the electoral effect of policy eligibility, we use panel data from six elections across 3,000 settlements, applying the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fidesz}_{it} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{RCSOKelig}_i + \beta_2 \text{Post}_t + \beta_3 \text{RCSOKelig}_i \times \text{Post}_t + \\ & + \beta_4 \text{HVPelig}_i + \beta_5 \text{Post}_t + \beta_6 \text{HVPelig}_i \times \text{Post}_t + \\ & + X'_{it}\gamma + \mu_i + \varphi_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Where  $\text{Fidesz}_{it}$  is the vote share of Fidesz in settlement  $i$  in election  $t$  (where  $t$  denotes elections in April 2014, May 2014, October 2014, May 2018, May 2019, and October 2019),  $\text{RCSOKelig}_i$  and  $\text{HVPelig}_i$  are eligibility dummies for Rural CSOK and HVP programs for settlement  $i$ ;  $\text{Post}_t$  is a dummy for the October 2019 election (post-treatment);  $X_{it}$  is a vector of settlement-level control variables (see Appendix D in the Supplementary File);  $\varphi_t$  denotes elections fixed effects; and  $\mu_i$  are settlement fixed effects. We weight settlements by the number of eligible voters and report robust standard errors clustered at the settlement level. As it is standard in difference-in-differences estimation, the primary parameters of interest,  $\beta_3$  and  $\beta_6$ , provide the difference-in-differences estimates of the effect of program eligibilities on Fidesz support. Our analysis focuses on settlements with fewer than 10,000 residents, as local elections follow different rules in larger areas, and urban centers such as Budapest and county capitals differ significantly from smaller, subsidy-eligible settlements. This results in a sample of exactly 3,000 settlements observed over six elections from 2014 to 2019 (totaling 18,000 observations).

Among the settlement-level control variables  $X_{it}$ , two are particularly important. First, settlement-specific shares of public workers at each election control for the impact of the Public Work program, a major tool used by the Fidesz government to gain votes through clientelistic ties, especially before the October 2014 local elections (Gáspár et al., 2023). Including this variable ensures that the electoral effects of the Public Work program do not confound our estimated eligibility effects. Second, we control for the election-type-specific impact of (log) population, capturing the fact that voters in smaller settlements tend to be more active in local elections. This adjustment ensures that our estimated treatment effects do not reflect the higher turnout in smaller, subsidy-eligible settlements during local elections.

It is important to note that in Equation 1, we include the Rural CSOK eligibility and HVP eligibility variables simultaneously. This is because both variables may be correlated with party preferences and omitting either could lead to omitted variable bias in estimating the other variable's parameters. If, for instance, Rural CSOK eligibility were excluded, despite being positively associated with Fidesz vote share, its effect would be absorbed by the HVP eligibility variable included in the regression, leading to an overestimation of the latter's parameter. To accurately estimate the effects of these two variables, both must be included in the same regression equation.

A key theoretical question is whether incumbents' electoral gains stem primarily from mobilizing citizens who would otherwise abstain or from persuading former opposition supporters to shift their allegiance. To evaluate the relative impact of mobilization versus vote switching in the relationship between government spending and electoral outcomes, we also estimate Equation 1 using voter turnout rate—and separately, opposition vote share—as the dependent variable.

The three columns of Table 2 present the estimation results of Equation 1 using different dependent variables. The first column shows that policy eligibility alone increased Fidesz's vote share by approximately



0.5 percentage points in settlements eligible for the HVP but not for Rural CSOK (i.e., settlements with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants but without shrinking populations). Additionally, Rural CSOK eligibility led to an increase of 1.7 percentage points in Fidesz's vote share, a statistically significant effect at the 1% level.

The second column examines opposition vote share, revealing a statistically significant decline of 1.2 percentage points in HVP-eligible settlements, while Rural CSOK eligibility has no significant effect. The third column aligns with these findings: Rural CSOK eligibility appears to have mobilized voters by increasing Fidesz's vote share, whereas the HVP seems to have demobilized voters by reducing opposition support.

Crucially, our results do not support the presence of vote switching—where voters shift directly from opposition parties to Fidesz. If vote switching were occurring, we would expect to see a simultaneous increase in Fidesz's vote share and a corresponding decline in opposition support. However, this pattern does not appear for either Rural CSOK or HVP eligibility.

While the three columns in Table 2 indicate effects of policy eligibility, they do not capture the impact of actual subsidy amounts on Fidesz and other parties' popularity. In the first panel of Table 1, we observe that although 2,479 settlements (82.6%) were eligible for Rural CSOK, only 1,418 (57.2%) received subsidies, leaving 1,061 intended-but-untreated settlements. Similarly, Table A8 in the Supplementary File shows that of 2.039 million people living in Rural CSOK-eligible settlements, only 1.66 million actually received subsidies. The second panels of Table 1 and Table A8 reveal similar patterns for HVP: Only 77.4% of eligible settlements and 68.3% of eligible voters received HVP subsidies, compared to eligibility rates of 95.9% and 78.7%.

This gap between eligibility and actual treatment suggests that even individuals in eligible settlements who had not received subsidies by the time the local elections took place may have increased their support for Fidesz. Mere eligibility can influence political preferences, as parties use these strategies not only to reward direct beneficiaries but also to appeal to a broader rural constituency. Voters who have not yet received subsidies—at least until the October local elections—may still update their party preferences based on the government's policy signaling and perceived competence in delivering benefits (as explained in Section 2).

Our objective is to disentangle the policy's effect in eligible settlements that received subsidies from its effect in those that did not receive the subsidies by the time the local elections took place. In similar cases, the literature often relies on estimating the intention-to-treat effect (Baker et al., 2008; Havnes & Mogstad, 2011), which averages the treatment effect across all units, regardless of actual treatment, and may not accurately reflect the true treatment effect. To obtain the treatment-on-the-treated effect, the intention-to-treat estimate is typically scaled by the treatment probability—divided by the share of treated

**Table 2.** The effect of Rural CSOK and HVP eligibility on Fidesz and opposition vote shares and on turnout rate.

Dependent variable
--------------------

Notes: Settlement fixed effects, election dummies, and control variables are included; settlements are weighted by number of eligible voters;  $N = 18,000$  (six elections in 3,000 settlements); robust std. errors are in parentheses. \*\*\* indicate significance at 10%, 5%, and 1%, respectively.

units within the intent-to-treat group (Baker et al., 2008; Havnes & Mogstad, 2011). However, this approach assumes no separate intent-to-treat effect, an assumption that may not hold in our context.

To account for the actual amount of subsidies, we estimate the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fidesz}_{it} = & \alpha + \beta_1(\text{RCSOKpc}_i > 0) + \beta_2\text{Post}_t + \beta_3[\text{RCSOKpc}_i \times \text{Post}_t] + \\ & + \beta_4(\text{HVPpc}_i > 0) + \beta_5\text{Post}_t + \beta_6[\text{HVPpc}_i \times \text{Post}_t] + \\ & + X'_{it}\gamma + \mu_i + \varphi_t + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Where  $\text{RCSOKpc}_i$  and  $\text{HVPpc}_i$  are per capita Rural CSOK and HVP subsidies received in period  $t = 6$ , respectively. Similarly to Equation 1, our key parameters are  $\beta_3$  and  $\beta_6$ , representing the difference-in-differences estimates for per capita Rural CSOK and HVP effects on Fidesz vote share. We weight settlements by their eligible voter count and report robust standard errors clustered at the settlement level.

A key difference from our eligibility regressions in Equation 1 is that we can no longer assume that per capita subsidy amounts are determined solely by objective criteria. While eligibility depended on objective and exogenous factors (e.g., population size and dynamics), actual subsidies—particularly for the HVP, as documented in Section 4—reflect idiosyncratic, often political, decisions that are endogenous to Fidesz support. Thus, we instrument the endogenous per capita subsidy amounts with subsidy eligibility.

For policy eligibility to serve as a valid instrument, it must satisfy both relevance and exogeneity criteria. As previously argued, the eligibility criteria are exogenous to Fidesz support as well as to opposition support and turnout by design. They are also relevant, as per capita subsidies are naturally correlated with eligibility. The strength of our instruments is further supported by the first-stage  $F$ -statistics, which are approximately 810 and 263 for the two endogenous variables. These values indicate strong instruments, making the usual  $t$ -ratio-based inference valid in our IV regression (Lee et al., 2022).

Table 3 presents the estimation results. The first column of Table 3 shows that each additional HUF 10,000 (approximately USD 30) of per capita Rural CSOK subsidy raises Fidesz's vote share by about 1.6 percentage points, whereas the effect of per capita HVP subsidies is smaller, around 0.5 percentage points, and statistically insignificant. For opposition support, however, per capita HVP subsidies appear to demobilize voters, reducing the opposition vote share by approximately 1.1 percentage points, while the estimated effect of Rural CSOK on opposition support is small and not statistically significant at the 5% level. Finally, consistent with our eligibility-based estimates, Rural CSOK subsidies significantly increase turnout by boosting support for the governing party, while per capita HVP subsidies slightly reduce turnout, primarily by demobilizing opposition voters. Importantly, we again find no evidence of vote switching, as the decline in opposition support does not translate into a corresponding increase in Fidesz's vote share.

**Table 3.** The effect of per capita Rural CSOK and HVP subsidies on Fidesz and opposition vote share and on turnout rate.

Dependent variable
809.84
262.90

Notes: Settlement fixed effects, election dummies, and control variables are included; settlements are weighted by the number of eligible voters;  $N = 18,000$  (six elections in 3,000 settlements); robust std. errors are in parentheses. \*\*\* indicate significance at 10%, 5%, and 1%, respectively.

## 6. Conclusion

The strategic allocation of government spending before elections is especially crucial in democratic backsliding and competitive authoritarian regimes, where elections serve as a key mechanism for legitimizing the regime and consolidating electoral support. This study has examined the impact of a major rural-targeted spending program in Hungary, a prominent example of democratic backsliding, on electoral support for the Fidesz government, as well as the strategic logic behind the targeting of these funds. It has investigated whether resources were allocated to reward certain settlements and has assessed the government's effectiveness in consolidating political backing through these initiatives. Specifically, we have explored whether electoral gains result from mobilizing voters in core, Fidesz-leaning settlements, suppressing opposition turnout, or shifting the allegiances of formerly opposition-leaning settlements. The program channels substantial financial resources into rural areas through two key components: The Rural CSOK, a programmatic policy that provides housing subsidies to eligible individuals, and the HVP, a non-programmatic, discretionary policy that funds essential infrastructure, public services, and community development in rural settlements.

To enhance our understanding of the electoral impact of targeted policies and the government's strategy for allocating resources, we have utilized highly detailed observational data on both benefits and voting behavior, leveraging the quasi-random assignment of program eligibility. Our analysis reveals that the government strategically allocated non-programmatic, discretionary HVP subsidies to reward core settlements where Fidesz outperformed expectations in previous elections, making these areas significantly more likely to receive funding. Examining the electoral and mobilizational effects of these targeted programs, we find that both eligibility for subsidies and the amount of disbursed funds (each additional HUF 10,000 or USD 30 per capita) increased Fidesz's vote share by around 1.7 percentage points in eligible rural settlements. This effect operates primarily by mobilizing core supporters and previously non-voting individuals, with additional impacts from demobilizing opposition voters. However, we find no evidence that these policies lead to vote switching.

Our findings make two key contributions to the literature. First, we examine the link between voting behavior and targeted government spending in competitive authoritarian and democratic backsliding contexts. While a rich literature documents the electoral effects of spending policies in these regimes (Bulut, 2020; Gáspár et al., 2023; Linos, 2013; Mares & Young, 2019; Pepinsky, 2007; Pepinsky et al., 2025), including tax relief, pension subsidies, workfare programs, clientelist policies, economic favors, fiscal

expenditures, and conditional cash transfers, our study extends this body of work by analyzing the electoral effects of a large and economically significant targeted spending program. This rural-targeted program, integrating both programmatic and non-programmatic components, enables us to examine how program eligibility and benefit amounts influence settlement-level support for the governing party.

Second, we contribute to the debate on strategies employed in the context of democratic backsliding, specifically how governments sustain regime legitimacy by maintaining popular support through electoral strategies of targeted spending (Brollo & Nannicini, 2012; Bulut, 2020; Finan & Schechter, 2012; Hill, 2017; Jensenius & Chhibber, 2023; Nichter, 2008; Pepinsky et al., 2025). The non-programmatic and discretionary HVP provides a clear example of government control over targeted disbursements, with decisions regarding which settlements receive funding, the amounts allocated, and the timing fully determined by the government. By analyzing not only the total HVP allocations but also each of its 15 subprograms and the infrastructure and development needs of settlements, we offer further evidence that the government strategically uses these funds to reward core supporter rural areas.

Future research could further investigate the electoral effects and causal mechanisms underlying these two policies. Further analyses could examine the short-, mid-, and long-term impacts of targeted spending, particularly as the HVP has expanded since 2019 to civil organizations, education centers, and rural businesses. Additionally, future research could explore the sectoral consequences of policy-driven spending, such as its impact on Hungary's construction industry and whether initial economic benefits for rural areas have been sustained despite rising costs. Other important avenues of future research include analyzing migration patterns in response to program eligibility and how these shifts affect local political dynamics. Finally, individual-level survey data using techniques for addressing sensitive questions could help assess the role of local politicians in mediating the political effects of targeted spending, particularly whether Fidesz-aligned villages experience stronger electoral gains and how local elites shape voter attribution of economic improvements.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

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

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## About the Authors



**Krisztina Szabó** is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy, Royal Holloway University of London, a visiting lecturer at the Department of Political Science, Central European University, Vienna, and a research fellow at the HUN-REN Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Institute of Economics, Budapest.



**Ádám Reiff** is a senior research fellow at the HUN-REN Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Institute of Economics, Budapest, and visiting faculty at the Department of Economics and Business, Central European University, Vienna. A significant part of this project was completed while he was a visiting fellow at the CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest.



# “Strongmen” Don’t Redistribute: Illiberal Leaders on the Right and Worsening Economic Inequality

Dean Schafer<sup>1,2</sup> , Seraphine F. Maerz<sup>3</sup> , Carsten Q. Schneider<sup>4</sup> ,  
and Alexandra Krasnokutskaya<sup>5</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary

<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Mississippi State University, USA

<sup>3</sup> School of Social and Political Science, University of Melbourne, Australia

<sup>4</sup> Department of Political Science, Central European University, Austria

<sup>5</sup> Department of Network and Data Science, Central European University, Austria

**Correspondence:** Seraphine F. Maerz ([seraphine.maerz@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:seraphine.maerz@unimelb.edu.au))

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## Abstract

Illiberal leaders—sometimes called strongmen—often campaign on being more effective. The tradeoff presented to citizens is straightforward: they promise to cut through the indecisiveness and gridlock of democratic debate and give people what they want. Such leaders often use the rhetoric of economic grievances, corruption, and redistribution, but do they follow through on those promises? We answer this question using data from 38,557 speeches by 381 leaders in 120 countries between 1998 and 2024, combined with economic indicators from the World Bank and V-Dem measures on regime type and resource inequality. Utilizing a machine learning approach, we employ BERT language models that place leaders’ speeches on two continuous dimensions measuring liberal–illiberal speech and left–right economic positions. We test whether illiberals are more effective at translating their economic preferences into material changes. We show that illiberal leaders do deliver the goods—but only when they are on the economic right and only in the direction of greater economic inequality. Illiberals resemble populists because they engage in the rhetoric of cultural exclusion, but they do not push a distributional policy that benefits most citizens. The policy preferences of illiberal leftists, on the other hand, have no apparent effect. This article makes methodological contributions by building a one-dimensional scale for measuring the economic left–right positions of political leaders. This article also contributes to our understanding of the pernicious effects of illiberal leaders in deepening economic inequality.

## Keywords

authoritarian; BERT language models; democracy; economic inequality; illiberal; material distribution; populism; strong leader; strongman; text analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Actors like Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, and Tayyip Erdoğan claim to be fighters on their supporters' behalf. They fight to protect culture, but also to battle corruption, inflation, and the regulatory and economic policies of out-of-touch elites. From the bottom-up, much work shows that citizens tend to turn to strong leadership in times of economic crisis (Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Schafer, 2021; Sprong et al., 2019; Weyland, 2003; Xuereb et al., 2021). People's behavior suggests that they believe the delegation of power to a less constrained executive can strengthen citizens' voices against the resistance of horizontal checks and competing elite interests (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Chong & Gradstein, 2008). The sources of the psychological appeal of illiberal "strongman" leadership—as a reaction to instability, uncertainty, and a sense of threat—are also well-established (Duckitt et al., 2002; Harms et al., 2018; Inglehart et al., 2006; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Stenner, 2005). The perception that illiberal "strongmen" can more effectively deliver economic results thus appears central to their appeal.

The rise of illiberal leaders who challenge democratic norms and institutions while claiming to fight for ordinary citizens presents a potential corrective to economic inequality in democracies. Economic inequality motivates support for illiberal types (Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Sprong et al., 2019), giving such leaders cover to weaken institutional checks on their power. Although such leaders are often labeled as "populists," we emphasize the distinction between populism—defined as a mode of politics that focuses on the conflict between "the people" and "the elites" (Funke et al., 2023; Mudde, 2017)—and illiberalism—characterized by the critique of liberal democratic norms and institutions of accountability, attacks on minority rights, the imposition of monolithic cultural standards, and the concentration of executive power (Enyedi, 2024). A rational political actor in this situation would have little reason to fix structural problems that they find politically advantageous. While such illiberal leaders clearly deliver on reinforcing the cultural standards of the majority, and on villainizing gender and ethnic minorities (Ergas et al., 2022; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), only a handful of studies explore their economic impact (Funke et al., 2023; Strobl et al., 2023). Therefore, this article asks: When it comes to economic policy, does illiberal leadership produce more effective redistribution?

The empirical evidence on whether illiberal leadership delivers economic benefits is mixed. While democracy is often assumed to reduce inequality through greater participation and redistribution, both Acemoglu et al. (2015) and Scheve and Stasavage (2017) find little evidence for a relationship between democratic institutions and improved economic equality. On the other hand, authoritarian leaders—who by definition are less subject to a wide variety of special interests—might be more able to act on their own preferences and, thus, reduce inequality if that is their goal. In this direction, leaders' personal backgrounds and ideological orientations do appear to matter, with Han and Han (2023) finding evidence that leaders from poorer backgrounds are more likely to pursue redistributive policies in authoritarian contexts—though they identify similar patterns in democracies as well (Han & Han, 2021). However, populist leaders, despite their anti-elite rhetoric, generally fail to reduce inequality (Strobl et al., 2023) and overall have a deleterious effect on GDP per capita and macroeconomic stability (Funke et al., 2023). Therefore, whether leaders' economic

policy preferences are amplified by their style or constrained by institutions represents a gap in recent literature on the effects of illiberal governance. This article addresses this gap by testing the relationship between illiberal leaders' economic positions and subsequent economic inequality.

To answer this question, we draw on the speeches of political leaders in 120 countries over 25 years, from 1998 to 2024. We use quantitative text analysis methods and the assistance of LLMs to place these leaders on continuous economic left-right and liberal-illiberal scales based on the content of their public statements. Combined with economic indicators—such as GDP growth (World Bank, 2024) and the equal distribution of resources (Sigman & Lindberg, 2015)—we test whether leaders who have contempt for institutional constraints are more likely to get their way on economic policy. Because our methodological approach provides both left-right and liberal-illiberal scales for the same leaders, we can test the interaction between these variables and determine whether the direction of the effect is asymmetric. Our results show that illiberal leaders do have a greater influence on material inequality, but only those who are on the right. Using time-series models with country-fixed effects, we find that the combination of illiberal leadership and economically right-wing preferences is a significant predictor of future increases in inequality. On the other hand, the economic preferences of liberal leaders have no apparent effect, nor do those of leaders who are left and illiberal. Illiberal “strongmen” are more likely to deliver material changes, but only in the direction of greater inequality.

## 2. The Causes of Inequality

Economic inequality has numerous pernicious effects. Inequality can threaten the stability of democracy (Houle, 2009), incite higher levels of violence (Enamorado et al., 2016), hamper economic growth (Stiglitz, 2016), motivate anti-social behavior (Fehr, 2018), damage social cohesion (Barr et al., 2024), undermine health outcomes (Neckerman & Torche, 2007), reduce levels of political participation (Solt, 2008), diminish political equality (Houle, 2018), amplify polarization (Gunderson, 2022), decrease support for democracy (Kriekhaus et al., 2014), and motivate the desire for a strong leader (Sprong et al., 2019). Inequality can, therefore, propel political instability as citizens lose faith in democratic institutions' ability to deliver fair economic outcomes. If citizens instead turn to a strong leader to solve the problem of inequality it could also lead to democratic decline.

Some explanations for economic inequality emphasize the role of structural factors and slow-changing institutions. Structural explanations include globalization and technological change—which favors skilled, educated workers—the transformation of labor markets through declining unionization, and shifts in corporate structure toward financialization and maximizing shareholder value (Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Piketty & Saez, 2003). Boix (2010) presents a historical institutional approach. He shows that initial inequalities in wealth, land ownership, and political power lead to institutions that perpetuate economic disparities through restricted access to public goods and political participation. Such factors tend to be outside the power of governments to influence in the short or even medium-term but would need to be accounted for when interpreting the influence of individual political leadership.

Economic inequality is also the result of policy choices. Policies that can effectively reduce inequality include progressive taxation of income and inheritance, expansion of public education, universal welfare provisions, minimum wage guarantees, and labor market institutions that strengthen workers' bargaining power

(Bourguignon, 2018). In the other direction, deregulation and trade liberalization appear to increase inequality (Bergh & Nilsson, 2010). The effectiveness of these policies is evident in cross-national comparisons: European countries with more generous social welfare provisions and progressive tax systems have consistently lower levels of post-tax-and-transfer inequality than the United States (Scheve & Stasavage, 2017). We might expect policies that favor workers and redistribute downward to become law more often in regimes with citizen enfranchisement. However, the adoption of such policies is not necessarily more common in democratic systems.

Democracies are not systematically more economically equal. While the median voter theorem suggests that democracies should reduce inequality through greater redistribution—since the median voter typically has below-average income and would benefit from redistributive policies—empirical research finds little systematic relationship between democratic institutions and reduced inequality (Acemoglu et al., 2015; Scheve & Stasavage, 2017). Two factors may explain this puzzle: First, citizens' preferences for redistribution are shaped not just by their economic position but also by beliefs about social mobility, the fairness of market outcomes, and other ideological factors (Piketty, 1995; Scheve & Stasavage, 2017). Second, even when popular demand for redistribution exists, democratic institutions may fail to translate these preferences into policy. This can occur through various mechanisms—electoral institutions may favor wealthy interests (Iversen & Soskice, 2006), policymaking may be captured by economic elites (Bartels, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014), or democracy itself may be “captured” by wealthy elites who increase their investments in *de facto* power to offset their reduced *de jure* power under democratic institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008). Even if citizens in a democracy want redistribution, they may not have the political power to make it happen.

### 3. Do Illiberal “Strongmen” Redistribute? If So, For Whom?

We define the “strongman” leadership type as illiberal, rather than populist, because illiberalism provides a more coherent, internally consistent conceptualization that better describes the agenda of “strong” leaders. Populists may criticize elites, but they are not necessarily illiberal and can accommodate liberal democratic norms and institutions (Blokke, 2021; Canihac, 2022; Wolkenstein, 2019). On the other hand, illiberalism, insofar as it challenges key components of liberal democracy—such as constraints on executive power—has clearly defined political goals about how power should be organized. “Strong” leaders who display illiberal tendencies may or may not adopt populist rhetoric, but their willingness to break institutional constraints raises the possibility that they could be more effective at implementing their preferred economic policies, whether those policies increase or decrease inequality.

While illiberal leaders might campaign on economic grievances, their actual economic preferences, and ability to follow through on those preferences, is an empirical question. Certainly, there are leftist illiberals, such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, or Evo Morales in Bolivia, who propose state interventions to relieve poverty and reduce inequality. However, in the time period covered by this article (1998 to 2024), such cases are limited geographically (to Latin America) and tend to be the exception. Most illiberal actors are on the right, and embrace nativist, cultural issues (Guasti, 2021; Margalit et al., 2022; Mudde, 2014; Pirro, 2023; Pirro & Stanley, 2022), to the extent that the terms far right and illiberal are often used interchangeably. Gender and immigration are central to illiberals' political messaging (Ergas et al., 2022; Halikiopoulou &

Vlandas, 2020; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022), even if immigration is not exclusively a far-right issue (Carvalho & Ruedin, 2020). Illiberalism, thus, tends to be associated with the right and cultural intolerance:

*H1: Illiberal leaders are more likely to be on the economic right than the economic left.*

Some research suggests that left parties “neoliberalize” (Snegovaya, 2024) and that illiberals’ economic left–right positions tend to be more ambiguous (Costello & Lilienfeld, 2021). Toplišek (2020) describes how illiberal right-wing parties like Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland adopt “heterodox” economic strategies, and both Bagashka et al. (2022) and Binev (2023) discuss how illiberal parties in Central and Eastern Europe take advantage of policy gaps vacated by traditional leftist parties. Yet, numerous illiberal leaders in very different countries—Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the US, Modi in India, or Bolsonaro in Brazil—also adopt some typically economic right positions, such as being pro-privatization, pro-business, and anti-unions (Chatterji et al., 2019; Fabry, 2019; Tansel, 2018). Such actors maintain neoliberal economics in practice while preserving a sizable role for the state—sometimes called “authoritarian neoliberalism.” Although their economic positioning may be less salient than cultural issues, we expect that illiberal leaders systematically favor right-wing economic policies.

The economic policies of illiberals matter not only because of the recent political success of these leaders, but also because economic conditions can motivate popular support for their style of leadership. Economic and political instability can diminish popular support for democracy, and these factors, as well as economic growth under illiberals, can shore up support for non-democratic leaders (Bosco & Verney, 2012; Carlin & Singer, 2011; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Kurlantzick, 2013; Schafer, 2021; Singer, 2018; Teixeira et al., 2014; Weyland, 2003). Furthermore, economic inequality specifically can motivate popular support for illiberals, with evidence showing that people see fewer checks and balances on the executive as a way to counter-balance the influence of unelected elites (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Sprong et al., 2019; Xuereb et al., 2021). People are willing to delegate away democracy to leaders they see as potentially being more effective in addressing economic issues like inequality. However, while illiberal leaders might indeed be able to propel the economy due to their cutback of institutional checks on their power, they are unlikely to do this in favor of the disadvantaged. As illustrated by Rathgeb (2024, p. 7), illiberal leaders might pursue some left-wing economic policies to please their working-class voters, yet, such selective status protection does typically not include inequality-reducing policies in the sense of addressing vertical inequalities between the rich and the poor, between labor-market insiders and outsiders, or between native and alien workforces. In other words, while illiberals might claim in their speeches to reduce inequality to attract voters, there is a high likelihood of seeing an increase in inequality under their rule:

*H2: Illiberal leaders have a negative impact on inequality.*

Are illiberal leaders more effective at translating their economic preferences into material outcomes? The failure of leaders in democracies to address economic inequality (Scheve & Stasavage, 2017) suggests that adherence to liberal democratic norms may constrain leaders’ ability to implement their preferred policies. Political elites’ capacity to address economic inequality in democracies could be particularly constrained if policymaking is captured by unelected elites (Bartels, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014; Winters, 2011) or if democratic institutions themselves have been co-opted (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008). Leaders who are willing to concentrate power in the executive and bypass institutional constraints should therefore

have greater capacity to implement their economic agenda, whether that agenda increases or decreases inequality. This leads to our third hypothesis:

*H3: The relationship between leaders' economic left-right position and inequality is stronger for illiberal leaders than for liberal leaders.*

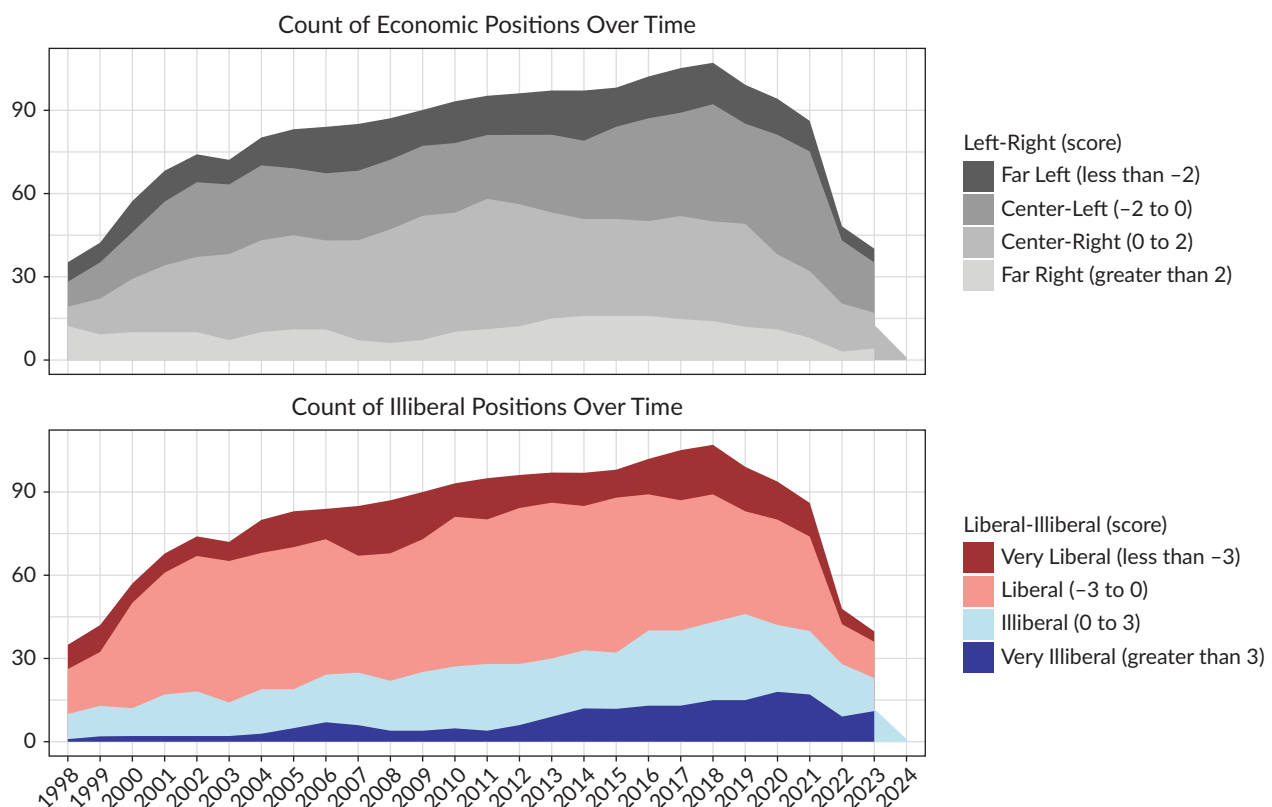
This hypothesis proposes to test whether disregard for liberal democratic norms enables leaders to more effectively translate their economic preferences into material results. A significant interaction between leaders' economic position and their liberal-illiberal stance would indicate that illiberals do indeed “deliver the goods”—though not necessarily in the redistributive direction that their supporters might expect.

