

(Micro)Identities in Flux: The Interplay of Polarization and Fragmentation in Polish and European Politics

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Abstract

This conceptual article interrogates the role of identity politics—amplified by political elites and magnified through social media—in destabilizing the foundations of liberal democracy by deepening ideological, social, and cultural divisions. It critically examines the dynamics of micro-identity formation, exploring their paradoxical capacity to either intensify polarization, erode democratic norms, and foster social fragmentation, or, conversely, to reinforce democratic norms. Through a case study of micro-narratives, such as the discourse surrounding the term “TERF” (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), the article highlights how the politicization of identity can fuel polarization and entrench societal fault lines. Equally, drawing on analyses of parliamentary elections in Poland, it illustrates how strategic integration of micro-identities into coalition-building efforts can yield positive outcomes, ultimately bolstering the democratic process. The article contends that safeguarding democratic norms necessitates the crafting of inclusive narratives that acknowledge micro-identities, uphold cultural and ideological pluralism, and reaffirm the core democratic principle of minority rights protection. In this context, particular attention is given to Polish PM Donald Tusk’s post-2023 election discourse as an exemplar of an integrative narrative strategy.

Keywords

democratic norms; (de)polarization; European politics; micro-identities; Poland

1. Introduction

In liberal democracies, ideological diversity is not merely inevitable but foundational. Disagreements over economic policy, human rights, and the role of the state are intrinsic to the political process, with consensus-building serving as a pivotal mechanism in decision-making (e.g., Lipset, 1959). Unlike alternative democratic models—such as India’s “majoritarian democracy” or the illiberal model espoused by Viktor Orbán in Hungary—liberal democracy is anchored in a core set of normative principles, including respect for democratic institutions, the peaceful transfer of power, civic engagement, freedom of expression and pluralism, the rule of law, and most crucially, mutual tolerance (Meyer, 2020). These democratic norms extend beyond the protection of individual civil liberties; they ensure legal protections for the free functioning of minorities, including religious, ethnic, and LGBTQ+ communities, as organized groups (Kołakowski, 2014; Safran, 2019). To maintain these norms, liberal democracies depend on independent judiciaries and strong civil institutions, which function as critical bulwarks against majoritarian encroachment, safeguarding the rights and participation of marginalized groups (Hilbink, 2012).

However, polarization—whether political, institutional, or affective—poses a profound challenge to these democratic principles, especially the protection of minority rights (Carothers & O’Donohue, 2019; Fukuyama, 2018). Much of this polarization can be traced back to processes of identity formation and the strategic exploitation of these identities by political elites through the use of social media (Baumer & Gold, 2015). Specifically, by targeting certain voter groups with tailored messages that align with their group’s expectations, values, and norms, political actors tap into the strong sense of belonging individuals derive from their affiliations, often reinforcing normative pressures to conform (e.g., Bicchieri, 2005; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Research has demonstrated that while such tactics can be highly effective in mobilizing support, they also may deepen societal divisions, exacerbating different types of inequalities, enflaming identity-based conflicts, and entrenching partisan hostility (Druckman, 2024; McCoy et al., 2018; Somer et al., 2023).

Although much previous research has explored the role of identity in broad categories—such as ethnicity, race, religion, or political affiliation—in fueling polarization (e.g., Castle & Stepp, 2021; West & Iyengar, 2022), the role of micro-identities (e.g., subgroups within larger categories) remains significantly underexplored. Moreover, actionable strategies for mitigating identity-driven polarization are neither well-documented nor systematically tested. Thus, this article seeks to address these gaps by investigating the role of micro-identities and their dual potential to either aggravate polarization or, when appropriately integrated into political decision-making, contribute to depolarization. We critically examine how micro-identities are frequently framed in opposition to one another, highlighting how political and cultural elites exploit these identities to deepen societal divisions. Using the case of trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) narratives, we illustrate the ways in which identity-based conflicts are then mobilized to entrench polarization. However, we contend that when micro-identities are properly recognized and incorporated into political strategies, they can function as powerful mechanisms for depolarization and the reinforcement of liberal democratic norms. To support this claim, we present case studies from Poland’s parliamentary elections, demonstrating how the strategic incorporation of micro-identities in coalition-building efforts can yield democratic outcomes. Next, we further analyze the construction of political narratives, distinguishing between two dominant types that shape the European political landscape. Central to our discussion is the imperative of crafting “inclusive narratives”—discourses that recognize and

respect the plurality of micro-identities within society. While such inclusive narratives may initially contribute to social fragmentation, we argue that, over time, they play a crucial role in mitigating polarization and sustaining the foundational democratic norms essential for the stable functioning of liberal democracy.

2. Polarized Social Identities Along Political Cleavages

The concept of political or ideological polarization refers to the widening divide between two major political factions on key societal issues (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). This polarization manifests at two distinct levels: “elite polarization,” characterized by increasing ideological divergence in the legislative behavior of elected officials, and “mass polarization,” which reflects deepening ideological rifts within the general electorate. Lipset and Rokkan (1967), in their “cleavage theory,” posit that political transformations are often driven by shifts in societal identities, since profound structural divisions within society become embedded in the political sphere through individual identity affiliations (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Zollinger, 2024). Recent scholarship has increasingly underscored the centrality of social identities—how individuals perceive their connections to specific social groups—in shaping political attitudes and behavior (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Young, 2023). Notably, some researchers argue that individuals often base their political choices not on policies or ideologies, but on their social identities—their deeply ingrained sense of who they are (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Young, 2023). This identity-centered approach has gained increasing traction, particularly with the rise of “affective polarization,” wherein animosity toward political opponents overshadows substantive policy disagreements (Dimant & Kimbrough, 2024; Druckman et al., 2024; Iyengar et al., 2019; Sides et al., 2016).

