



Faculty of Political Science  
and International Studies  
University of Warsaw



INSTITUT  
ZA FILOZOFIJU  
I DRUŠTVENU  
TEORIJU

**Second International Academic Conference**  
**ELECTIONS – DEMOCRACY – CRISIS**  
**EDC 2024**

**C O N F E R E N C E**  
**P R O C E E D I N G S**

Organized by the Faculty of Political Science  
and International Studies of the University of  
Warsaw and the Institute for Philosophy and  
Social Theory of the University of Belgrade

**February 29 – March 1, 2024, Warsaw**

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**FOR PUBLISHER**

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**DESIGN AND LAYOUT**

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**ISBN: 978-86-82324-58-4**

**BELGRADE, 2024**

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This publication was realised with the support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the realisation and financing of scientific research 451-03-66/2024-03/ 200025

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# Second International Academic Conference

## ELECTIONS – DEMOCRACY – CRISIS

### EDC 2024

February 29 – March 1, 2024, Warsaw

# A G E N D A

## DAY 1 (February 29, 2024)

### 08:30 REGISTRATION

### 09:00 OPENING

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28 str. Prof. Jan Baszkiewicz Auditorium

### 09:15 – 10:45 PANEL 1: UNDERSTANDING POPULISM

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28 str. Prof. Jan Baszkiewicz Auditorium

**Chair:** Spasimir Domaradzki (University of Warsaw)

- Marta Pascal (Pompeu Fabra University): Trust as a regenerating vector of democracy in Europe
- Vasiliki (Billy) Tsagkroni & George Kordas (Leiden University; Panteion University, Athens): Populism Crisis Nexus
- Francisco Batista (Universidade Nova de Lisboa): Populism as a Democratic paradigm rupture: a Brave New World in the horizon?
- Yannis Tsafos, Soner Baskaya & John Tsoukalas (University of Glasgow): Oil Price Shocks & Political Transitions: The Role of Fiscal Capacity

### 11:00 – 12:30 PANEL 2: EXPLORING THE LINK BETWEEN PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28 str. Prof. Jan Baszkiewicz Auditorium

**Chair:** Małgorzata Kaczorowska (University of Warsaw)

- Anna Unger (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest): Advocacy potentials of opposition parties and NGOs by direct democracy: a case study from Hungary
- Mihaela Ivănescu (Ovidius University of Constanța): Can There Be Democracy without Participation? On Electoral Absenteeism and the Chronic Crisis of Representation in Romania
- Dmitrij Wolodin (Kozminski University, Warsaw): Democratic innovations in war-torn Ukraine: a beacon for post-neo-liberal democratic resilience?
- Dejan Bursać & Nikola Jović (University of Belgrade): Voting preferences of the transitional losers: A perspective from Serbia

### **13:00 – 14:15 PANEL 3: PARTIES & PARTY LEADERS**

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 3 str. Room 5 Czarnowski Hall

**Chair:** Vadym Zheltovskyy (University of Warsaw)

- Vujo Ilić & Dušan Spasojević (University of Belgrade): The Demand Side of Political Personalization: The Determinants of Leader-over-Party Voter Preferences in Serbia
- Mattia Gatti (LUISS Guido Carli University, Rome): Managing the grumbles: How do intra-party dissent and leader domination affect salience strategies in Western Europe?
- Erdogan Altun (Istanbul University): When Clientelism is in Crisis: Local Brokers of JDP during 2014 and 2019 Local Elections in Turkey

### **14:15 – 14.45 LUNCH BREAK**

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 1 str. Room 1

### **14:45 – 16:00 PANEL 4: PROSPECTS FOR EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY**

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 3 str. Room 5 Czarnowski Hall

**Chair:** Piotr Tosiek (University of Warsaw)

- Gerard Conway (Brunel Law School): Democracy as a Justiciable Concept in the EU
- Anouk van Vliet & Jan Meijer (Leiden University): MP's attitudes towards European authoritarian leaders in light of the Russo-Ukraine war
- André Pereira Matos & Vanda Amaro Dias (Universidade Portucalense; Universidade de Coimbra): Addressing the crisis of democracy in Europe and beyond: a comparative analysis of the EU's democracy promotion strategies in Hungary, Turkey and Ukraine
- Gábor Kurunczi (Pázmány Péter Catholic University): Is the European Union in crisis? The relationship between EU citizenship and direct democracy and its impact on democratic legitimacy

### **16:15 – 17:30 PANEL 5: ELECTORAL INNOVATIONS**

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 3 str. Room 5 Czarnowski Hall

**Chair:** Dejan Bursać (University of Belgrade)

- Bohdan Szklarski (University of Warsaw): Built in crisis enhancing mechanisms in democratic systems and how democracies deal with them – a comparison between USA and Europe
- Jurijs Nikišins (University of Latvia): The Quest for Democratic Bliss: Which Dimensions Hold the Key?
- Ian Parenteau (Royal Military College Saint-Jean, Québec): Are Electoral Management Bodies Ready to Mitigate New Electoral Risks?

## **18:00 DINNER**

**Venue:** Restauracja Kameralna, Mikołaja Kopernika 3 str. – corner with Przyboscia str.

## **DAY 2 (March 1, 2024)**

### **09:30 – 10:45 PANEL 6: STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 3 str. Room 5 Czarnowski Hall

**Chair:** Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse (University of Warsaw)

- Adam Szymański (University of Warsaw): Crisis of Democracy in Poland – Does It Affect the Subnational Levels?
- Dušan Vučićević & Viktor Stamenković (University of Belgrade; Institute for Political Studies Belgrade): Leveraging Local Interests: A Content Analysis of Parliamentary Questions in Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, and Slovenia
- Cristina Matiuta (University of Oradea): European Elections in Romania: a framework for analysis

### **11:00 – 12:30 PANEL 7: POPULIST CONCEPTS IN AND BEYOND EUROPE**

**Venue:** Krakowskie Przedmieście 3 str. Room 5 Czarnowski Hall

**Chair:** Dušan Vučićević (University of Belgrade)

- Khaled Imran (University of Pecs): Uncivil Societies in Authoritarian Regimes: A Systematic Literature Review (2002–2022)
- Andrei Gheorghe (University of Bucharest): The construction of the concept of Romanian people and his enemies in AUR's leaders discourses during the Covid-19 crisis and Russian war in Ukraine
- Eszter Katona & Renáta Németh (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest): Unveiling Geopolitical Shifts: The Evolution of the Carpathian Basin Discourse in Hungarian Parliament (1998–2020)
- Edoardo Lavezzo (University of York): The impact of domestic factors on the middle power status: Examining Turkey's Presidentialism to understand how the country's democratic backlash affects the relationship with the EU

## **12:30 CLOSING REMARKS**

## **13:00 LUNCH**

**Venue:** Restauracja Kameralna, Mikołaja Kopernika 3 str. – corner with Przyboscia str.

# TRUST AS A REGENERATING VECTOR OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research is to explain how systematic work on citizen trust could be a fundamental element to regenerate and improve the health and strength of democratic systems. In this sense, the use of technology and digital elements in democracy can constitute a source of solutions in the current post-pandemic European societies. Thus, we will study the elements that could help us to explain the current levels of trust of European citizens in their democratic institutions; we will discuss the solutions that technology offers us to improve the relationship between citizens and institutions; or how strengthening levels of citizen trust could be a good recipe to avoid the degradation of our democratic systems, influenced by disparate factors and subject to daily tensions between the actors who play in the democratic arena: that is, citizens, institutions and media and social networks. The methodology used in this paper is both qualitative and quantitative and combines different research techniques.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of trust plays a crucial role in the functioning and sustainability of democracies, and its importance is particularly evident in the context of Europe. Trust appears to be a regenerating vector for democracy, as it is both a prerequisite for the smooth operation of democratic institutions and a product of their effective functioning. When trust erodes, it can lead to political apathy, low voter turnout, and the rise of populist movements that may undermine democratic rules. Scandals, corruption, and a perceived lack of transparency can contribute to a decline in trust. Rebuilding trust often requires addressing these issues head-on and implementing meaningful reforms. According to Eurobarometer data on the state of democracy in the EU and its member countries published in December 2023, 32% of Europeans point to “growing distrust and skepticism towards democratic institutions” as a threat to the quality of European democracy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article combines quantitative and qualitative methodology and uses as its main research techniques content analysis of specific literature and analysis of data about citizens trust in democracies and institutions which is available in the Eurobarometer database.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

New technological and digital tools could improve trust by creating specific tools that could be used reciprocally by institutions and citizens in order to improve their direct relationship and the execution of their respective roles within the current democratic regimes.