## 4. Data

To test the above hypotheses, this study uses political leaders' speeches. We focus on speeches that are representative of leaders who wield executive power (prime ministers, presidents, or sometimes monarchs, when appropriate). The speech data combines several existing datasets of public-facing speeches (Hawkins et al., 2022; Maerz & Schneider, 2020, 2021; Wagner & Enyedi, 2024). Additionally, the authors scraped the websites and YouTube channels of executives. The choice of speeches is intended to capture leaders' public-facing persona as presented to domestic audiences. For this reason, we did not use speeches that were given at the United Nations (Dasandi et al., 2023), for example. Overall, the data used to calculate leaders' positions comprises 38,557 speeches by 381 leaders in 120 countries over 25 years, from 1998 to 2024, for a total of 2,080 country-year observations, with 66 percent of the observations from democratic regimes, and 34 percent from authoritarian regimes. Figure 1 summarizes the time series data for our two dimensions of interest: economic left-right and liberal-illiberal positions of political leaders.

Sources for the speech data cover many languages. We chose to translate the speeches into English because it allowed us to read the speeches. Original languages include, for example, Turkish, Danish, Armenian, and Hungarian. Machine translation methods such as the Google Translate API have been shown to produce high-quality translations that compare well to human translation (de Vries et al., 2018). By translating the speeches into English, we can assess the content of the original speeches as well as the classification results of the text analysis.

We break the speeches into shorter, semantically coherent chunks roughly a paragraph in length. We did this for both practical and conceptual reasons. Large Language Models (LLMs) based on the Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) architecture can only process text of 512 tokens or less (roughly 400 words). The speeches used for this analysis are often several thousand words or longer. We split speeches into shorter sections of no longer than 200 words using the semantic text splitter Python package (Brandt, 2023). We chose 200 words because we found that to be the optimal length for capturing meaningful parts of speeches that addressed only one idea or topic. Using topic classification, we further refined the paragraphs to only those about the economy, resulting in a total of 109,374 paragraph-length parts of speech.



**Figure 1.** Description of time series data of economic left-right and liberal-illiberal positions of political leaders. Note: Each scale is continuous but has been divided into four levels for descriptive purposes.

## 5. Research Design

### 5.1. Measuring Leaders' Positions Using Speech Data

We use LLMs fine-tuned on hand-coded text examples to build a left-right economic scale based on leaders' speeches. The LLMs identify when leaders take leftist positions—such as supporting universalistic welfare spending or taking pro-labor stances—or rightist positions—such as encouraging a pro-business environment and opposing government spending—and track whether leaders more frequently take economically left or right positions. The scale places leaders on a left-right position ranging from -10 (for very leftist) to 10 (for very economically right). A score of 0 indicates an economically centrist position.

Training data used to fine-tune the LLMs was checked by hand. Strong leftist positions were defined by support for a robust social safety net, government welfare spending, economic redistribution, unions, or labor rights. Leftist positions are also defined by criticism of structural economic disadvantages, economic inequality, and the role of government in addressing these. Rightist positions are defined by strong support for free market principles, small government, and minimal regulation. Statements opposing unions and workers' protections, and the belief that government should play no role in correcting economic inequalities, were also indicative of an economically right position.



During the hand-coding process, we scored statements on an economic left–right scale from –10 to 10. Statements that were clear and strong demonstrations of a leftist position were given a score of –10. Statements that contained leftist positions but were less clear or less strong were given a lower score such as –6 or –3. We gave a score of 0 to statements that were about the economy but did not clearly take a left–right position. On the other hand, strong, clear statements of rightist positions were given a score of 10. If statements contained rightist positions but with some ambiguity, then they were given a score somewhere between 1 and 10 depending on the strength and clarity of the rightist position in the statement. Using this approach, we hand-coded 3,088 real examples drawn from the speeches of political leaders, which we used to fine-tune a BERT model to score speeches on a –10 to 10 left–right economic scale.

Language modeling through word embeddings enables a more nuanced approach to text classification by capturing the contextual relationships between words. In this study, we leveraged the BERT architecture (Devlin et al., 2018), which embeds words within their surrounding linguistic context, allowing for a more sophisticated interpretation of semantic subtleties like illiberalism and economic left–right positions. In particular, we used the DistilBERT model because it is computationally more efficient, but retains 97 percent of the language understanding capabilities of larger BERT models (Sanh et al., 2020). We fine-tuned a DistilBERT model on the 3,088 hand-checked examples using PyTorch (Paszke et al., 2019). The model architecture consists of the DistilBERT transformer base with an additional linear regression layer to output scores on a continuous –10 to 10 left–right economic scale.

We also score the same leaders on a liberal–illiberal scale—using parts of their speeches that were about group identity, institutions, or accountability. This speech corpus, thus, covers the same leaders but is distinct from their speech chunks about the economy—with only a 10 percent overlap, for example when leaders address topics such as social spending that helps minorities or invokes feelings of national pride over economic achievements. The liberal–illiberal scale is first introduced by Maerz et al. (2025), and draws on a similar approach to the one we use in this article based on work by Maerz (2019), Maerz and Schneider (2020, 2021), and Schafer et al. (2025). Like the left–right economic scale, the liberal–illiberal scale also ranges from –10 to 10, with –10 indicating very liberal speech and 10 indicating very illiberal speech.

The liberal–illiberal scale is composed of two dimensions: inclusive–exclusive values and power concentration–dispersion. The inclusive–exclusive values dimension captures the extent to which speakers support political exclusion or inclusion based on group identity. Statements representing exclusive values might suggest imposing monolithic cultural standards, disliking universalism, disregarding principles of human equality, and condoning the curtailment of rights. Inclusive values are represented by celebrations of diversity, multiculturalism, cooperation, and tolerance.

The power concentration–dispersion dimension refers primarily to institutional accountability and checks on the use of power. Illiberal statements on this dimension include suggesting that the executive should not be limited in their exercise of power, attacks against the legitimacy of institutions responsible for horizontal accountability, and accusations that political opponents or the media are enemies of the nation. Liberal statements on the power concentration–dispersion dimension, on the other hand, support transparency and accountability, and praise the institutions responsible for enforcing accountability in democracies (such as the media and judiciary). These two dimensions—inclusive–exclusive values and power concentration–dispersion—measure leaders' commitment to two key aspects of liberal democracy.

These two measures—economic left–right and liberal–illiberal stances on group identity and institutions—describe two of the most fundamental ideological positions that leaders can take on economic and socio-political issues. Our approach utilizing BERT language models allows us to map leaders on continuous –10 to 10 scales based on their declared positions to domestic audiences. In Section 6 we present descriptive statistics demonstrating the face-validity of these measures. We also use these measures to show whether leaders we might typically describe as “strongmen” are indeed more economically on the right and to test whether their attitudes predict subsequent changes in redistributive policy and inequality within a country.

## 5.2. Modeling the Impact of Leaders’ Positions on Inequality

Leaders’ positions—even very powerful leaders—take time to produce changes in government policy and actual material redistribution. Therefore, to test our argument about the impact of strong leaders’ economic ideology, we model the effect of their positions as having a two-year lag on inequality. This two-year lag allows time for leaders to influence existing policy and for the effects of policy changes to percolate through the economic system.

We also control for structural and historical institutional factors that might influence inequality independent of policy choices by leaders. We do not control for factors such as the regulation of unions or tax rates, which while certainly influencing inequality (Neckerman & Torche, 2007), are downstream of leaders’ preferences. In more wealthy countries—as measured by high GDP per capita—there is more opportunity for greater economic disparity. Likewise, GDP growth and decline can increase or flatten economic inequality. Thus, we control for these structural factors. GDP per capita and growth data are drawn from the World Bank (2024). The presence of democratic institutions could facilitate greater levels of accountability, and we control for this using two different variables: V-Dem’s Regimes of the World index (RoW), which has four levels: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy (Lührmann et al., 2018) and V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). Historical trends shaped by the choice of economic institutions at critical early moments or by the timing of technological change can also determine levels of economic inequality (Boix, 2010). Thus, we include country-fixed effects,  $\gamma_i$ , to control for time-invariant structural factors and cluster the standard errors by country. The country-fixed effects model is provided below:

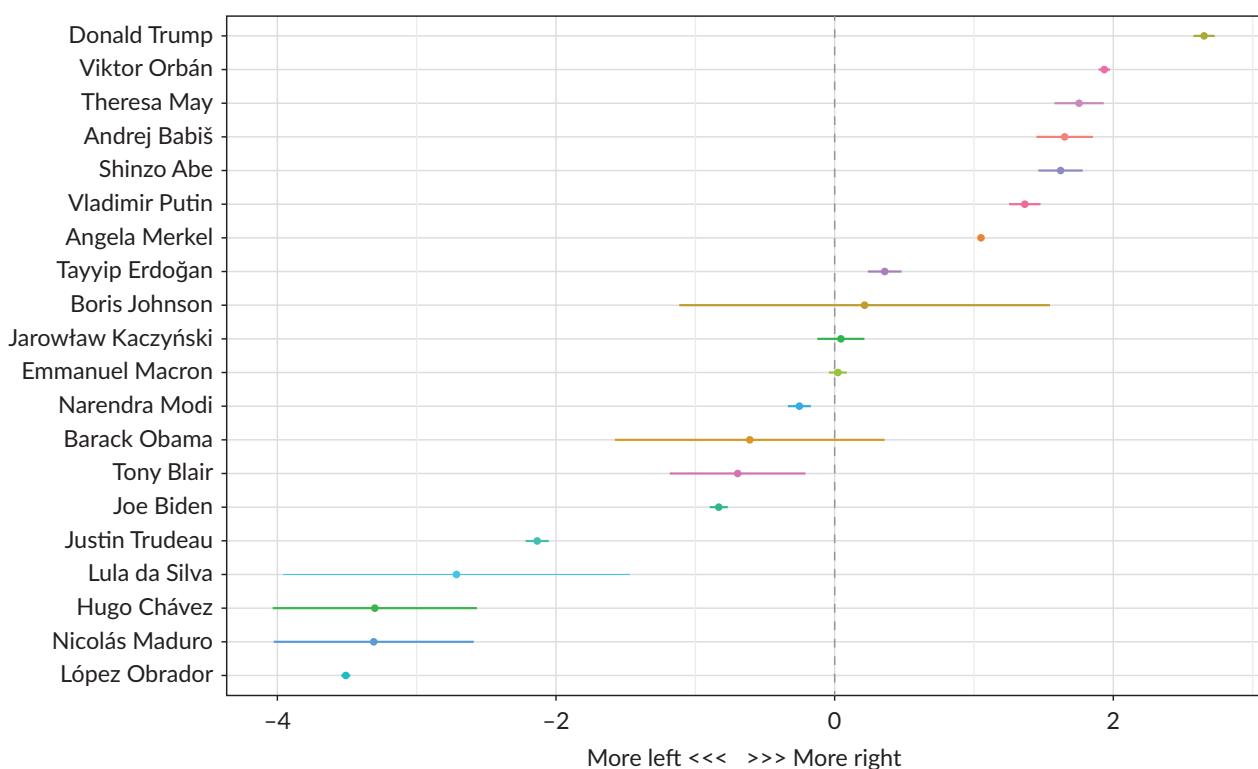
$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{EconLeftRight}_{it(t-2)} \times \beta_2 \text{Liberal-Illiberal}_{it(t-2)} + \beta_3 \text{EconLeftRight}_{it(t-2)} + \beta_4 \text{Liberal-Illiberal}_{it(t-2)} + \beta_5 \text{Regime}_{it} + \beta_6 \text{GDPpc}_{it} + \beta_7 \text{GDP growth}_{it(t-1)} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$

The dependent variable,  $Y_{it}$ , is inequality as measured by V-Dem’s equal distribution of resources index, *v2xeg\_eqdr*, that measures the equal distribution of resources using a four-part index comprised of indicators for particularistic vs. public goods, means-tested vs. universalistic welfare policies, educational equality, and health inequality (Coppedge et al., 2024; Sigman & Lindberg, 2015). As an additional robustness check, we use the Gini index from Solt’s World Income Inequality Database, which is in Section 3 of the Supplementary File (Solt, 2021). We include an interaction of leaders’ economic left–right position and their liberal–illiberal position to test whether the effect of leaders’ economic ideology is conditioned by their regard for liberal norms and institutional checks. This interaction allows us to understand whether illiberals do indeed redistribute more effectively. This model allows us to test whether leaders’ economic left–right position is a significant predictor of future levels of inequality.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Description of Leaders' Positions

As an initial validity check, we examine the economic left–right positions of some prominent world leaders. Figure 2 aggregates all statements in our dataset about the economy by leaders such as Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald Trump, and Emmanuel Macron. We provide the point estimates and standard errors around those points. Wide standard errors are primarily due to few observations for some leaders, though could also indicate variation in leaders' position over time. While individual parts of speeches could potentially receive a score ranging from  $-10$  (very left) to  $10$  (very right), statements receiving extreme scores are rare. Rather, averaging across many speeches, leaders' left–right position tends to fall between a narrower band, ranging from approximately  $-4$  to  $4$ .



**Figure 2.** Economic left–right scores of world leaders. Point estimates average over leaders' entire tenure.

Leaders' positions, based on speech scored by our DistilBERT model, fall approximately where we would expect. Donald Trump, Theresa May, and Andrej Babis are on the right end of the economic spectrum. In their professional career, all three worked in business or finance and were leaders of explicitly pro-business, pro-free market parties. On the other hand, Latin American leaders suspicious of the free market who, while in government, led state interventions aimed at correcting market inequalities, are furthest on the left. "Third-way" politicians like Tony Blair and Barack Obama are on the center left. Perhaps surprisingly, Viktor Orbán falls considerably to the right. Despite preserving a strong role for the state, Orbán regularly expresses pro-business, anti-union sentiment—and has passed regressive policies such as reducing unemployment benefits and criminalizing homelessness (Fabry, 2019). Granted, this figure flattens any variation these leaders may express in their economic left–right position over time. But our purpose in

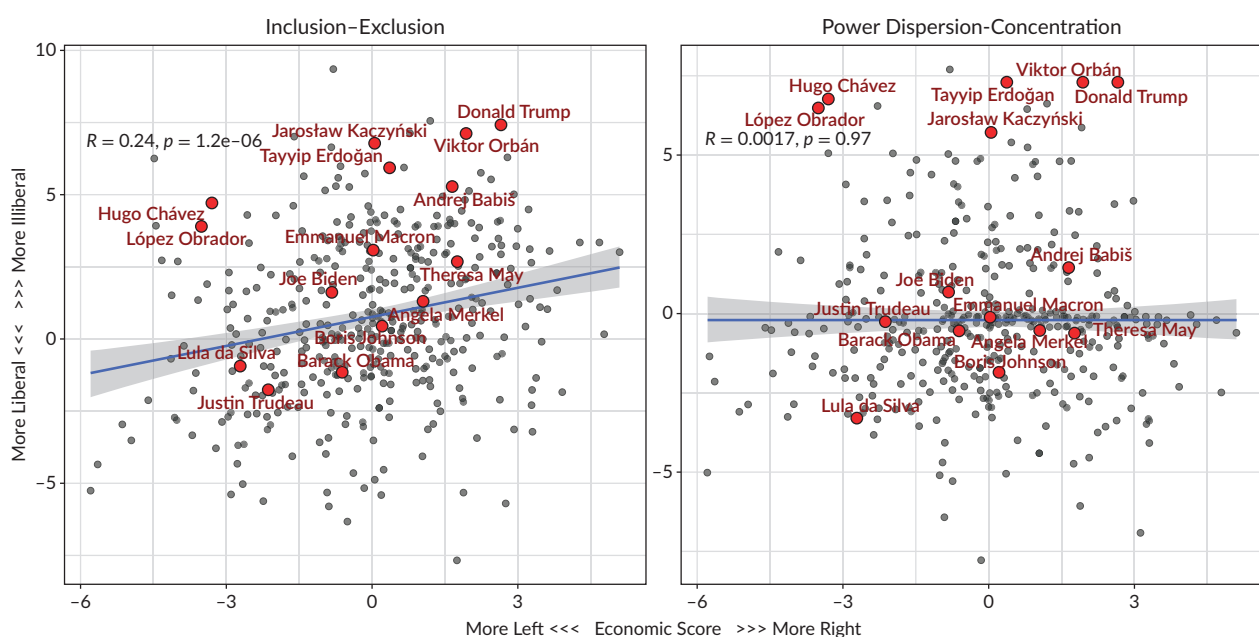
Figure 2 is demonstrative. By using our DistilBERT model to score paragraphs from leaders' speeches on an economic left-right scale and taking the average of those scores, we can get a reliable and comparative picture of leaders' public positions.

We are also interested in the correlation between illiberal "strong" leaders and economic left-right positions. Here, we define an illiberal "strongman" type as a leader who attacks cultural and institutional norms, which we operationalize using earlier work by Maerz and Schneider (2020, 2021) and Schafer (2024). Applying their scaling approach to the same speeches of these leaders, we can examine whether leaders who take positions supportive of economic redistribution are also more likely to attack liberal norms and constraints on their exercise of power. Figure 3 shows the correlation between leaders' economic left-right positions and between leaders' inclusive-exclusion values and preferences for power dispersion-concentration. Do strong leaders in fact take more redistributive positions?

**Figure 3.**

Illiberal "strongmen" are not economic leftists. We find support for H1. The evidence provided in Figure 3 therefore pushes back against the conflation between illiberalism and populism. Illiberal leaders—which include Trump, Orbán, and Erdoğan, but also many more—are, on average, economically on the right. Specifically, illiberal leaders who grab onto group identity issues, and push exclusive, intolerant values, are more likely to be on the right economically. On the other hand, there is no correlation between a leader's attitude about power dispersion or institutional accountability and their economic left-right position.

These findings accord with other research showing that pro-business parties tend to rely on cultural cleavages to expand their popular appeal (Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Rodrik, 2021). Explicit attacks by politicians on institutions that enforce democratic accountability are generally not popular (Graham & Svobik,



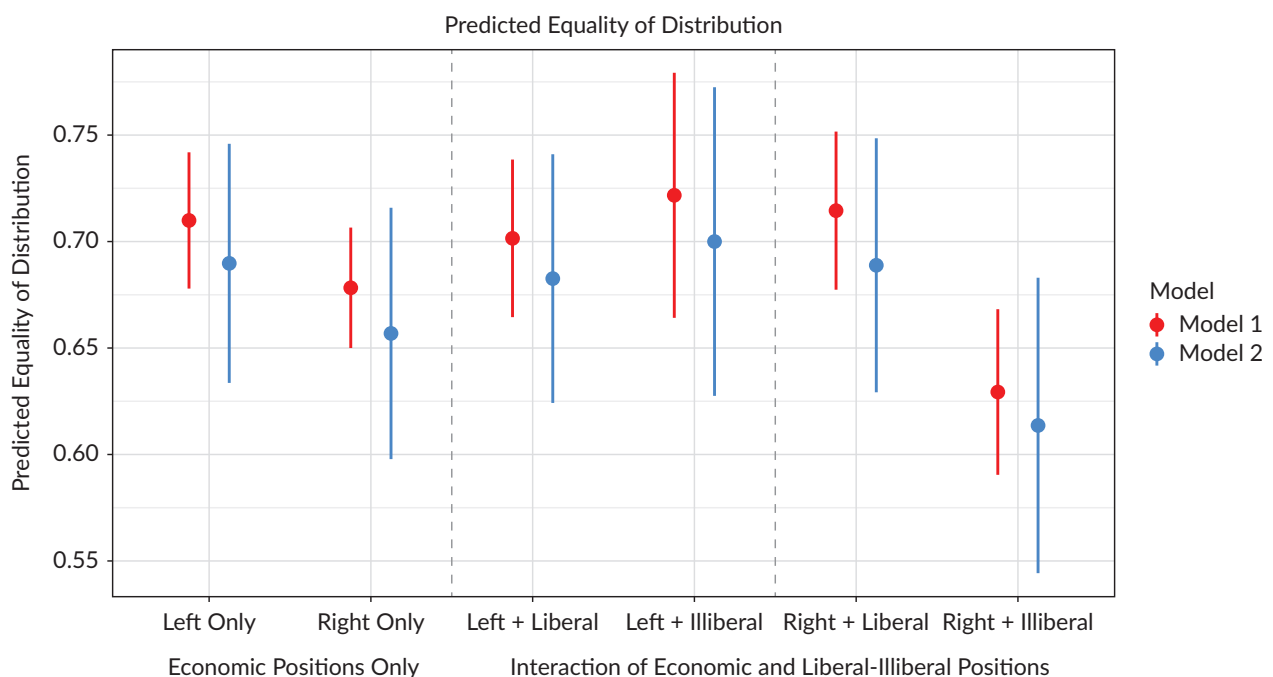
**Figure 3.** Correlation between economic left-right and liberal-illiberal positions. Each dot represents one political leader.

2020), but attacks on liberal norms and minority outgroups can facilitate the consolidation of power by illiberal leaders when economic appeals are less available due to their party's ideology or past policy positions (Mukand & Rodrik, 2018; Schafer, 2021). Thus, we find evidence that strong leaders—despite their image as populists and speaking about issues like inflation—are less likely to consistently support policy positions that facilitate a reduction in economic inequality.

## 6.2. Do Leaders' Positions Impact Inequality? Do "Strong" Leaders Have a Stronger Impact?

Next, we use the measures of leaders' positions to test whether strong leaders redistribute more effectively. The regression is the country fixed effects model described in Section 5.2. The data is structured as panel data with country-year as the unit of analysis and the speaker is the head of the executive branch of a country in a given year. Speakers' left-right and liberal-illiberal positions lagged two years behind the dependent variable—inequality—to allow time for each leader's influence to be felt on the economy. For the illiberalism scale, we initially merge the two subdimensions—inclusive-exclusive values and power concentration-dispersion—by taking the higher of either score for a speaker in a given year. To control for institutional effects, Model 1 uses RoW and Model 2 uses EDI. Figure 4 shows the results of the regression (see full table in Supplementary File). The leftmost side of the figure shows the predicted effect of a leader's economic left-right position on inequality without conditioning on their liberal-illiberal position. The middle and right sections of the figure show the effect of economic left and right positions interacted with the speaker's illiberalism.

At first, leaders' economic left-right position appears to influence inequality. However, after conditioning on leaders' illiberalism, the effect on liberal leaders disappears. We can see the point estimates and confidence intervals for the predicted effects of leaders on inequality broadly overlap for leaders who are left + liberal, left + illiberal, and right + liberal. For liberal leaders, their stated economic policy is not a significant predictor

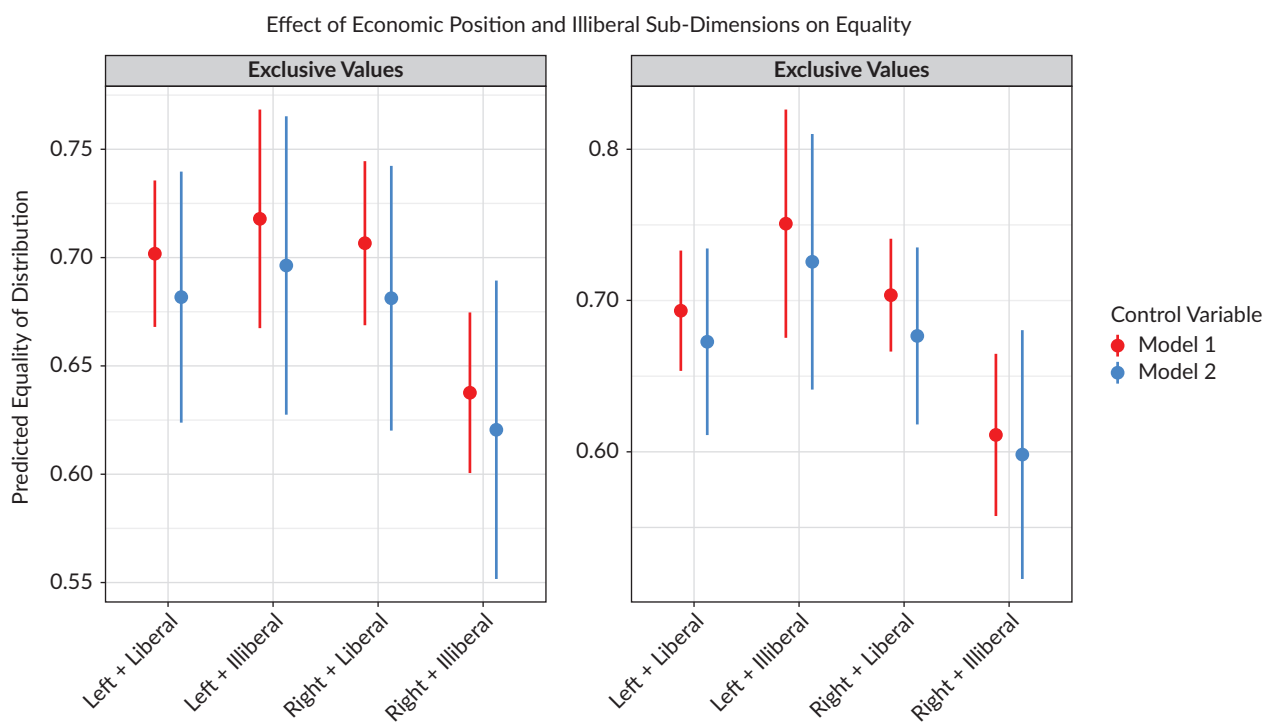


**Figure 4.** Predicted effect of economic left-right position on inequality and interaction with illiberalism.

of future levels of economic inequality. On the other hand, if we look at the estimates for illiberal leaders, the effect of illiberal leaders persists, but primarily in the direction of greater levels of inequality when a leader is right + illiberal. When illiberal leaders adopt free market, anti-regulation rhetoric, their preferences appear to have an effect that is clearly distinguishable from their more liberal counterparts. But when illiberal leaders are also leftists, the effect of their economic position is statistically indistinguishable from liberal left leaders. Illiberal leaders are indeed better at getting things done. Such so-called “strongmen,” far from being economic populists, are more effective when they are on the right and prefer to distribute more unequally.