Francis Fukuyama argues that the foundational principles of liberal democracy—grounded in a certain universal and ostensibly shared system of values and norms—are increasingly undermined by the rise of “identity politics” (Fukuyama, 2018). This phenomenon, driven by dynamic socio-political forces, appears to contribute to a weakening sense of community and may play a role in increasing social and political fragmentation (Fukuyama, 2018). Contemporary debates and scholarly discourse on identity politics in the US and Europe reflect the extent to which political, social, and cultural polarization is maintained, largely by political elites (Druckman, 2024; McCoy & Somer, 2019). This, in turn, translates into what scholars have termed a “democratic recession,” characterized by the corrosion of long-established social norms once considered stable and immutable (Diamond, 2015). The strategic deployment of “identity politics” may serve as a mechanism for various political groups to bolster their influence and political power; through carefully crafted, polarizing narratives, these groups selectively appeal to specific components of these identities among their electorate or political constituencies. In explaining the process of polarization, Fukuyama (2018) highlights that left-leaning political movements in the US and Europe have played a key role in advancing multi-level identity-based frameworks that, while intended to empower marginalized communities, have simultaneously alienated other demographic groups. Specifically, he argues that identity-based advocacy has often prioritized the grievances of historically oppressed groups while sidelining populations traditionally associated with conservative values—such as individuals of European descent affiliated with Christianity, rural communities, and proponents of traditional family values and structures. This perceived exclusion is likely to fuel resentment among these groups, who feel unfairly blamed for societal discrimination. Consequently, these groups may begin to increasingly view themselves as victims of “liberal elites” in the US or “leftist elites” in Europe (Holmes, 2017).

In response to these perceived cultural and political shifts, traditional and more conservative groups who perceive themselves as marginalized could embrace countervailing identity frameworks emphasizing “familiarity” and resistance to perceived external threats. These perceived threats include mass migration from the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia, as well as the proliferation of multifaceted identities championed by many progressive European parties (Jansma, 2024; Ylä-Anttila, 2017). Within this context, such liberal frameworks might be seen as undermining cultural-national coherence, ultimately fueling political and affective polarization (Stichweh, 2021). This dynamic will possibly contribute to a resurgence of nationalist sentiments and a renewed attachment to dominant cultural identities, which, as Ozkirimli (2005) observes, often serves to rationalize and justify exclusionary policies and beliefs. Some empirical evidence supports these trends. Eurobarometer surveys (European Commission, 2021) reveal that family and nationality remain central to European self-identification, with 81% and 73% of respondents, respectively, citing these as core components of their identity.

Identity politics usually extends beyond individual and group affiliations, permeating institutional structures, thus posing a serious threat to the fundamental norms of liberal democracy. Institutional polarization has the potential to affect perceptions of impartiality and independence within state institutions, which may, in turn, influence public trust in mechanisms critical for upholding legal and social guarantees (Jezierska & Sörbom, 2021). In deeply polarized environments—including civil society organizations—state institutions will possibly become instruments of partisan agendas rather than neutral arbiters, further weakening democratic structures and trust in governance (Sörbom & Jezierska, 2023). The consequences of this institutional polarization also tend to spill over from civic institutions to others; as public trust in these organizations deteriorates, so too does trust in broader state institutions, triggering a wide-ranging systemic crisis (Druckman, 2024). A striking example of this trend emerged in Poland when, in December 2024, Polish Supreme Court Judge Piotr Prusiniowski warned of a potential legitimacy crisis following the 2025 elections, cautioning that the country could face a scenario in which two rival presidents emerge, with neither faction accepting the other’s authority (“Niebawem w Polsce może być dwóch prezydentów,” 2024). This echoes the aftermath of the 2020 US elections, in which Donald Trump’s supporters refused to recognize his defeat, alleging widespread electoral fraud and claiming the election was “stolen” (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2020). Such distrust in institutional neutrality—whether in the judiciary, the media, or civil society—might signal a dangerous acceleration of polarization that threatens democratic governance. As confidence in institutions wanes, the perceived legitimacy of democratic processes may weaken, increasing the likelihood of governance crises and heightened social conflict.

3. Identity Politics and Emerging Micro-Identities

Fukuyama (2018) conceptualizes identity politics through the lens of “isothymia”—a term he derives from the Greek *thymos*, denoting the intrinsic human desire for recognition in the eyes of others. This concept encapsulates a blend of pride, self-worth, and dignity, as well as an acute sensitivity to one’s social positioning as an autonomous individual. He deems “isothymia,” the struggle for recognition, to be the engine of world history, and a driving force behind contemporary identity politics, leading to the construction of distinct cultural group identities that diverge from the mainstream majority (see the description of the process of subgroup or dual identity formation in Verkuyten, 2013). These identity formations are exemplified by communities such as Roman-Catholic Latinos in the US, LGBTQ+ groups, and various Muslim communities across Europe—each shaped by distinct origins and ideological orientations.

A defining characteristic of modern identity politics is the increasing fragmentation of broad identity categories into more nuanced and distinct micro-identity groups, each with its own unique experiences, reflecting the phenomenon of “cross-cutting cleavages”—a process wherein individuals belonging to the same overarching identity group develop varied, divergent, and at times conflicting, allegiances (Dunning & Harrison, 2010; Root, 1996; Verkuyten, 2013).