## **MAIN CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Political trust is generally understood as the confidence that citizens have in their institutions. Citizen's democratic satisfaction and dissatisfaction has a direct relationship with citizens perception about the capacity of governments and politicians to solve their demands and needs. Thus, to the extent that citizens have been perceiving a relevant distance between their needs and the actions taken by politicians from the institutions, the levels of public trust in some democratic institutions have been devalued. According to an OECD study pub-

lished in 2022, “trust varies across institutions. The police (67.1%), courts (56.9%), and civil service (50.2%) and local government (46.9%) garner higher levels of public trust than national governments (41.4%) and national legislatures like congresses and parliaments (39.4%)”. However, these figures are extremely volatile so political trust is susceptible to change quickly considering any situation: economic issues; unexpected scandals, corruption, misinformation; the role of the media amplifying (or not) any specific issue; etc. There are several key aspects that could exemplify the importance of trust for the correct functioning of democratic regimes:

### **1. Trust in Institutions:**

- **Government Institutions:** Trust in government institutions, including the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, is essential for the effective functioning of a democracy. Citizens need to believe that these institutions are transparent, accountable, and responsive to their needs.
- **Electoral System:** Trust in the electoral process is fundamental for the legitimacy of elected representatives. If citizens doubt the fairness and integrity of elections, it can undermine the democratic system.
- **Legal Institutions/Rule of law:** trust in the rule of law is key. Independent and impartial legal institutions contribute to citizens’ confidence that justice is administered fairly and without bias.

### **2. Trust in Political Leadership:**

- **Political leaders:** trust in political leaders is vital for their ability to govern. Leaders who are perceived as honest, competent, and committed to the public interest are more likely to maintain the support and confidence of the citizens. When citizens trust their leaders, they are more likely to accept the outcomes of democratic processes, even if their preferred candidates or policies do not prevail.

### **3. Economic Trust:**

- **Economic Stability:** Economic factors, such as trust in the stability of the economy, job security, and fair distribution of wealth, influence citizens’ overall confidence in democratic governance.

### **4. Social Cohesion and Trust:**

- **Social Capital:** Trust fosters social cohesion and inclusivity within a society. In a democratic setting, a diverse range of individuals and groups must coexist and collaborate. Trust helps bridge social divides and encourages a sense of unity.
- When people trust that their voices will be heard and their rights protected, it promotes inclusivity and discourages the marginalization of certain groups.

### **5. Media and Information Trust:**

- **Media Integrity:** A free and independent media is essential for the functioning of democracy. Trust in the media is critical for informed public discourse.
- **Misinformation and distrust in media** can undermine the democratic process. Building trust in journalism and ensuring the availability of reliable information is essential.

### **6. Trust in political integrations (ex-European Integration):**

- **EU Institutions:** trust in the EU institutions is significant, as they play a central role in the integration of European countries. Perceptions of fairness, effectiveness, and responsiveness of EU institutions contribute to the overall trust in the European project.
- **International cooperation within the EU:** trust is also crucial in the context of international relations within Europe. Collaborative efforts among European nations require a foundation of trust to address shared challenges and promote peace and stability.

## 7. Responsive Governance:

- Citizen Participation: trust is reinforced when citizens feel that their voices are heard and that democratic institutions are responsive to their concerns. Encouraging citizen participation and engagement can enhance trust in the democratic process. Trust is closely linked to the responsiveness of governance. Governments that address the needs and concerns of their citizens are more likely to be trusted.
- Open communication, accountability, and responsiveness to public opinion contribute to building and sustaining trust in democratic institutions.

In summary, trust is a dynamic and regenerating force in democracy. Fostering and maintaining trust in institutions, leaders, and societal relationships is essential for the resilience and effectiveness of democratic systems in Europe and beyond. Regular assessments, transparency, and a commitment to democratic values are key components of sustaining trust in the democratic process.

## **FINDINGS**

The elements that could help us to explain the current levels of trust and distrust of European citizens in their democratic institutions are the followings:

- From rationality to emotionality
- Lack of “democratic education programmes” since the early ages.
- The new forms of political communication (social networks, virality, influencers) and the dilution of the media as the only intermediaries between citizens and institutions/politicians
- The spread of misinformation and fake news
- Cases of corruption that still affect political parties.
- Lack of transparency in citizen decision-making processes or lack of real accountability processes.

By improving political trust, we are avoiding the degradation of our democracies, and to achieve that, at least the following measures should be taken:

- Changes in electoral legislation to favour processes of direct democracy and improvement of representative democracy through real processes of accountability.
- Extend citizens participation rights by walking towards a deliberative democracy.
- Advance in the design of public policies that allow the active, effective, and real listening of citizens by the institutions.
- Adopt transparency measures (that do not slow down the internal tasks of the administration) that guarantee good control of public money.
- Design and implementation of a European educational strategy on democracy from the earliest ages to stop at the root the ability of populism to penetrate among young people by using social networks and virality.
- Strengthen the govtech sector so that it can offer institutions effective tools to fight against threats to democracy (for example fake news, low levels of political participation, etc.)
- Investment to implement electronic voting in electoral processes. Promoting a new social “electoral deal”.



# CONTEMPLATIONS ON THE CORE OF THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC CRISIS: DECIPHERING POPULISM AMIDST THE CULTURE WAR

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## ABSTRACT

The scholarly community has arrived at a consensus indicating that the emergence of Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRP) is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors, as argued by Mudde (2021). This phenomenon is intricately tied to both national and international crises. Some scholars propose that the silent cultural revolution in Western societies, as posited by Inglehart (1977), has precipitated a cultural counter-revolution (Ignazi, 1992) leading to the ascent of Populist Right-wing Parties (Minkenberg, 1992; Mudde, 2007; Betz, 1994). This unfolding scenario is often described as a “Culture War,” a profound clash between contrasting perspectives on socio-cultural values. On one hand, progressive endeavors aspire to deconstruct age-old norms, advocating for the dominance of post-materialistic ideals. On the other hand, conservative realms project an unwavering commitment to the preservation of national and religious socio-cultural values as sacred. Both factions deploy a moral-ethical rationale in their pursuits, turning the cultural discourse into a complex tapestry of ideological contention. The battleground of cultural discourse becomes a dynamic arena where divergent visions of societal values engage in a profound confrontation.

This research will center on a singular case study examining the Democratic paradigm in Portugal, which confronts multifaceted national crises, including instances of corruption scandals involving government officials resulting in the resignation of the Prime Minister and necessitating new elections. Furthermore, a significant cultural crisis will be explored, which the paper argues that contributes to the ascendancy of populist party CHEGA that will be evident in the upcoming elections. This crisis is rooted in the challenge posed to cultural values by progressive policies implemented by the government and ideologies that run counter to the conservative and Catholic nature inherent in Portuguese society.

## MAIN CONCEPTS

- Populism as a political ideology (“elites” vs “the people”).
- Silent culture revolution (Inglehart, 1977).
- Culture War: the term “Culture War” encapsulates divergent and antagonistic perspectives concerning the comprehension of the world, the desired mode of its operation, and the socio-cultural values deemed imperative for cultural hegemony, thereby fostering human advancement and justice. Progressivist endeavors aspire to deconstruct age-old norms, championing the ascendancy of post-materialistic ideals. In stark contrast, conservative realms feign an unwavering commitment to preserving national and religious socio-cultural values as sacrosanct.

## METHODOLOGY

- Political speeches, party political program, or interviews originating from the populist right-wing party CHEGA will be subjected to scrutiny, as well as from other political factions, in a comprehensive exam-

ination featured in both print and digital media. This analysis involving leaders and activists from the CHEGA party, will play a pivotal role in elucidating the intricate interplay of conservative socio-cultural and religious convictions within the political sphere, particularly within the right-wing populist faction.

## **INITIAL FINDINGS**

The current state of democratic systems in Europe is facing a crisis, as highlighted by the central theme of this conference. Various international and domestic disruptions have led to a growing skepticism towards traditional political entities, portraying them as corrupt and indifferent to the needs of the people. Exploiting this sentiment, right-wing populist factions construct a narrative that aligns with their political ideology and rhetorical strategies. They present an ideological framework where “the people” are portrayed as morally virtuous, in direct contrast to “the elite.” This elite is depicted as morally compromised and self-serving, often associated with mainstream political parties, particularly those with left-wing progressive ideologies.

In the Portuguese context, the inception of democracy materialized as a consequence of the 1974 Revolution, more colloquially known as the Carnation Revolution, which dismantled the authoritarian fascist regime. Consequently, the democratic ethos in Portugal represents a relatively nascent phenomenon within its political landscape. Over the ensuing half-century of this evolving reality, the Socialist party has predominantly wielded governance, thereby shaping the contours of Portuguese democratic governance. The genesis of the Portuguese populist right-wing party, Chega, unfolds against the backdrop of a series of political imbroglios and instances of corruption that have cast a shadow upon the nation’s political landscape. The arrest of former Prime Minister José Sócrates in 2014, affiliated with the Socialist party, on charges spanning corruption, money laundering, and tax evasion, marked a pivotal moment. The subsequent inquiry, denoted as “Operation Marquis,” laid bare allegations of clandestine financial transactions and kickbacks transpiring during Sócrates’ tenure. Concurrently, the fiscal demise of Portugal, attributed to socialist economic policies during his premiership, further heightened the political maelstrom.

A subsequent chapter in this saga unfolded with the “BES Banking Scandal” in 2014, where the collapse of Banco Espírito Santo (BES), a stalwart among Portugal’s financial institutions, precipitated a profound financial scandal. As the ripples of discontent reverberated, they culminated in the resignation of Portugal’s Infrastructure Minister, João Galamba, amid a scandal entwined with the state-owned airline TAP. Subsequent revelations of corruption and influence peddling in lithium mining concessions and a hydrogen production project further deepened the fissures in the political edifice, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Antonio Costa, in November 2023. In a more recent development, the President of the Madeira Region, Miguel Albuquerque of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), was found guilty of multiple corruption charges, a circumstance which prompted his resignation, along with that of two other implicated individuals, in January of 2024.