The significance of the predicted influence of right illiberal leaders—and left illiberals’ lack of influence—does not appear to be an artifact of sample size. While there are considerably more observations of liberal leaders (666 left liberal leaders and 627 right liberal), there are also a substantial number of observations of illiberal leaders (251 left illiberal and 374 right illiberal; see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File for scatterplot of observations). This number of observations (251 illiberal leftist) is generally considered adequate for detecting even modest effect sizes in panel data analysis. Therefore, we have enough observations to detect a significant effect on the left illiberals, if there was one to be found. The influence of right illiberals—in contrast to the left—clearly appears to be one-sided.

The influence of leaders on the economic right persists across both types of illiberalism: exclusive values and power concentration (Figure 5). For leftist leaders, only those who expressly aim to concentrate institutional power in the executive manage to move economic policy in their desired direction. Perhaps not surprisingly, identity politics does not appear to be a tool of leaders on the economic left.

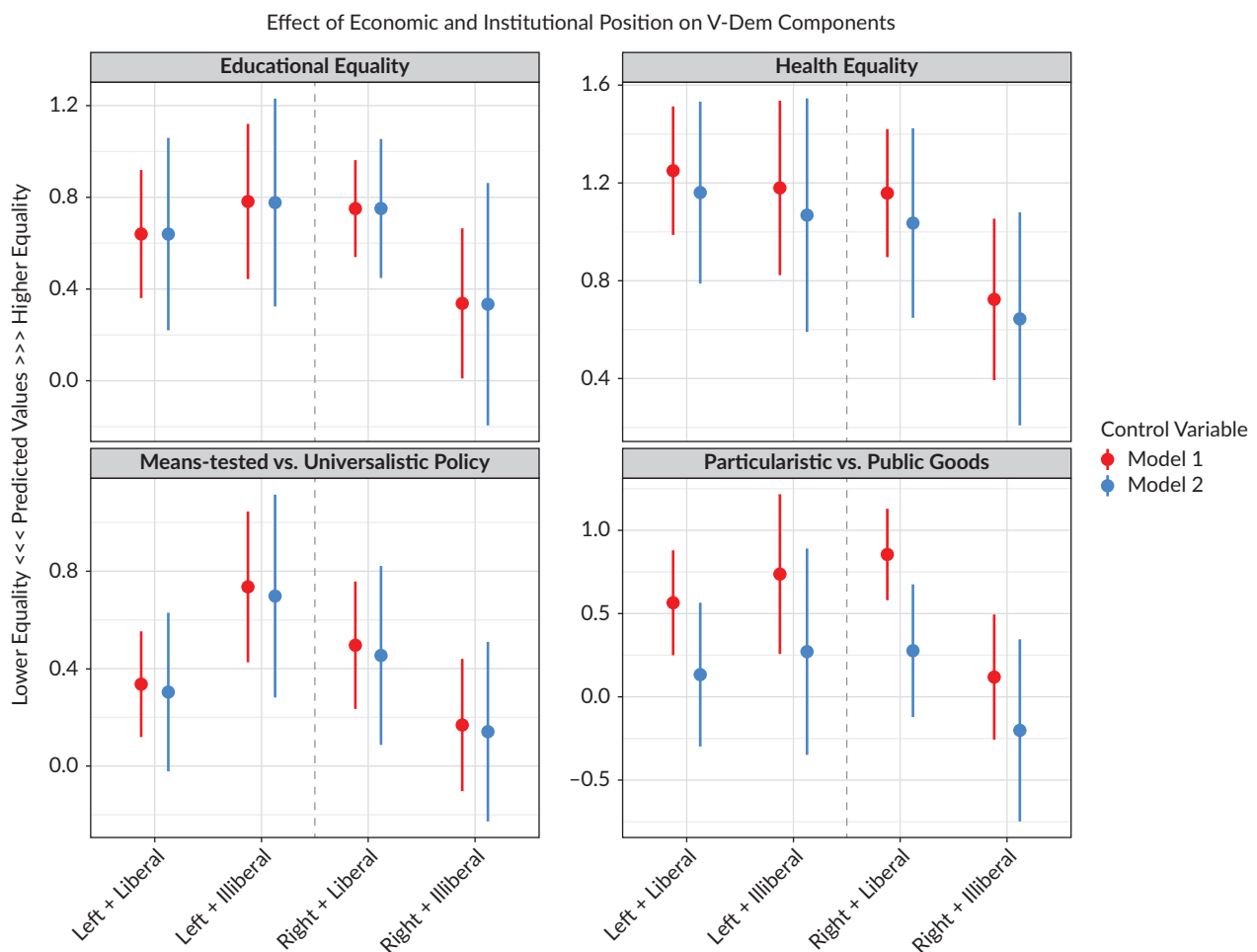


**Figure 5.** Predicted effect of each subdimension of illiberalism on inequality interacted with economic left-right.

Leaders on the right appear to strategically use both cultural issues and real institutional changes to influence the economic policy in a way that lines up with their expressed economic preferences. Such leaders are more likely to take illiberal positions on both dimensions, with a correlation of 0.773. Expressions by leaders on the left show a lower correlation of 0.596 between their positions on these two illiberal dimensions (see Figure A2 in the Supplementary File for scatterplots showing correlation). It remains beyond the scope of this article to analyze how these two dimensions reinforce each other as a political strategy, but these findings suggest that the choice of far-right leaders to leverage cultural grievances and attack democratic constraints is effective and linked to their economic preferences.

### 6.3. Leaders' Influence on Subcomponents of Inequality and the Mechanisms of Illiberalism

Illiberal leaders on the economic right appear to influence multiple aspects of inequality at once. We can see this by breaking down V-Dem's equality of distribution index to its subcomponents. Leftist illiberals, on the other hand, influence one area only: the implementation of means-tested vs. universalistic welfare policy.



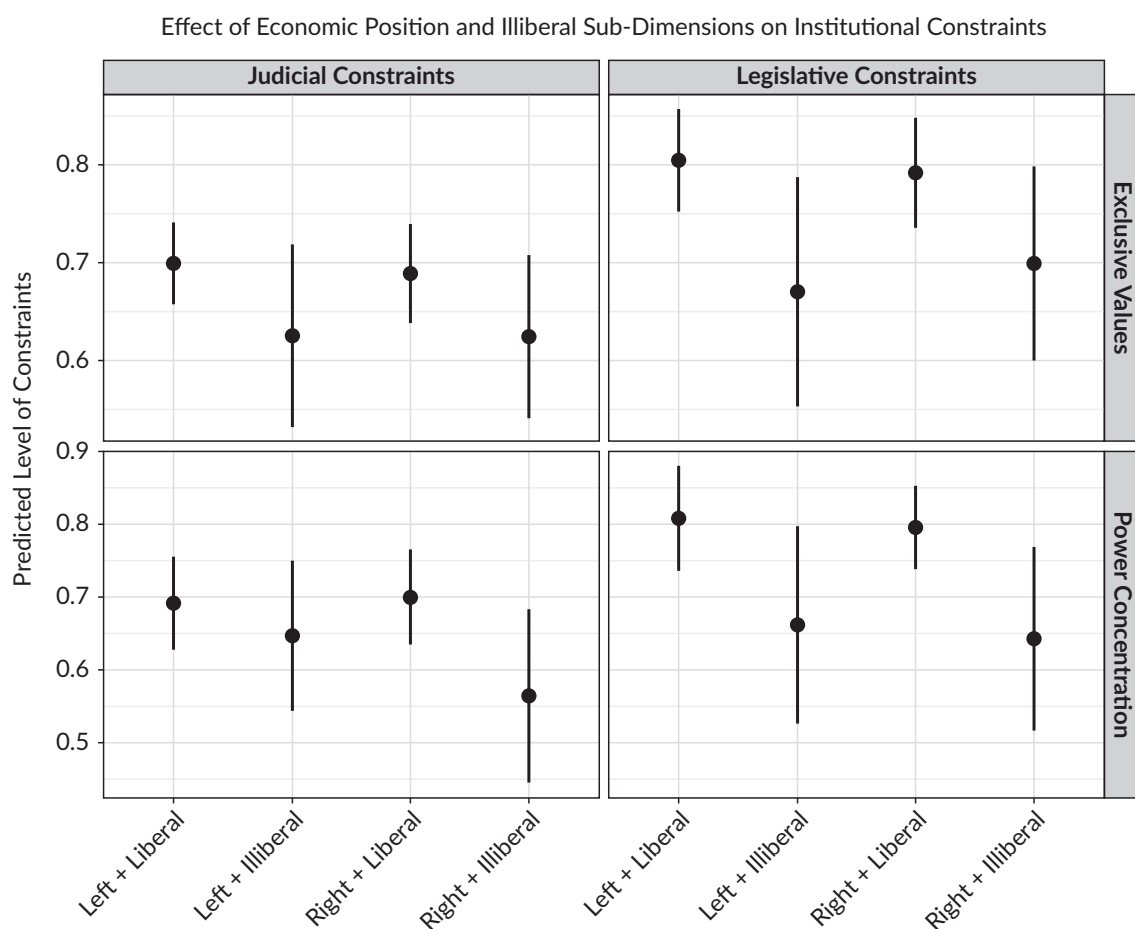
**Figure 6.** Predicted effect of economic left-right on subcomponents of inequality, interacted with illiberalism.

These results reinforce the findings above about the effectiveness of “strongman” leaders on the economic right. Such leaders are more likely to engage in particularistic and means-tested distribution and their tenure predicts worsening educational and health equality. The effect of other leaders’ economic preferences is



indistinguishable from zero, except for leftist illiberals, who are more likely to pass universalistic welfare policies.

Executives who express illiberal values may be more effective because they undermine constraints on their power. In particular, they might undermine judicial and legislative constraints. To test this possibility, we run additional regressions with the same controls, interactions, and country-fixed effects, but using two different dependent variables—judicial constraints, or *v2x\_jucon*, and legislative constraints, or *v2xlg\_legcon*. The aim is to assess whether strongmen on the right are more likely to undermine the independence of the parliament and courts.



**Figure 7.** Predicted effect of each subdimension of illiberalism on executive constraints.

All illiberal leaders appear to undermine executive constraints regardless of their economic position. The tenure of both leftist and rightist illiberals predicts the weakening of judicial and legislative checks on their power. If we look at the power concentration–dispersion dimension specifically (bottom left panel of Figure 7), we see a considerable difference between right-wing illiberals and their liberal counterparts on judicial constraints. The difference in the marginal effect of right + illiberals vs. right + liberal is greater than 0.1 on a continuous scale from 0.0 to 1.0. Right-wing illiberals appear to be particularly successful at undermining judicial constraints on their power. This is particularly consequential not only because the judiciary enforces horizontal accountability, but also because of the necessity of an independent judiciary for maintaining economic fairness.

## 7. Discussion

Illiberal leaders do deliver. Such “strongman” types tend to be on the economic right and embrace cultural illiberalism—advocating for political exclusion based on group identity and the imposition of monolithic cultural standards. These leaders are also more effective than their liberal counterparts at translating their economic preferences into material changes. The result of their pro-privatization, anti-regulation, and anti-union positions is increased levels of economic inequality. This economic outcome appears to reinforce the political conditions that enabled their rise to power in the first place.

There is potential for a vicious feedback loop when illiberals come into power. Their economic policies increase economic inequality, which in turn generates more economic grievances and uncertainty among voters. These conditions, as shown by Sprong et al. (2019), tend to increase popular demand for strong leadership, creating fertile ground for future illiberal leaders. Meanwhile, the concentration of wealth strengthens the political power of economic elites (Houle, 2018), who can support illiberal leaders’ cultural messaging while benefiting from their economic policies.

Illiberal leaders appear to benefit from the gap vacated by traditionally leftist parties. Social democratic and mainstream left parties—both in advanced industrial economies and Latin America—moved to the center on economic issues and there is considerable evidence that they lost the support of many voters as a result (Evans & Tilley, 2012; Lupu, 2016; Polacko, 2023; Spoon & Klüver, 2019). These parties’ shifts to the center limited voters’ choices while economic inequality increased in many of the same countries. Limited choices combined with inequality’s negative effects on financial stability, social cohesion, and democratic trust fuel popular support for illiberal leaders (Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Sprong et al., 2019), who do little to improve people’s underlying material conditions.

Cultural issues effectively mask the economic agenda of illiberal leaders. While illiberalism is not historically new (Guasti, 2021; Mudde, 2014), what has changed is how successfully these leaders have leveraged cultural issues like immigration and globalization to expand their appeal despite implementing policies that increase economic inequality (Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Rodrik, 2018). The growing concentration of wealth creates a mutually reinforcing relationship between illiberal leaders and economic elites: the leaders emphasize cultural grievances rather than economic redistribution and their wealthy supporters have strong economic incentives to help amplify that cultural messaging (Mukand & Rodrik, 2018). This strategy allows illiberal leaders to implement policies that reward their wealthy supporters while maintaining popular support through cultural appeals rather than economic redistribution.

The asymmetric effectiveness of illiberal leaders provides insight into why democracy often fails to reduce inequality. Our findings show that when illiberal leaders pursue right-wing economic policies, they achieve their goals more effectively than liberal leaders, but this advantage largely disappears for left-wing economic policies. This asymmetry suggests that bypassing democratic institutions is not sufficient on its own to implement policy changes—leaders also need the cooperation of economic elites. This aligns with research showing how wealthy interests can maintain their influence even under democratic institutions through increased investment in *de facto* power (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008) and the capture of policymaking by economic elites (Bartels, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014). While democratic institutions may constrain both left and right policy agendas, illiberal leaders can more effectively pursue right-wing policies because they align

with existing economic power structures. This helps explain both why illiberal leaders who campaign on economic grievances ultimately fail to deliver redistribution and why democratic institutions alone are insufficient to ensure more equal economic outcomes.

Coalition dynamics and elite power concentration, thus, appear crucial for understanding why some illiberal leaders succeed in undermining both political and economic equality, while others fail. Jacob (2025) shows that citizens' disappointment with democracy—which can be driven by economic inequality and poor government effectiveness—can reduce constraints on illiberal behavior and open the way for illiberals like Orbán to win supermajorities. Benasaglio Berlucchi and Kellam (2023) show that the latter is particularly consequential for democratic backsliding. Similarly, Rathgeb (2024) demonstrates how radical right parties' capacity to implement welfare chauvinism, economic nationalism, or trade protectionism depends on their ability to manage social coalitions that support their political project. Future work could explore how coalition politics can drive the vicious feedback loops linking inequality, the rise of illiberal far-right “populists,” and democratic backsliding.

The methodological approach developed in this article provides new insights into the relationship between economic and cultural politics. By using BERT language models to simultaneously measure leaders' positions on both dimensions, we can reveal patterns in how leaders carefully coordinate their positions. Our findings challenge the argument that illiberal leaders have ambiguous economic positions (Binev, 2023; Toplišek, 2020). On average, cultural illiberalism and right-wing economic positions tend to co-occur. This suggests that economic ambiguity could reflect strategic communication rather than genuine policy uncertainty and that this uncertainty is stripped away when we look at the dominant pattern of leaders' speeches. Our approach also demonstrates that by measuring what leaders say, we can anticipate more clearly what they do.

## 8. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that illiberal leaders do not redistribute downward. Their economic preferences do not benefit most citizens. We build a novel measure of leaders' economic left–right positions based on their speeches—covering 120 countries over 25 years, from 1998 to 2024. We show that illiberal leaders tend to be economically right-wing and are more effective than their liberal counterparts at translating these preferences into material outcomes—but only when pursuing policies that increase inequality. This finding challenges the idea that illiberal “strongmen” behave like economic populists and helps explain why democratic institutions often fail to reduce inequality: economic elites retain significant influence over policy and weakened horizontal accountability might only amplify their power.

Our results suggest a troubling dynamic in contemporary politics. Economic inequality creates a demand for strong leadership, but illiberal leaders who gain power by appealing to these grievances implement policies that further increase inequality. These leaders appear to maintain popular support by emphasizing cultural anxieties over economic issues, creating conditions favorable to future illiberal leaders. This pattern, combined with the retreat of traditional left parties from redistributive positions, points to the difficulties of addressing inequality through existing political channels. The effectiveness of illiberal right-wing leaders contrasted with the ineffectiveness of both liberal leaders and illiberal leftists, reveals how economic power shapes political outcomes, especially when democratic institutions are undermined.

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## Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University), Petra Guasti (Charles University), and Bálint Mikola (CEU Democracy Institute).

## Data Availability

Data used for analysis is available upon request.

## Supplementary Material

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

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## About the Authors



**Dean Schafer** is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Mississippi State University and was a Post-doctoral Researcher at the CEU Democracy Institute. His research interests include democracy and authoritarianism, political parties, political economy, and the Middle East, with a focus on Turkey. He uses data science methods (including text and network analysis) to measure elite attitudes and shifts in their coalitions over time. His work has been published in *Party Politics*, *South European Society and Politics*, and *Nationalities Papers*.



**Seraphine F. Maerz** is a lecturer in political science at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests focus on the comparative study of political regimes, Internet politics, and political communication, using quantitative methods and computational text analysis. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Peace Research*, *Political Science Research and Methods*, and the *British Journal of Political Science*.



**Carsten Q. Schneider** is pro-rector for external relations, interim rector, president-elect, and professor of political science at Central European University. His research and teaching focus on the study of political regime change and comparative social science methodology. He is the author of three Cambridge University Press books on set-theoretic methods and QCA. His articles appeared, among others, in *Comparative Political Studies*, *Democratization*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Political Analysis*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Sociological Methods and Research*.



**Alexandra Krasnokutskaya** holds a BA in political science with an MSc in social data science from Central European University in progress. Her research interests focus on migration and labor market dynamics and applying quantitative methods to analyze and address contemporary social issues.

## Far-Right Illiberalism in the European Parliament

Larissa Böckmann <sup>1,2</sup> , Sarah L. de Lange <sup>1</sup> , Nathalie Brack <sup>2</sup> , and Matthijs Rooduijn <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Centre d'étude de la vie politique (Cevipol), Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

**Correspondence:** Larissa Böckmann ([l.c.boeckmann@uva.nl](mailto:l.c.boeckmann@uva.nl))

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### Abstract

The rise of illiberalism has become a global concern, especially since the establishment of far-right illiberal regimes in countries such as Hungary, India, Poland, and Turkey. When in power, far-right parties tend to promote democratic backsliding, leading to a proliferation of studies of the illiberal regimes established by the far-right. Less attention has been paid so far to the embrace of illiberal ideas by these parties. Although studies of these parties' populism, nativism, and authoritarianism are ubiquitous, we know little about the way in which these three ideological pillars become integrated into an overarching illiberal agenda. This article aims to analyze the extent to which European far-right parties embrace illiberal ideas, irrespective of whether they are in power. To pursue this objective, we focus on parliamentary speeches given by far-right parties in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2019. Methodologically, we employ a dictionary-based content analysis to identify which speeches by far-right members of the European Parliament contain illiberal ideas. Subsequently, we measure the percentage of far-right illiberal speeches per year. Our study shows that although illiberalism has always been a relevant feature of the far-right, illiberal ideas have become more prominent in speeches of far-right members of the European Parliament since 2017, after Brexit and the election of Trump.

### Keywords

European Parliament; far-right; illiberalism; liberal democracy

## 1. Introduction

Liberal democracy faces serious challenges across the globe (e.g., Fukuyama, 2020; Mounk, 2020). Many countries witness a protracted process of democratic erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 77), during which multiparty elections remain in place, but become less meaningful through weakening of the rule of law and

checks and balances, restricting media freedom, and reducing the space for civil society (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). One of the main causes of the decline of liberalism has been the rise of far-right actors, with many illiberal transformations happening under the administration of far-right parties (e.g., Plattner, 2021; Rupnik, 2016; Vachudova, 2020). Illiberal reforms have been implemented by the far-right in, for example, Brazil (e.g., Milhorance, 2022), Hungary (e.g., Rupnik, 2022), Italy (e.g., Baldini, 2024), Poland (e.g., Pirro & Stanley, 2022), and the United States (e.g., Mudde, 2022).

Research on illiberal democracy has first and foremost centered on what far-right parties do when they gain power. Comparative studies have not yet extensively explored whether far-right parties embrace illiberalism as a consistent set of ideas, and if yes, whether these ideas are also advocated by far-right parties that are not in power. After all, even parties in opposition can potentially erode democracy through their discourse and actions (e.g., Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). Hence, to fully understand the nature and extent of the challenge that far-right parties pose to liberalism, it is important to assess whether they promote illiberal ideas when in government *and* opposition.

Existing scholarship shows tensions between far-right ideology and the principles of liberal democracy (e.g., Mudde, 2007) and how the far-right politicizes the liberal political system (e.g., Engler et al., 2023). However, few studies have studied whether illiberalism, understood as a consistent set of ideas rejecting the ideas that are central to liberalism, is present in far-right discourse. We address this gap by empirically investigating the extent to which the far-right propagates illiberalism in parliamentary settings. Thus, our study explores the question: *To what extent do far-right parties embrace illiberal ideas?* To answer this question, we use recent conceptualizations of illiberalism as a coherent set of ideas (e.g., Enyedi, 2024b; Kauth, 2024; Laruelle, 2022; Smilova, 2021), in which the democratic notion of popular sovereignty as a legitimate source of power is combined with the rejection of liberal rights and freedoms, including of the institutions that safeguard those principles.

We investigate far-right illiberalism by conducting an automated content analysis of parliamentary speeches given by far-right actors in the European Parliament (EP) between July 1999 and April 2019. At the core of our analysis lies the assumption that speeches contain crucial messages as they “create meaning over social and physical phenomena and can eventually shape political decisions” (Wunsch & Chiru, 2024, p. 7). To assess the presence of illiberalism in far-right speeches, we develop a carefully validated multi-dimensional dictionary that builds on the conceptualization of Smilova (2021) and measures the presence of a preference for unrestrained popular sovereignty, ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism in speeches by far-right members of the European Parliament (MEPs). This allows us to descriptively explore the frequency with which far-right illiberalism occurs in their parliamentary speeches and whether this frequency has changed over time. Since illiberalism has become politicized more recently, most prominently through Viktor Orbán’s promotion of the illiberal state, we would expect to see an increase over time.

We analyze the content of speeches of far-right parliamentarians in the EP because it represents the only formal arena in which far-right parties from different countries deliver messages under similar conditions. Speeches in national parliaments are shaped by local customs, issues, and regulations. By contrast, speeches delivered in the EP can be more readily compared, as they are all given within the same institutional context. While we acknowledge that the EP represents an environment in which far-right illiberalism is less likely to

occur than in national parliaments, we also observe that the politicization of the EU makes it likely that illiberalism is present. On the one hand, we recognize that contestation over EU policy issues has been characterized by limited politicization (e.g., De Bruycker, 2017; Hurrelmann et al., 2015), that debates in the EP have generally not been closely followed by EU citizens, and that the connection between MEPs' legislative behavior and citizen behavior is weak (e.g., Chiru, 2024). On the other hand, EU politicization has increased considerably, and EU issues have become more salient to citizens, parties, and the media (Braun, 2021; C. E. de Vries, 2018; Maier et al., 2021). Consequently, studies of the politicization of liberal democracy have increasingly focused on the EP as arena (e.g., Coman, 2022; Wunsch & Chiru, 2024). Focusing on the role of the far-right in this process is particularly relevant, given that their MEPs tend to make strategic use of their mandate to appeal to the wider public to increase the visibility of their ideas and agenda at the national level (Brack, 2015). As noted by McDonnell and Werner (2020, pp. 9–10), studying the far-right in the EP can tell us a great deal about where these parties are going, both nationally and internationally.

Our results show that far-right MEPs have always advocated for illiberal ideas in their speeches in the EP, in contrast to MEPs belonging to mainstream groups such as the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). More importantly, the relative number of speeches given by the far-right that include illiberal ideas has overall increased over time. In 2017 and 2018, almost 5 percent of far-right speeches in the EP contained illiberal ideas, suggesting that illiberalism is a relevant feature of far-right ideas. Our expectation is that far-right illiberalism is even more prevalent in more politicized contexts, such as national parliaments, or in arenas in which the far-right can communicate its ideas more freely, such as on social media.

## 2. The Fourth Wave of the Far-Right and Its Tension With Liberal Democracy

Far-right parties have become important players in European politics, often polling above 15 percent of the vote. Moreover, they have assumed national office in many European countries, including Austria, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland. As a result, many studies have examined the impact these parties have on liberal democracy, especially when in office (e.g., Bichay, 2024; Pirro, 2024; Plattner, 2021). When investigating this impact, research has typically focused on nativism and authoritarianism as the two ideological cornerstones of both subtypes of the far-right, namely the extreme and the radical right (Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2023). In addition, several studies have also examined the impact of far-right parties' populism on liberal democracy (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Below, we discuss the tension between these three ideological elements and the principles of liberal democracy.

### 2.1. Nativism and Liberal Democracy

Nativism consists of a combination of nationalism and xenophobia and nativists propagate the idea that states should be "inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native (or 'alien') elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). The distinction between natives and non-natives is predominantly based on cultural, ethnic, or racial criteria, with "the nation [being] narrated as one continuous and unified community of people, despite the overwhelming evidence against such notions" (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019, p. 590). Far-right parties emphasize the need for cultural homogeneity, sometimes even advocating for an ethnocratic political regime as a far-right utopia (Mudde, 2007). Far-right parties employ the doctrine of



“ethnopluralism,” according to which ethnic groups are not superior to one another, but incompatible to such an extent that they should stay separated to preserve diversity and pluralism (e.g., Mudde, 2019). Hence, while far-right parties pretend to be true defenders of difference, they denounce social or ethnic pluralism as being fundamentally threatening to the native culture and the internal homogeneity of the polity. Moreover, they are also hostile towards minority rights.

## 2.2. Authoritarianism and Liberal Democracy

Authoritarianism reflects a preference for a strictly ordered society, claiming that authorities must be followed and that disobedience should lead to severe punishment (Mudde, 2007). However, this adherence to law-and-order-policies reflects only one particular aspect of authoritarianism, which represents a broader “desire for in-group conformity at the expense of personal autonomy, represented by deference to authority and intolerance towards those who violate in-group norms, activated under perceived threat” (Praet, 2024, p. 2). Since the content of in-group norms and authority depends on a party’s host ideology, right-wing authoritarianism often finds its expression in moral conventionalism, that is, the exaltation of traditional values and customs, such as traditional gender roles (Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2023). Authoritarianism also aggressively denounces and discredits those who deviate from in-group norms, embracing the communitarian notion of a legalized morality and the submission under a prescribed and singular authority. Hence, authoritarianism creates tension with the liberal-democratic principles of pluralism and minority rights (Praet, 2024).

## 2.3. Populism and Liberal Democracy

Populism is a thin-centered ideology focused on the distinction between the “corrupt elite” and the “pure people” as a key societal divide and contends that politics must reflect the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populism is monist as it assumes “the people” to be the only legitimate group, with homogeneous interests, preferences, and values. The distinction between people and elite is drawn on a moral basis and not according to objective socioeconomic criteria or societal position (Mudde, 2021). Although not prevalent amongst all far-right parties, the tension between populism and liberal democracy has received the most scholarly attention (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016). Some scholars describe a specific populist understanding of democracy that can be distinguished from a liberal one (Caramani, 2017; Urbinati, 2013; Vittori, 2022), based on populists’ preference for unconstrained majority rule, which is defended in the name of “true democracy,” as well as their political anti-pluralism, which rejects a diverse distribution of political power amongst elites. Moreover, the belief in a homogeneous general will, shared by all “true” members of the in-group as the only legitimate foundation of politics is at odds with the principles of pluralism and minority rights (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

On the basis of existing studies, it has been shown that there are inherent tensions between nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, on the one hand, and the principles of liberal democracy, on the other hand. Scholarship has pointed out how each of these three ideological cornerstones of the far-right can individually negate pluralism and constrain minority rights. However, liberalism is often understood as a broader set of ideas, and until recently, it has remained undertheorized how the far-right promotes a fundamental rejection of liberalism, and embraces a consistent illiberal vision of society, politics, and economy.



## 2.4. Illiberalism as a Set of Ideas

While the term illiberalism has been first and foremost used in the context of political regime studies, recent research has focused on different facets of illiberalism, such as illiberal practices, governance, or constitutionalism (e.g., Kauth & King, 2020; Laruelle, 2023; Sajó et al., 2021). Most significantly for this study, illiberalism has recently been conceptualized as a set of principles or ideas, or more specifically a (thin-centered) ideology (e.g., Coman et al., 2023; Enyedi, 2024b; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Laruelle, 2022; Smilova, 2021). Central to this conceptualization of illiberalism is the parties' opposition to the central tenets of liberalism, which can be summarized as consisting of the principles of limited power, state neutrality, and the open society. Illiberalism therefore advocates for "power concentration, a partisan state, and a closed society" (Enyedi, 2024a, p. 4) and can accommodate various types of illiberalism based on distinct ideological traditions, such as traditionalist, religious, paternalist, or libertarian illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024a; see also Freeden, 2015).