This trend is particularly evident in the growing recognition of identities formed at the intersection of multiple axes of discrimination; for instance, the lived experience of a Black lesbian woman cannot be wholly subsumed under the broader categories of either race, gender, or sexual orientation alone; rather, it is impinged upon by the intersectionality of all three dimensions (Bernstein, 2005). In immigration, multiculturalism, and social integration contexts, individuals may hold complex or hybrid identities that bridge different cultural, ethnic, national, or social groups (Settles & Buchanan, 2014; Verkuyten, 2013). For example, dual (or multiple) identities (Settles & Buchanan, 2014; Verkuyten, 2013) reflect the simultaneous identification with two or more distinct social or cultural groups, typically involving a minority group and a larger, dominant group (e.g., Root, 1996). Representatives of these micro-groups increasingly advocate for the recognition of their full subjectivity within mainstream society, calling for a reinterpretation of existing social and legal norms that, in their view, have either historically marginalized them in the past, or continue to disadvantage them now as individuals and communities (Bernstein, 2005; Gitlin, 1995). Given that the protection of minority rights is a universally accepted norm in liberal democracy, such demands are often considered justified within democratic frameworks (Biró & Newman, 2022). Building on Fukuyama’s (2018) work, a micro-identity—a type of subgroup identity (Rabinovich & Morton, 2011)—can be defined as a deeply subjective sense of belonging to an exceptionally specific and narrowly defined group. Members of these groups are bound by a shared identification with particular aspects of social reality and a strong belief in their distinctiveness (see also Verkuyten, 2013). In the digital realm, micro-identities often emerge as fluid and transient entities, characterized by distinct epistemic realities, unwavering internal support for their ideology and activities, and a strong sense of in-group self-determination (Lüders et al., 2022; see also van Zomeren et al., 2008). These identities are fragmented, context-dependent, and emotionally charged, coalescing around composite ideas and belief systems—features that set them apart from broader identity constructs (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023).

Emerging micro-identities and their corresponding micro-narratives are continuously evolving, embodying a sense of fluidity in which identities are dynamic and subject to change over time (Verkuyten, 2013; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2012). Meanwhile, more established micro-identities persist, adapting and reshaping themselves in response to shifting social and political landscapes. This perpetual process reflects individuals’ fundamental search for belonging, meaning, and purpose within their worldviews (for a review see Kruglanski et al., 2025). Importantly, micro-identities do not inherently preclude the coexistence of other identities or affiliations, including those rooted in religious, ethnic, and national affiliations (Verkuyten, 2013). For instance, an individual adhering to fundamentalist Islam in Europe may construct their identity based on Wahhabi ideology, viewing themselves as a “true Muslim.” While this micro-identity, in theory, does not clash with the broader concept of Muslim identity, the majority of Muslims do not subscribe to this radical interpretation of Islam and can openly reject it. Nonetheless, this commonality with conventional religiosity does not deter its adherents from pursuing their own ideological objectives; in fact, they may simply perceive other Muslims as “unaware of their true identity” and work towards “raising their awareness” to a more “authentic” understanding of their faith (e.g., Firro, 2018; Rashid, 2003). Evidently, two parallel

processes are at play: the formation of a Muslim (minority) community across national borders (previously existing mainly in theory as the *umma*), and the simultaneous emergence of distinct micro-identities within that community itself (Kossowska et al., 2023).

One of the key drivers of social identity fragmentation is the increasingly segmented media landscape of recent decades (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Mancini, 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2017). The sheer proliferation in the number of media outlets has dispersed audiences across an ever-expanding array of platforms, many of which prioritize political agendas over journalistic objectivity (Benkler et al., 2018; Holt, 2016; Nygaard, 2019). Digital media further fast-tracks this process by fostering fluid and context-dependent modes of engagement, enabling individuals to navigate between discussions that emphasize different facets of their social identities (Cork et al., 2020; Hopthrow et al., 2020). We suggest that these shifting contexts may facilitate increasingly dynamic and fluid identification processes, encouraging further fragmentation of identities. Beyond media dynamics, fragmented identities may also stem from the attenuating ties between citizens and political parties. Over the past several decades, party identification has declined, while voter mobility and electoral volatility have risen (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Dalton, 2018; Zollinger, 2024). Indeed, studies suggest that individuals' political attitudes are now more sophisticated and multifaceted than the rigid, simplistic cleavages reflected in conventional party politics (Caprara et al., 2006; Piurko et al., 2011).

In summary, while polarization remains a prominent concern in contemporary political discourse, the increasing specificity of identity categories, the growing fragmentation of media environments, and the erosion of stable partisan loyalties collectively indicate a broader trend towards social and political fragmentation. This shift may reflect the complexity of modern identity dynamics, where people's allegiances and identifications are fluid, multifaceted, and often at odds with established political and social structures. Therefore, the very existence of micro-identities in pluralistic societies should be taken into account by the political class both when crafting appropriate narratives for their voters and while forming suitable electoral coalitions. This consideration is particularly critical in an era of heightened cultural, institutional, and political polarization. A more finessed interpretation of micro-identities—and their strategic integration into political discourse and policymaking—holds the potential to mitigate polarization and contribute to a more effective process of depolarization, a subject we explore in further detail in the following sections.