These successive scandals have catalyzed a crisis within Portugal’s political democracy, fomenting a palpable surge in public distrust towards the established political elite and the two mainstream political parties: Socialist Party (PS) and PSD. This disquiet provides fertile ground for the ideological discourse propagated by Chega. Established in 2019, Chega has experienced a noteworthy ascent, garnering 7.2% of electoral votes within three years, securing a third-place position. As the nation approaches the crucible of the March 2024 elections, this democratic tumult portends a transformative moment. Current indicators suggest that Chega may amass approximately 20% of the vote, symbolizing an undeniable paradigm shift in a predominantly left-wing political landscape. This impending electoral juncture serves as the crucible for a nation in the throes of redefining its political ethos, where the discourse and ascent of Chega manifest as both symptom and agent of a profound political metamorphosis in Portugal.

This research paper endeavors to elucidate the multifaceted reasons underpinning the burgeoning support for the CHEGA party. Beyond the conspicuous backdrop of political scandals and instances of corruption, Portugal, akin to numerous European counterparts, finds itself embroiled in a discernible “Culture War” conflict where antithetical perspectives coalesce—namely, a progressive and a conservative orientation. Consequently, the study endeavors to not only delineate the political scandals that have facilitated the ascension of CHEGA but also to explicate how the “Culture War” phenomenon has galvanized the populace, compelling their electoral endorsement of this party. This is particularly pronounced in Portugal, a socio-culturally conservative

nation with deep-rooted Catholic affiliations, where left-wing progressive ideologies, emanating from the realm of post-materialism, are perceived as encroaching upon the country's cultural and national fabric. The research delves into the intricate tapestry of socio-cultural dynamics, elucidating how the "Culture War" has emerged as a pivotal determinant in propelling support toward CHEGA. The socio-cultural landscape of Portugal, deeply embedded in Catholic traditions, perceives the progressive policies introduced by the erstwhile Socialist government, including a coalition with Marxist parties, as antithetical to conservative and religious values. Instances such as the advocacy for gender ideology and, more recently, the adoption of policies regarding mixed-toilets in public schools, are construed as emblematic of a departure from cherished societal norms. Moreover, the research delves into the phenomenon of political migration, wherein disenchanted members from various political parties—ranging from the Social-Democrats (PSD) and the CDS to the Iniciativa Liberal (IL)—have defected to CHEGA. This defection is predicated on a fundamental ideological misalignment within their original parties, which, in their estimation, endorse what is disparagingly termed the "Woke Culture" or progressive policies. In conclusion, this research aims to transcend a mere enumeration of political scandals, extending its purview to encompass the intricate interplay between political upheavals, cultural dynamics, and the resultant ideological shifts that coalesce within the realm of Portuguese politics. By unraveling the nuanced strands of this socio-political fabric, the paper aspires to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the factors propelling the ascendancy of CHEGA within the intricate matrix of Portuguese political discourse.

# THE SITUATION OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN HUNGARY: MAIN FEATURES

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## THE SITUATION OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN HUNGARY: MAIN FEATURES

Hungary is a very interesting place for direct democracy: compared to most countries in the world, there is in principle a wide range of access to initiative and referendum (I&R), both at local and national level. However, this possibility in principle has not resulted in significant practice, with the number of referendums being particularly low. A particular interesting feature of the Hungarian situation is that citizens' initiatives have only been successful if they were either launched by a parliamentary party or if an already ongoing initiative was taken up by a parliamentary party during the period of signature collection. Although there are examples of initiatives launched by extra-parliamentary parties and citizens, supported by up to several hundred thousand signatures, these referendums have been blocked by the institutional political elite on each occasion. This three-decade-long practice is interesting not only in comparison with other countries (see e.g. Pállinger 2018), but also because the issue of direct democracy and democratisation in Hungary became closely intertwined in the second half of the 1980s.

The constitutional institutionalisation of the I&R in Hungary is an integral, albeit little discussed, part of the history of the democratic transition from the socialist system in Hungary. The first national referendum in the country's history (the 'four-yeses' referendum of 26 November 1989), launched by opposition parties and with thousands of citizens' signatures, became a prominent moment in the process of regime change. It is way less well-known that the idea of direct citizen participation and the possibility of ensuring it had already emerged years earlier, in 1985, when certain tendencies of the state party, the environmental movements that were then emerging, and intellectuals, and representatives of the legal profession (mainly constitutional lawyers) began to propose and examine ways of making the political system more democratic and ensuring citizen participation through the referendum. In 1987-88, opposition organisations, which were already becoming increasingly visible, included among their demands the introduction of a national referendum (Unger 2022a). This demand in principle was given particular importance and emphasis by a social movement and protest against the construction of the Bős-Nagymaros dams, a specific environmental issue. In addition to environmental concerns, the planned dams in the Danube very quickly became a symbol of the brutality and inhuman nature of the socialist system, and by the second half of 1988 the demonstrations organised against it had become opposition protests in their own right. In the meantime, the democratisation process accelerated: not only were the first opposition parties formed, but in the first half of 1989 the parliament adopted some elements of the so-called democracy package plan, which guaranteed, among other things, freedom of association and assembly and the right to strike. As a final act of this democracy package plan, in June 1989, the country's first referendum law was passed by the parliament (1989:XVII. tv.), which introduced the citizens' initiative in Hungary (Pállinger 2018).

The 'four-yeses' referendum demonstrated the power of the institution: it can be used not only to decide specific issues, but also as a political mobilising, agenda-setting and base-building tool. From 1990 onwards, three main features have characterised the way political actors have dealt with referendums. Firstly, parliamentary parties did not support initiatives from extra-parliamentary actors as far as possible. Secondly, the governing parties of the time considered referendums to be a limitation of representative democracy and a populist political institution that was incompatible with parliamentarianism, and thirdly, all parliamentary parties launched initiatives and requested referendums when they were in opposition.

Beyond all this, however, there is another peculiarity of popular votes in Hungary: each initiative vote went beyond the issue at hand, each redrawing the domestic political map and creating political fault lines. It is not possible to go into this in detail in this paper, but it is worth noting here that a referendum has always been a very strong influence in times of domestic crises and upheavals<sup>1</sup>. It follows that political actors, including civil society actors, have from time to time seen the referendum as an opportunity for political action.

In the following paper, I will examine the systemic characteristics of this institution and the factors that matter in the success or failure of an initiative. What could be the reasons why, while referendum is an important institution of the Hungarian political system, we have had so few referendums and so little opportunity for the opposition and civil society to express their interests through referendums.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY**

The concept of direct democracy is nowadays often used in a broad sense, including all kinds of participatory practices and opportunities, from consultative procedures to questionnaires (e.g. national consultation in Hungary), and participatory budgeting. In this study, direct democracy is used in a narrower sense: direct democracy is an institutionalised procedure whereby voters decide an issue by casting their vote. That is, voters participate by universal suffrage and their decision has a direct impact on the issue (Altman 2017). These institutions are referred to by Altman as Mechanism of Direct Democracy (MDD) and include initiatives, referendums and plebiscites. A special form of MDDs are CI-MDDs, i.e. Citizen Initiated MDDs<sup>2</sup>: in these cases, not only can a referendum be held on the basis of a legal or constitutional provision (see: mandatory referendums), but citizens also have the right to initiate a popular vote under certain conditions (Altman 2011, 15-16).

One of the fascinating questions in the study of direct democracy is why countries introduce it in the first place. This question is worth exploring if only because such a reform of decision-making cannot take place without representation, since it is the parliament that legislates on the institutions of the MDDs. We find that usually a political-social crisis situation is behind the institutionalisation of I&R: it could be a serious domestic political crisis, a democratisation transition, or a process of national independence (Schiller 2013). In such situations, it may make sense for representative actors to transfer the decision-making power and responsibility to the electorate. On the one hand, the decision taken in this way has a much stronger legitimacy than the one taken through representative process, and also gives the initiating politician a kind of extra democratic character. On the other hand, this kind of socialisation of the conflict at stake can contribute to a wider social debate, and is a form of mediation between opposing views. Finally, a referendum can also be useful for a political force because it can be used as a kind of political weapon against other parties and institutions (for details on all this see Bjørklund, 1982).

While there has been a lot of research on individual referendums or groups of referendums in the past decades, and as we have seen above, there is also literature on the specifics of the introduction of MDD, with a few exceptions, there has been little research on the impact of I&R (e.g. Matsusaka 2014, Papadopoulos 2001). This is all the more striking because since the turn of the millennium, measuring democracy has become a major focus of comparative politics and democracy studies. A plethora of indices have been created to examine and compare the degree of democracy, democratic or non-democratic institutions, the nature of democracy in each country, and so on. However, to date, there has been little examination of direct democracy in this direction. Mainstream works on constitutional law are mainly concerned with the limitations of direct democracy, its compatibility with representative institutions and its supposed threat to human rights, or with highly detailed positivist analyses of how referendums can or cannot be initiated or held. Political science analyses are mainly concerned with campaigning, agenda-setting, communication, political mobilisation and the public policy implications of individual referendums.