In this article, we focus on one specific type of illiberalism: far-right illiberalism. The general definition of Enyedi (2024a) should therefore be tailored to our object of study. Smilova (2021) has undertaken such an endeavor, explicitly relying on the accounts of right-wing thinkers and on examples of far-right actors when developing her conceptualization of illiberalism. Smilova describes illiberalism as an alternative model for politics and society that aims to substitute liberal rights and freedoms with illiberal values and to dismantle those institutions that safeguard it. Illiberalism is nominally integrated into a discourse that accepts the notions of popular sovereignty and procedural democracy as legitimization of political power, and is, hence, not necessarily anti-democratic (Kauth & King, 2020; Waller, 2024). However, illiberal actors often stretch the boundaries of democracy, creating "the conditions of stepping beyond democratic procedures" (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1314). This makes their true adherence to democracy questionable.

Smilova (2021) conceptualizes illiberalism along three dimensions that correspond to elements of far-right ideology, namely those of (a) unrestrained popular sovereignty, (b) ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and (c) anti-liberal anti-globalism. This way of thinking about illiberalism is in line with that of Laruelle (2022, p. 309), who argues that illiberalism "proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity," and that of Guasti and Bustikova (2023, p. 131), who characterize it as a "set of principles opposed to pluralism, minority accommodation, and ideological heterogeneity."

The first principle of illiberalism, which Smilova (2021, p. 193) labels as "Unrestrained popular sovereignty," identifies "the people" as the only legitimate source of power and therefore promotes unrestrained majority rule. It is built on Rousseau's idea of absolute majoritarianism, stating that popular sovereignty as the fundamental principle of democracy shall in no way be constrained and that politics must be an expression of the *volonté générale*, that is the collective judgment about the common good (Held, 1996). In line with this, illiberalism considers institutions or laws that safeguard minority rights or limit popular sovereignty, such as the rule of law, fundamentally illegitimate and undemocratic, thus rejecting political liberalism. While the main reasoning for opposing constraints on popular sovereignty is this majoritarian understanding of democracy, a second objection is articulated from the perspective of efficiency, claiming that only a strong and unhindered state can establish security and prosperity (Smilova, 2021, pp. 182–183).

The second principle of illiberalism, which Smilova (2021, p. 193) labels as “Ethno-nationalist ‘common good’ anti-pluralism and anti-individualism,” focuses on the ethno-nationalist “common good” that contains its concept of the polity, who should be part of it, as well as its central values, and who gets to define them. Ethno-nationalism emphasizes the meaning of shared ethnicity or origin—either conceptualized as “racial” or “cultural” kinship—for the harmonious functioning of a political community and thus advocates a pre-political definition of nationhood and belonging (Brubaker, 2009). The illiberal notion of the common good promotes traditional values and stresses the primacy of the collective and its “shared identity, common interests, and collective duties” (Smilova, 2021, p. 193), subordinating the individual under traditional hierarchy and authority structures such as God, the family, or even nature. Social and cultural liberalism are rejected as they allegedly pervert society into an aggregate of atomized individuals lacking cohesion and identity, threatening “the natural order” and destroying the very foundation of democracy (Smilova, 2021, p. 193). Instead, an anti-individualist and anti-pluralistic vision of society is promoted, with collectively defined and legalized values that substitute the diversity of individual preferences and conceptions of a good life, advocating “hetero-normative sexuality and ties of solidarity formed around a communitarian view of nationhood and sovereignty” (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023, p. 131). This socio-cultural dimension of illiberalism can be found in the work of several scholars that emphasize the importance of, for example, illiberal conservatism and civilizationalist ethnocentrism (Enyedi, 2024b), the rejection of multiculturalism (Laruelle, 2022), the promotion of cultural conservatism and ethnic nationalism (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023), or the attempt to install exclusion and a hierarchy between in-group and out-group (Kauth, 2024).

The third principle of illiberalism, which Smilova (2021, p. 193) labels “Anti-liberal anti-globalism,” rejects the integration into global markets as well as supranational institutions. It defines national prosperity as the dominant criterion for economic governance following the idea of “Our Nation First.” Different economic doctrines are compatible with this guiding principle, such as protectionism of the national economy, or an ethnicized economic redistribution and social benefits in favor of the autochthone community to foster cohesion (Smilova, 2021, p. 193). While Smilova conceptualizes illiberal anti-globalism in a rather narrow, exclusively economic manner, we suggest including also the rejection of an integration into supranational institutions, such as the EU and the liberal international order more generally, including a negative position towards political globalization and US-American dominance within a unipolar world (Zürn, 2018). Within real-world messages, political and economic globalization are often hard to disentangle, as the integration into supranational institutions and the corresponding transfer of sovereignty are depicted as harmful for national prosperity, decreasing the possibility for national economic governance. We also think that it is important to highlight that the term globalism often contains a notion of conspiratorial thinking that works as an anti-Semitic dogwhistle, blaming an alleged elite—“the Globalists”—for all hardship in an increasingly complex world (Rensmann, 2011). In sum, illiberal anti-globalism emphasizes the absolute priority of the national (economic) interest and the importance of national sovereignty to achieve this. This broad definition of anti-liberal anti-globalism as a rejection of the integration into global markets as well as into supranational and multilateral institutions is in line with other definitions of illiberalism, emphasizing that both components play a role in illiberalism (Laruelle, 2022, p. 309).

While we have acknowledged that nativism, authoritarianism, and populism challenge the liberal democratic principles of pluralism and minority rights, the study of illiberalism accounts for a broader rejection of liberal principles and a particular pattern of polity-based contestation. Illiberalism provides a useful perspective to study the co-occurrence and integration of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism into a consistent

set of ideas, which needs to be considered to fully understand the challenge that far-right parties pose to liberal democracy.

### 3. Data and Methods

To assess the extent to which far-right parties embrace illiberalism, we conducted an automated content analysis of both written and spoken debate contributions to the plenary in the EP. Analyzing those contributions, which we refer to as speeches in the remainder of this article, comes with several advantages over other types of sources. First, speeches contain messages that are to a certain extent influenced by ongoing political developments, unlike more static sources like party manifestos that are only issued around election time (e.g., Hunger, 2024). Second, they are used to strategically set the agenda by focusing on issues that are later amplified and debated on social media (Poljak, 2024). Third, focusing on speeches allows for a better analysis of ideology than, for example, roll-call votes, given that speeches are not equally subjected to party or group discipline and cover a broader scope of issues, including issues that are not voted on. Although parliamentary speeches can have a symbolic or strategic character with few consequences for real behavior, they provide nuanced information about a party's ideology and policy positions (Proksch & Slapin, 2010, pp. 588–589).

#### 3.1. Studying the Far-Right in the EP

We focus on far-right speeches in the EP because it is the only formal political setting where far-right parties from many different countries are represented (e.g., McDonnell & Werner, 2020). This environment offers an opportunity to systematically study speeches given in a single institutional setting. Focusing on speeches delivered in national parliaments would be more challenging as they diverge significantly across countries due to specific institutional, political, and cultural differences.

Our data consists of speeches by far-right MEPs given in plenary debates between July 1999 and April 2019. We include speeches by MEPs belonging to parties that have been classified as far-right in The PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2024). In addition, we add far-right parties that gained representation in the EP but are not included in The PopuList because they failed to meet its selection criteria (i.e., at least 2 percent of votes or one seat in national parliamentary elections). Mainstream parties that have turned into far-right parties during the period of 1999–2019, such as Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland, have been included for the entire time frame to be able to observe whether their entry into the far-right party family coincides with their adoption of illiberalism. However, we perform two robustness checks, excluding these parties from the analysis prior to their radicalization and excluding them entirely from the analysis (see Section S4 of the Supplementary Material). Far-right parties that gave fewer than 10 speeches in the EP between 1999 and 2019 were excluded from the analysis. An overview of the parties included in our study is provided in Table 1.

To collect the speeches given during this period we make use of an already existing corpus of officially translated speeches that covers the period from July 1999 till January 2018. These speeches have been annotated with additional information about the speakers, such as their national party affiliation or their EP group affiliation (Karakanta et al., 2018). However, due to changes in the general translation regulations of the EP, few speeches given after November 2012 have been officially translated and therefore are not part of this corpus. To account for this, we extended our corpus by downloading all speeches in their original

**Table 1.** Far-right parties in the EP 1999–2019.

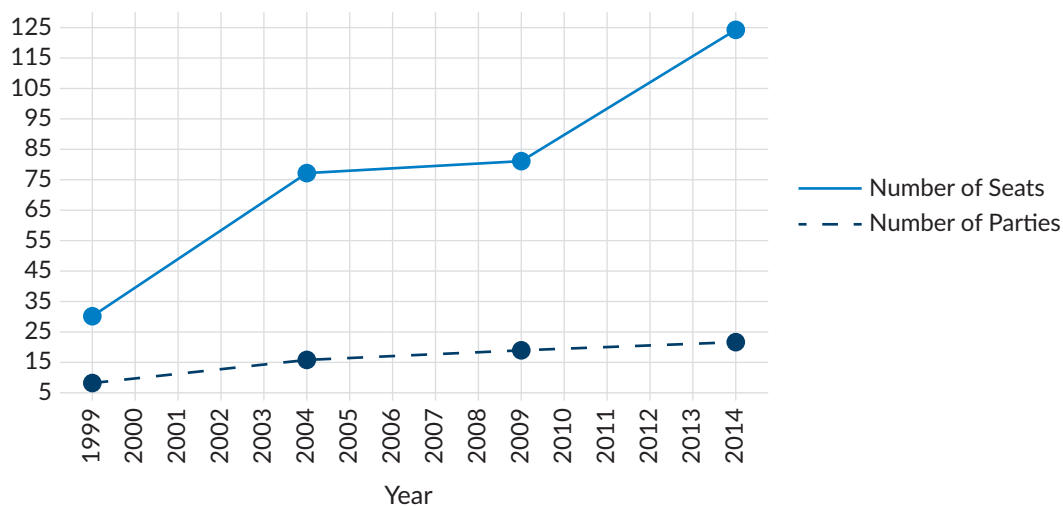
Country	<i>N of speeches</i>
Germany	1,074
Bulgaria	228*
United Kingdom	55
United Kingdom	81
United Kingdom	267
Italy	72
Poland	110
Croatia	1,030
Croatia	441
Denmark	366
Hungary	7,156
Finland	244
Belgium	837
Latvia	290
Austria	6,835
Romania	136
Bulgaria	1,023
Greece	108
Italy	443
Hungary	1,342
Poland	146
Poland	4,135
Poland	333
Italy	625
Germany	168
France	15,732
Italy	6,209
Slovenia	276
Netherlands	656
Greece	3,518
Greece	723
Slovakia	563
Slovenia	2,615
Italy	28
Sweden	199
United Kingdom	8,690
Poland	959
	67,713

Note: \* includes also speeches from the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB)

language from the EP website, beginning in December 2012 and ending in April 2019, and translated them with Google Translate. While human translation is expected to be more accurate than machine translation, research has shown that the latter yields at least satisfactory results and should therefore constitute an appropriate basis the analysis (E. de Vries et al., 2018).

Table 1 also provides an overview of the total number of speeches given by each party in the EP between 1999 and 2019. Our corpus consists of a total of 67,713 speeches delivered by far-right MEPs from 37 parties. There is enormous variation in the number of speeches given by individual far-right parties, with the highest number of speeches given by the National Front/National Rally (RN; almost 16,000 speeches) and the lowest number by the Social Alternative: Lista Mussolini (AS; 28 speeches). The variation in the number of speeches from party to party reflects the growing success of the far-right in the EP. Parties that have been in the EP for a long time have seen their seat share increase significantly, leading to more MEPs and more speeches. However, other far-right parties have only made it into the EP more recently, sometimes with smaller seat shares, and therefore have given fewer speeches.

To contextualize our analysis, it is important to highlight that the number of far-right parties in the EP has grown from 8 in 1999 to 22 in 2014. Moreover, the number of MEPs has risen exponentially from 30 in 1999 to 124 in 2014 (see Figure 1). Consequently, the number of speeches given per year has also increased substantially, from 330 in 2000 to 1,696 in 2018, and two years have a particularly high number of far-right speeches—2015 and 2016 (see Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Far-right representation in the EP.

### 3.2. A Dictionary Approach to Measuring Illiberalism

Methodologically, we rely on a dictionary-based approach, which has been extensively used to study far-right messages in the EP and in national parliaments, as well as in party manifestos and social media content (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Borbáth & Gessler, 2023; Engler et al., 2023; Gründl, 2022; Hunger, 2024; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). Dictionaries are an efficient way to assess the prevalence of a theoretical concept in a document, following a simple logic: A list of keywords indicative of a particular concept is developed and applied to a corpus of text documents. The results are frequency counts of the number of

correspondences with the dictionary in a given document, which can then be subjected to further analysis, depending on the research aim. Two potential shortcomings of dictionaries are that they often fail to recall all relevant terms and that they must be tailored to the specific research purpose, since “the scores attached to words must closely align with how the words are used in a particular context” (Grimmer et al., 2022, p. 181). To account for both potential biases, keywords must be chosen carefully and an extensive validation of the dictionary and the results is required (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Potential validation methods range from human coding to unsupervised machine learning methods, which recently emerged in the field (Maerz & Schneider, 2020).

Taking these potential shortcomings into account, we construct the dictionary in a four-step procedure. First, we developed an initial list of keywords indicative of illiberal ideas, based on the theoretical considerations in the literature and the existing illiberalism dictionary constructed by Maerz (2019). Second, we qualitatively analyzed a sample of 500 speeches given by far-right MEPs between February 2018 and April 2018 to inductively detect additional keywords and take the particular discursive context of the EP into account. Third, we analyzed a second, randomly drawn sample of 15 speeches per year (total number of 315 speeches) to detect keywords that are specific to the societal or political context at a particular moment in time. Fourth, we made use of our validation strategy to find additional illiberalism keywords. The validation approach is discussed below.

Instead of restricting our dictionary to single-word terms, we followed Gründl’s (2022) approach and included terms that span multiple words and regular expressions. This approach should result in a more precise and comprehensive list of keywords that is better able to capture illiberalism. For example, the expression “will of the majority” seems like an appropriate indicator for a preference for unconstrained majority rule, while both “will” and “majority” are generic and ambiguous words that carry a high risk of confusion. Using regular expressions that match specific patterns in textual data allows us to detect instances of illiberalism along a variety of adjectives, like “our people” or “Italian people,” which should result in a more precise measure. It also allows us to exclude specific word combinations that do not match illiberalism adequately. We conduct the steps of the dictionary analysis using Gründl’s (2020) R package “multidictR.” We further employed an extensive validation strategy for our list of keywords. Since automated content analysis can only augment, but not substitute, human coding (e.g., Grimmer & Stewart, 2013), we qualitatively assess if a word is sufficiently indicative of illiberalism. This also lowers the risk of including words that can be used in both a liberal and an illiberal way. For each term in our dictionary, we analyzed a randomly drawn subset of up to 20 speeches containing the keyword and assessed its relevance for our illiberalism dictionary, as suggested by Bonikowski and Gidron (2016). This resulted in a total number of 2,655 speeches. To properly apprehend the meaning of a keyword, we read the relatively short speeches in their entirety, taking the context of each keyword into account. For each speech, the validation procedure was executed by two independent coders. In the last step of our dictionary validation, we built on a random sample of 105 speeches of our corpus that was assessed by two of the authors and an independent coder. Based on that, we also calculated interrater reliability. Our results suggest a sufficient agreement of 88 percent between the three raters, resulting in a Fleiss Kappa value of 0.78. Table S1 in the Supplementary Material gives an overview of the full list of keywords after validation; Table S2 reports basic performance metrics of the dictionary. Even though the validation shows that the keywords in general capture the phenomenon of illiberalism adequately, it also demonstrates that it is difficult to assign the keywords unambiguously to one of the three dimensions of illiberalism identified by Smilova (2021). This is partly due to our focus on the EP, in which many speeches contain an anti-globalist

stance directed against the EU when addressing substantive policy issues. The following example for the keyword “democratically elected” illustrates this:

Madam President, this attachment to democracy throughout the world is remarkable, but here, in the European Parliament, it seems to me a priority to be concerned about democracy in Europe and, for my part a fortiori, in France. In Europe too, freedoms are violated. The democratically elected Hungarian and Polish governments defend the identity of their people, you threaten them. The Italians bring to power two parties concerned about the interests of their people, the Eurocrats call for their will not to be respected. (French MEP Marie Christine Arnautu, National Rally (RN), 12.06.2018)

While this observation empirically corroborates our argument that far-right illiberalism consists of a consistent set of ideas, it makes it difficult to establish how frequently the individual dimensions are discussed. We therefore primarily focus on a summative measure of illiberalism in our results section, while occasionally referring to scores on the three individual dimensions.

To obtain this summative illiberalism score, we apply the final dictionary to our corpus, counting the frequency of illiberal keywords for each speech. A speech is classified as illiberal when it contains at least two terms included in our list of keywords. While this is a rather restrictive measure, it avoids taking a single correspondence with our dictionary as evidence for an illiberal speech, as for many terms a certain ambiguity remains. The employment of this strict criterion is also theoretically motivated, since we are interested in the analysis of coherent far-right illiberalism. For this reason, we also calculate an even more stringent measure that classifies speeches as illiberal when they contain at least two keywords from two different dimensions.

## 4. Results

To assess the extent to which illiberalism is present in far-right speeches in the EP, and whether we can observe an increase in illiberalism over time, we analyze the percentage of far-right speeches per year that can be classified as illiberal. To obtain the percentual values, we take the number of speeches containing at least two keywords in a particular year and divide it by the total number of speeches given by far-right MEPs in that year. However, before examining the evolution of far-right illiberalism over time, we briefly examine the general distribution of keywords over the three dimensions of illiberalism, as well as the absolute number of speeches that can be classified as illiberal.

### 4.1. Descriptive Results

Of the 67,713 far-right speeches that we analyzed; 5,010 speeches contain at least one illiberal keyword (see Table 2). If we look at the three dimensions of our illiberalism measure, the political dimension, which captures unconstrained majority rule, is present in 1,892 speeches, the cultural dimension, which captures ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, is found in 1,590 speeches, and the economic dimension, which captures anti-liberal anti-globalism, can be observed in 2,015 speeches. The higher prevalence of the economic dimension when compared with the political and the cultural dimensions could be due to the EU’s traditional focus on economic integration and the fact that economic policies fall within the ordinary legislative procedure, closely involving the EP since 2009 (Bressanelli & Chelotti, 2018; Wallace



**Table 2.** Frequency of dictionary matches across dimensions.

Number of speeches
1,572
1,303
1,687
120
161
128
4,562
409
39
5,010

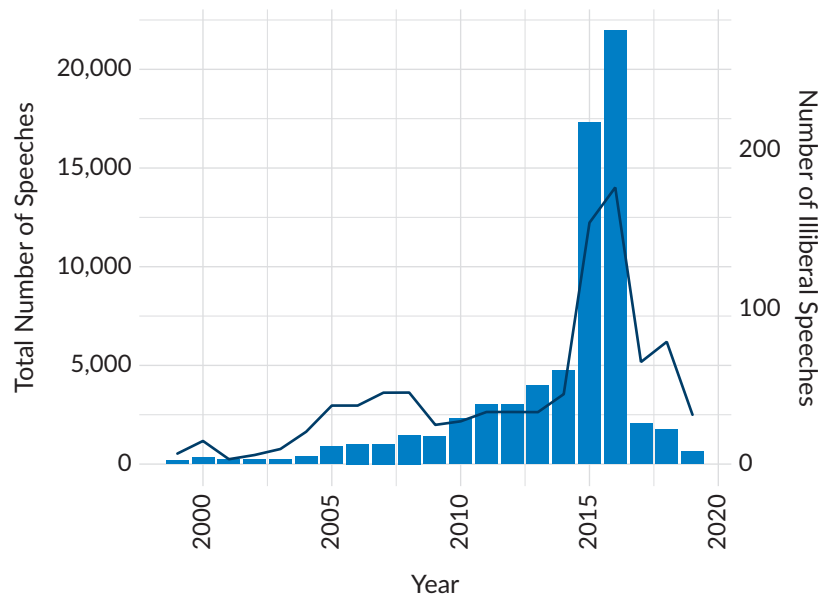
et al., 2021). Additionally, this could be a consequence of the inclusion of words that identify a rejection of supranational integration into the EU.

A total of 925 speeches contains two or more keywords from our illiberalism dictionary and in about half of these speeches there is a co-occurrence of at least two dimensions of illiberalism. Unconstrained majority rule & ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism co-occur 120 times, unconstrained majority rule & anti-globalism 161 times, and ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism & anti-globalism 128 times. An additional 39 speeches contain keywords from the three dimensions of the dictionary.

Given that our total corpus consists of 67,713 speeches, only 7 percent of far-right speeches contained at least one keyword from our dictionary. When using our more restrictive criterion of the occurrence of at least two keywords, irrespective of the dimension they belong to, the total number of speeches that can be classified as illiberal is 925 or 1.4 percent of the corpus. When we restrict our measure further to the co-occurrence of at least two keywords from two separate dimensions, the number of speeches that qualify as illiberal drops to 448 or 0.7 percent of the corpus. While these percentages might seem rather low, they reflect the strict criterion for inclusion we applied and correspond to similarly low frequencies for populism in the EP. Hunger (2024), for example, concludes that 3.2 percent of speeches by populist parties in the EP contain a populist message, while Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) measure an even lower share of 2.5 percent. This is corroborated by other studies analyzing the occurrence of populist ideas in electoral manifestos (Rooduijn, 2013).

## 4.2. Analysis Over Time

Even with these relatively low absolute numbers and percentages, an increase in illiberal speeches over the years can be observed (see Figure 2). While in 2000 only 15 illiberal speeches were given by far-right MEPs, this number gradually increased over time. Initially, the increase was modest, with the absolute number of illiberal speeches peaking in 2008 at 46. Subsequently, the number increased much more rapidly, with a second peak in 2015 and 2016 with 153 and 176 speeches qualifying as illiberal. In these two years, the high number of illiberal debate contributions coincides with a peak in the absolute number of speeches given by far-right actors in the EP. After 2017 and a change in the Rules of Procedure of the EP (see Sorace, 2021), both the

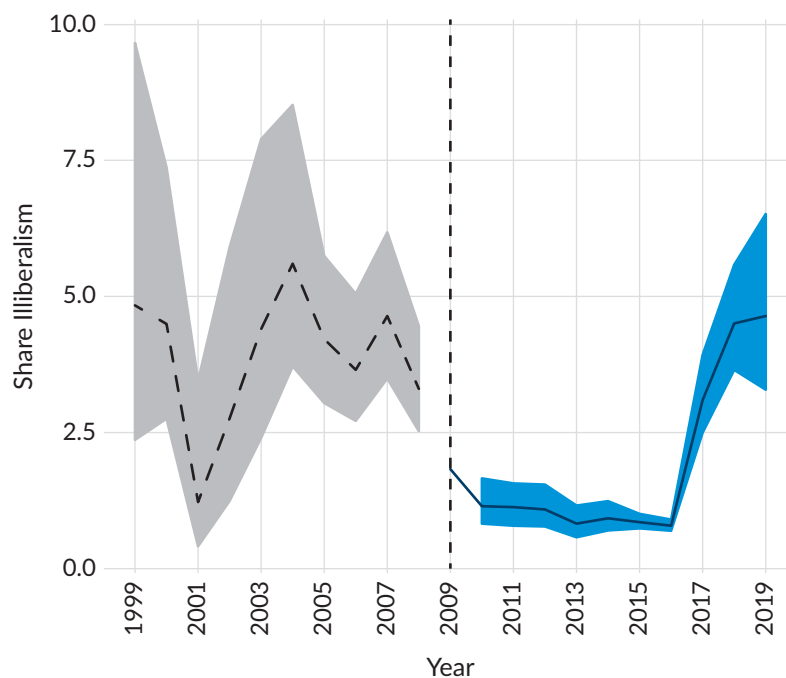


**Figure 2.** Absolute number of illiberal speeches over time.

number of illiberal speeches and the absolute number of speeches given by far-right MEPs decrease again. For 2019, the data collection concluded in April 2019, when the 8th term of the EP came to an end. This automatically results in fewer speeches, since the time period under investigation is much shorter.

As indicated in the methods section, the increase in illiberalism in speeches of far-right MEPs should also be considered in light of the growth of the number of far-right parties and MEPs in the EP. Hence, it is essential to analyze any developments over time by looking at the way in which the percentage of speeches per year that can be classified as illiberal has changed. Figure 3 (left panel) shows that from 1999 to 2008, when few far-right parties were represented in the EP (eight in the 5th parliamentary term) and the total number of far-right MEPs (30 in the 5th parliamentary term) was still relatively low, our illiberalism measure fluctuates quite strongly, and no over-time trend can be observed. While the share of illiberal speeches was relatively high in 1999 and 2004 with 4.8 percent and 5.7 percent respectively, it dropped significantly in 2001 and 2006 to 1.2 percent and 3.7 percent respectively. We suspect that these fluctuations are due to the fact that our measure is sensitive in this period to the actions of individual MEPs, who can impact our measure with only a few illiberal speeches.

From 2009 onwards, when 19 far-right parties and 81 of their MEPs are represented in the EP, a clear pattern emerges (see Figure 3, right panel). While the share of illiberal speeches is low from 2009 to 2016, a strong growth in such speeches occurs in the second half of the 8th term of the EP between 2017 and 2019. From 2013 to 2016, fewer than 1 percent of far-right speeches contain at least two references to our keywords and therefore qualify as illiberal. Between 2017 and 2019 this percentage increases quickly to almost 5 percent of speeches. Hence, Figure 3 suggests a considerable growth of illiberal speeches over the course of the 8th EP term. A regression analysis performed for the effect of time on illiberalism scores from 2009 onwards using a quadratic function confirms this suggestion. The exact results can be found in Table S3 in the Supplementary Material.

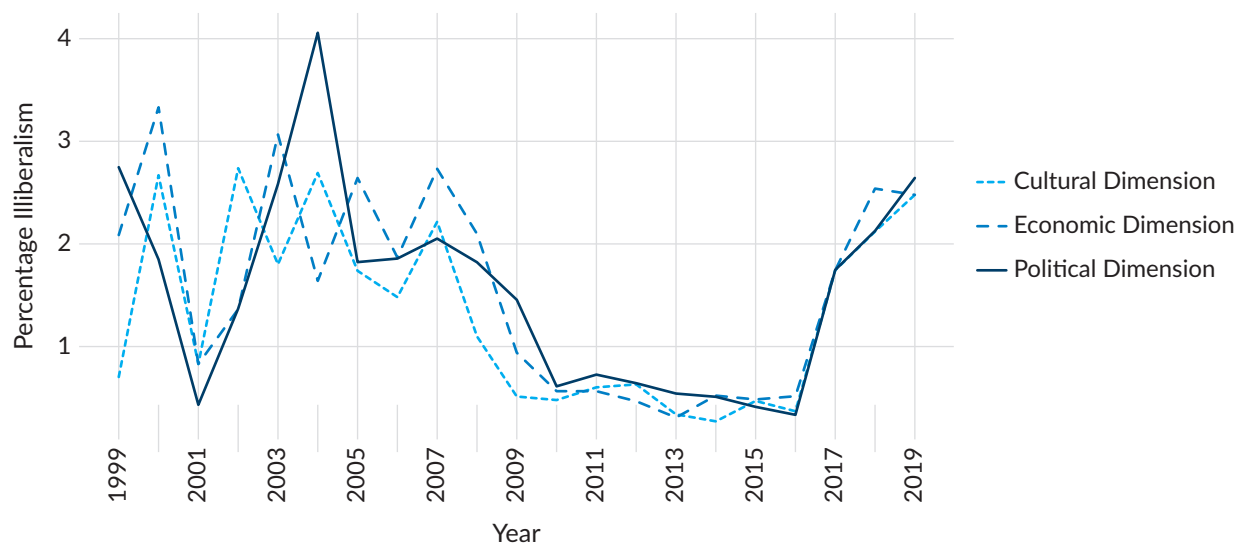


**Figure 3.** Share of illiberal speeches per year. Notes: The left-hand panel represents illiberalism in far-right speeches between 1999 and 2008, when the measure was more sensitive to individual cases; the right-hand panel represents illiberalism far-right speeches between 2009 and 2019, after a more stable trend evolved.