3.1. Polarizing Potential of Micro-Identities: A TERF Case Study

The concept of micro-identities plays a fundamental role in the context of socio-political functioning, raising the question of just how “micro” these identities can actually be. Feminist identity, for instance, is often perceived—particularly in right-wing discourse—as a monolithic and highly cohesive movement. However, since at least 2008, a fierce internal dispute has fractured feminist communities, leading to the exclusion of certain feminists from mainstream discourse on women's rights. This rift became particularly visible with the emergence of the term “TERF,” coined by feminist writer Viv Smythe to describe activists who reject the notion that transgender women are truly women, and who thus advocate for the exclusion of transgender women from women's spaces and organizations. Since its introduction, the label “TERF” has been widely used to describe feminist individuals whose opposition to legislative initiatives supporting transgender rights has led to their marginalization within feminist movements (Smythe, 2018).

The prominence of the TERF identity was significantly amplified by the British author J. K. Rowling, who has repeatedly expressed the view that completely disregarding biological gender is an abusive act and constitutes another form of discourse that aims to exclude women. She has articulated a position that acknowledges transgender rights while simultaneously asserting the distinctiveness of female lived experiences:

I respect every trans person's right to live any way that feels authentic and comfortable to them. I'd march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans. At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female. I do not believe it's hateful to say so. (Rowling, 2020)

Despite this, many feminists, including Rebecca Solnit, reject Rowling's concerns, arguing that trans women do not pose a threat to cis women and that exclusionary rhetoric risks further marginalizing them (Solnit, 2020).

Rowling, however, like other feminists skeptical of transgender women, opposes the liberalization of laws concerning gender identity change, arguing that legislative reforms could be exploited by sexual predators to gain access to spaces designated for women. In Poland, criminologist Magdalena Grzyb of Jagiellonian University has voiced similar concerns. She holds the view that the recognition of *felt gender* as the sole criterion for legal gender change undermines feminist principles and risks exacerbating discrimination against women. Additionally, Grzyb has contended that trans individuals are not the most excluded group in Polish society, as groups such as the Roma and homeless populations experience even greater exclusion. These comments sparked intense controversy, leading to the cancellation of one of her university lectures following backlash from trans activists. The furor surrounding her remarks erupted on social media and in the pages of *Kultura Liberalna*, an influential Polish intellectual magazine, further illustrating the deeply polarized nature of contemporary feminist discourse (Grzyb, 2021). Initially, the term TERF was used specifically to describe feminists who distanced themselves from trans-inclusive feminism. However, it quickly took on additional connotations and, in some cases, was re-purposed into a political weapon wielded by exclusionary factions. As a result, the term has become a permanent fixture of contemporary feminist discourse, often invoked in ideological battles over gender identity and rights (Hines, 2017).

Rowling's influence, combined with feminist debates over trans rights, has reverberated in Poland, where right-wing media have distorted the conversation to serve their own agenda. Conservative outlets have convinced many Poles that the left seeks to erase the word "woman" from public discourse (Tomaszewski, 2021). They have not only cited Rowling but also Urszula Kuczyńska, a feminist activist and linguist affiliated with the Lewica (The Left) party, who—like Rowling—expressed concerns about replacing "woman" with terms such as "person with a uterus" (Romanowska, 2020). The backlash within progressive circles over her statement overshadowed the Lewica party's broader political and economic agenda, shifting public discourse almost exclusively toward LGBTQ+ issues. This shift likely contributed to Lewica's unexpectedly low support in the 2023 elections, as many traditionally left-wing voters—including segments of the working class—migrated toward Koalicja Obywatelska (Civic Coalition [KO]), a party that offered a broader ideological spectrum (Pawłowska & Korzeniowska, 2023). This case demonstrates how identity debates, when amplified and politicized, can reshape electoral outcomes—not only by fuelling internal divisions within progressive movements but also by providing right-wing narratives with a powerful wedge issue to exploit.

The TERF case exemplifies what can be an intrinsic feature of micro-identities: their tendency to be forged in opposition to other ideological narratives. In politicized contexts, micro-identities may emerge through

resistance, rebellion, and dissent, by defining themselves in contrast to narratives considered too mainstream, generic, or universalist. The TERF faction's critical view of trans women functioned as an internal pivot, setting them against even other competing micro-identities. In this sense, politicized micro-identities often derive their cohesion less from an intrinsic sense of belonging to a specific minority group and more from a perceived separateness from the majority (Gerbaudo et al., 2023). Unlike conventional social identities, which are typically rooted in self-perception and personal identification, micro-identities are primarily defined through external relational dynamics—shaped by opposition to other social groups, and the values, norms, and attitudes they represent (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023; Törnberg, 2022). However, it is important to recognize that not all micro-identities are defined by antagonism toward dominant socio-political frameworks. Some micro-identities adopt a more neutral stance, forming around common interests, cultural affiliations, or philosophical standpoints without necessarily positioning themselves in opposition to the political mainstream (Wachter et al., 2015).