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to the four-party referendum in 1989, there were two referendums on hospital privatisation and dual citizenship in 2003-2004 (2004), and a social referendum against the government's proposed reforms (2008), which began in 2006 during a protracted political crisis.

<sup>2</sup>The opposite of CI-MDD is TD-MDD, Top-Down Mechanisms of Direct Democracy, which includes plebiscites initiated on the basis of individual deliberation by representative actors, as well as binding referendums resulting from legal obligations.

Compared to these standard analyses, David Altman's approach is particularly innovative: one important feature of his Direct Democracy Practice Potential (DDPP) index is that, unlike the usual "representative or direct democracy" approach, it focuses not on how dangerous a referendum is or whether voters are competent on a particular issue, but on how accessible MDD institutions are in principle (by law) and in practice (by procedure) (Altman 2017). Altman examines the institution in two dimensions: on the one hand, how easy it is to initiate a referendum in a given country (triggering), and on the other hand, how likely it is that a referendum will achieve its purpose and bring about change, either in policy or in general political terms (achieving the purpose, Altman 2017).

This two-dimensional analysis should be extended on the basis of the Hungarian experience. The resulting analytical framework has three aspects: ability to initiate (triggering), decisiveness, and predictability. Triggering is the same as Altman's first criterion, and shows whether MDD institutions are available in a given country, and if so, which institutions and under what conditions and with what details. Decisiveness, although at first sight a tautological criterion, is of real importance: it refers to whether the MDD in question really puts the decision in the hands of the electorate or whether there is an additional actor (e.g. parliament) that can overrule the decision taken by referendum or give it substance. Predictability is primarily a procedural and enforcement aspect, and refers to the ability of MDDs initiated by citizens or other actors to successfully pass through the relevant procedural stages, i.e. both initiators and voters can be sure that each initiative will be treated in the same way and will have the opportunity to finally decide on the issue by a popular vote (Unger 2019).

Decisiveness and predictability somewhat cover Altman's second aspect, but this separation is important for two reasons. Firstly, because the rules of initiative and referendum may differ from country to country, even if they are identical in their main features. A good example is the Hungarian case: citizens have the right to initiative, an institution available in relatively few countries. However, unlike in other countries, the Hungarian initiative is not a specific draft law, but only a mandate for the parliament to legislate on the issue in question. We saw a quite similar situation in the case of Brexit: although the parliament made a referendum possible by law, this decision could not affect the sovereignty of the parliament, and the British electorate could not oblige the House of Commons to decide how to leave the EU. On the other hand, unlike representative elections, the procedures surrounding popular votes (I&R and plebiscites, too) are much less regulated in many countries (campaign rules, opportunities for stakeholders, information for voters, etc.). Although I&R are in fact part of voting rights, in most countries the rules related to referendums are not derived from a voting rights approach, but from the relationship between representative and direct decision-making, usually involving the most detailed restrictions on direct decision-making (Unger 2022b).

In the analysis I will examine the 1988-89 and the 2022-23 initiatives and, in addition to the three aspects mentioned above, I will also consider the stability of the existing political system, i.e. whether any of the crisis phenomena mentioned by Schiller are present in Hungary in the given period. The main criterion for the selection of the 1988-89 initiative is that it was the subject that transformed the referendum issue from a matter of intellectual-political debate to a matter of national importance and general public interest. Few people seemed to be interested in the principle of introducing I&R; while the sheer possibility (demand) of a referendum on a key environmental and energy policy issue has become an important issue for millions. In this respect, the period 2022-23 is very similar to 35 years ago: an essentially public policy-like and economic issue becomes absolutely political, and it is, as it was in 1988-89, both an environmental and an energy policy issue. Another similarity between the two periods is that the Hungarian political-constitutional system can be classified as a non-democratic system, although it is true that there are clear views on the 1988-89 period, while the current period is more controversial.

# CAN THERE BE DEMOCRACY WITHOUT PARTICIPATION? ON ELECTORAL ABSENTEEISM AND THE CHRONIC CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION IN ROMANIA

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## ABSTRACT

Most of the definitions of democracy encompass three key elements at their core: pluralism, participation, and free and fair elections. In one of the most well-known theorizations of democracy, Robert Dahl proposes two dimensions of democratization, later essential for the survival and evolution of democratic regimes: participation and public contestation. They create the basis on which free and fair electoral processes are organized, which subsequently generate stable, legitimate, and representative political institutions. A low voter turnout, therefore, essentially affects the quality of political representation and can generate unstable political institutions, whose activity becomes harmful to society over time.

This paper analyzes how electoral absenteeism impacts the quality of political representation in Romania, by referring to a series of recent developments in the party system and the accompanying governmental instability that has become entrenched lately. The analysis covers the two most recent rounds of parliamentary elections in Romania, from 2016 and 2020, which recorded the lowest voter turnout in the last three decades. The main findings show that absenteeism, which is rooted in Romanian voters' behavior (at least where the parliamentary elections are concerned) directly influences the emergence and the electoral success of new political actors of more radical persuasions, while at the same time contributing to government instability. The paper attempts to answer what does all this entail for the future prospects of Romanian democracy. Is this backsliding inevitable in post-transition systems or is it merely a feature of the Romanian case that both voters and representatives have grown complacent to?

## INTRODUCTION. SHORT LITERATURE REVIEW

Elections are the epicenter of contemporary democracy and voting is the single most common but important act of participation (Dahl, 1971; Sartori, 1987; Aldrich, 1993). It is through this process that the evolution of democratic society can be changed or inefficient or unpopular leaders or governments can be replaced with more suitable alternatives. A low voter turnout is usually seen as an indicator of the problems that contemporary democracies are challenged with, suggesting that "fewer citizens consider elections the main instrument for legitimizing political parties' control over political decision-making" (Leterme, 2016: 9).

The increase or decrease in the number of citizens participating in the polls is a good indicator of the degree of consolidation of a democracy, of citizens' interest in politics, as well as of the trust they have in state institutions. Obviously, there are many factors that can affect voter turnout, both in a positive or a negative way. Among the most important factors that influence citizens' electoral participation are the interest in politics, the sense of civic duty, the voters' relationship with the political space, but also the mobilization of citizens by parties or candidates. In addition to that, the perceived importance of an election (here, we refer to the classification of elections in two main categories: first-order elections and second-order elections) of how decisive the results are expected to be can boost or drop voter turnout (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984).

Approaching this research subject from different other perspectives, scholars have argued that countries with smaller populations tend to register higher voter turnout (Stockemer, 2017), that turnout will be higher when political parties spend more money on their electoral campaigns, or that turnout boosts when the outcomes of an election are expected to be very close (Cancela and Geys, 2016). Other variables that influence voter turnout are education (Verba et al., 1995; Nie et al., 1996), community size (Remmer, 2010) or specific contexts from the election day, such as weather conditions (Persson et al., 2014). There is also extensive research linking participation with the type of electoral system used, and arguing that proportional representation, while generating or maintaining political fragmentation, also boosts turnout (Rae, 1967; Powell, 1980; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Blais and Carty, 1990; Fink-Hafner and Novak, 2022).

### **ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION - THE ROMANIAN CASE**

Electoral participation in Romania has registered a dramatic decline in the last two decades, especially for parliamentary elections. The refusal of voters to participate in the polls and, therefore, the loss of support offered by them to politicians represents a serious danger for the quality of democracy in Romania, which, 35 years after the fall of the communist regime, is still insufficiently consolidated or, more precisely, “partially consolidated”, as the latest Freedom House report shows (Freedom House, 2023).

According to official data from the 2020 parliamentary elections, in Romania there are 18.19 million citizens with the right to vote, and of these, only 31.84% participated in the elections. (Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority, 2020). The voter turnout basically had a downward trajectory from 1990 to the present. If in 1990 (it is true, in the first free elections after the fall of the communist regime) more than 85% of voters participated in the polls, in 1992 and 1996 their number dropped to 76%, in 2000 it reached 65%, in 2004 it was 58%, and in 2008 it fell below 50% for the first time, reaching the alarming rate of 39.2% (Ivănescu, 2023). In the 2012 parliamentary elections, there was only a slight increase in voter turnout, which barely exceeded the 40% threshold (41.76%), and four years later, in 2016, only 39.49% of Romanian voters turned out at the polls. The year 2020 marked the lowest turnout in Romania’s post-communist history. Only 31.94% of Romanians participated in the parliamentary elections and, even if the crisis generated by the coronavirus pandemic certainly exerted a certain influence on the participation rate, it has become increasingly clear that Romanian citizens are no longer motivated to vote for their representatives in the two chambers of the parliament.

Some scholars argue that this low interest of the Romanian electorate in voting can have several causes: the lack of major differences in terms of the political offer (similar political programs, which no longer differentiate between the ideological left and the right and which parties unable to represent the interests of certain groups); the lack of confidence of the electorate in the implementation of projects on the public agenda (the inability of the political class to implement major projects in sectors such as infrastructure, education, health, social assistance); abandoning of the references to the period of the communist regime, which in early ‘90s represented an important mobilizing factor for the electorate, to the detriment of comparisons with NATO or European Union member states (Deşliu, 2008: 306).