The findings of this analysis over time can possibly be explained by key events at specific moments in time. For example, a possible explanation for the comparatively high values in the early 2000s, such as the rise in illiberalism after 2001, could be the result of a general increase of culturally illiberal stances in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This interpretation is supported by the fact that during this period, the increase in illiberalism is primarily due to high scores on the ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism anti-individualism dimension (see Figure 4). Similarly, the peak in 2003 and 2004 could also be due to the high salience of EU enlargement, as well as debates about the draft of a European constitution. Previous research has established that far-right parties justified their predominantly negative position towards the accession of new countries mostly in identity-related and sovereignty terms (Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022).

The prolonged period of low levels of illiberalism between 2010 and 2016 coincides first and foremost with the aftermath of the eurozone crisis. On the one hand, it is surprising that this crisis did not generate more speeches that contained anti-liberal anti-globalist ideas (see Figure 4). After all, far-right parties are assumed to have capitalized on the grievances related to the Great Recession and the EU's handling of the crisis (e.g., Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). On the other hand, we see it as an indication that the articulation of illiberal ideas might be contingent upon the topics that are debated in parliament. Existing research shows that the far-right is less likely to engage in economic debates (e.g., Cavallaro et al., 2018; Otjes et al., 2018; Pirro & van Kessel, 2017), which seems to be also the case in our data.

Surprisingly, the debates around the humanitarian crisis (the so-called refugee crisis), which took place in 2015 and 2016, did not lead immediately to a higher share of speeches with illiberal ideas. While it could have been expected that far-right actors would have promoted such ideas given that immigration is the core issue of the far-right, no clear increase in ethno-nationalist anti-pluralism and anti-individualism can be observed during

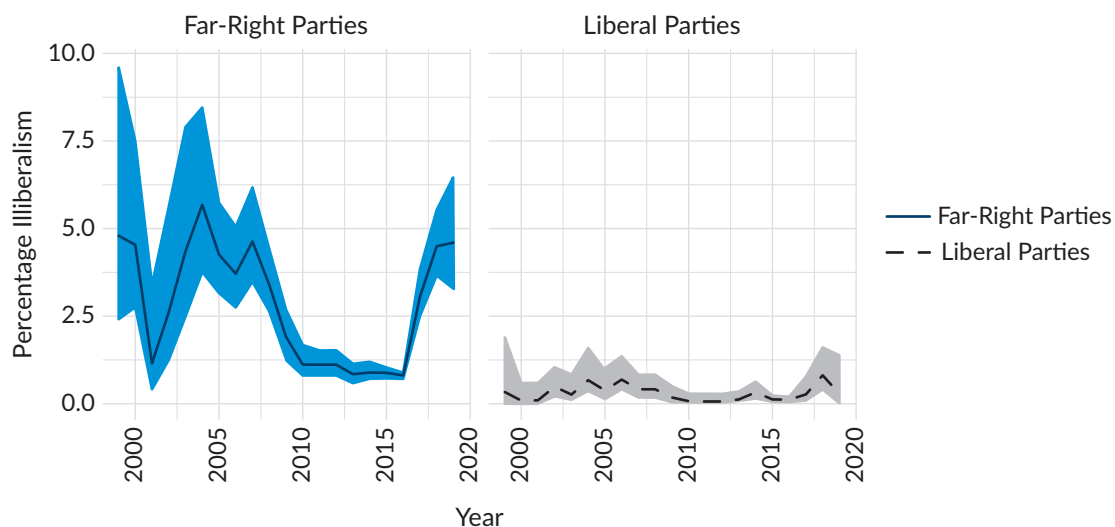


**Figure 4.** Share of illiberalism over time and across dimensions.

this period (see also Figure 4). This result is especially surprising, given that the far-right gave its highest number of speeches in the EP in 2015 and 2016, suggesting that they did address the crisis, and potentially also the looming Brexit. Why these contributions did not contain more illiberal ideas requires more research, probably of a more qualitative nature to examine the exact content of the speeches that were given.

Since 2017 the prevalence of illiberal ideas has significantly risen across all dimensions (also see Figure 4), occurring in over 4 percent of speeches in 2017 and 2018. This trend suggests the spread of illiberal ideas, particularly following Brexit and the election of Trump in 2016, which have contributed to the global diffusion of far-right ideology (Ramos & Torres, 2020). Surprisingly, the increase did not follow directly after Viktor Orbán promoted the idea of an illiberal state in his 2014 speech at the 25th Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp. Even though existing research has demonstrated that Orbán has emerged as the role model for the far-right in Europe by actively offering himself as an ideological example other far-right politicians can imitate (Mos & Macedo Piovezan, 2024), our findings suggest that it might have taken the far-right a couple of years to adopt his model of an “illiberal state, a non-liberal state” (Rupnik, 2022).

Finally, we compare our results for far-right messages to speeches given by mainstream politicians to assess whether we are measuring something truly particular about the far-right. For that reason, we chose the least likely case for illiberalism, which is the ALDE group (now Renew, former Group of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party). Figure 5 shows the share of illiberal messages for the liberal party family, next to the results for far-right parties to facilitate the comparison. Our results show a substantive difference between both party families: Illiberal messages are almost completely absent in the speeches of ALDE MEPs. Moreover, the percentage of illiberal speeches never crosses the 1 percent threshold. This stands in stark contrast with the results for the far-right, for which the percentage is higher than 1 in 17 of the 20 years studied. The comparison also serves as an additional check on the validity of our dictionary. Since the illiberalism values for ALDE members are close to zero, we are confident that the list of keywords is identifying illiberal ideas, rather than measuring the salience of themes that can be discussed in an illiberal and a liberal way.



**Figure 5.** Share of illiberalism over time for far-right parties and liberal parties.

Overall, our findings demonstrate that illiberalism is present among the far-right in the EP and that it has increased significantly in recent years. The increase in the absolute number of speeches containing illiberalism is mostly due to the steady increase in far-right parties and their MEPs, which has risen from 30 in the 5th term to 124 in the 8th term. The relative increase since 2017, however, takes place after Brexit and the election of Trump, which are generally considered to be watershed moments in the development of the far-right. Given that illiberalism is present in at least 1 percent of far-right speeches in almost all parliamentary years under investigation and makes up 1.4 percent of the far-right speeches between 1999 and 2019, we conclude that illiberalism forms an important ingredient of far-right ideas. Moreover, our results show that far-right illiberalism constitutes a coherent set of ideas, with references to unconstrained majority rule, ethno-national anti-pluralism and anti-individualism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism occurring at similar rates, trending together over time (see Figure 4), and co-occurring in almost half of the speeches that contain two references to keywords indicative of illiberalism. These results are in line with previous studies that observe growing discursive cohesion among far-right actors in the EP (e.g., Bélanger & Wunsch, 2022; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

This article has focused on the extent to which European far-right parties promote illiberalism, which we conceive of as a set of ideas that coherently integrates the far-right's nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Building on a dictionary-based text analysis of far-right speeches given in the EP between 1999 and 2019, we show that illiberal ideas have been present in these speeches as early as the turn of the century, demonstrating that far-right illiberalism is not a new phenomenon. While the far-right's illiberalism remains limited throughout the financial and humanitarian crises of the early 2000s, we observe a marked increase from 2017 onwards. This increase follows directly after the Brexit referendum and the election of Trump in 2016 and occurs in the midst of a parliamentary term, which suggests it is not related to campaign dynamics or an electoral power shift in the EP.

Our analysis also reveals that the three dimensions of illiberalism that we distinguish on the basis of Smilova (2021)—(a) unrestrained popular sovereignty, (b) ethno-nationalist anti-individualism and anti-pluralism, and (c) anti-liberal anti-globalism—reflect a coherent set of ideas among far-right parties. The three dimensions are mentioned in the speeches more or less equally often, and trend together over time. All in all, our findings suggest that illiberalism is an important element of far-right ideology and thereby also plays a role in the growing discursive cohesion among the far-right in the EP (Wunsch & Bélanger, 2024).

Because the EP represents a parliamentary context in which politicization of political issues is lower than in national parliaments, we did not expect to find large shares of illiberalism in far-right speeches. Yet, even with our restrictive measurement that requires multiple illiberal keywords to be present, we find relevant levels of illiberalism of up to 5 percent. This percentage is somewhat higher than for example the level of populism reported in previous studies. Given the context in which we have measured illiberalism, we expect it to be even more pervasive in far-right speeches in national parliaments, or in their communication on social media or at party rallies.

Our article constitutes one of the first attempts to operationalize, measure, and analyze empirically the relatively new conceptualization of illiberalism as a set of ideas, using a dictionary approach. With the illiberalism dictionary that we have developed and validated, scholars will be able to analyze illiberalism in a multitude of settings and sources, such as in national parliamentary debates, in speeches given at party conferences, in newspaper interviews, or in online talks. The dictionary can be adapted to different contexts and be combined with other methods of content analysis, such as large language models, as recently shown by Röth et al. (2024).

Our article may have important policy implications. Research on the policy consequences of the far-right's rise has often focused on the specific issue of immigration. This is understandable given that immigration is their absolute core priority. Our analysis, however, indicates that these parties are more than “just” nativist (as well as authoritarian and populist); they also endorse an overarching illiberal set of ideas that extends beyond this single issue and influences their broader stance on democracy. The rise of the far-right may therefore have more severe policy implications than commonly assumed—even in countries where these parties are not in power. The more successful these parties are in promoting ideas incompatible with liberal democracy, the greater the threat to the liberal democratic system itself.

Although our study advances our knowledge of far-right illiberalism, it comes with several limitations. Firstly, our analysis ends in April 2019 and does not include the 9th EP term, in which the far-right has further expanded its number of MEPs. We would expect that illiberalism has become even more prominent in far-right speeches after 2019, given the increasing politicization of illiberal reforms in Hungary and Poland, and the themes of democratic quality and the rule of law more generally. Secondly, our validation strategy only compared the illiberalism of far-right and ALDE MEPs, arguing that ALDE was the least likely case to find illiberalism. In future research, the illiberalism scores of the far-right could also be compared to those of other EP groups to examine whether they differ between the far-right and, for example, the European People's Party (EPP). Thirdly, while we showed that illiberalism increases along each of its constitutive dimensions, we cannot identify the specific policy domains or debates that drive the increase in illiberal far-right speeches.

Our limitations also link to avenues for future research. Firstly, a more in-depth investigation into the drivers of the frequency with which the far-right gives illiberal speeches, and changes therein, is necessary. While the patterns identified in this article provide valuable insights, our interpretation of what causes the increase in illiberalism over time remains tentative. A study that systematically explores the context in which debates that feature illiberal speeches occur, along with a closer examination of the policy issues fueling illiberalism, could offer a deeper understanding of the rise of illiberalism. Such an analysis would also allow a differentiation by policy areas, which might accommodate different articulations of illiberalism. Secondly, the far-right in the 9th and 10th EP terms is more heterogeneous than ever, with new far-right parties having gained representation. These parties come from countries without prior far-right representation, such as Spain and Portugal, or represent extremist strands of thinking, such as *Konfederacja* from Poland or *Motoristé sobě* from Czechia. This heterogeneity might be reflected in the extent to which individual far-right parties embrace illiberalism and can potentially be explained by party-level factors, such as electoral strength in the national and EP arenas, governmental status, and office-, policy-, and vote-seeking strategies, as well as country level factors, such as historical legacies, or length of EU membership. Thirdly, research has shown that mainstream parties can co-opt far-right ideas for strategic reasons (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Han, 2015). It is possible that an increase in illiberalism combined with a growing presence of the far-right in the EP may produce a contagion effect. This might be particularly pronounced amongst center-right parties, given that they are the ones who lose most voters to the far-right (Bale & Kaltwasser, 2021) and have incentives to form alliances with the far-right in the EP to increase their influence (Brack & Marié, 2024). Fourthly, future research should study whether the illiberalism that far-right parties promote in their speeches also translates into illiberal voting on policy proposals and amendments. Finally, future research could investigate intragroup dynamics on the far-right to provide us with more information about the role of specific parties in the development and dissemination of illiberalism in Europe. It could explore how these ideas travel from country to country and from level of governance to level of governance and thereby form a building block for the cooperation of the far-right in Europe. While liberal democracy seems increasingly threatened, understanding illiberalism, its pervasiveness, and the role it plays in actors' behavior and communication might give us tools to protect liberal democracy.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.



## Data Availability

Data is available upon request to the corresponding author.

## Supplementary Material

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

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## About the Authors



**Larissa Böckmann** is a joint PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam and at Cevipol, Université Libre de Bruxelles. Her research interests lie in far-right politics and their consequences for (liberal) democracy, as well as comparative politics and political sociology more generally.



**Sarah L. de Lange** is professor of political pluralism at the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. Her recent research projects focus on the emergence of new political oppositions in Europe on the basis of, amongst others, geographical, generational, and educational divides, and their impact on the functioning of democracy.



**Nathalie Brack** is associate professor in political science at Cevipol, Université Libre de Bruxelles, visiting professor at the College of Europe, and co-editor of the *Journal of European Integration*. Her research interests include Euroscepticism, the radical right, the European Parliament, and the challenges to representative democracy. Her ongoing research projects focus on the conspiratorial discourses of politicians in Europe and on fact-based policy-making.



**Matthijs Rooduijn** is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. He is interested in the transformation of, and challenges to, contemporary liberal democracies. Specifically, he studies topics such as populism and the far left and right, and how political narratives can strengthen or weaken liberal democracy. In recent research projects he examines the political psychology of the far right and the impact of empathy and tolerance messages on prejudice.

# How Terror Attacks Shape Political Agendas on Multiculturalism in France

Elena Cossu  and Caterina Froio 

Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, Sciences Po (Paris Institute of Political Studies), France

**Correspondence:** Elena Cossu ([elena.cossu@sciencespo.fr](mailto:elena.cossu@sciencespo.fr))

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## Abstract

Terror attacks do more than take lives, they reshape the boundaries of political discourse. This article examines how terror attacks in France (2014–2021) influenced political agendas on multiculturalism by analyzing 143,870 tweets from major political parties. Drawing on data from the AUTHLIB project, we apply multilingual RoBERTa and DistilBERT models for natural language inference and sentiment analysis. While evidence of salience contagion is limited, our findings reveal position contagion: mainstream parties adopted increasingly negative rhetoric on cultural diversity and especially Islam in the aftermath of attacks, echoing far-right narratives. In contrast, the Front National (renamed Rassemblement National in 2018) consistently maintained its negative framing. This dual dynamic—mainstream parties shifting rightward while far-right rhetoric remains constant—contributes to the normalization of illiberal positions in French politics, where civic values, particularly *laïcité*, are deployed to justify cultural and religious exclusion. Methodologically, the article introduces an innovative approach for tracking party positions over time using social media data and natural language processing. Beyond the French case, the study underscores a broader paradox: liberal democracies, in seeking to defend their foundational values, may increasingly adopt illiberal discourse that undermines the very principles they aim to protect.

## Keywords

far-right; France; illiberalism; Islam; party communication; terror attacks

## 1. Introduction

Terror attacks do more than claim lives, they redraw the boundaries of what can be said politically, especially in debates over national identity (della Porta et al., 2020). This article analyzes how political parties responded



to three major attacks in France: the Charlie Hebdo and Hypercacher shootings (January 2015), the Bataclan massacre (November 2015), and the Nice truck attack (2016). We focus on party communication in the wake of these events, with particular attention to the framing of multiculturalism in political discourse. Central to our analysis is the convergence—or divergence—between far-right and mainstream parties in their rhetoric before and after these attacks. By tracing shifts in emphasis and tone, particularly negativity, we examine how such critical events shape political agendas and contribute to the spread of exclusionary cultural narratives, central to illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024). In doing so, we highlight a broader paradox: liberal democracies, in seeking to defend what they perceive as the liberal order, may increasingly rely on illiberal discourse that ultimately undermines the very values they seek to protect.

This article aims to fill a key gap in the literature on political parties and the far-right. While existing research has extensively examined electoral dynamics—understandably so, given both the growing influence in the ballots of these parties and the abundance of campaign data—it has largely overlooked how party communication evolves between elections, especially in response to critical events. This gap is significant, as understanding how mainstream parties respond to terror attacks is essential, at least for two reasons. First, it illuminates their immediate tactical choices and reveals how far-right parties indirectly influence immigration politics through their impact on other political actors. Second, understanding how parties interact and portray themselves to the public outside of electoral periods is essential in a context where citizens increasingly turn to (digital) media to learn about politics, and traditional channels of political communication, including party manifestos, seem to lose momentum. To address this gap, we use a novel empirical strategy taking advantage of the unique granularity of social media data. This approach allows us to observe real-time changes in parties' discourse before, during, and after terror attacks. We use a multilingual variant of the RoBERTa model pre-trained for natural language inference to classify 143,870 tweets over the 2014–2021 period.

While researchers mostly link the politicization of issues related to multiculturalism to long-term trends associated with the rise of far-right parties (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 1996; Mudde, 2007), the reconfiguration of political competition (Kriesi, 2013), and mainstream party strategies (Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer, 2020; Meguid, 2009; van Spanje, 2010), our article complements available knowledge by emphasizing the role of short-term factors. In doing so, we aim to understand if and how terror attacks contribute to the diffusion of negative views of multiculturalism in political agendas by shifting issue politicization dynamics between mainstream and far-right parties. Our study builds upon emerging research examining political parties' reactions to the European asylum policy crisis (Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019) and terror attacks in Germany (Völker, 2024). We show that terror attacks catalyzed shifts in how political parties discuss multiculturalism. Specifically, while evidence of salience contagion remains limited, our analysis reveals position contagion: Mainstream parties adopted more negative rhetoric regarding cultural diversity and particularly Islam following attacks, increasingly aligning with far-right narratives. Differently, the Front National (FN; Rassemblement National [RN] since 2018) maintained a stable negative rhetoric. This dual process—mainstream parties shifting rightward while far-right actors maintain negative narratives—contributes to the normalization of illiberal positions in French politics, where civic values, and notably *laïcité*, are used as tools to justify cultural and religious exclusionism.

This study contributes to existing literature in two key ways. First, it demonstrates how far-right ideas enter the mainstream through the spread of exclusionary civic frames in political agendas. This process reflects a



broader trend of normalizing illiberal discourse on ethnic and cultural diversity—particularly Islam—blurring the lines between radical and mainstream political rhetoric. Second, methodologically, the article introduces a novel granular measurement of party positions on multiculturalism-related dimensions between elections based on social media data, providing a valuable tool for future research.

The article is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework for analyzing shifts in political agendas on multiculturalism following terror attacks and examine the term's use in the French context. Second, we describe the research design and methods, before discussing the results.

## 2. The Politics of Multiculturalism and Terror Attacks

How do terror attacks influence parties' communication strategies on multiculturalism in between elections? Debates around multiculturalism have been central to political conflict (Esser, 2013), though the term itself and its use in the present work require careful conceptual unpacking. Multiculturalism encompasses distinct forms of cultural pluralism, from indigenous rights to immigrant integration, each raising different normative and practical challenges (Kymlicka, 1996). The concept has been variously understood as a demographic reality of cultural diversity, a set of public policies for accommodating difference, a form of political claims-making by minority groups (Koopmans et al., 2005), and a philosophical position on the recognition of cultural rights (Malik, 2014). In the European context, debates have primarily focused on the integration of post-war immigrants and their descendants, particularly regarding the accommodation of cultural and religious practices in public institutions. However, as Brubaker (2017) notes, these debates often conflate distinct issues such as questions of civic integration, religious accommodation, social cohesion, and national identity. In this study, we use the term "multiculturalism" rather than "ethnic and religious diversity" or "immigration" as an umbrella concept to emphasize not only the coexistence of diverse groups but also the societal frameworks, policies, and ideologies that shape and are shaped by this diversity. This encompasses issues related to immigration and cultural diversity, including Islam. In other words, while "ethnic and religious diversity" describes the demographic reality, "multiculturalism" engages with the broader cultural and political implications central to our analysis. Building on this conceptualization, we understand political agendas about multiculturalism as the set of structured policy priorities and ideological objectives that political actors advance through communication channels regarding immigration and cultural diversity (Kingdon, 1984). This aligns with understanding the politicization of these issues as "an expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system" (Hutter & Grande, 2014, p. 2), driven by competing framing strategies—specific ways of defining the meaning of the same problem (Entman, 1993). The literature on political parties and the far-right has provided crucial insights into how these issues acquired growing relevance in contemporary politics. Still, available scholarship has predominantly focused on electoral dynamics, somehow overlooking what happens outside election times, particularly in the context of short-term extremist violence.

For decades, opposition to multiculturalism has been central to far-right parties whose worldview combines nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007; Pirro, 2023). These parties, emerging in the 1970s, uniquely politicized immigration and diversity issues that were previously peripheral to other parties' campaigns (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 1996), playing the role of challengers within political systems (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). While initially marginalized among voters, far-right parties and their nativist campaigns have progressively gained centrality in European countries (Arzheimer, 2018; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017),

sometimes even entering governments and redirecting policies (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). This increasing influence has led specialists to talk about a long-term process of the mainstreaming of far-right politics, underscoring how these parties have successfully pushed multiculturalism to the forefront of political agendas (Mudde, 2019). Specialists of party competition have zoomed in on the dynamics of inter-party interactions during elections, and their effect on specific issues, notably immigration (Meguid, 2005; van Spanje, 2010), but the results remain unclear (see Rovira Kaltwasser & Bale, 2021). Some contend that growing support for far-right parties pushes mainstream parties to emphasize immigration more in elections (salience contagion). Others, instead, argue that electoral competition also encourages them to shift towards negative positions on immigration (position contagion; see Abou-Chadi, 2016; Meguid, 2005, for an overview). Additional evidence suggests that center-left parties are less affected by far-right success than center-right parties in both processes (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Han, 2015; van Spanje, 2010). These developments result from far-right electoral success and mainstream parties' responses to voters' priorities (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Stier et al., 2018). Still, none of these studies covers between election times or the context of terror attacks. This gap may be partly explained by the rising electoral success of these parties, but also by the limitations of commonly used data sources—such as electoral manifestos and expert surveys—which often lack the depth and flexibility needed to capture dynamic shifts over time.

Another strand of research examines how terror attacks influence political parties' engagement with multiculturalism between elections. Acts of terrorism significantly impact party behavior because these events place topics on the party-system agenda, compelling other parties to address them, regardless of their own interests (Green-Pedersen, 2019). Focusing on the 2014 EU migration policy crisis, Gessler and Hunger (2022) show that in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, mainstream parties could not ignore the immigration issue under those circumstances. They found that salience contagion (already present before the long summer of migration) intensified during the crisis but diminished afterward. However, they do not find strong evidence of position contagion. Hutter and Kriesi (2019) corroborated these findings across all EU countries, observing similar patterns of salience contagion without positional shifts. Recently, Völker (2024) examined the consequences of Islamist violence in Germany. She demonstrated that the far-right party (Alternative for Germany) and mainstream-right parties converged in attributing the central security threat to migration. These arguments dominated political discourses after the attacks, while left-wing parties adopted different positions that featured less prominently in political agendas. Our study builds on this body of literature to explore how mainstream and far-right parties politicize multiculturalism during periods between elections, particularly in the context of large-scale terror attacks.

We expect mainstream parties to engage in strategic adjustment between elections as they compete with the far-right's politicization of multiculturalism. Specifically, when far-right parties achieve electoral success, competing parties tend to adjust their positions to maintain their electoral appeal. Our theoretical framework assumes that this contagion effect operates through two interrelated mechanisms: salience (mainstream parties discussing multiculturalism more frequently) and position (adopting more negative sentiment on multiculturalism). The salience contagion mechanism emerges as mainstream parties face dual pressures: the need to respond to intensified far-right rhetoric and heightened public attention following terror attacks (Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Völker, 2024). The position contagion mechanism operates through Islamist attacks that function as critical junctures—disrupting the status quo and opening space for significant political and discursive change (della Porta et al., 2020). These junctures do not merely reflect

existing tensions; they actively reshape political possibilities by enabling certain actors and legitimizing specific narratives in the public sphere while constraining others. In this context, opposition to multiculturalism spreads across the political spectrum, normalizing resistance to cultural pluralism.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Case Selection

France provides an exemplary case for examining political parties' communication on multiculturalism in the context of terror attacks. The country's unique assimilative approach to integration was shaped by the revolutionary ideals of citizenship based on individual rights rather than group identities, further crystallized through the Third Republic's emphasis on secular education and civic nationalism. The cornerstone of this model, *laïcité*, formalized by the 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and the State, evolved from an anticlerical movement aimed at limiting Catholic influence to become a fundamental principle defining the relationship between the state and religion (Doytcheva, 2018, 2021). This distinct form of *laïcité* demands the relegation of religious expression to the private sphere while promoting a shared civic culture in public spaces. The country's "republican universalism" model prioritizes the adoption of French cultural norms and values over the formal acknowledgment of ethnic or religious diversity, reflecting a long-standing resistance to Anglo-American forms of multiculturalism. However, this assimilationist approach has faced mounting challenges since the post-war period, particularly following decolonization and subsequent waves of immigration from the Maghreb. While conformism to the French republican political culture could simply be imposed during the colonial era, post-war migrants—particularly those of Muslim belief—have not been so easily assimilated and have sometimes demanded a *droit à la différence* (right to be different; Favell, 2001). The tension between republican universalism and the lived experiences of cultural diversity makes France a critical case for examining multiculturalism, not as an official policy, but as an analytical framework for understanding how a nominally universalist society grapples with religious and cultural pluralism, especially regarding the policies that impact Muslim communities.

Before the series of terror attacks that started in 2014, political agendas on multiculturalism in France emphasized debates over *laïcité*, exemplified by the 2004 ban on religious symbols in public schools and the 2010 ban on face-covering veils during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency. The political landscape transformed dramatically following the Islamist attacks in 2015–2016. These events, occurring amid ISIS-led violence across Europe, prompted a significant shift in French politics (Mondon & Winter, 2017). Most notably, socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls's proposal to revoke citizenship from dual nationals convicted of terrorism—historically a FN flagship issue—and socialist President Hollande's attempt to constitutionalize emergency powers represented the left's growing acceptance of enhanced security measures. While both initiatives were ultimately abandoned, they contributed to legitimizing far-right security public discourse and created deep divisions within the Socialist Party. The period between 2017 and 2021 witnessed an intensification of these dynamics under Macron's presidency. A series of events—including the murder of teacher Samuel Paty in October 2020—led to increasingly restrictive policies targeting what the government termed "Islamic separatism." The 2021 "anti-separatism" law—officially called the law "reinforcing republican principles"—expanded state oversight of religious organizations and associations, while strengthening requirements for religious neutrality in public services. This rightward trajectory was further evidenced by Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin's criticism of Marine Le Pen for being "too soft" on Islam during a

televised debate, signaling how security and identity issues associated with Islam had come to dominate French political discourse (Mondon, 2024).

Despite the distinctive features of its citizenship model, France shares commonalities with other European countries. The country hosts a successful far-right party, the FN, which has been subject to a *cordon sanitaire* strategy by mainstream parties, at least at the national level and during the period considered in this article (Ivaldi, 2016). This approach is meant to isolate the far-right party politically and prevent the normalization of its ideas in mainstream discourse. Additionally, until 2021, like other European countries, France exhibits the paradox of stable public attitudes towards minorities alongside the growing visibility of these issues in public debates (Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme, 2021). While there is no single, universally accepted definition of what constitutes a mainstream or a far-right party (Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019), in the article we follow Moffitt (2021) and define mainstream parties as ideologically moderate, electorally significant political actors with a realistic potential to govern or participate in government coalitions. In France, these correspond to the centrist party, En Marche (Renaissance since 2022), Les Républicains, and the Socialist Party. Close to these, we also consider Debout la France, the Front de Gauche (France Insoumise since 2016), Le Parti Communiste Français, Les Verts, and the Union des démocrates et indépendants (UDI) because of the prominent role they play in French politics. Similarly, we follow Mudde (2007) as updated by Pirro (2023) and consider the FN a far-right party (see Supplementary Material, Table A, for acronyms and original names).

### 3.2. Methodology

In our exploratory study, we aim to do two things: first, we identify and measure multiculturalism and its related dimensions, and second, we assess the sentiment of each mention. We focus on political communication by parties on social media, specifically by analyzing Tweets. To achieve these goals, we use transformer-based natural language processing models that are pre-fine-tuned for specific tasks and work directly with our data. These models excel at understanding language and context, making them more effective than traditional dictionary-based methods. This allows us to accurately classify large datasets and track language changes among different actors over time. More technical details on these models and the tasks they perform can be found in the Supplementary Material.