3.2. Micro-Identities in Political Elections: A Case Study of Poland

Political, affective, and institutional polarization occurs within increasingly pluralistic yet deeply unequal societies, where political divisions frequently overlap with ideological, social, and religious divisions (Wilson et al., 2020). In any state, while opposition groups may share a common critique of the ruling powers and a critical view of the policies being proposed or implemented, they often diverge on numerous other issues. In Poland, opposition to the ruling Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS; Law and Justice) government has encompassed not only left-wing groups but also conservatives who opposed the government's foreign policy—particularly its confrontational stance toward the European Union (EU)—and the politicization of state institutions, especially the judiciary. Consequently, building an effective democratic opposition required political actors to account for not only the overarching phenomenon of polarization but also for the existence of micro-identities, which may have their own political dimension (Paterson & Witzleb, 2020). In other words, greater party pluralism—meaning a larger number of diverse political groups or unique political offerings—and rising factionalism within major parties are not anomalies but rather natural consequences of an electorate whose ideological composition is becoming increasingly complex and fragmented, with burgeoning voter identities and growing ideological pluralism. The proliferation of political offerings in the marketplace of ideas reflects the corresponding diversification of voter identities and communities, necessitating a recalibration of political strategies to accommodate this new reality (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017). Accordingly, political actors and various ideologues must craft more inclusive and comprehensive narratives for their audiences that acknowledge cultural and ideological pluralism, while simultaneously constructing experimental yet viable post-election coalitions to secure power (Fortunato, 2021). This phenomenon was evident after Spain's 2019 general elections, when Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez formed a coalition between the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and Unidas Podemos—an unprecedented experiment in coalition governance since the Second Spanish Republic. Four years later, Sánchez replicated this approach by forming another coalition government, this time with Sumar, a newly established left-wing political platform launched by Yolanda Díaz, with Unidas Podemos also participating in the new governing alliance (Field & Teruel, 2023). A similar dynamic played out in Poland three months later. The Polish case is particularly instructive because the opposition parties against the then-government, collectively referred to as the United Opposition, successfully ousted PiS, a party widely regarded in Europe as a populist right-wing grouping that, despite its defeat, continued to command significant electoral support. However, opposition leaders faced considerable strategic dilemmas in the run-up to the parliamentary elections.

Prior to the parliamentary elections in the autumn, two clashing electoral strategies emerged within the Polish opposition parties. Advocates of a unified opposition list, who rallied around the social media hashtag #silnirazem (“strongtogether”), argued that only a fully consolidated front—one that neutralized internal ideological divisions—could overcome the ruling United Right coalition, led by PiS, and take power in Poland (Przeworski, 2024). Conversely, critics of this approach contended that such enforced unity inherently excluded certain voters from the political discourse, i.e., those with specific priorities and expectations, including feminists and LGBTQ+ activists, on the one hand, and conservative opposition supporters on the other. The latter group rejected PiS’s right-wing populism but remained wary of the dominant liberal-progressive orientation of Donald Tusk’s KO. This fragmentation within the opposition created potential for cognitive dissonance among many voters, both those with more left-wing and liberal views, and those attached to traditionally conservative values, even potentially discouraging electoral participation altogether. In Table 1 we provide an overview of how different ideological groups and their micro-identities shaped the 2023 Polish election results, hoping that it helps non-experts understand the political landscape and coalition-building dynamics.

Ultimately, partly as a result of political calculations, and partly due to the individual ambitions of various party leaders, rather than coalescing into a single electoral bloc, opposition forces opted for a hybrid strategy. The opposition entered the elections as three separate, but strategically aligned, coalitions: KO, Trzecia Droga (Third Way; a center-right alliance between the Polish People’s Party [PSL] and Poland 2050, a centrist party), and Lewica (a progressive-leftist electoral alliance). This multi-coalition approach proved successful, leading to a decisive electoral victory.

The decision to abandon a single opposition list in favor of an intermediary electoral strategy was probably the result of drawing the right conclusions from a United Surveys election poll (Żółciak & Osiecki, 2022) which indicated that, while 62% of opposition party supporters backed the idea of a unified electoral list, a substantial minority (31%) expressed concerns that such a move would dissuade them from voting at all. The strategic flexibility of the opposition coalition ensured that a diverse electorate—dissatisfied with PiS rule but unwilling to compromise on ideological principles—could still find political representation without feeling forced into an ideologically monolithic bloc. In December 2023, Donald Tusk became prime minister and formed a new government incorporating all the major democratic opposition groups. While it remains a matter of speculation whether a single opposition list would have secured a comparable electoral outcome, the exceptionally high voter turnout suggests that the majority of voters dissatisfied with the rule of the United Right had found their political and ideological niche; in other words, a significant portion of the electorate was able to align

Table 1. An overview of how different ideological groups and their micro-identities shaped the 2023 Polish election results.

Party	Political Spectrum	Social Values	Source: Based on Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej (CBO) 2023
Lewica	Far-left to center-left	Socially liberal	
KO	Center-left to center	Socially liberal to moderate	
Trzecia Droga	Center to center-right	Moderately conservative	
PiS	Right-wing conservative	Socially conservative	
Konfederacja	Far-right	Ultra-conservative and libertarian	

with political options that resonated with their ideological and identity-based preferences without making too many concessions to their own beliefs (Jaworska-Surma et al., 2023). The possibility of choosing from a broader range of programs was particularly critical for younger voters, who tend to prioritize more granular political and cultural concerns that align with their emerging micro-identities.

The Polish case suggests that the opposition's electoral success was, at least in part, an inadvertent response to this increasingly relevant phenomenon of emerging micro-identities, which are making a tangible impact on the electoral process and, subsequently, on the policies implemented. However, while micro-identities reflect the diversity inherent in pluralistic democracies, their instrumentalization in politics carries risks. Liberal democracy is based on compromise, and without at least a minimalist but foundational political narrative, it is difficult to envision how a lasting parliamentary majority can be built. Micro-identities, in and of themselves, it must be emphasized, do not pose a direct threat to the stability of the state per se; rather, it is their strategic exploitation that creates a potential for disintegration and political volatility, making moderate majorities hostages to a vocal and active minority. The challenge, therefore, lies in preventing public discourse from becoming dominated by narrow, highly vocal groups whose demands, while legitimate, may disproportionately influence broader governance structures.