Compared to the year 2000, when a decrease in citizens’ interest in voting could already be observed, in 2020 voter turnout has halved. A possible explanation for this sharpening of the phenomenon of absenteeism can also be sought in the low level of partisan identification, a phenomenon that was generated both by the instability of parties on the political scene, especially in the first part of the ‘90s, but also by the appearance and disappearance of political formations, which prevented the formation and consolidation over time of a strong partisan identification. The switching of some politicians from one political party to another has also contributed to the decrease of voters’ trust in them and to the decrease of voter turnout.

Another factor that influences voter turnout is represented by the evaluations citizens make of political institutions and actors. Thus, the lack of trust in the Government or Parliament, or the negative evaluation of their activity negatively influences the turnout. The Standard Eurobarometer Survey 98, winter 2022-2023 showed that Romanian citizens’ trust in political parties, in the government and parliament is extremely low and is decreasing compared to 2022. Thus, at the beginning of 2023, only 27% of Romanians declared that they trust political parties (compared to 36% a year ago), 23% of citizens trust the parliament and 21% trust the government (Eurobarometer 98, 2023). Most recently, an opinion poll carried out in the second part of January 2024 shows



that the confidence of Romanian citizens in the government remained as low (21%), while the confidence in the parliament, president and political parties decreased even more: only 17% of Romanians declare that they still trust the parliament and only 14% in the president and the political parties (Euronews Romania, 2024).

In November 2023, INSCOP Research, one of the most well-known public opinion research institutions in Romania, published an analysis on the level of trust of Romanian citizens in the main institutions of the state, compared to the situation recorded a decade ago, in 2013. The Army and the Church are the institutions in which Romanians have the most trust: 70.4% of them trust the Army (compared to 65.4% in 2013) and 62.5% trust the Church (compared to 65.2% in 2013). The Presidency enjoys the trust of 29.8% of Romanians (compared to 25.8% in 2013), and the Government, with 19.4% trust (compared to 34.8% in 2013) and the Parliament, with 17.4% trust (compared to 26.7% in 2013) (INSCOP Research, 2023).

## **THE 2016 AND 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA AND**

### **THEIR POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES**

The analysis of the results of the two rounds of parliamentary elections shows that absenteeism, which is already a phenomenon rooted in the electoral behavior of Romanian voters, (at least where the parliamentary elections are concerned) directly influences the emergence and the electoral success of new political actors of more radical persuasions, while at the same time contributing to government instability.

The Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD) and the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL) are the two political parties that have dominated the Romanian political landscape in the last three decades. Their constant presence in the Parliament or in the government ruling majorities positioned them as the main political forces of Romania, situated at the center-left, respectively center-right part of the ideological line.

Since 2016, there have been some rearrangements on the Romanian political scene, that have brought to attention two new political formations, one that has first entered parliament after the 2016 elections and one that emerged more recently, after the 2020 elections. The first one is the Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România, USR), which appeared as a second conservative party in Romania, as an alternative to PNL and gained a fast popularity mostly due to their strong anti-corruption discourse, this being a systematically sensitive issue for the country. USR entered the parliament for the first time in 2016, with 8.9% of the vote share, but almost doubled their electoral score in 2020, after they merged with another smaller and more recently founded party, Liberty, Unity, and Solidarity Party - PLUS (Partidul Libertate, Unitate și Solidaritate). PLUS was founded only two years earlier, in 2018, by former Prime-minister Dacian Cioloș and first allied with USR in February 2019, in order to put up a stronger candidate list for the European Parliament Elections in May 2019.

The constant fragmentation of the Romanian party system led, however, to another surprising development: after the 2020 parliamentary election, the far-right, populist, nationalist Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, AUR) entered the Parliament, with 9.1% of the vote share, making it the first far-right parliamentary party in Romania since the Greater Romania Party, which had around 20% of the vote share in 2000, was the largest opposition party and proposed a candidate for Romanian Presidency, Corneliu Vadim-Tudor, who managed to reach the second round of presidential elections in 2000. AUR presents itself as a conservative party, in opposition to the established parties and proposes a populist, extremist, nationalist rhetoric, further contributing to the fragmentation and polarization of the Romanian party system.

One possible observation would be that both USR and AUR managed to enter parliament as a direct result of the electoral system. The closed-list proportional representation system is known to favorize the representation of smaller, newly formed or even extremist parties, that would experience great difficulty in entering the parliament when a type of majority electoral systems is used. Also, the high rate of absenteeism would be another factor that contributed to those parties' results in their first parliamentary election. As large parts of the electoral body chose not to vote, especially being unsatisfied with the trend of the Romanian democracy, the activity of the government and not trusting the political parties anymore, the smaller parts of the voters who were convinced by the newly formed parties meant, at the end, more than 5% of the total vote share, surpassing the threshold and ensuring that both parties would gain seats in the Parliament. A higher turnout and a better mobilization of the electorate from the two biggest parties would have probably meant that none of the new parties would have succeeded in entering the parliament in 2016 and 2020 respectively.

The difference between the turnout in local elections from 2016 and 2020 was of only 2% of the votes: 46.67% of the voters participated in the local elections from 2020, compared to 48.17% in 2016 (Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority, 2016, 2020; Ivănescu, 2022). However, turnout in parliamentary elections dropped from 39.49% in 2016 to 31.94% in 2020 and, while the COVID pandemic may have an influence in that case, the fact that local elections, held in September 2020, were practically not affected by the pandemic, would rather suggest that the more relevant factor which influenced the turnout was the populations' extended disappointment with political parties, the government, and the parliament.

The fragmentation and instability of the party system has led to the fact that six political parties entered Parliament in 2016 and five parties did so in 2020. Only four of those parties were present in both legislatures: PSD, PNL, UDMR and USR (though, in 2016, URS entered the Parliament on its own, while in 2020 it has already merged with PLUS, which offers a first explanation for the much-improved electoral score, from 8.9% to 15.4%). The two smallest parliamentary parties from 2016, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (Alianța Liberalilor și Democraților, ALDE), and People's Movement Party (Partidul Mișcarea Populară, PMP), which obtained 5.6% and 5.4% of the votes share, did not manage to maintain themselves in Parliament in 2020. With only 4.8% of the votes share, PMP was very close to entering Parliament in 2020, but failed to do so. ALDE practically dissolved itself and it recently was absorbed by PNL, from which it was formed by rupture back in 2015.

The presence of AUR in the Romanian Parliament was the big surprise of the 2020 elections, when the newly formed party managed to obtain almost 10% of the votes cast. Advocating for the unification of Romania with Republic of Moldova and with a rhetoric based on four major concepts of nationalist far right parties, family, fatherland, faith, and freedom, AUR is a party very similar to the Polish PiS of the Hungarian Jobbik, which managed to surpass former parliamentary parties, like PMP or ALDE and even older and more established parties, like UDMR. 30% of its votes came from Romanians in diaspora, for whom the nationalist and populist rhetoric used by AUR proved to be a winning strategy. Most of the electoral polls did not predict such a high score for AUR, mainly because at the local elections held in September, the party scored under 1%. The low turnout from the parliamentary elections (with more than 15% lower than in the local elections) favored AUR, making it the fourth parliamentary force, after PSD, PNL and USR-PLUS.

Governmental instability is another effect of the low electoral turnout. In the last ten years (since 2014), Romania had 17 people serving as prime-ministers and 13 changes of government. This is a direct effect of the fragmentation of the party system and the instability of political parties, which are unable to hold durable alliances in parliament. For example, after the 2020 elections, even if PSD won the elections (gaining 28.9% of the votes), the party was unable to form a ruling majority (AUR not being a preferred possible alliance partner), so a parliamentary majority was formed by PNL, USR-PLUS and UDMR (who won 25.2%, 15.4% and 5.7% respectively). After less than one year, in November 2021, USR left the government, after many disagreements with PNL, and after the Ministry of Justice, Stelian Ion, was dismissed. URS threatened PNL with a vote of no confidence, which eventually led to the fall of the government, with the support of PSD, who voted in favor of the no confidence motion. In the beginning of November 2021, PSD and PNL started to discuss about a possible coalition. This was confirmed by the Parliament by the end of the month, starting the National Coalition for Romania, during which both parties agreed to rotate their presidents as prime ministers: Nicolae Ciucă, from PNL, would hold this role from December 2021 to June 2023, and Marcel Ciolacu, from PSD, would take his place from June 2023 until the next parliamentary elections, from late 2024.

It remains to be seen if the PSD-PNL coalition will continue after the local, presidential, and parliamentary elections which will take place in 2024. Representatives from both parties stated, on different occasions, that the continuation of the cooperation is possible, even if experts argue that it is more likely that the two parties will return to their old rivalry. However, with the growing danger posed by an AUR which is believed to double its electoral score from 2020, the continuation of the PSD-PNL coalition does not seem too unlikely. Also, with AUR entering Parliament, describing itself as a somewhat Eurosceptic party, in favor of Europe of nations, Romania is experiencing a trend which is already rooted deep in European politics: the emergence of populist radical right-wing parties. The intensification of this trend or, on the contrary, its containment, is dependent on the result of the 2024 elections, both at national and European level, and of European Union's capacity to effectively respond to those challenges.

# **DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS IN WAR-TORN UKRAINE: A BEACON FOR POST-NEO-LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The ongoing armed conflict with Russia has put Ukraine in an unprecedented position, necessitating adaptive governance. While many might anticipate a retreat to centralized authority, especially within neoliberal frameworks that traditionally prioritize such responses during crises, Ukraine's experience challenges these assumptions. Remarkably, the country has shown an inclination towards democratic innovations, even amidst the turmoil of war.