For identifying references to multiculturalism in each tweet, we label each observation to indicate whether it contains dimensions related to multiculturalism. The relevant dimensions we identified include assimilation, diversity, headscarves, immigration, Islam, jihadism, Muslim culture, secularism, the Bataclan terror attacks, and the Charlie Hebdo terror attacks (see Supplementary Material, Table B). We also check whether the texts refer to multiculturalism in general. These terms were selected for their significance within the French citizenship model, as previously discussed.

We classify each social media text as either including or not including each of the dimensions mentioned in the previous paragraph. To do this, we use a version of RoBERTa pre-trained on a natural language inference task. The model and task classify the logical relationship between pairs of sentences (premise and hypothesis), which is valuable for automating tasks that require human-like understanding across multiple languages. The model then labels the tweets based on the premises in Table B of the Supplementary Material, creating a classification for each dimension associated with multiculturalism. After labeling all tweets, we selected those marked as containing any reference to these categories and randomly checked

their accuracy. Table B in the Supplementary Materials also shows the number of texts identified for each dimension.

For sentiment measurement, we classify tweets based on whether their sentiment is negative, neutral, or positive. For this, we use a pre-trained, uncased DistilBERT model specifically designed for understanding tweets and their sentiments. This model was fine-tuned on a dataset of tweets for sentiment analysis (Igali et al., 2024). The fine-tuning trains the model to categorize tweets as positive, negative, or neutral, using a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates a low probability of the sentiment and 1 indicates a high probability. For example, a text with a positive sentiment score of 0.9 will be extremely positive in tone.

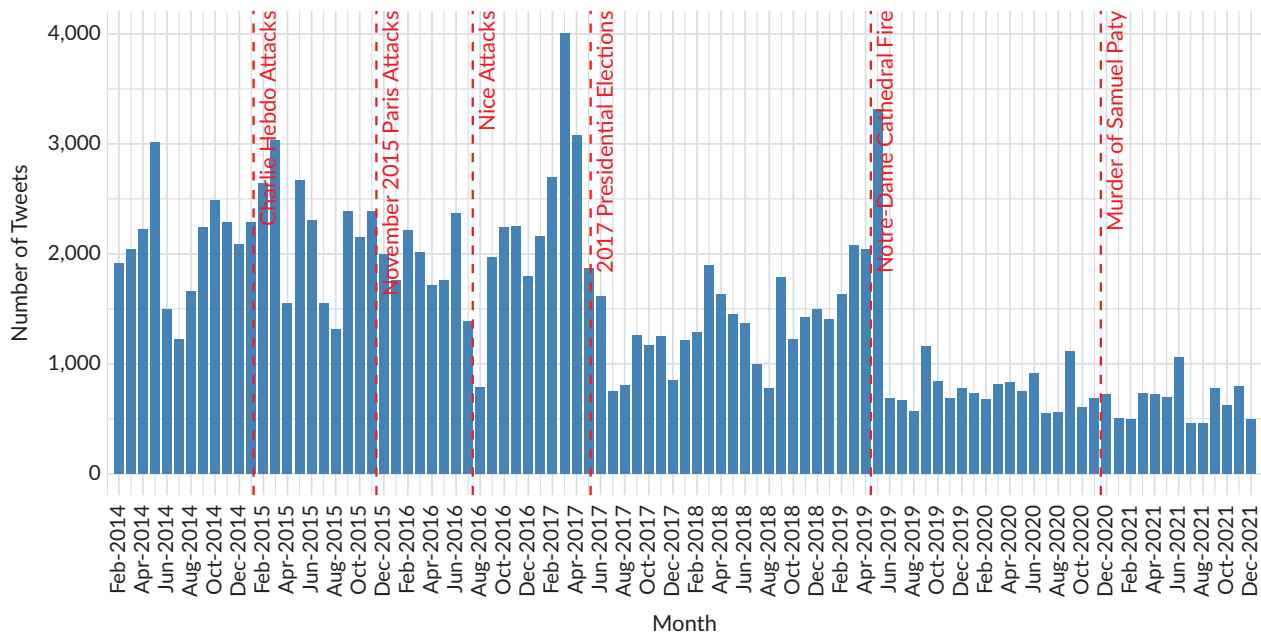
Finally, it is important to explain how we operationalize the pre- and post-event phases in our analysis. For texts related to terror attacks, we divide the data into two categories: pre-event and post-event. The pre-event category includes the 10 months leading up to each attack, while the post-event category covers the 10 months following each event. We chose a 10-month window to avoid mixing our results with the discourse surrounding the November 2015 attacks and to maintain a consistent timeframe across events. This window, combined with data extending up to 2021, allows us to observe spikes in communication linked to large-scale terror attacks as expressions of political reaction. More details about the events and the timeframes can be found in Table C of the Supplementary Material.

### 3.3. Data

The article draws on data for France from the AUTHLIB project, focusing on political parties' communication activity between 2014 and 2021. This timeframe covers several terror attacks that dramatically intensified debates about cultural integration and diversity, notably the Charlie Hebdo shooting, the Hypercacher kidnappings, the Bataclan Theatre massacre in 2015, and the Nice truck attack in 2016. This period not only captures the immediate impact of the attacks but also allows for comparison with other significant events in France during these years, including elections, providing a broader context of political discourse trends. While Twitter (now X) data has limitations, its granularity and real-time engagement with unfolding events made it ideal for analyzing how political parties adjusted their communication after the attacks. In addition, before Elon Musk's ownership in 2022, Twitter served as a primary communication channel between political institutions and the public (Bauer et al., 2023; Daniel et al., 2019).

The focus of our analysis is on the discourse of all political parties that either secured at least 2% of the vote in any election or held representation in parliament. These parties—whose Twitter handles are detailed in Table B in the Supplementary Material—range across the political spectrum from the far-left to the far-right and also include centrist parties and The Greens. Our far-left/far-right categorization is based on the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2024), and for other party families we use the PartyFacts database. Figure 1 shows the number of tweets by major political parties in France over time.

Our final dataset comprises over 1 million tweets from all major parties, which, after excluding retweets, amounts to 143,870 tweets from January 2014 to December 2021. The tweets were collected using the MiNet library (Plique et al., 2024), and their distribution is illustrated in Figure 1. For data management, we translated texts utilizing the Google API, especially since the RoBERTa model we employed does not support French. Around terror attacks in 2015–2016, there were clear spikes in tweet volume, suggesting increased



**Figure 1.** Distribution of tweets of major French political parties over time.

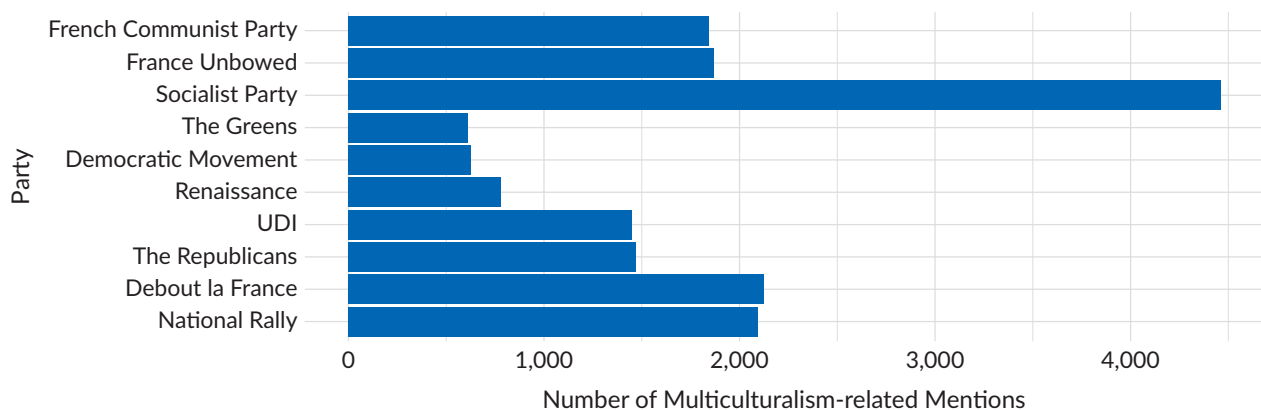
political communication. Similarly, periods leading up to elections in 2017 also saw heightened tweeting activity across parties. In contrast, other intervals exhibited lower and more variable tweet counts, potentially reflecting less intense political communication.

## 4. Results

The analysis is structured in three interrelated steps. First, we examine whether and how mainstream parties and the FN/RN emphasize multiculturalism, focusing on how much attention—or salience—issues related to immigration and cultural diversity receive in Twitter posts across major parties in France in the context of terror attacks. Second, we analyze political parties' positions on the same issues related to multiculturalism, specifically their negativity, and investigate whether parties adopt more negative views. Finally, we conduct a more fine-grained analysis of these shifts by examining the framing strategies that accompany them, with a particular focus on the theme of *laïcité*, which became central to political agendas in the aftermath of Islamist attacks.

### 4.1. The Salience of Multiculturalism in the French Party System and the Responses to the FN

To begin, we examine whether, when, and to what extent mainstream parties and the far-right engaged in political communication on multiculturalism, highlighting the dynamics of salience contagion. To measure the salience of multiculturalism in parties' Twitter communication and its emergence on the political agenda in the context of large-scale terror attacks, we simply count the number of tweets referring to multiculturalism, i.e., the keywords identified before by the FN and compare it to that of the other major parties in France, with particular attention to temporal patterns around large-scale terror attacks. Figure 2 presents the total volume of multiculturalism-related mentions across French political parties, providing insight into how various parties engaged with this issue.



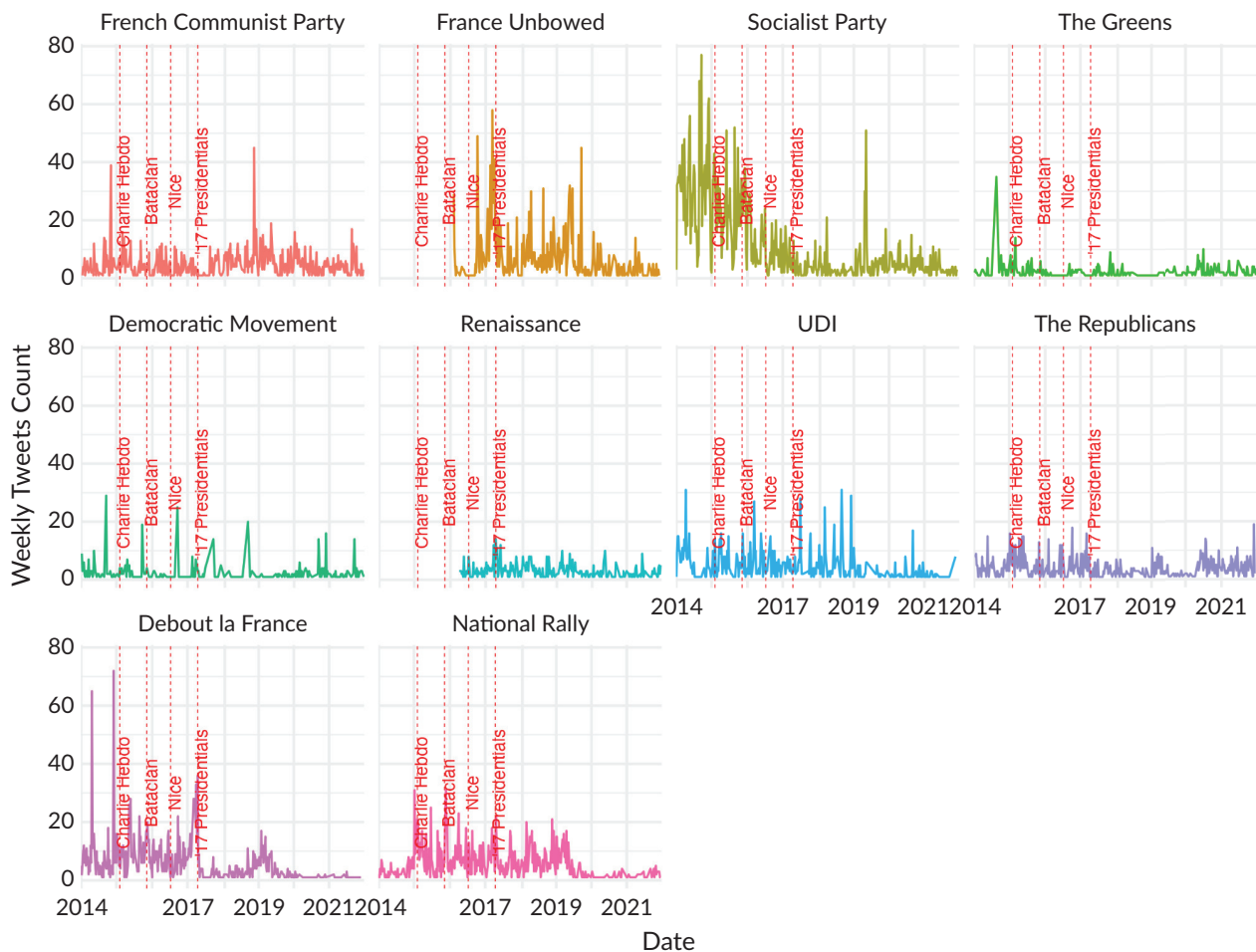
**Figure 2.** Total mentions of issues related to multiculturalism by French political parties between 2014–2021.

The data reveals that all major political parties in France have communicated about multiculturalism on Twitter, albeit with important differences, with an average of approximately 1,640 mentions per party. The Socialist Party demonstrates exceptional engagement, with approximately 4,100 mentions—nearly 2.5 times the average—suggesting a strategy to maintain ownership of the issue despite the challenging political climate following the terror attacks. Four other parties exceeded the average engagement: National Rally and Debout la France (both around 2,100 mentions), followed by France Unbowed and the French Communist Party (both approximately 1,800 mentions). This distribution reveals how parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum—from the mainstream center-left socialists to the far-right FN—prioritized multiculturalism in their communications, albeit presumably with different framing approaches. Five parties fell below the average engagement threshold. The Republicans and UDI (both approximately 1,300 mentions) demonstrated moderate but below-average attention to multicultural issues. The mainstream centrist parties—Renaissance and the Democratic Movement—and The Greens showed substantially lower engagement (600–700 mentions), less than half the system-wide average. This pattern suggests a potential strategy by mainstream centrist formations to minimize emphasis on multiculturalism in their communications. The distribution around the average reveals a U-shaped pattern of issue engagement, where multicultural discourse was most prominent at the ideological poles while mainstream centrist parties appeared reluctant to emphasize these potentially divisive themes. This distribution of mentions across the political spectrum indicates that multiculturalism was not exclusively dominated by far-right discourse but rather remained a topic of significant engagement across the French political landscape. It is particularly of interest to see how these mentions are higher for the more right-wing or left-wing parties, with the exclusion of the Socialist Party, however, we can see in Figure 3 published fewer posts related to multiculturalism over time. We find similar results for the mentions specifically related to Islam as shown in the Supplementary Material.

To shed light on the temporal dynamics of these debates, Figure 3 tracks the evolution of multiculturalism-related tweets over time, highlighting key events that may have influenced parties' communication strategies.

The Socialist Party demonstrates the most dramatic temporal pattern, with particularly intense engagement during 2016–2017, reaching peaks of 60–80 weekly tweets. This period coincides with the 2017 presidential election campaign, suggesting a strategic emphasis on multiculturalism during this pivotal



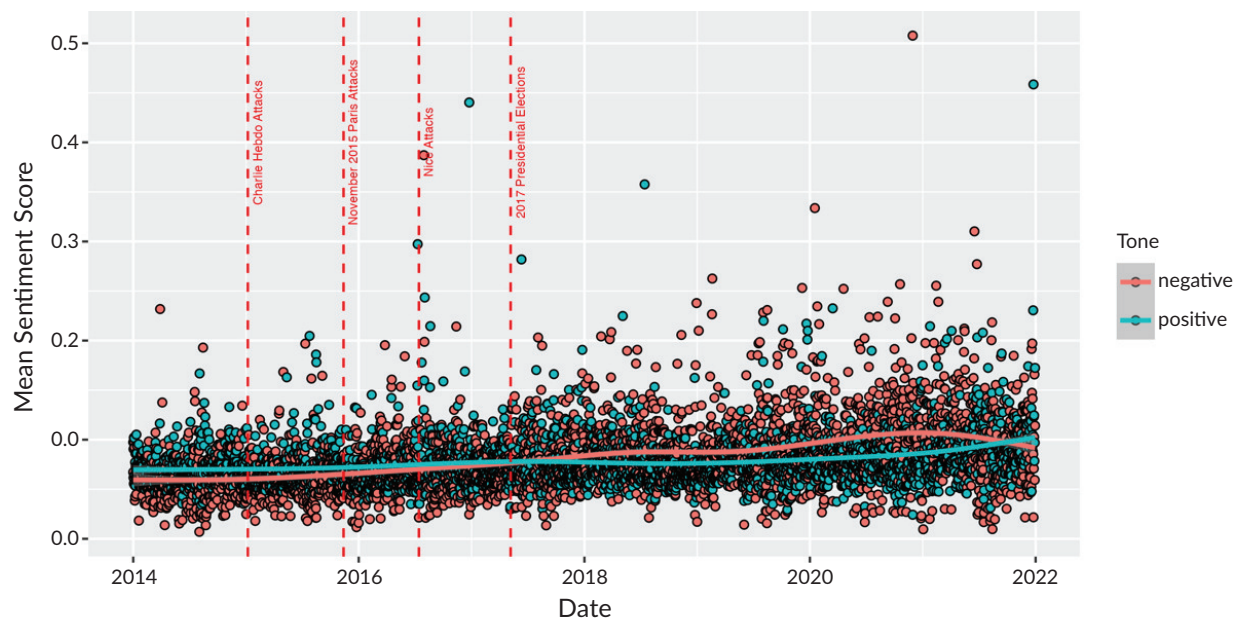


**Figure 3.** Saliency of multiculturalism in tweets in France by party.

moment. Following this peak, the Socialist Party's engagement with multiculturalism declined. France Unbowed shows a similar though less pronounced pattern, with notable spikes around 2017 (approximately 60 weekly tweets) that subsequently diminished. The French Communist Party maintained more consistent engagement over time, with periodic increases but without the dramatic peaks seen in other left-wing parties. The FN/National Rally displayed relatively steady engagement from 2014 through 2021, with moderate spikes following key events marked in the timeline, particularly around the Bataclan attack and the 2017 presidential election. Centrist, mainstream parties (Renaissance and the Democratic Movement) and The Greens showed the lowest and most sporadic engagement, with only occasional spikes rarely exceeding 20 weekly tweets. This confirms their generally lower prioritization of multiculturalism in their communication strategies. Notably, several parties exhibit response patterns to major events, particularly the Charlie Hebdo attack (January 2015), the Bataclan attack (November 2015), the Nice attack (July 2016), and the 2017 presidential election. These events appear to have temporarily increased engagement across the political spectrum, though with varying intensities. The UDI party, for instance, shows distinct spikes following the 2019 and 2021 events. The temporal analysis reveals that while multiculturalism remained a consistent feature of French political agendas, its saliency fluctuated significantly over time, peaking during moments of national crisis and electoral campaigns. Building on these findings regarding saliency, the next step is to examine the positions taken by different parties on multiculturalism, particularly the degree of negativity expressed, as outlined in the position contagion mechanism of the theory.

#### 4.2. Mainstream Parties' and FN Positions on Multiculturalism: Systemic Trends in Negativity

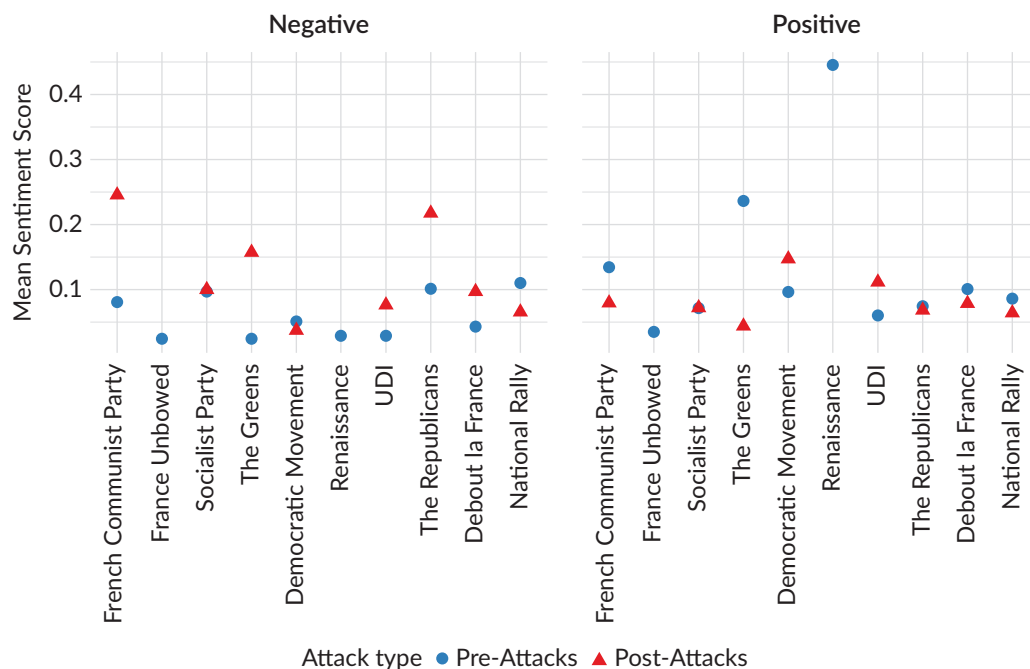
We observed that while the far-right maintains the most consistent focus on multiculturalism, it does not always have the highest level of attention. This topic, however, gains prominence during terror attacks. But do political parties adopt more negative views? To explore this, we turn to the sentiment analysis of the tweets to assess the theoretical argument of positional contagion. To begin with, Figure 4 maps the general evolution of the tone of multiculturalism in the French party system.



**Figure 4.** The sentiment of tweets on multiculturalism by major political parties in France over time.

Figure 4 illustrates the sentiment of tweets by French political parties over time, with negative sentiment shown in red and positive sentiment in teal. Overall, the figure shows minor fluctuations in the sentiment expressed in tweets by political parties over time. Still, around terror attacks and the 2017 elections, there are spikes in negative sentiment, suggesting that parties' communication became more critical of multiculturalism during these periods. Between terror attacks, the sentiment appears more mixed, with both negative and positive tones present. Figure 5 further illuminates the position contagion mechanism by showing the mean sentiment scores (positive and negative) for various political parties regarding multiculturalism before and after terror attacks.

Figure 5 presents sentiment analysis scores related to multiculturalism for major French political parties, with negative sentiment shown in the left panel and positive sentiment in the right panel. The figure compares sentiment before (circles) and after (triangles) terror attacks. Overall, the sentiment landscape shifts toward greater negativity and reduced positivity following terror attacks, suggesting a broader political hardening toward multiculturalism across the French party system. More specifically, negative sentiment increased post-attacks for nearly all parties but less so for the FN/RN. This shift is especially pronounced for the French Communist Party, the mainstream Socialist Party, and The Republicans. The Democratic Movement also saw a slight increase in negative sentiment, although it remained relatively low. Interestingly, the FN showed a slight decrease in negative sentiment after the attacks, potentially reflecting a consistently



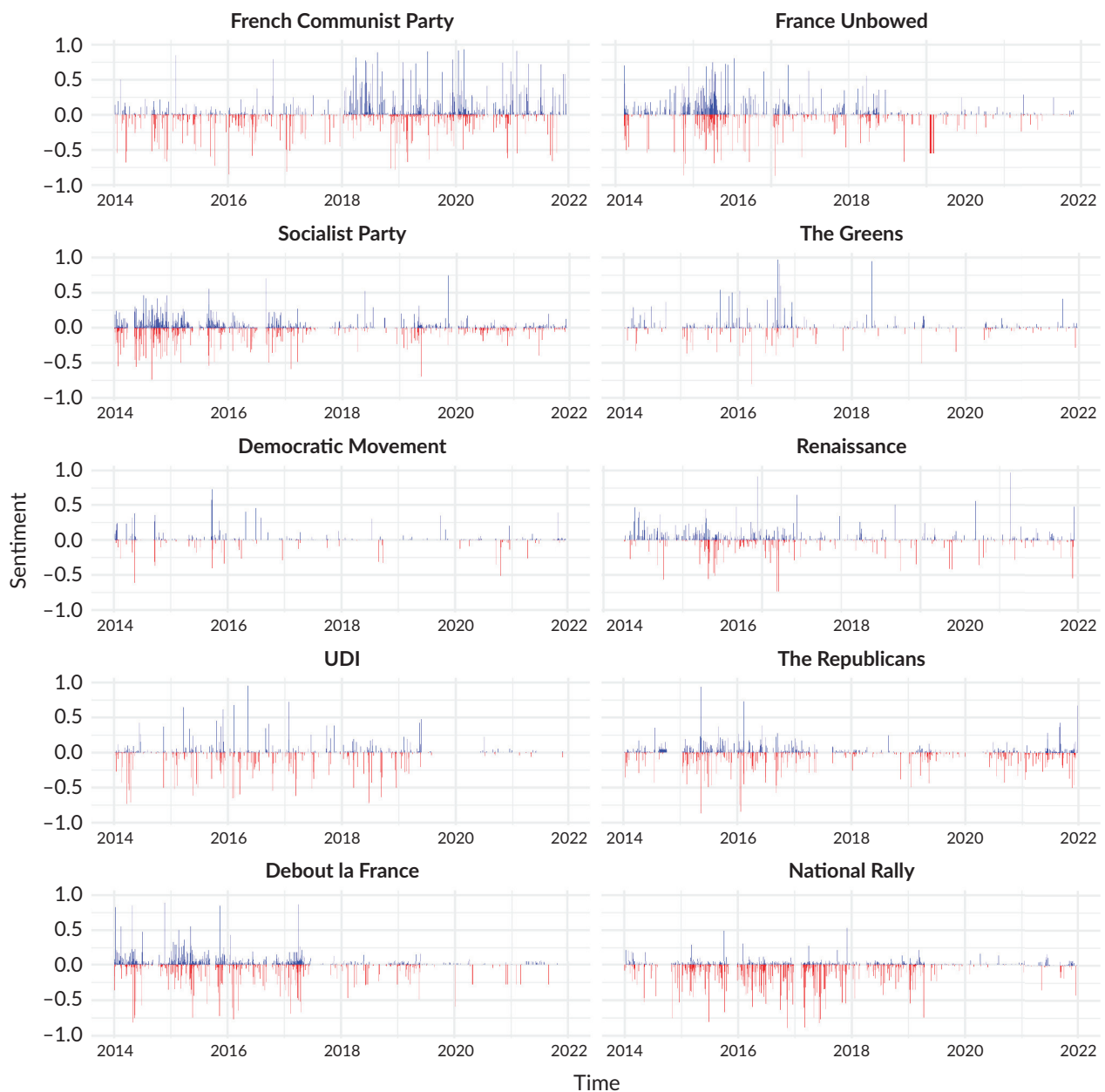
**Figure 5.** Sentiment scores on multiculturalism score before and after terror attacks for major political parties in France.

critical stance that did not intensify further. On the positive sentiment side, most parties exhibited a decline post-attacks. However, the Democratic Movement and Socialist Party stand out as exceptions, showing modest increases in positive sentiment. In sum, these findings suggest that French political parties became more polarized in their negative framing of multiculturalism, while positive expressions grew less common. In the next section, we explore salience and position dynamics for the topic *laïcité* that has been central in debates around multiculturalism, especially in the context of Islamist terror attacks.

#### 4.3. An Exclusionary Civic Frame: *Laïcité*

To further investigate the mainstreaming of far-right positions on multiculturalism, we zoom on political communication about *laïcité*. Figure 6 presents a sentiment analysis of tweets related to the topic of *laïcité* across French political parties from 2014 to 2021. By doing so, we can identify the extent to which political parties resorted to *laïcité* in public debates.

The figure displays positive sentiment values above the horizontal axis and negative values below. Several key patterns emerge over time. While *laïcité* has traditionally been invoked to defend secularism, it has increasingly become a contested rhetorical tool, used by parties across the political spectrum to advance differing agendas. The FN consistently exhibits the most negative sentiment toward *laïcité*, which may seem counterintuitive given the party's anti-immigration stance. However, this likely reflects its rejection of liberal or multicultural interpretations of *laïcité*—those that tolerate or accommodate minority religious practices. From this perspective, the FN frames *laïcité* negatively when it is associated with protecting diversity rather than enforcing cultural conformity.



**Figure 6.** Sentiment analysis for the topic *laïcité*.

Mainstream parties such as the Socialist Party and The Republicans show more variability in sentiment, with spikes in negativity often coinciding with events like the 2015 terror attacks. This suggests that, at times, they have aligned rhetorically with the far-right, adopting more exclusionary interpretations of *laïcité* in response to public pressure or radical-right framing. In contrast, far-left parties like the Communist Party and the Greens generally express more positive or neutral sentiments, likely embracing *laïcité* as a protective and inclusive secular ideal.