A potential solution lies in cultivating political communication centered on shared goals—however minimal those objectives may be. By fashioning unifying narratives that transcend factional divisions while still recognizing the legitimacy of micro-identities, political actors can mitigate polarization and create the groundwork for long-term democratic stability. This approach, if effectively applied, could work as a viable strategy for diminishing social and political polarization in the long term.

Despite its electoral success, the “coalition of many coalitions” faces a fundamental challenge: ideological cohesion. As Poland's ruling bloc consists of diverse factions with differing priorities, deep-seated divisions on sensitive issues like abortion and the role of the Church in public life may make it increasingly difficult to maintain unity. A striking example of this tension emerged when Minister of Culture and National Heritage Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz decided to cut state subsidies for religious publications, publicly declaring that “the mission of the state is not to spread faith and salvation” (“This is a secular state,” 2024). His stance aligns with the secular vision championed by Civic Platform (PO, which is the strongest party within KO) and Lewica, who advocate for a clearer separation between Church and State. However, a different perspective was offered by Deputy Prime Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, leader of the coalition conservative PSL. While he supports limiting the Church's direct involvement in politics, he insists that policy should still be grounded in Christian values (“Kosiniak-Kamysz: PSL konsekwentnie broni wartości chrześcijańskich,” 2019). This debate unfolds against the backdrop of Poland's rapid secularization, particularly among younger generations. A 2018 Pew Research Center report identified Poland as one of the fastest-secularizing countries globally, based on the widening gap in religiosity between younger and older demographics (“Proportion of Catholics in Poland,” 2023; “The age gap in religion,” 2018). The 2021 National Census further underscores this shift, revealing that 71.3% of Poles identified as Roman Catholic, a sharp decline from 87.6% in 2011 (“Coraz mniej katolików,” 2023; Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2021). These trends suggest that proposals for further secularization—championed by PO and Lewica—are likely to resonate with younger voters. However, the coalition's ideological diversity means that secularization reforms will likely be tempered by compromise. With both PO and PSL operating within the ruling coalition, any major push toward a more secular state is expected to be moderate, carefully balancing progressive aspirations with conservative sensibilities.

The key political question is whether this cautious, incremental approach will prove sufficient to keep younger, secular-minded voters engaged. If reforms fall short of their expectations, disillusionment could drive voter apathy, weakening support for the coalition in future elections. Ultimately, much will depend on Prime Minister Donald Tusk's ability to maintain credibility, sustain coalition unity, and craft a compelling vision for governing a deeply divided society in an era of growing political polarization.

4. Searching for Common Ground Addressing Micro-Identifications

The role of “grand political narratives” is crucial in shaping socio-political dynamics. These overarching narratives function as an ideological backdrop against which more personal personalized stories can be crafted, and ideological identities developed and refined (Mayer, 2014). The process of identity formation is continuous but labile, susceptible to evolving social contexts and technological developments. The increasing individualization of society—intensified by the logic of algorithm-driven digital environments—stimulates the birth of additional micro-identities (Kossowska et al., 2023), potentially accelerating disintegration processes with far-reaching and dramatic repercussions.

In this fragmented landscape, the urgent task for a responsible political class is to construct a maximally inclusive narrative that resonates across a broad spectrum of the electorate. Such an endeavor is complex, as it must accommodate the diverse needs of an increasingly pluralistic society. Historical precedents provide valuable insights; in Poland, the “Solidarity” movement of the 1980s stands out as a unifying narrative that successfully brought together individuals from varied social and ideological backgrounds (Brier, 2021). The political context of that time was pivotal, with a clearly defined opponent—the oppressive and economically inept state—with which negotiations could be conducted, leading to a peaceful compromise. By way of contrast, the predicament democratic countries find themselves in today seems to be much thornier (Foret, 2024).

We identify two predominant narratives existing in the cultural-political space of Europe. The first, tentatively labeled “cultural-liberal” and “pan-European,” embodies a form of universal social norms, with similar characteristics across most countries in Western, Northern, Central, and Southern Europe. As an overarching framework, it puts an emphasis on the secular nature of the state (for example, opposing the overt display of religious symbols in public spaces), and is liberal on moral issues—strongly supporting reproductive rights and same-sex partnerships, and open (or at least not vehemently opposed) to immigration including ethnic and religious groups from outside the Western sphere. It thus envisages a multicultural society while being skeptical of “national values,” or even the concept of a “nation-state” grounded solely on ethnic principles (Duranti, 2017). Political parties or a coalition of parties, such as KO in Poland, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany, and La République En Marche! in France, conform to this narrative. Overall, this narrative advocates for a high level of income redistribution, criticizes global capitalism and economic neoliberalism, and places various interpretations of equality and social justice on a pedestal. Within this framework, the EU is envisioned as a cohesive entity built on shared ideological foundations, including a commitment to moral diversity, tolerance, and the principle of secular governance. For all its celebration of a diversity of traditions, languages, and customs, this narrative comes with a caveat—not always explicitly stated—that this multiplicity falls within “European moral values and social norms.” These norms include tolerance for various minorities within the framework of multiculturalism policy and/or the acceptance of secular state principles (Triandafyllidou et al., 2011). The intellectual underpinnings

of this narrative can be traced back to theorists like Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, or Benedict Anderson, who describe how modern nations can be engineered into a deliberate “construct” rather than, for example, the culmination of organic, historical processes of development of a national identity (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 2009; Hobsbawm, 1992). From this perspective, it is thought to be perfectly feasible to “overcome” the risk of nationalism and “reconstruct” societies according to more liberal formulas. Even if not always explicitly articulated, the aspiration for a pan-European identity serves as a crucial reference point, despite the controversies and doubts it raises (Applebaum, 2020). The responsibility for advancing this vision rests with the political and intellectual elites across the Old Continent, who are fully cognizant that only a more unified and integrated Europe can effectively respond to external threats (Hampshire, 2014).