Rather than restricting democratic spaces, Ukraine has expanded them by adopting various tools, such as participatory budgeting and e-government solutions. These strategies defy conventional neoliberal thinking, promoting grassroots involvement at a time when centralization might seem more intuitive. Such innovations in Ukraine raise compelling questions: How have these democratic strategies endured war pressures? What insights might they offer for other contexts grappling with challenges to democratic governance? Furthermore, can Ukraine's journey inspire re-imaginings of governance structures in a post- neoliberal world?

This paper, while modest in its scope, aims to shed light on Ukraine's adaptive governance mechanisms. Through this lens, it offers reflections on the potential for democratization processes to persist and adapt under adverse conditions. The Ukraine example beckons scholars and policymakers alike to rethink the potential trajectories of governance, especially in challenging contexts, and to envision a post-neoliberal future where democratic resilience takes centre stage.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Democracy, as a lot of other systems (e.g. economic, with its small, medium, and extended business cycles), should be observed through cyclic or wave dynamics (e.g. a famous Huntington's "wave theory"). There is no doubt that the dynamics of democratic changes have many examples of breaking, improving, or failing processes. According to many scholars, today's world is living in a period of a "democratic malaise" (Geissel&Newton 2011) or "democratic recession" that is affecting the entire world (Diamond 2015; Urbinati 2016). In practice, it is visible through a decline of trust in national governments and other political institutions, a drop in voter turnout, and a significant fall in citizen participation in public meetings and decision-making processes. As a result, according to the data provided by Freedom House - "democracy in the world has been in siege for the last 15 years."

Therefore, by analogy with economics, where one of the most effective instruments during a downturn is investments in innovations, democracy for recovery and further changes also needs a straightforward approach. Innovation, in general, is the implementation of better solutions that meet new requirements or current needs (Maryville 1992). In a democracy, innovations could be in the form of new or essentially streamlined practices, processes, services, technologies, models, or approaches completely available to governments and society. The main goal of such a "product" is to improve the quality of the democratic system at any level or to create good conditions to transition to democracy. It does not mean that the offered solutions should always be new and

never have been used before. Democratic innovation (henceforth DI) in a particular country or region could be “exported”, reinvented, or copied from other regions. In this case, the newness is that the offered “product” is new (or implemented in a new, more effective way) for this particular country.

It might be expected that all types of DI are pretty universal. A similar effect could be achieved anywhere by exporting DI from the democratic context where it has been proved. Nevertheless, without democratic institutions, creating a long-lasting process of complex democratic changes is impossible. Thus, even some types of DI could be implemented in authoritarian realities, and the general impact will be somewhat vague.

The picture looks quite different in the situation with hybrid regimes. The democratic institutes here exist but need essential efforts to be improved. Particularly here, if implemented effectively, DI could strengthen citizenship and enhance the whole process of democratisation. At the same time, implementation could be more complex than for stable democracies. All actors implementing DI in such realities should be very sensitive, as if DI fails, citizens and other interlocutors will not trust them more. Therefore, it can erode immature democratic institutions, and the whole process of democratisation could be postponed. Additionally, citizens could question the efficiency of democracy in general and, consequently, ask for non-democratic solutions. The widespread impact can vary when implementing, depending on the type of DI, level of implementation, and the realisation process.

Nevertheless, analysing existing cases and their implementation around the globe, I am arguing that particularly participatory budgeting (henceforth PB), due to its positive impact on citizenship and local democracy, should be one of the first types of DI that hybrid regimes applied. Unlike many other democratic innovations at the local level, participatory budgeting covers all stages of the decision-making process: setting up funding priorities through deliberation, decision-making, and co-implementation, accompanied by monitoring and control (Khutkyy 2017).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in late February 2022, has had a catastrophic impact on the socio-economic fabric of the country. According to the World Bank, the GDP plummeted by approximately 30% in 2022 alone). This dramatic decline in economic output reflects the extensive damage and disruption caused by the conflict. The human cost of the war has been equally devastating. An additional 7.1 million Ukrainians were projected to fall into poverty, effectively setting back the nation’s poverty reduction objectives by 15 years. This surge in poverty levels is a direct consequence of the widespread destruction and economic stagnation (“Ukraine Overview,” World Bank).

Additionally, Ukraine’s exports faced considerable setbacks due to Russian blockades on Ukrainian seaports. These ports are pivotal conduits for the nation, managing nearly 90% of Ukraine’s grain and oilseed exports. The blockade severely disrupted these critical export channels, exacerbating the economic crisis (Hillman and McCalpin, 2022). the most immediate and palpable impact of this conflict was the unprecedented movement of people. As per data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), by 25 May 2023, Ukraine had approximately 5.1 million IDPs.

Nevertheless, despite all losses, Ukrianian local communities show grat resistance to the crisis and attempts to centralization of all decision-makingprocess during the martial law in country. One of the crucial factor for this that starting from 2014 (after “Revolution of dignity”) Ukraininan society is characterized by bigger numbers of meaningful cases of participation and deliberation among citizens. For example, from 2014, Ukraine has had a tremendous positive shift in democratic innovations implementation, mainly participatory budgeting and digital participation. For instance, according to the Participatory budgeting world atlas, Ukraine was the fifth country in the world that implements PB on a national level and ranked fourth in Europe in PB cases number (about 4,65% of the total number of PB cases in Europe) (Participatory budgeting world atlas 2020). Furthermore, according to Digital Democracy Database (Khutkyy 2021), among 50 European countries, Ukraine had the most extensive number of digital democracy instruments on the national level – 60.

This paper’s main goal is to analyse the particular impact PB as a type of DI has on local democracy. Even though PB was started in Brazil in the late 1980s and is a well-studied phenomenon, the vast majority of researchers are

concentrated on some theoretical dimensions of the PB process or on showing up advantages and disadvantages of PB based on particular local cases. There is a definite lack of research covering PB more complexly, showing its specific impact. This article aims at closing this gap by answering the following question: what impacts does PB have on local democracy in a situation when democratic institutions are weak and inefficient especially during the military conflict?

My reasons in this paper are developed over three main sections. In the first section, I distinguish PB's importance within a hybrid regime. Later, its impact on local democracy is analysed. Moreover, this section describes the research design, and the case selection and research methods used are explained. Further, the empirical results of participatory budgeting in Ukraine are presented, and research hypotheses are checked. In the last section, I present conclusions to the paper and potential future research directions.

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

PB was started in Brazil, where it has had its history of success by empowering citizens, including members of impoverished communities, since the late 1980s (Oxfam 2006). Most scholars (Miller et al. 2017; Bland 2017; Calabrese et al. 2020 etc. ) agree that the essence of participatory budgeting is to allow people to identify, discuss and select projects for further funding from public funds; therefore, it allows them to make objective decisions about how local funds should be spent.

Participation in PB can provide social cohesion between individuals from different backgrounds, and some "community building" (Fishkin 2011; Pin 2017). It helps to clarify controversies among citizens and justify their decisions. Thus, the process of PB and its results can be accepted as legitimate (potentially at all three levels of legitimacy: input, throughput, and output). This is crucial for hybrid regimes where authorities need legitimacy to demonstrate their stability, necessity, and rightness. Moreover, the possibility of participating in the decision-making process became necessary for achieving legitimacy (Bachmann 2004, p. 24).

Additionally, PB can have a significant and positive educational effect (Cooke 2000). Participation in this process produces "civic virtue", which can be understood as the "creation of more active, informed and cooperative citizens with more developed "democratic capabilities"" (Worthington, Rask, Minna 2013, p.51).

PB creates the space for participants to present their views on how their school/district/city/region/country should be improved, enhance participation and increase the general quality of the decision-making. Therefore, a well-developed PB can create interpersonal and political trust, improve communication and information flows, increase satisfaction levels with public services, promote accountability and transparency, and tackle corruption (Beuermann and Amelina; Asen 2017; Festenstein 2005; Volodin 2019; Shah 2007). In addition, it should be underlined that the current PB incorporates many digital tools in the design and implementation of the processes. My objective was to explore the specific outcomes achievable in various political environments, particularly focusing on hybrid regimes. The first part of this study, initiated in early 2022, involves an analysis of participatory budgeting (PB) in Ukraine over the period from 2015 to 2021. The primary aim here was to test the hypothesis that in Ukraine, participatory budgeting substantially and positively influences local-level democracy.

The second part of the study is dedicated to examining the period of intensified Russian aggression from 2022 to 2023. In this segment, I aimed to investigate how democratic tools have withstood the pressures of war.

To address these questions and test the hypothesis, this study employed a mixed methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative aspect involved collecting and analyzing data from various sources such as the public services portal, municipal websites, existing e-participatory budgeting platforms, and social media. The qualitative analysis was pivotal in understanding the nuances of the PB process, highlighting differences and similarities, and elucidating the main stages of the PB cycle. This comprehensive approach facilitated the gathering of community-level statistics, data on participatory budgeting funding, submission and voting statistics, and insights into regularities within the PB process.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

In analysing the impact of the PB on local democracy, two different types of impact should be considered. Firstly, it is a program-level impact - PB's impact on the people who directly participate in the process (preparing projects, participation in expert commission, voting, etc.). Secondly, a community-level impact is an impact that all elements of the PB process have on a specific population (community, town, region. etc.).