Other parties—such as Debout la France, Renaissance, and France Unbowed—demonstrate intermittent negativity, particularly around major political events, indicating their engagement in ongoing debates over the meaning of secularism. Overall, our findings suggest that *laïcité* is increasingly used to negatively frame

multiculturalism, especially in the wake of Islamist attacks. Examples of this include mainstream party tweets such as: “Le voile islamique est un combat essentiel pour la République” (“The Islamic veil is a fundamental battle for the Republic;” Socialist Party) and “Laïcité means freedom from religious pressure. If you can’t accept our values, maybe France isn’t for you” (The Republicans).

## 5. Conclusions

This study investigates how terror attacks shape political agendas on multiculturalism, using France as a case. By analyzing 143,870 tweets from the French political parties between 2014 and 2021, we explore the dynamics of salience and position contagion in party communication, with a specific focus on how far-right narratives relate to mainstream discourse. The results contribute to the broader understanding of how illiberal discourses gain traction in European democracies, particularly in between elections, during periods of heightened public tension.

The findings reveal significant shifts in political discourse around multiculturalism during terror attacks, aligning with previous research while also highlighting notable differences. Differently from Gessler and Hunger (2022), we do not find clear evidence of the salience contagion mechanism, e.g., that these terror attacks increased the overall salience of multiculturalism in French politics. We find that the far-right maintains the most consistent focus on multiculturalism, but it does not always have the highest level of attention. This absence of salience contagion may be attributed, at least partly, to the imprecise definition of what is encompassed in the broad concept of multiculturalism and how it is operationalized, making it difficult to track consistent patterns of increased attention across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, we do find evidence of heightened negative attention to the issue across the party system during terror attacks. In fact, terror attacks appear to trigger a shift towards more negative and less positive sentiment on multiculturalism, reinforcing polarization.

A central element of this process is the use of an exclusionary civic frame—a discursive strategy that reinterprets civic values, particularly *laïcité*, to justify cultural and religious exclusion. In line with previous research, the findings show that civic values can be used as tools to justify exclusionism (Doytcheva, 2021; Froio, 2018; Halikiopoulou et al., 2013; Mudde, 2024). The far-right frequently portrays *laïcité* in negative terms when it is linked to pluralism or multicultural accommodation. Meanwhile, in the context of terror attacks, mainstream parties become more negative towards multiculturalism and visible religious expression, portraying them as threats to civic unity and national identity. Growing negativity at the party system level contributes to the erosion of distinctions between far-right and mainstream political rhetoric, especially on issues of identity and integration. Furthermore, we observe that negative sentiment toward multiculturalism persists well beyond the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks. This suggests that these discursive shifts are not merely reactive, but part of a deeper, structural transformation in how cultural diversity and religion inform political conflict in France (Kriesi, 2013).

Methodologically, the study’s innovative approach leveraged social media data and advanced natural language processing techniques, providing an unprecedented granular view of political discourse between elections. This methodology transcends traditional “snapshot” data sources like electoral manifestos and expert surveys, offering deeper insights into political communication processes. While insightful, the study acknowledges several methodological constraints. The focus on specific terror attacks provides only a partial

view of political discourse dynamics. The reliance on Twitter may overrepresent elite political actors while underrepresenting broader societal perspectives, limiting the generalizability of the analysis. Future research should address these limitations notably by conducting comparative studies within and without Europe, triangulating findings using diverse data sources, exploring smaller-scale incidents and protest mobilizations, and tracking the long-term electoral and policy impacts of these discursive shifts to address causality. Notwithstanding its limitations, our findings demonstrate how terror attacks can act as catalysts for discursive shifts, enabling the normalization of illiberal positions toward cultural diversity and Muslim minorities. These insights not only illuminate political developments in France but also point to a deeper paradox in contemporary democracies: in their efforts to safeguard liberal values, democracies may resort to illiberal discourses that ultimately erode those very principles.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The code used for the analysis is publicly available at: <https://github.com/elenacossu/terror-attacks-france>

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the data, access to the full dataset is restricted. Interested researchers may request access by contacting the authors directly.

### Supplementary Material

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

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## About the Authors



**Elena Cossu** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE), Sciences Po Paris. Her research focuses on deviations from democracy and the use of machine learning and experimental methods in comparative political science research.



**Caterina Froio** is an associate professor at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE), Sciences Po Paris. Her work examines political parties, far-right mobilization, and digital politics in Western Europe from a comparative perspective.

# Opposition to Government and Back: How Illiberal Parties Shape Immigration Discourse and Party Competition

Franziska Wagner<sup>1</sup> , Dean Schafer<sup>2,3</sup> , and Mehmet Yavuz<sup>1,4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, Central European University, Austria

<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Mississippi State University, USA

<sup>3</sup> CEU Democracy Institute, Hungary

<sup>4</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg, Austria

**Correspondence:** Franziska Wagner ([wagner\\_franziska@phd.ceu.edu](mailto:wagner_franziska@phd.ceu.edu))

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## Abstract

In recent decades, illiberal far-right parties have seen electoral success, reshaped European politics, challenged established norms, and accelerated shifts in political discourse. Thought to be isolated by a *cordon sanitaire*, these parties are increasingly normalized, gaining footholds in parliament and government—from coalition participation in Austria to majority rule in Hungary. As illiberal far-right parties gain access to power, a pressing question arises: How does their parliamentary and governmental participation influence both their discourse and that of mainstream parties? While we know that far-right parliamentary entry influences mainstream parties’ policy adaptations and strategic positioning, less is known about their systematic effects across countries or how governing responsibilities affect their discourse. Theories of issue competition suggest that parties adjust their stances to maintain voter support, but case studies have suggested diverging results. Leveraging a novel liberal–illiberal scale based on word embeddings and dictionaries, this study examines how far-right parties’ participation in parliaments and governments affects their own immigration discourse and that of mainstream parties by analyzing the interaction between 67 parties in eight European countries (Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland) over the last 15 years. Our findings show that mainstream parties, especially conservative ones, follow the shifts in the immigration discourse of far-right parties. Furthermore, we find that far-right parties minimally moderate their anti-immigration discourse when entering government and then radicalize again when they leave. The illiberal far-right therefore appears to have the net effect of pulling their country’s party system to the right on immigration. These findings clarify the consequences of illiberal party normalization for party competition, coalition strategies, and democratic stability in European politics.

## Keywords

Europe; far-right parties; illiberal parties; immigration discourse; parliamentary speeches; party competition

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## 1. Introduction

With the increasing vote share of far-right and illiberal parties, these groups have started to participate in governments across Europe. This development not only highlights gaps in political representation and introduces new conflicts within European party systems (Heinisch, 2003; Kriesi, 2014), but also raises significant questions about the resilience of liberal democracy. These parties' participation can undermine fundamental liberal-democratic values, procedures, and institutions (Mudde, 2016). At the same time, their political success can pressure mainstream parties and alter the spatial dynamics of political competition.

Previous research has examined how the entrance of far-right parties into parliament impacts mainstream parties and their political learning processes (Heinze, 2022). Their entrance can pressure mainstream parties to shift their positions or redefine policy priorities, particularly on issues like immigration (van Spanje, 2010; Zaslove, 2004). Scholars have also increasingly focused on the policy impact of illiberal parties in power (Lutz, 2019). However, there is less clarity on how illiberal far-right parties affect party competition and strategic communication once their role becomes normalized, as they cycle between opposition and government. This gap is particularly relevant given the increasing participation of illiberal parties in government and its implications for liberal democracies (Mudde, 2019). These dynamics raise pressing questions for policymakers about the extent to which including illiberal far-right parties in coalitions can undermine democratic principles.

This study addresses this gap by employing an innovative scaling method that measures illiberalism in party discourse using a combination of word embeddings and dictionaries, allowing us to track changes in rhetoric across multiple countries and time periods. We analyze illiberal far-right parties' influence on other parties' rhetoric in parliamentary speeches and investigate whether far-right parties moderate before and after the participation in government. Specifically, we examine the immigration rhetoric of 67 parties in eight European parliamentary countries—Austria, Czechia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Estonia—between 1996 and 2024, when illiberal far-right parties were present in parliament and, in the majority of cases, also spent some time in a government coalition (except in Estonia and Germany). Our analysis reveals three main patterns. First, shifts in far-right parties' immigration discourse are associated with corresponding shifts in mainstream parties, with limited influence observed among niche parties. Second, conservative mainstream parties appear to be the most responsive, aligning more with illiberal positions as far-right discourse becomes more illiberal. Lastly, far-right parties exhibit minimal moderation upon entering government and radicalize when they leave, only partially supporting the inclusion-moderation theory. Overall, illiberal far-right parties appear to have an illiberalizing effect on their country's party system, suggesting that both inclusion and exclusion fail to contain their influence.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2, we review previous research on spatial and issue competition in parliamentary settings, with a particular focus on the far-right. In Section 3, we specify our hypotheses, synthesizing the existing research. In Section 4, we present our methodology, describing our

approach to measuring illiberal positions on immigration using text-as-data. In Section 5, we present the results of our analysis, and in Section 6, we discuss our findings and their implications.

## 2. Party Competition and Illiberal Parties

Over the past decades, illiberal parties' success has reshaped the competitive political landscape. The question of why and how parties change their policy positions has long been a central concern in political science. Political parties, driven by both vote-seeking and office-seeking goals, shape their policy stances in response to spatial and issue competition dynamics. These strategic adjustments are not simply reactions to shifts in public opinion, but rather the result of complex interactions between competing parties on issue ownership and issue salience (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Meguid, 2005). One key factor driving these changes has been the rise of illiberal far-right parties in the last decades. For those actors, political competition is about driving issue salience and forcing parties to take positions around "their" topics such as immigration, thereby contributing to the politicization of their topic (Hutter & Kriesi, 2021; Mudde, 2010). This can push mainstream parties to modify their positions on salient issues.

For conceptual clarity, we should note that while illiberalism can theoretically manifest across the political spectrum, including the left (Enyedi, 2024), in contemporary European party systems illiberal and far-right parties largely overlap empirically insofar as both describe parties that oppose liberal democratic principles, particularly regarding immigration. Therefore, while acknowledging their conceptual distinction, we use the terms illiberal and far-right interchangeably when referring to parties that combine far-right ideology with illiberal practices. These parties' growing electoral success has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of party competition.

According to the median voter theorem, parties tend to converge toward the preferences of the median voter to maximize electoral success (Downs, 1957). However, challenger parties such as illiberal far-right ones disrupt established political dynamics. Their rise prompts mainstream parties to shift right to recapture votes (Meguid, 2005). This contagion effect has been observed across multiple cases, influencing party systems beyond the left-right spectrum (Abou-Chadi, 2016; van Spanje, 2010). Mainstream parties now increasingly mention liberal-authoritarian issues in their manifestos and have moved right on cultural issues (Wagner & Meyer, 2017), as well as on their socio-economic policymaking (Röth et al., 2018). These shifts are often strategic, aimed at maintaining electoral competitiveness and coalition viability (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Schafer, 2021). Broadly understood, when confronted with illiberal far-right parties, mainstream parties tend to either accommodate or distance themselves from these positions to retain voter support (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Kriesi et al., 2008).

While previous literature has often focused on mainstream parties' responses to illiberal far-right parties, less attention has been given to how illiberal parties themselves are affected by mainstream parties. Some evidence suggests that illiberal parties may moderate their positions when seeking coalition participation. However, the moderation thesis remains contested, with mixed results regarding the effects of a *cordon sanitaire* (Akkerman et al., 2016; van Spanje & van der Brug, 2007). Even when illiberal parties enter coalition governments, they tend to maintain extreme policy positions, although their support can decline when they govern alongside the political establishment (Akkerman, 2012; van Spanje, 2011). Despite evidence for the impact of mainstream parties on illiberal far-right parties through, for example, government participation,

the extent and type of effect remains unclear. This gap has important consequences for democratic governance, especially if mainstream parties normalize illiberal parties' rhetoric to maintain power and enter government coalitions.

The rise of illiberal far-right parties and their impact on mainstream parties also presents significant challenges for democratic stability. As mainstream parties shift their positions to counter illiberal challengers, the polarization of political discourse, especially on immigration, can erode democratic norms and consensus politics, intensifying societal divisions. Moreover, mainstream parties' shift in policy positions has resulted in a normalization of illiberal parties' anti-immigration positions (Wagner & Meyer, 2017). Lastly, the accommodation of illiberal parties through coalitions has been shown to negatively affect the quality of democracy by reducing the rights of minorities and eroding the rule of law and separation of powers (Fallend, 2012). Despite those substantial dangers to democratic principles, there is still relatively little systematic, comparative research examining how illiberal parties influence mainstream parties and shift their rhetoric across cases and over time.

This study addresses this gap by bringing together the literature on party competition and coalition formation. Specifically, it explores how illiberal far-right parties' electoral success and government participation influence discourse on immigration policy. It asks how mainstream parties adjust their positions on immigration in response to the rise of illiberal parties and, conversely, how government participation with mainstream parties affects illiberal parties' discourse.

### **3. Strategic Positioning of Mainstream and Far-Right Parties: Accommodation and Moderation**

The electoral success of illiberal far-right parties has altered the competitive landscape. Mainstream parties have responded by adjusting their positions on immigration and multiculturalism. While political competition can take various forms, including position blurring or issue emphasis, parties tend to be strategic: increasing the salience of issues that benefit them. This strategy alters the space of political competition and creates new dimensions of political conflict (Rovny, 2013), aligning with theories of issue ownership and salience theory (Petrocik, 1996). Since the growing success of illiberal far-right parties has made immigration a central issue of political competition, one can observe significant fluctuations in the salience and politicization of the issue (Grande et al., 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2018), which has also affected mainstream parties' stances.

Mainstream parties, though heterogeneous, often respond similarly to shifts in the political landscape by following the agenda set by illiberal far-right parties. They base their responses on the perceived effects on electoral performance and coalition possibilities (Abou-Chadi, 2016), choosing between accommodative or adversarial strategies depending on the electoral threat posed by shifts in spatial competition (Meguid, 2005). In immigration policy, both left and right mainstream parties have increased their anti-immigrant rhetoric and adopted more authoritarian (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020) or pro-welfare positions to attract far-right voters (Krause & Giebler, 2020). This behavior is influenced by parties' incentive to accommodate niche parties that typically focus on a single issue like immigration (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Kriesi et al., 2008; Meguid, 2005).



We expect to observe an accommodative strategy particularly with right-wing and conservative mainstream parties. When far-right parties are electorally successful, mainstream right-wing parties are likely to view government coalitions with them as beneficial, offering both political viability and ideological coherence. As these coalitions become possible due to illiberal parties' electoral gains, mainstream right-wing parties tend to move further to the right on cultural issues to accommodate illiberal parties and therefore emphasize anti-immigration positions (Abou-Chadi, 2016; de Lange, 2012; Wagner & Meyer, 2017). This rightward shift polarizes parties' spatial competition and can force mainstream left-wing parties to either oppose the shift or join the far-right coalition, resulting in a bipolar space (de Lange, 2012). By adopting more anti-immigration positions, mainstream parties can extend their time in power.

Overall, mainstream parties react to illiberal parties and shift their positions and issue emphasis based on changes to spatial competition, following challenger parties' positions. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1a: When far-right parties adopt more (or less) illiberal anti-immigrant rhetoric in parliament, mainstream parties will similarly adopt more (or less) illiberal, anti-immigrant rhetoric.

H1b: This effect will be stronger for conservative mainstream parties compared to non-conservative ones.

However, electoral success or loss is not the only factor driving shifts in party rhetoric. Changes in parliamentary power dynamics, particularly parties entering and exiting government, also matter. The shift from opposition to government and vice versa reshapes how parties present themselves. The task of an opposition party is to criticize the government and provide alternative proposals (Helms, 2008), presenting themselves as the main competitor to the majority government position. Far-right parties in opposition tend to adopt extreme positions to distinguish themselves (van Spanje & van der Brug, 2007). However, when their status changes—such as by entering parliament or government—their incentives to maintain combative rhetoric shift accordingly.

For successful illiberal far-right parties in opposition, the possibility of joining government coalitions creates new strategic pressures. Mainstream parties considering coalition bargaining and policymaking implications might be cautious of coalition partners with extreme policy positions. They can therefore demand moderation on specific issues like immigration as a condition for coalition formation. And, at the same time, the inclusion-moderation thesis suggests that illiberal far-right parties will moderate their rhetoric upon entering government to align with the median voter (Berman, 2008; Downs, 1957). Therefore, coalition-influenced moderation has involved announcing policy compromises and shedding populist rhetoric (Heinisch, 2003). This applies both to governance and electoral campaigns, where parties signal their willingness to cooperate.

Illiberal far-right parties employ various strategies when seeking office. For them, policy moderation typically means aligning positions with potential coalition partners, usually mainstream right-wing parties (de Lange, 2012). However, this compromise often focuses on socio-economic issues rather than topics like immigration where far-right parties maintain ownership (Afonso, 2015). Through this logrolling strategy, illiberal parties do not need to make concessions on owned issues, while mainstream parties gain support for their socio-economic agenda (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). In some cases, illiberal parties can even retain

their extreme positions despite government participation (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010). Lastly, illiberal right-wing parties in government might revert to their extreme positions and attempt to go against their coalition partner when policy compromise becomes too costly. This can jeopardize government participation and result in a coalition implosion (Afonso, 2015).

Overall, evidence of moderation is mixed and country-dependent (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016). Far-right parties that moderate their positions during campaigns or in government can later face electoral punishment (Martin & Vanberg, 2011). The Austrian FPÖ illustrates these risks: They had to reverse their opposition to the European Union and unambiguously condemn Nazism before entering a coalition with the ÖVP in 2000. This moderation, combined with the FPÖ's subordinate role in government policy-making, led to a weakened electoral support and internal party member dissatisfaction, ultimately resulting in the breakdown of the coalition (Fallend, 2012). The costs of moderation extend beyond the coalition: After leaving government in 2002, internal tensions split the FPÖ, leading to the creation of the BZÖ (Taggart & Szczesniak, 2013).

Despite these risks, illiberal far-right parties rarely decline opportunities to join government coalitions (Akkerman et al., 2016). Even parties like the FPÖ have accepted disadvantageous coalition agreements and reentered government after coalition breakdown, despite continuing electoral losses (Fallend, 2012). Other parties, like Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), have similarly moderated positions—in their case, softening Eurosceptic positions (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016). Considering these context-dependent patterns in parliamentary systems, we propose a second pair of hypotheses:

H2a: After joining government, far-right parties will moderate their anti-immigration discourse.

H2b: Far-right parties will become more illiberal upon becoming part of the opposition.

## 4. Research Design

### 4.1. Case Selection

This study focuses on eight very different European parliamentary countries: Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. We chose these countries because they have parliamentary systems with coalition governments due to their proportional electoral systems, except for Hungary, which has been dominated by Fidesz since 2010. Importantly for testing our hypotheses, these countries, during the period covered, have seen a far-right party either in parliament or join and/or leave government as presented in Table 1. Moreover, these countries vary in their size, geography, demographics, ideological cleavages, and age of their democracies. The historical relevance of the far-right also varies across these eight cases. In Italy and Austria, far-right parties have been influential in parliamentary politics since the early post-World War II period and also participated in government. In contrast, far-right parties gained parliamentary representation more recently in countries like Finland, Czechia, Hungary, and Poland. Similarly, in Germany and Estonia such parties only emerged in parliament following the refugee “crisis,” with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) entering parliament for the first time in 2017 (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019; Ruzza, 2018; Widfeldt, 2018; Wondreys, 2021). A detailed overview can be seen in Table 1.

Substantively, the cases vary considerably regarding policies related to immigration. While Finland, for example, continues to have the most inclusive integration policies over the years, Poland and Hungary remain more restrictive than the European average. Immigration policy also differs across countries both in substance and over time (Schultz et al., 2021; Solano & De Coninck, 2023). Similarly, European far-right parties are not homogeneous in their expressions related to immigration (Mudde, 2016). We can see a more exclusionary European-centric discourse after the 2015 refugee “crisis” and/or a shift to an ethno-religious discourse, or parties such as the Movement for Better Hungary (Jobbik) adopting more Islamophobic rhetoric (Moutselos, 2023; Mudde, 2016).

Yet, immigration is a salient policy issue in each country included in this study. Given that these cases show variation in many dimensions relevant for explaining party behavior, studying these cases provides a most-different systems design, enhancing the external validity of our findings (Rohlfing, 2012). We therefore use the policy debate around immigration to test our hypotheses about the impact of illiberal parties on their country’s party system. We define far-right parties based on the classification by Mudde (2007), which includes anti-immigration as a central issue to their policy program as an indicator. Additionally, we emphasize the illiberal element of such parties which can be placed on a spectrum from illiberal democratic to anti-democratic positions (Pirro, 2023), as well as parties’ efforts “aimed at power concentration, partisan state, and closed society” (Enyedi, 2024, p. 5).

## 4.2. Data

For parliamentary speech data, we rely on various established datasets, including ParlaMint (Kuzman et al., 2023), ParIEE (Sylvester et al., 2022), and ParlSpeech (Rauh & Schwalbach, 2020). For Germany, we further supplement our dataset with the SpeakGer dataset (Lange & Jentsch, 2024). These datasets collect official recordings of parliamentary debates and contain text for a total of 869,080 speeches given by all major parties in Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland (see Table 1). Such speeches are representative of salient policy debates as well as the positions parties hold on issues such as

**Table 1.** Overview of data.

Country	Time Period	Number of Documents
Austria	1996–2022	102,862
Czechia	2013–2023	86,078
Estonia	2011–2022	95,184
Finland	2012–2024	211,292
Germany	2010–2023	130,576
Hungary	2014–2023	52,498
Italy	2013–2022	93,162
Poland	2015–2022	97,428
<b>8 Countries</b>		<b>869,080 Documents</b>

Note: Illiberal right-wing parties are in italics.

immigration, social policy, or education. The datasets cover over a decade in each country—enough time to observe shifts in the positions of mainstream and far-right parties before they form coalitions, during their time in government together, and after they break up or lose elections. Lastly, it should be noted that the Czech party ANO does not neatly fit into the category of far-right parties, as its classification remains contested in both academic literature and expert surveys. However, its shift toward illiberalism since 2014 makes it nonetheless fitting for our purpose. The party has increasingly implemented illiberal policies and adopted Eurosceptic and conservative positions, creating tensions within its former affiliation with the liberal ALDE group in the European Parliament. This ultimately led to the founding of Patriots for Europe together with other illiberal far-right parties such as Fidesz and FPÖ (Havlík & Hloušek, 2021; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2022; Murphy, 2024).

### ***4.3. Scaling Liberal–Illiberal Positions on Immigration***

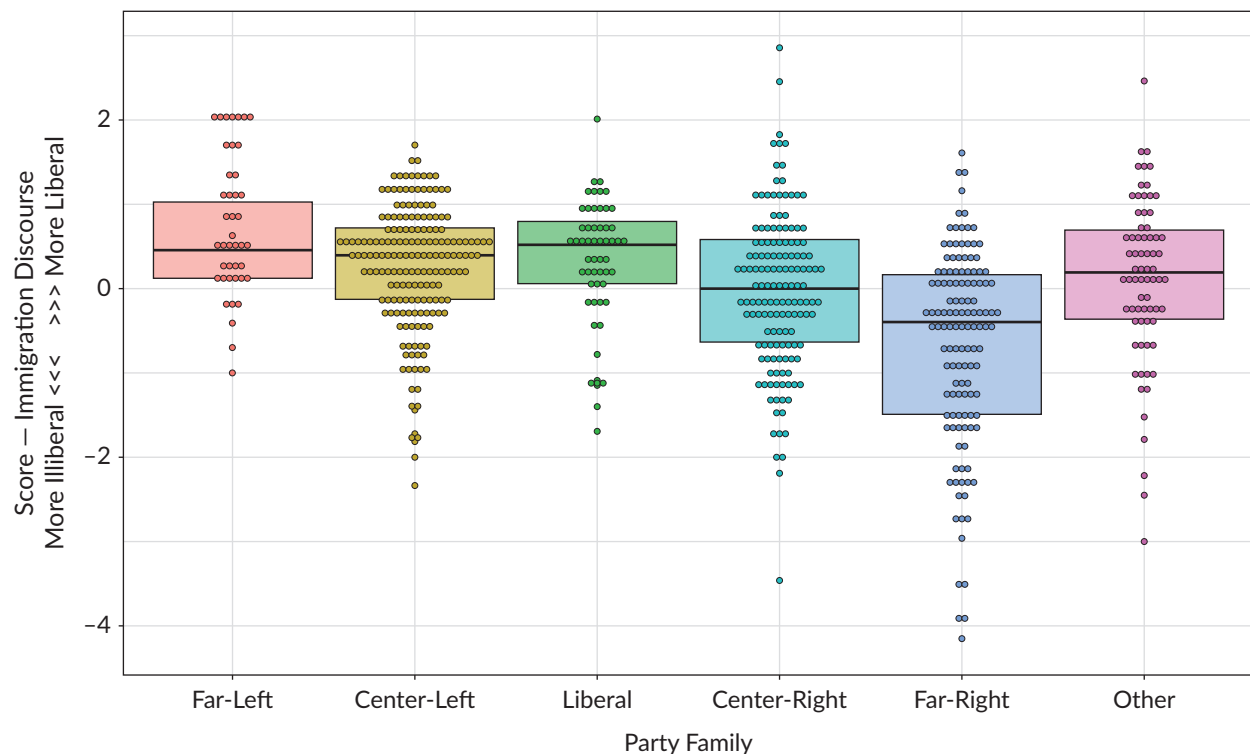
Following Schafer et al. (2025), we use text analysis of these parliamentary speeches to measure the debates over immigration on a liberal–illiberal scale. To this end, we start by creating a dictionary that defines the debate around immigration policy, which includes “immigration,” “border,” “asylum,” “migrant,” and “migration.” These terms are likely to appear primarily in debates about immigration—and not other contexts—and as a group encompass key aspects of the debate, from border security to the treatment of migrants once they are in the country.

We pair these immigration terms with liberal and illiberal dictionaries. Dictionaries for liberalism and illiberalism were initially derived from terms validated by Maerz and Schneider (2020) and Schafer (2024). Illiberal terms are indicative of discourse referring to intolerant, anti-pluralist, anti-minority language, for example, “invasion,” “threat,” “abuse,” or “illegal.” Such words—when co-occurring with immigration terms—generally have the intended effect of framing refugees and immigrants as a threat, as undeserving, or as Other, while prioritizing the dominant in-group (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material; van Dijk, 1993).

The language of parties in parliament is modeled using a word-embeddings approach. Word embeddings offer an unsupervised method for modeling language grounded in Wittgenstein’s (1973) use theory of meaning. This method leverages the distributional hypothesis of language, which proposes that we can know the meaning of a word by “the company it keeps” (Firth, 1957, p. 11).

Word embeddings encode the similarity between words based on the frequency of their co-occurrence in usage. They have been shown to successfully capture ideology in parliamentary corpora (Rheault & Cochrane, 2020). And, crucially, word embeddings are sensitive to changes in word usage over time (Rodman, 2020). For example, while the word “immigration” will likely always refer to the same topic, it might be embedded in the language of a dramatically different ideological valence, depending on the speaker and the time.

We used the text2vec GloVe algorithm (Selivanov et al., 2022) to train the word-embedding models. The training data are the collections of parliamentary speeches. We train separate models for each party in each country based on speeches given by members of that party in parliament. Further, to measure change over time, we break up the data by year and train a separate model for each year that each party was in parliament. We therefore train a total of 638 models, representing party-years, which is our unit of analysis.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of country-year scores on the illiberal-liberal scale by party family.

The corpora normally used to train word embeddings are extremely large, containing billions of words. Our corpora are relatively smaller. We, therefore, use a bootstrapping method shown by Rodman (2020) to stabilize model outputs and make analysis less vulnerable to bias produced by single documents. We then looked at the semantic similarity—measured by the cosine similarity in the vectorized word-embedding space—between the sets of words in our dictionaries. The cosine similarity between the liberal and illiberal dictionaries and each immigration term represents the degree to which immigration is defined by a liberal or illiberal discourse. We took the difference between the average cosine similarity of the liberal and illiberal dictionaries with the immigration-related terms to produce a single score for each policy area. The final liberalism-illiberalism scale has been validated through checks with an established measure of party positions on policy issues, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Jolly et al., 2022), and shows a statistically significant correlation between the two measures, which can be found in Figure A1 in the Supplementary Material.