On the other hand, the second narrative—which we term “national conservative”—accepts, though not always without contention, the functioning of the EU in its current political form while strongly contesting the current immigration policy. Central to this narrative is its concern about unchecked immigration, with the result that this issue has become dominant in domestic political struggles. Limiting migration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, and, in the case of Western European countries, from the so-called “new EU member states in the East” is a major strand in this narrative, stemming from the fear that excessive cultural diversity (especially involving non-European elements) could cause the cultural and social coherence of the state to crumble, potentially leading to soaring crime or even anarchy in certain areas. Not surprisingly, this perspective emphasizes “national security” and “law and order,” particularly in response to various forms of social unrest (including riots) in neighborhoods predominantly inhabited by immigrant communities and their descendants (Murray, 2018). The issue of migration and security is intricately linked to individual states’ attitudes toward the concept of the EU itself, symbolized by “Brussels.” The “national conservative” narrative reflects growing skepticism, not only toward any form of political centralization at the pan-European level but also toward even moderate proposals to streamline collective actions across the Union. The reason for this is that it is believed these could diminish the role of individual member states, for example, by weakening the veto of a single country, which might thereby paralyze a community’s ability to act in some areas of national interest (Caiani et al., 2024). Hence, “Brussels” is viewed, if not as an enemy, then at least as an adversary that must be dealt with firmly. Thus, there is a strong emphasis on the fundamental principle of subsidiarity, which lies at the core of the EU, even if is not always positively received within the “socio-liberal” narrative. This “national conservative” narrative draws, to some extent, on the French Annales School, particularly its prominent representative, Fernand Braudel, and his concept of *longue durée*, which emphasizes the enduring nature of cultural and national identities (Braudel, 1982, 1995). While elements of national constructivism are incorporated into the narrative itself, it primarily intends to promote a vision of national identity as a product of natural, long-term development, resistant to external influences (Duranti, 2017).

Both narratives are, at their core, political constructs, rarely manifesting in pure ideological form within the social realities of individual European countries. Nonetheless, they serve as broad narrative frameworks from which more specific ideological messages are derived (Mayer, 2014). Depending on the country, issues such as migration, the role of religion in public life, or economic policies might be emphasized differently. However, this ideological dichotomy—more or less refined across various parts of the Union—seems to delineate the political contours of Europe. Even if we view these two narratives as representing extremes on a broad ideological continuum, with individual parties positioning themselves closer to or further from these extreme points, a fundamental ideological division is clearly apparent. One might postulate that the field of

ideological compromise between these narratives—and thus between individual parties or party coalitions representing them—appears to be narrowing, with the extremes becoming more pronounced. This phenomenon is perhaps most evident in the US, where the ideological overlap between the two major parties has nearly vanished, effectively eliminating the once-present categories of “liberal Republicans” and “conservative Democrats” (Kleinfeld, 2021).

This growing polarization of narratives implies that individuals increasingly feel compelled to either identify with one of these narratives, even if they do not fully endorse all aspects, or to search out alternative ideological positions outside the established continuum. This trend contributes to the proliferation of narratives within the existing ideological continuum or to the creation of various narratives that challenge the existing mainstream political system reflected in the continuum. Notably, research conducted in Europe and the US indicates that a segment of the population remains unaligned with either dominant narrative, seeking instead a new ideological offering which may not be within the continuum. (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). The evident recent electoral success in Poland of a coalition comprising multiple party alliances, each showcasing distinct political narratives, illustrates this hypothesis. However, the sustainability of such a coalition hinges on constructing a unifying narrative—one with a minimal effective dose of ideological content while addressing key issues, thereby realistically constituting the lowest common denominator, palatable to the majority of voters (Capano et al., 2023). In Poland, for example, this involves the issues of national security (amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia’s belligerent stance) and the preservation of a just rule of law. Ideological differences within such a coalition are natural, and heated negotiations and a search for common ground comprise the attendant norms of such a democratic system.

At the same time, the formation of a parliamentary majority of this kind entails risks, including the potential overreach of power under the guise of democratic legitimacy. A democratic litmus test for such a parliamentary majority lies in its adherence to civil liberties and minority rights, even when these principles are subject to divergent interpretations. As Leszek Kołakowski noted years ago:

Tocqueville...saw both the advantages and dangers of various political systems, and his famous remarks on democratic tyranny, the tyranny of the majority, have certainly not aged....For this reason, civil liberties often seem more important to us than the rule of the majority, considering that majority rule can degenerate into terrible despotism, and public life can sometimes be tolerable without majority rule. (Kołakowski, 2014, p.190)

Compromise, though often at the expense of the idealized ideological purity of each side, must prioritize respect for civil liberties and minority rights as the cornerstone of any political agreement within a coalition. Constructed effectively, such a narrative can provide a counterbalance to opposing narratives that may lean toward more authoritarian governance models.