I have defined several areas of the local democracy most influenced by PB and proposed metrics on how impact could be measured. For that purpose, the theoretical apparatus of de Sousa, da Cruz & Fernandes's, and Khutkyy & Avramchenko's works have been adapted and applied (the scheme will be presented as Annex).

To evaluate the potential impact, received data on PB was managed by statistical analysis: descriptive statistics, dispersion analysis, non-parametric correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

The time of the study as stated above include two periods: first covers 2015–2021 and covers all PB competitions in the studied cities. Due to the different timing of competitions, a single approach was used to identify them in the study - they were taken into account when voting for projects. The second one is based on the data received for 2022-2024 and covers all available cases related to PB implementation.

Most of the data that have been used to study the impact is based on results of Ukrainian Municipal Surveys conducted by the International Republican Institute in the regional capitals of Ukraine not occupied by Russian or Russian-backed forces with more than 17,000 respondents sample size. Unfortunately, the impact has been measured only for the first period (2015-2021) as for the second we don't have necessary data (after the full scale aggression has started).

[ ... ]

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# VOTING PREFERENCES OF THE TRANSITIONAL LOSERS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM SERBIA

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## ABSTRACT

Economic crises create specific social conditions that affect voter preferences and behaviors. The Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008 spilled over to Serbia a year later, causing a major shock to the fragile Serbian economy, already burdened by wars and international isolation of the 1990s, along with inequalities and uncertainties caused by the late transition. Subsequent elections brought the collapse of the post-2000 political consensus, with many liberal and social democratic parties never recovering and moreover the party system being dominated by the populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) from there on. Main hypothesis of this manuscript stipulates that the 2008 crisis cemented the pool of transitional losers composed of low skilled workers, unemployed, low educated, rural, and elderly populations, providing continuous support for the SNS ever since. Authors will examine whether their socioeconomic status still replicates to the SNS votes, even though the party has been in power for almost 12 years. This would mean that the old economic traumas are still relevant for directing the voter preferences. Authors will employ the findings from the nationwide public opinion surveys.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 20th century, numerous studies have demonstrated the impact of sociodemographic factors on voters' decisions, with some specifically focusing on the relationship between the economic status or class position of voters and their political preferences. Meanwhile, the modern world has undergone seismic changes: the number of democracies has increased, economies have become interconnected, classes have become more fluid, and crises from distant places have started to affect the globalized world more than ever before. In that period, socialist countries of the former Eastern Bloc have entered an era of transition and rapid adoption of capitalism, along with democratic reforms. Besides obvious benefits and economic growth, this has brought about the escalation of social inequalities, the loss of state-provided privileges, the decomposition of existing classes, and exposure to global competition and global shocks. Further down the road, both developed democracies and former socialist countries in Europe and elsewhere were equally strongly affected by the aftermath of the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis, which came after almost two decades of growth. This crisis was characterized by high unemployment, income declines, cuts in social benefits, but also pronounced fear of losing the social status and a consequent decline of trust in business and especially political elites (Owczarek, 2017). All of that provided a favorable social framework for populist politicians: the rise of Donald Trump in the United States or Brexit politicians in the United Kingdom can be related to the economic crisis. Central and Eastern Europe proved to be particularly fertile ground for populists during this period, so much so that authors spoke of a "populist belt" stretching from the Baltic to the Mediterranean Sea (see: Eiermann, Mounk & Gultchin, 2017).

The transition in former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe has affected large parts of these societies, leaving many groups at the mercy of economic and social forces they did not always understand. The immense societal stratification during this period inevitably produced winners and losers of the reforms, and the later Global Financial Crisis revealed the losers that growth has its limits and that promises and hopes for a better tomorrow may never reach them. These grievances and frustrations shaped their electoral behavior. The impact of these groups on political outcomes has been explored in a number of case studies within the post-socialist framework, although seldom with the focus on Serbia.

This is particularly intriguing because the country is one of the first where a populist party (Serbian Progressive Party, srb. Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) won the elections right after the crisis, retaining its grip on power to this day. The authors of this study argue that this party consistently gathers its support by exploiting the unified voice of those left behind in the transition process, which in Serbia began in full swing very late compared to other former socialist states: practically only with the overthrow of the Slobodan Milošević regime at the end of the year 2000. The subsequent chapters of the study will delve into the theoretical framework of economic voting, with a particular focus on transitional losers, as well as the dynamics of the relationship between populist parties, voters, and the crisis. We will then establish a hypothetical framework for the study, present the methodology and data sources, as well as the models with which we will examine the socio-economic structure of the SNS support, and the impact of transitional losers' vote in Serbia.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECONOMIC VOTING AND THE TRANSITIONAL LOSERS**

A series of studies have identified the impact of voters' economic status on the decisions they make at the polls, particularly concerning the choice between ruling and opposition parties, or, in ideological terms, between right-wing and left-wing parties (for an extensive review of the 20th century literature on the subject, see: Miller, 1997). One of the later studies (Leigh, 2005) illustrates that the divide between political parties in developed Western democracies is particularly pronounced in three sociodemographic dimensions: between the young and the old, between the wealthy and the poor, and between native and foreign-born citizens. The theory gained a new momentum with the examination of the economic voting hypotheses in former communist countries, which, in a rapid process of transition, underwent significant socioeconomic stratification, creating a new constellation of social classes. An influential study conducted within the framework of argumentatively most successful post-socialist economies (Fidrmuc, 2000) noted significant differences in terms of voting preferences related to the experiences of certain demographic groups with transformational reforms during the 1990s, clearly delineating a distinction between the young, educated, entrepreneurs, and urban population on one hand, and the unemployed, pensioners, manual and agricultural workers, on the other. Incidentally, the connection between unemployment and strong voting preferences has been identified over the broader European sample (see: Algan et al., 2017).

This brings us to the concept of transitional losers, the individuals or groups who experience negative consequences during the process of societal transformation. These drawbacks can include economic hardships, loss of social status, and the protracted feeling of being left behind in the evolving socio-political landscape. In academic literature, this concept emerges in the context of post-socialist transformation, forming part of the narrative of social distinction. Primarily associated with the discourse of reforms in Russia and the concept of individual well-being as the primary criterion distinguishing winners from losers early in the transformational processes, the term quickly expanded to encompass all other countries with a similar circumstances (see: Danilova, 2014). Specifically, the notion of transitional losers is linked to the inequality caused by tectonic changes in the wage structure after market reforms, i.e., after the abolition or significant reduction of centrally determined wage levels. This led to wage disproportions and subsequent social status disparities (see: Brainerd, 1998). Apart from the case study of the Russian Federation, a similar phenomenon has been academically explored in countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and East Germany, where it has been associated with other significant demographic factors like education, urban-rural divides, or age (see also: Brainerd, 1998:1095).

A detailed study of five Central European countries (Mateju, 2012) confirmed these findings. According to this paper, the common determinant of the boundary between the subjective assessment of the status of winners and losers was, in fact, the age of respondents. A significantly smaller number of losers were identified in younger



cohorts, in contrast to the older ones, which mostly felt left behind. Additionally, the rural population, especially agricultural workers, and often families of manual workers tended to perceive their position in the transition as losing, as did unemployed respondents. Another case study from Latvia also found that transitional losers, in terms of a decline in personal income in the first five years of the transition, were most prevalent in demographic groups such as women, rural populations, and specifically for that Baltic country, members of the Russian minority (Titma, Tuma & Silver, 1999). Some research also identified women as transitional losers (see: Spehar, 2006). A paper examining the position of recipients of social benefits in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Russia over a ten-year transitional period revealed that the unemployed were the most common cohort of transitional losers. It also revealed that a decline in income was experienced by urban pensioners in all examined countries except Russia. Education, in the context of this study, proved to be another strong factor in terms of acquiring a higher social status during the transition (see also: Verhoeven, Jansen & Dessens, 2009).

### **POPULIST POLITICIANS AND THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS**

The impact of a crisis on the rise of populist tendencies within a society was among the first identified by Laclau (1977). Meanwhile, numerous authors have established the impact of economic crises on the consolidation, growth, and even the assumption of power by populist candidates and parties (see: Moffitt 2015; Hernandez & Kriesi 2016). Conventional wisdom suggests that during periods of economic difficulties, those currently in power tend to lose support, while opposition forces, often populist, tend to strengthen. This pattern can be replicated among social groups most affected by the crisis: presumably the unemployed, lower-educated, elderly, or rural populations are the ones who often find resonance with the narratives and communication of populist politicians.

There are some alternative explanations regarding class support for populists during times of crises, which put more emphasis on the subjective perception of threat to the current economic status. Exploring the surge of support for Donald Trump before the 2016 presidential elections, Mutz (2018) found that the key driver was an economic (but also cultural) threat to the collective social status of white, Christian men in the United States. A similar correlation between the subjective perception of social status and the likelihood of voting for the right-wing populist parties is identified across the panel of European countries by Gidron and Hall (2017). Their conclusions align with our earlier assertions about the strong impact of the crisis in 2007-2008 and beyond on the rise of populists, mostly in Central and Eastern Europe, especially when compared to the transformational crisis of the early 1990s. The harsh transformational reforms did not produce many populists and seldom led them to electoral successes, in stark contrast with the 2007-2008 crisis. Simply put, the initial conditions in which citizens evaluated their position in 2008 were better, subjective status and the potentials for loss were higher, hope was greater, and as a result, the crisis served as a more significant threat to voters' status than the post-socialist transformation.