The distribution of the country-year scores for parties' positions on immigration accords with our intuition based on party families. Figure 1 groups the country-year scores for all parties in this study so the distribution by party family can be easily compared. The y-axis reflects the liberal-illiberal scale. Positive scores are more liberal, and negative scores are more illiberal. The Far-Left category includes parties coded as radical left by CHES. Center-Left includes social democrats and greens. Center-Right includes conservative parties and Christian Democrats. Far-Right is drawn from parties coded by CHES as radical right. The Other category includes agrarian and regionalist parties. The scores used for this analysis consist of 615 country-year observations for 67 unique parties from 8 countries between 1996 and 2024.

On average, radical left and liberal parties are the most liberal on immigration. Unsurprisingly, the radical right is the most illiberal. Still, we can see considerable variation within party families. This suggests considerable

within- and between-country variation as well as considerable within-party variation over time. Using this data, we can test whether far-right parties do indeed have a radicalizing effect on immigration discourse at the party-system level. We can also test whether they moderate that position over time as they enter government and radicalize when they leave.

#### 4.4. Assessing the Effect of Far-Right Anti-Immigration Discourse: A Fixed Effects Approach

We use three sets of regressions to test the hypotheses outlined in Section 3. To examine H1a and H1b regarding the impact of increased anti-immigration discourse by far-right parties on that of mainstream parties, we run a series of models using a sample of non-far-right parties in Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. In these models, the dependent variable is the average (il)liberality of a party's immigration rhetoric in a given year, based on our word-embedding approach.

To test H1a, we include a model with an interaction term between mainstream–niche party status and the average shift in anti-immigration rhetoric of far-right parties in a party's country's parliament compared to the previous year. We calculate the average shift of far-right immigration rhetoric by averaging the change in the levels of (il)liberalism of all far-right parties in a country's parliament from  $t - 1$  to  $t$ . We identify the far-right parties using the CHES party family indicator (Jolly et al., 2022) as well as expert opinion in case of shifts that have not been captured or assigned yet. We present the parties coded as illiberal far-right with italics in Table 1. The independent variable indicates whether a party is mainstream or niche according to the party's vote share in the last national election. We understand mainstream parties as those parties that represent large constituencies and are consequently constrained by median voters (Ezrow et al., 2011). Accordingly, we code a party as mainstream if it has gained more than 15% of votes in the last election; otherwise, we code it as a niche party. In this model, we also add country-fixed effects to account for time-invariant country-specific factors that may shape the party system (such as institutional arrangements or socio-cultural values). Additionally, we include year-fixed effects to account for time-variant effects, which could include exogenous shocks on the political system such as increasing levels of immigration or the 2015 Syrian refugee “crisis” on party-system level attitudes on immigration. This is particularly relevant as it has increased the politicization of immigration and potentially has formed a new political cleavage (Grande et al., 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). With the specification described, we estimate the following model where  $i$  is the country,  $t$  is the year of observation, and  $\text{FarRightShift}_{it}$  refers to the average shift of far-right parties in a country-year combination:

$$\begin{aligned}
 (\text{il})\text{liberality}_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{liberality}_{i(t-1)} + \beta_2 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)} \times \text{Mainstream}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{FarRightShift}_{i(t-1)} + \beta_4 \text{Mainstream}_{it} \\
 & + \sum_{c=1}^C \alpha_{c\text{Country}_c} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it}
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

To test H1b, we include a model where we further distinguish between mainstream conservative, mainstream non-conservative, niche conservative, and niche non-conservative parties. This distinction aims to test if the magnitude of the effect of the far-right shift is indeed different for mainstream conservative parties compared to mainstream non-conservative parties. We again utilize the CHES party family indicator to code this variable. We code a party as mainstream conservative if it belongs to the Christian Democratic or Conservative party family and received more than 15% of the votes in the last elections. We code the party as non-conservative mainstream if it received more than 15% of the votes in the last elections but does not belong to the Conservative or Christian Democratic Party family. Other than distinguishing between conservative/non-conservative niche and mainstream parties, the model includes the same

specifications as the model that tests H1a. Specifically, we estimate the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned}
 (II)liberality_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 liberality_{i(t-1)} + \beta_2 FarRightShift_{i(t-1)ConservMain}_{it} + \beta_3 FarRightShift_{i(t-1)NonConservMain}_{it} \\
 & + \beta_4 FarRightShift_{i(t-1)ConservNiche}_{it} + \beta_5 FarRightShift_{i(t-1)NonConservNiche}_{it} + \sum_{c=1}^C \alpha_c Country_c \\
 & + \beta_6 Pre2015_{it} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it}
 \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Finally, to test H2a and H2b, we specify a single model that includes observations of parties that just entered or just exited the government. The dependent variable of this model is change in the illiberality of immigration discourse of a party from the previous year ( $t - 1$  to  $t$ ). The main independent variables in this model describe the interaction between whether the party is far-right or not, as well as the change in the party's government status. We classify change in government participation status as a two-categorical variable. If the party is in government in the year observed but has been in opposition for the previous two years ( $t - 1$  and  $t - 2$ ), we code its status as "entered government." If the party is currently in opposition but has been in government for the previous two years, we code its status as "entered opposition." Consequently, we exclude observations where a party has not been either in opposition or government consecutively for more than two years. By utilizing this approach, we model the effects of changes in government participation status dynamically. This model also includes country-fixed effects. Because the dependent variable is differenced (measuring change from one year to the next) it already accounts for linear time trends and therefore we do not include year-fixed effects. Instead, we add a before-and-after-2015 dummy variable. This dummy controls for the shock of the shift in attitudes after 2015 as a reaction to an increased level of migration from Syria and the Middle East. This model corresponds to the following equation where  $\Delta$  denotes change from the previous year:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \Delta(II)liberality_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 FarRight_{it} \times GovChange_{it} + \beta_2 GovChange_{it} + \beta_3 FarRight_{it} \\
 & + \sum_{c=1}^C \alpha_c Country_c + \beta_4 Pre2015_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}
 \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

## 5. Results: Conservative Mainstream Parties Follow the Far-Right

All of the hypotheses outlined in Section 3 involve interaction terms. For this reason, we present the marginal effect estimates of each of the three hypotheses visually, instead of presenting the regression coefficients, which are not directly interpretable (Brambor et al., 2006). The respective regression models can be found in Table A3 in the Supplementary Material.

Figure 2 illustrates the variation in far-right discourse and its relationship with mainstream and niche parties, addressing H1a. The horizontal axis represents the position that far-right parties take on, where negative values indicate a more illiberal immigration discourse. The vertical axis represents the immigration discourse of non-far-right parties, with lower or negative values indicating more illiberal discourse. The red line shows trends for mainstream parties, while the blue line represents niche parties, displayed along with their confidence intervals.

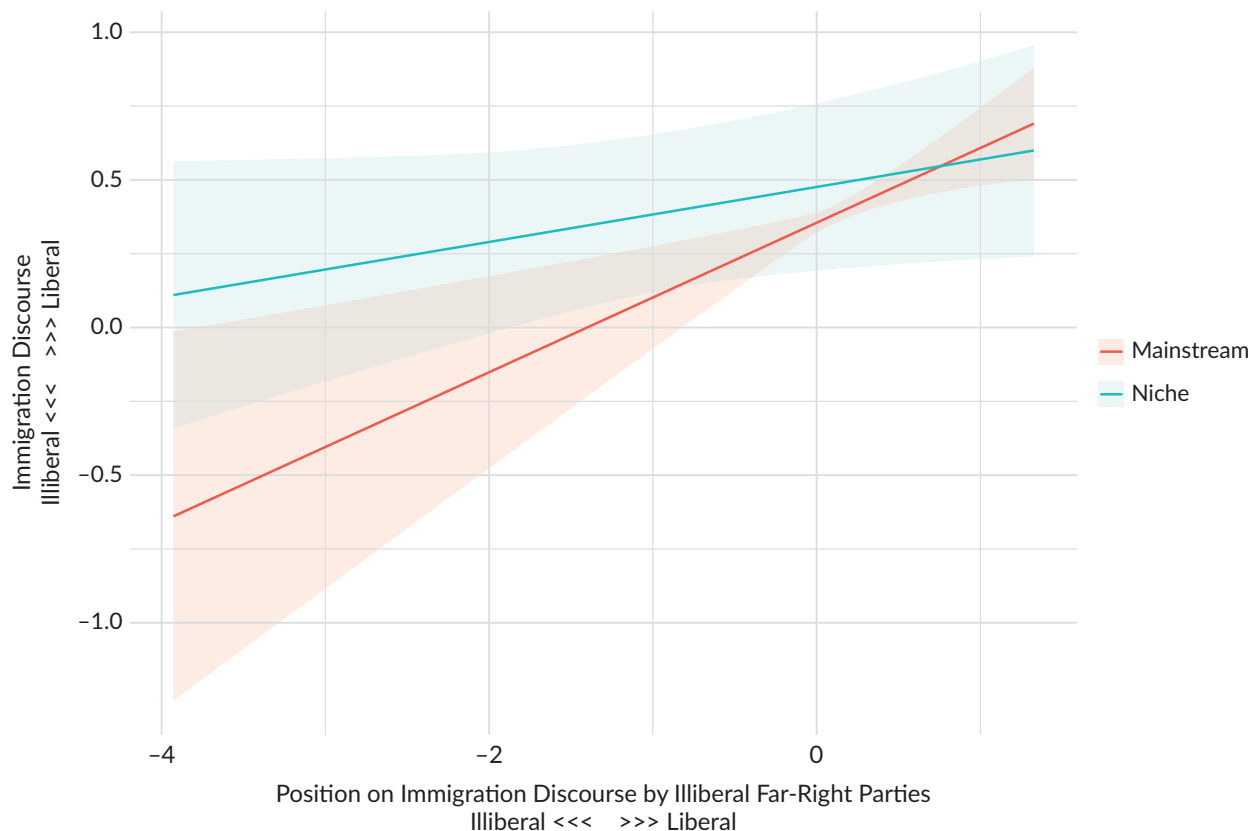
Figure 2 suggests that shifts in far-right parties' immigration discourse is associated with that of mainstream parties. Specifically, a one-unit shift by far-right parties toward a more illiberal stance correlates with a 0.25 increase in the illiberality of mainstream parties' discourse and this association is statistically significant at



the 95% confidence level. In contrast, the correlation of shifts in far-right parties' discourse with niche parties is 0.09, nearly three times less than that between mainstream parties and far-right parties. Furthermore, the association between shifts in discourses of far-right and niche parties, while positive, is not statistically distinguishable from zero. However, the two associations are also not statistically distinguishable from each other despite the substantive differences in their magnitude.

Overall, the evidence from the first regression model and Figure 2 suggests tentative support for H1a but is inconclusive. Further, as we demonstrate in Figure A2 (see Supplementary Material), these findings remain consistent if we focus on the immigration discourse of far-right parties using pooled OLS models as well as first-differenced models that take as the independent and dependent variables the change in parties' discourse from  $t - 1$  to  $t$ . We follow up this initial evidence in support of H1a with the next regression that breaks up mainstream parties by whether they are conservative.

In Figure 3, we test the argument of H1b. Using marginal effects, we show the association between the far-right and mainstream parties but further distinguish between conservative and non-conservative (denoted as "Other" in the Figure). Figure 3 suggests that shifts in the immigration discourse of far-right parties toward (il)liberalism push mainstream conservative parties to become, on average, more (il)liberal. Specifically, a one-unit increase (or decrease) in the illiberality of far-right parties' immigration discourse is associated with a 0.39 unit change in the position of mainstream conservative parties, and this association is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. In contrast, shifts in far-right parties' discourse on

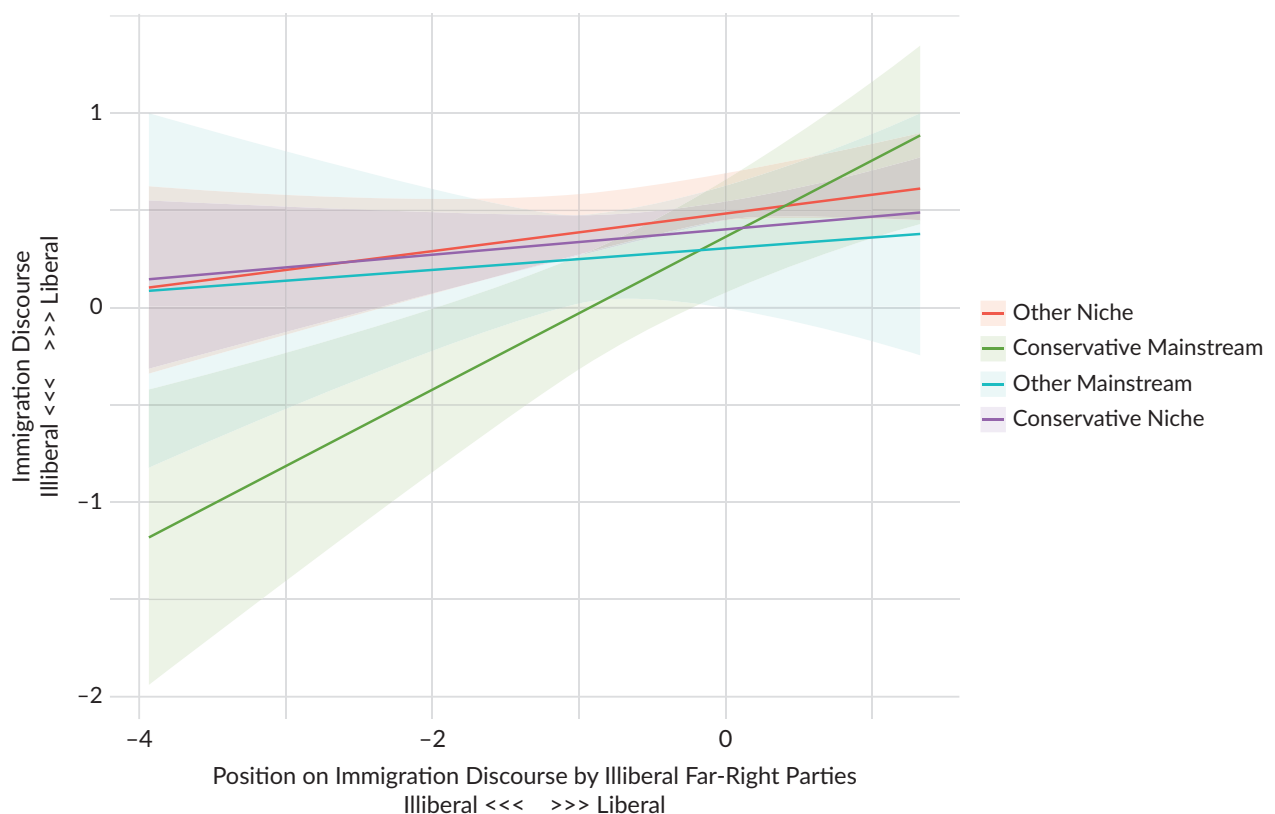


**Figure 2.** Marginal effects of average shift in immigration discourse by illiberal far-right parties on mainstream and niche parties' immigration discourse.

immigration do not show a significant relationship to the immigration discourse of other mainstream or conservative niche parties. Shifts among other niche, mainstream, or conservative niche parties do not appear to be a reaction to the anti-immigration rhetoric of the far-right. Using hypothesis testing (Arel-Bundock et al., in press), we can also see that the estimated effect of far-right parties' rhetoric on conservative mainstream parties is significantly higher than the far-right's estimated effect on other party categories at the 90% confidence level.

The far-right might have a small, party-system-wide effect on illiberal discourse around immigration. Figure 3 shows that the far-right's immigration discourse appears to have a small, positive, and nearly identical relationship with other mainstream, conservative niche, and other niche parties. However, this relationship does not meet the standard measures of statistical significance. The evidence therefore supports both H1a and H1b, but with some qualifications. The far-right appears to have a slight radicalizing effect on all political parties, which aligns with Kriesi et al.'s (2008) observations of far-right parties' role in spatial competition across party families. However, the radicalizing influence of the far-right is strong and statistically significant most consistently when it comes to pushing conservative parties in an illiberal direction (see further tests of this relationship in Figure A4 in the Supplementary Material). These findings extend previous research findings that accommodation of illiberal parties can not only be observed in conservative parties' manifestos (Wagner & Meyer, 2017) but also in their discursive practice.

Turning to the second set of hypotheses H2a and H2b, we test the effect of entering and exiting

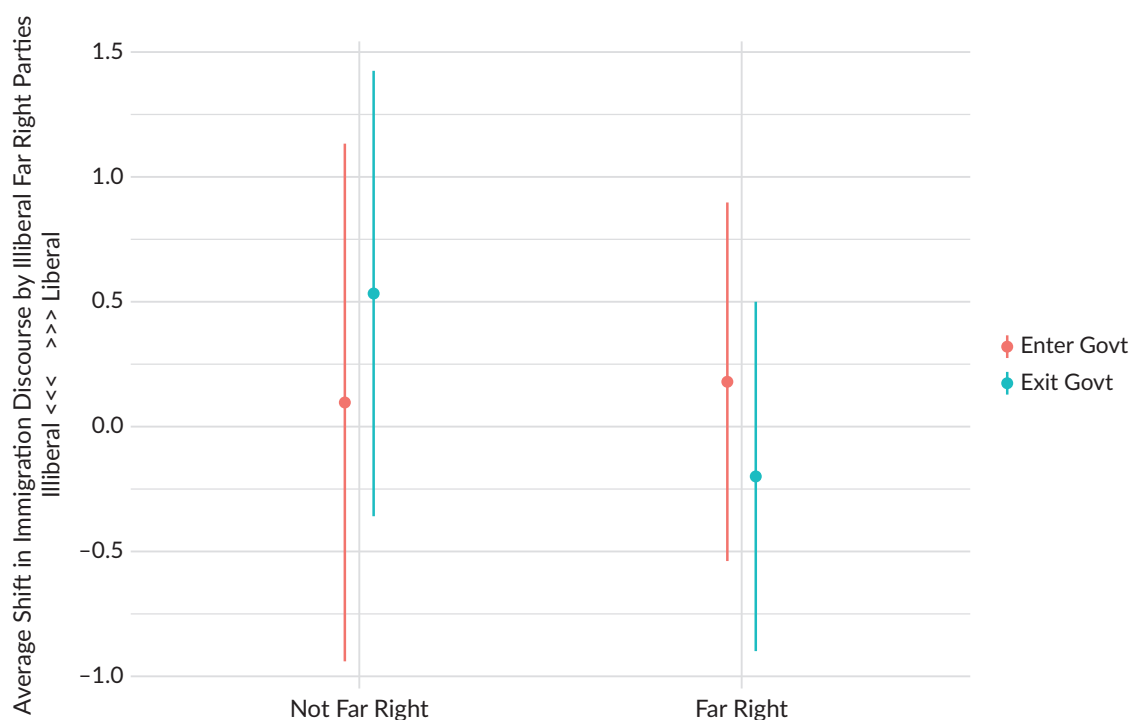


**Figure 3.** Marginal effects of average shift in immigration discourse by illiberal far-right parties on mainstream and niche parties' immigration discourse, with distinction between conservative and non-conservative parties.

government. Figure 4 displays the average predicted shift in the liberal–illiberal position of far-right and non-far-right parties. The estimates for illiberal far-right parties are shown on the right, while those for non-far-right parties are shown on the left. Red dots indicate the estimates immediately after parties enter government, and blue dots represent the estimates immediately after they exit.

Figure 4 provides evidence in support of H2a and H2b. It shows that, for far-right parties, the relationship between entering and exiting government and illiberal discourse on immigration follows the expected direction. However, the relationship reverses for non-far-right parties. When far-right parties enter government, their position on immigration becomes more liberal, while exiting has the opposite effect, resulting in more illiberal positions. Conversely, non-far-right parties show a tendency toward a less liberal immigration discourse upon entering government, whereas they shift toward a more liberal discourse when joining the opposition. When both entering and exiting government, they appear to maintain a liberal immigration discourse, contrary to far-right parties. The difference in the effect of exiting government between far-right and non-far-right parties is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

In other words, far-right parties entering government are, on average, more likely to moderate. And, when they leave, they are more likely to radicalize. However, there is considerable variation of these effects of entering and exiting government. Far-right parties are not homogeneous, which can be an artifact of coalition size, being a junior coalition partner, or party strategy. They have incentives for both liberal or illiberal communication strategies and might be punished for either approach as well. The moderating effect of entering government is clearest when comparing the far-right with parties that are not far-right. For parties not on the far-right, there is no clear effect of entering or exiting government—and there might even be a small illiberal effect of entering government. For the far-right, there is a clear divergence: The point estimates show a positive liberal effect of entering government, and an illiberal effect of exiting government. While previous literature has emphasized



**Figure 4.** Marginal effects of entering and exiting government on immigration discourse.

the country differences of immigration discourse (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016), we find a moderation effect of entering government on parliamentary speeches even after controlling for country-specific variation.

## 6. Discussion: The Far-Right's Overall Anti-Immigration Effect and the Failure of Accommodation

On average, far-right parties consistently express more anti-immigrant positions than the rest of the parties in the political system. While our analysis shows they may moderate somewhat when entering government, this moderation is limited and temporary. Our findings therefore suggest a more complex interpretation of moderation, contradicting work by van Spanje and van der Brug (2007)—far-right parties in government adapt their rhetoric without fully abandoning core anti-immigrant positions, and their expressed moderation often reverses upon returning to opposition. Most importantly, even as far-right parties temporarily moderate in government, they simultaneously pull mainstream conservative parties toward more illiberal positions. Therefore, their net effect on the political system is to make discourse on immigration more hostile overall. We thus build on Akkerman and Rooduijn's (2015) finding that neither inclusion nor exclusion strategies effectively moderate radical right party positions, by showing that inclusion of far-right parties in government does not lead to lasting moderation of their positions and likely has a deleterious influence on the broader discourse around immigration.

This has important implications for how to approach far-right parties within parliament and beyond. Parties that support accommodation strategies—such as granting government access—often justify this approach by arguing it will moderate far-right positions and reduce their electoral appeal. However, our findings suggest these strategies rest on flawed assumptions. The moderation we observe is temporary and likely superficial, while the far-right's influence on immigration discourse is pervasive. Paradoxically, research shows that when far-right parties enter government, they may not even produce more restrictive policies than center-right governments would on their own (Akkerman, 2012; Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). Rather, the far-right's most substantial impact appears to come through their influence on mainstream conservative parties, who adopt more restrictive positions regardless of whether the far-right is in government or opposition. This suggests that accommodation strategies fail to contain the far-right's influence while potentially legitimizing them through participation in government.

These results also highlight the dynamic interplay between issue ownership, salience, and strategic positioning. The observed shifts by mainstream conservative parties reinforce the notion of accommodation as a central strategy in electoral competition (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2017). The German case is illustrative. The entry of the far-right AfD into parliament not only significantly expanded the political space for party competition but also resulted in mainstream parties moving to the right. This case also exemplifies our findings on party family differences: While center-left parties like the SPD barely changed their positions or even moved further to the left on immigration, conservative mainstream parties such as the German CDU shifted rightward in various state parliaments (Atzpodien, 2022). Notably, this rightward shift occurred even as German federal parties, like the CDU, officially excluded the possibility of cooperation with the AfD—a stance they reaffirmed in 2018. However, this formal barrier has shown signs of erosion in state-level parliaments and in 2025 also on the national level (Thurau, 2025). Instances such as the election of an FDP politician with AfD support in Thuringia in 2020 and increasing cooperation on parliamentary motions illustrate the weakening resolve of mainstream center parties (Decker et al., 2023). The German

case thus illustrates a broader pattern supported by our findings: Whether through formal cooperation or despite official exclusion, far-right parties succeed in pulling mainstream conservative parties toward more illiberal positions on immigration, suggesting that accommodation strategies not only fail to moderate the far-right, but may accelerate the rightward shift of immigration discourse and policy.

## 7. Conclusion

This study provides a novel approach to measuring immigration discourse in parliamentary settings using an illiberalism–liberalism scale based on word embeddings and dictionaries. It addresses pressing questions regarding how far-right participation in parliaments and governments affects both their own rhetoric and that of mainstream parties by focusing on spatial competition. Responding to existing literature, we specifically focus on two issues: one, the potential influence of far-right parties' anti-immigration discourses on conservative mainstream parties, and, two, the moderating effect that entering or exiting government has on far-right parties' rhetoric. By combining various existing datasets on parliamentary speeches, we can analyze the party systems of eight countries between 1996 and 2024. These countries have seen a far-right party join parliament or transition in/out of government in the time covered by this analysis and there is considerable variation in the historical relevance of the far-right. These findings therefore travel well across diverse party systems.

We find that far-right parties' illiberal discourse on immigration leads to an increase in the illiberalism of conservative parties on immigration, supporting both H1a and H1b. However, while our initial accommodation hypothesis regarding all mainstream parties—that they will adopt more illiberal immigration discourse after a similar shift by far-right parties—is statistically significant, this significance disappears after accounting for conservative mainstream parties in H1b. Conservative mainstream parties—not all mainstream parties—respond by accommodating the position of far-right parties on immigration. This emphasizes the dynamic aspect of party competition, in which parties react to discursive shifts of ideologically proximate parties.

Our results provide contradictory evidence regarding the inclusion-moderation theory. On the one hand, far-right parties do indeed moderate their illiberal immigration discourse when entering government. Further research could address whether moderation is driven by conditions imposed by the coalition partner, such as with the FPÖ in 2000 (Fallend, 2012). Or possibly, moderation could result from being in power and therefore being responsible for policy decisions—rather than playing the opposition's role as a government critic (Helms, 2008). On the other hand, three factors counteract the tempering effect of entering government. One, there is high variation within illiberal far-right parties. Two, they illiberalize again when returning to the opposition, and three, they appear to have an overall illiberalizing effect on the party system. Therefore, on net, far-right parties appear to have an illiberal effect despite the potential for moderation.

Lastly, it is important to note that we have focused on parliamentary speeches in this study. Parties strategically communicate in different arenas of political competition and their discourse might not reflect their actions or communication in other mediums such as party manifestos. For instance, our results partially contradict previous research that analyzed press releases and found an increase in salience but no changes in positions after the 2015 refugee crisis (Gessler & Hunger, 2022). While parliamentary speeches are indicative of parties' positions on salient policy debates, it would be worthwhile to extend this study to other

contexts such as party conventions or social media. This would be particularly interesting in the context of tailored communication strategies.

Our findings highlight the evolving dynamics of party competition and far-right influence. While institutional constraints and coalition responsibilities may produce temporary moderation of far-right parties in government, this effect is ultimately overshadowed by their broader, illiberal impact on party systems. Our analysis of parliamentary discourse shows that mainstream conservative parties follow the far-right's more restrictive positions on immigration regardless of whether the latter is in or out of government. These findings demonstrate not just the failure of accommodation as both an electoral strategy and containment mechanism but also suggest that conventional approaches to managing far-right parties may miss these parties' most significant impact. Through their influence on parliamentary debate and policy positions, far-right parties shape the supply of elite discourse in ways that normalize illiberal, exclusionary positions—an effect that neither exclusion nor inclusion strategies effectively address.

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## Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University), Petra Guasti (Charles University), and Bálint Mikola (CEU Democracy Institute).

## Data Availability

Data associated with this study can be found in the following datasets: ParlaMint (Kuzman et al., 2023), ParLEE (Sylvester et al., 2022), ParlSpeech (Rauh & Schwalbach, 2020), and SpeakGer (Lange & Jentsch, 2024).

## Supplementary Material

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

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## About the Authors



**Franziska Wagner** is a PhD candidate at the Central European University in Vienna, Austria. She has also worked at the CEU Democracy Institute in Budapest, Hungary, for the Horizon project Neo-Authoritarianism in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response (AUTHLIB). Her current interests include far-right politics, political communication, social media, and computational social sciences. Her research has been published in *Frontiers of Political Science* and *East European Politics*.



**Dean Schafer** is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Mississippi State University and was a post-doctoral researcher at the CEU Democracy Institute. His research interests include democracy & authoritarianism, political parties, political economy, and the Middle East, with a focus on Turkey. He uses data science methods (including text and network analysis) to measure elite attitudes and shifts in their coalitions over time. His work has been published in *Party Politics*, *South European Society and Politics*, and *Nationalities Papers*, as well as public-facing outlets including *The Democracy Paradox* and *Foreign Policy in Focus*.



**Mehmet Yavuz** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Salzburg, Austria. He completed his PhD in political science at the Central European University (2024) in Vienna, Austria. His research interests include the politics of trade, quantitative text analysis, causal inference, and authoritarian regimes. In 2024, he was the co-recipient of the Elinor Ostrom Prize awarded by the Italian Political Science Association.



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