5. An Attempt to Construct an Inclusive Narrative in Poland After the 2023 Elections

As the leader of a multiparty and ideologically pluralistic coalition, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk attempted to construct an inclusive narrative that draws from both cultural-liberal/pan-European elements as well as conservative-traditionalist narratives. His approach has been to strive to apply the lowest common

denominator—a shared set of priorities capable of resonating with the widest possible electorate, regardless of their ideological leanings. In many ways, this strategy mirrors the “coalition of many coalitions” model that emerged in Poland prior to the 2023 elections, blending liberal-leftist themes with more conservative appeals to national traditions (Buras, 2024). As prime minister of a coalition government, Tusk strongly emphasizes the issue of security, positioning it as a unifying concern not only for Poland but for Europe as a whole. This focus is particularly germane in the context of Poland’s presidency of the Council of the EU (January–June 2025), a period during which security and geopolitical stability are expected to be dominant themes. The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, coupled with the hybrid war tactics initiated by Russia and Belarus, is presented not only as a direct threat to Central and Eastern Europe but to the EU as a whole (“Donald Tusk: Musimy bronić naszych granic,” 2024). Additionally, the outcome of the 2024 US presidential elections is anticipated to have significant ramifications for the EU’s geopolitical positioning, even affecting the functioning of the EU itself. In his key address to the European Parliament, Tusk underscored both security issues and the values of liberal democracy, including minority rights. While drawing from the resources of both narratives analyzed here, he deliberately avoided resorting to the extreme nationalist interpretations often associated with security discourse:

Security is extremely important in the day-to-day lives of all Europeans. Let me tell you this, if we believe that a change of presidency, of administration in the US is a leap into the unknown, remember this: Europe has never been afraid to leap into the unknown. I listen to other world leaders who remember their moments of greatness....I would like to tell you that you can tackle the problem of illegal migration and problems with internal security in Europe without nationalistic and xenophobic slogans. I would like us in this domain, just as with external security, to favor traditional democracy based upon traditional democratic values such as individual freedoms, respect for minority rights, freedom of speech, rule of law, public life free from corruption, politics free from the omnipotence of oligarchs. I would like all those who profess these values to show their power and force when we need to defend our borders and our security. (Tusk, 2025)

Delivered in Polish and translated simultaneously, this speech was directed not only at the members of the European Parliament but also at Tusk’s domestic electorate (“Donald Tusk w Parlamencie Europejskim,” 2025). By also briefly alluding to “Solidarity”—referencing an inclusive narrative that united diverse factions in the late 1980s—he sought to reinforce a broader message of political unity (Tusk, 2025). In national addresses, Tusk has further linked security concerns to the defense of freedom and, by extension, to the foundational principles of the EU. Speaking in Warsaw at the official inauguration of Poland’s Council of the EU presidency, he stated: “If Europe is powerless, it will not survive. Let’s do everything so that Europe and Poland do not have to pay the highest price for freedom, for strength, for sovereignty. Let’s do everything to make Europe strong again” (Strzelecki et al., 2025).

These key speeches represent an attempt to construct a political message that appeals to a broad political and social spectrum of society, particularly in a pluralistic landscape where micro-identities play an increasingly influential role. However, the effectiveness of such a narrative is also inextricably linked to the credibility of the narrator. An empathetic mainstream politician can craft a message that, in theory, should be widely acceptable, but its reception will ultimately be shaped by public perceptions of the speaker’s trustworthiness and political effectiveness in achieving their objectives (Capano et al., 2023). Consequently, criticisms of various aspects of Tusk’s constructed narrative—whether from political opponents or disillusioned voters—may stem less from

the content of his narrative and more from preexisting attitudes towards him as a political figure, despite his best intentions to construct the most inclusive narrative possible. Ultimately, the true test of both the narrator and the narrative will be the next parliamentary elections in Poland, which will determine whether this strategic attempt at inclusivity has successfully resonated with the electorate.

6. Conclusions

The role of micro-identities in processes of political polarization and depolarization remains insufficiently understood and warrants further study. However, its implications extend far beyond theoretical debates, carrying profound consequences for social cohesion, political stability, and governance within the Euro-Atlantic sphere and beyond. This topic is of interest not only to academics but also to individuals involved in various levels of politics. The issue is not merely one of social coherence and minimal cultural harmony within any particular state but of practical political strategy—particularly concerning how electoral decisions intersect with the self-definition of micro-identities across various segments of the electorate. As voter identities become increasingly pluralistic and specialized in terms of their increasingly narrow interests, these may not always align with mainstream narratives. Hence, a critical task for political elites in the coming years will be to construct more inclusive narratives that account for the dynamism of micro-identities in increasingly heterogeneous societies and uphold the norms of liberal democracy (primarily ensuring the protection of minority rights). If successfully delivered, such narratives could serve as an effective mechanism for mitigating polarization, and fostering a more stable and cohesive political order. This will likely be among the most pressing and complex responsibilities facing democratic leadership in the 21st century.

It is difficult to clearly assess how the examples of building ideologically diverse coalitions in Poland and Spain can be applied to other European countries. Nevertheless, it is worth proposing a working hypothesis that, in many EU countries, the principles of “ideological purity” and the promotion of carefully designed political platforms by individual parties will be replaced by the principle of creating effective coalitions composed of many parties, not necessarily closely aligned in terms of governance philosophy and ideological message. On one hand, this would reflect the growing ideological pluralism of voters and allow for the seizure of power in the state, but on the other, it would pose a significant challenge in terms of the political coherence of such a coalition, and thus its effectiveness in governance.

It is important to highlight the example of Germany, where two ideologically different parties, the CDU/CSU (Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich-Soziale Union, an alliance of two parties) and the SPD, have managed, despite challenges, to form a credible coalition (Große Koalition) that has governed for many years. They are prepared to form the same coalition again (Martin, 2025). It is therefore possible that the new paradigm of building a moderate and inclusive “coalition of many coalitions” with its own narrative, aiming to weaken radical and populist parties, will gain increasing acceptance in Europe. The coming years will reveal whether Europeans are ready for such solutions.

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