Furthermore, crises may not necessarily be economic but can also involve the malfunctioning of political institutions, or more recently, cultural identity crises, especially when it comes to the issues of immigration and integration in Western societies (see: Caiani & Graziano, 2021). However, these crises, although sometimes closely linked to economic shocks, are beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, given that populist parties are inevitably seen as products of political crises, we see these trends as supplementary, with economic problems only intensifying distrust towards existing political supply (Kriesi, 2015). Another long-established theory in political science tells us that lower social classes are more inclined to vote for political parties advocating for redistribution, i.e., left-wing parties, socialists, social democrats, labor parties, and the like. However, the shift of the left parties towards more moderate center position at the end of the 20th century, primarily operationalized through the acceptance of the market consensus, also caused the detachment from redistributive policies and, therefore, from their working-class and union origins. These trends, coupled with the left's additional turn towards identity issues, social reform, and integration, has alienated the traditional voter base. While this has seen as the tactical repositioning towards more middle or higher class support, in the longer term it created a political demand for populists, especially after the 2007-2008 crisis and its aftermath, when the threatened lower classes no longer had a political representatives of the left they could trust (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). The populist right swept right into that vacant space on the political spectrum.

The neoliberal left, as the Beck (2006:271-274) calls the newly transformed social-democratic parties, quickly occurred all over the former Eastern Bloc as well. These parties were nominally founded on leftist positions during the democratic reforms, but soon turned to adopt neoliberal policies. Examples of such cases include the Hungarian Socialist Party, the Czech Social Democratic Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Party in Romania, the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania, the Socialist Party in Albania, and so on. Many of these actors implemented economic reforms or were in power at the time of the Global Financial Crisis, paying the price for their disconnection from the original voter base of lower social classes and, in some cases, almost completely losing legitimacy among those voters (Farkas, 2016:459). An illustrative example in this regard is seen in Hungary, where the need for integration into the global economic order led almost entire political spectrum to adopt neoliberal ideological positions regarding socioeconomic policies (Wilkin, 2016:23-49). As a result, the Hungarian Socialists lost the support of both manual workers and rural demographics. The earlier liberal, now populist-right Fidesz, as well as the far-right Jobbik, adeptly exploited the situation, offering voters simple and materialistic solutions, along with strong criticism of the economic consensus and often with an offer of a scapegoat for their difficulties. An analysis by Kreko & Juhasz (2017:87) demonstrated that more than a third of Jobbik's voters come from the former socialist voter base. Here, we witness a demonstration of the trend presented earlier: voters that traditionally supported the left (workers, pensioners, rural population) were disillusioned by the handling of the crisis and turned to the anti-elite, populist, often far-right nationalist parties, which then consolidated support in these social groups.

### **HYPOTHETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Our research builds upon the conclusions of previously outlined studies but focuses exclusively on Serbia, requiring brief contextual explanations. After the Yugoslav wars and international isolation in the 1990s, Serbia entered a belated but accelerated transition in 2000, resulting in extreme societal stratification. Various classes of transitional losers who were bypassed by the benefits of privatization, marketization, and social transfer cuts emerged soon. In line with previous studies, this group in Serbia also consists of the elderly, pensioners, manual workers, the unemployed, the uneducated and also rural populations.

In the aftermath of the regime change in Serbia in 2000, two distinct waves marked the emergence of transitional losers, manifested by a surge in unemployment. The initial wave materialized promptly following the advent of the new democratic government, who, by means of market liberalization and the disengagement of the state from the managerial structures of the economy, precipitated a notable escalation in the unemployment rate. The second, notably more intense wave transpired amidst the Global Financial Crisis, a period during which Serbia confronted the challenge with a historically low unemployment rate of merely 13.6%, which came as a recovery after the transformational crisis. Nevertheless, the global economic downturn disrupted the previously optimistic trajectory of diminishing unemployment, precipitating substantial workforce reductions and culminating in the highest recorded unemployment rate (25.9%) since the democratic reforms.

In the aftermath, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won the 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections. The right-center populist party consolidated power ever since, while the support for many of the democratic parties associated with the 2000-2012 transitional period of reforms declined very rapidly. Despite the perceived dominance of major ethnic and geopolitical issues in Serbian politics, the SNS builds its popularity, both in campaigns and beyond, mainly on materialistic positions, presenting itself as the defender of a broad front of disenfranchised classes (see: Pavlović and Stanojević, 2016). One of the early and rare studies addressing the socio-economic foundations of SNS support revealed that, as early as the 2012 elections, the main predictor of a municipality predominantly voting for this party was economic, operationalized in terms of employment and income levels (Pejković, 2012).

Our main hypothesis assumes that since the last economic crisis, almost the entire pool of social groups that can be defined as transitional losers has turned to voting for the SNS. Accordingly, this party has been mobilizing primary support among citizens of a weaker market position in transitional democracy: the older population, manual workers, pensioners, the uneducated, the unemployed, and rural populations. The hypothesis, therefore, posits that, although almost 15 years has passed since and the economic situation in Serbia is relatively stable (unemployment in 2022 stands at 9%), experience of the crisis continues to influence the SNS voters. Old so-

cio-economic traumas remain relevant for voter preferences even today, while the ruling party also frequently tends to remind the voters about the blunders of its political competitors who governed Serbia during the economic troubles.

## **METHODS AND DATA**

The study employs two datasets from two separate public opinion polls. First of them was conducted from 8 to 23 December 2022. To ensure a comprehensive and representative dataset, a Face-to-Face (F2F) data collection approach was employed. The study included a final sample size of 1,185 respondents, with the research targeting a confidence interval of  $\pm 2.8$  for events anticipated to have a 50% incidence rate.

The second study was conducted from 25 October to 5 November 2023, in the same manner (F2F, TAPI) and with the identical sampling strategy, stratification criterion, and weighting procedure as described above. A total of 1,202 respondents participated in the study.

## **INITIAL FINDINGS SUMMARY**

The notion of a predominant shift of transitional losers towards the SNS since the last economic crisis was supported by our analysis, emphasizing the enduring impact of past economic hardships on voting behavior. Older individuals, those with lower educational attainment, and rural residents displayed a higher propensity towards the SNS, while attitudes towards capitalism among transitional losers indicated a diminished preference, highlighting nuanced socio-economic and ideological relationships.

These findings align with existing theories and contribute to understanding voting patterns and the emergence of populist parties, with implications not only for Serbia but also for the broader Central and Eastern European region.

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# THE DEMAND SIDE OF POLITICAL PERSONALIZATION: UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS OF LEADER-CENTRIC VOTER PREFERENCES IN SERBIA

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## **ABSTRACT**

The rise of political personalization, characterized by an increasing emphasis on individual politicians over collective party affiliations, has become a prominent feature in contemporary politics. This shift in voters' perceptions of political dynamics underscores the growing significance of individual leaders in shaping participation, opinion formation, and voting intentions. While personalization is acknowledged as context-specific and reportedly on the ascent in Central and Eastern Europe, our understanding of this phenomenon within polarized political environments still needs to be improved. Furthermore, the absence of robust instruments for quantifying the prevalence of leader-centric voting further limits our comprehension. This paper examines personalization in the political landscape of Serbia. It explores the levels of personalization and scrutinizes the motivations driving the demand for leaders over parties. Our argument posits cognitive mobilization as a pivotal factor influencing the inclination to rely on leaders—a cognitive process whereby voters' capacity to reason and process information affects their proclivity towards shortcuts, such as placing trust in individual leaders. The paper leverages data from original surveys to empirically test this heuristical explanation of leader-over-party preferences, examining reasons behind specific party support, including the party leaders. In addition, it deploys an innovative technique that indirectly gauges personalization. This involves analyzing survey responses where individuals articulate their voting intentions in an open-ended question. Our analytical approach incorporates distinctive voting habits and political attitudes while controlling for standard socio-demographic factors. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the demand side of political personalization within polarized political environments, shedding light on the interplay of cognitive mobilization, individual preferences, and broader socio-political dynamics.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Personalization of politics is part of a more significant transformation of the political parties, characterized as a transformation from mass to catch-all parties (Katz and Mair, 1995). The transformation included decreased importance of ideological positions and increased professionalization of politics (including not only candidates and leaders but also the number of professionals included in politics). The ideological changes caused partial dealignment between parties and their constituencies (Dalton, 2006) and paved the way for different forms of identification, including the leader-based one (Costa Lobo, 2008). In addition, personalization had additional incentives, primarily the role of media in contemporary politics.

Personalization is the trend of increased importance of individual actors compared to collective ones: in this particular case, the personalization of politics is always at the expense of political parties. It also means that leaders matter more because parties have come to matter less, leaving room for other (short-term) factors to intervene in voting decisions (D. Garzia et al., 2022). Interestingly, personalization is not the only challenge to contemporary political parties, as social movements have challenged them and a wave of new parties, party-like actors, and anti-party parties (Schedler, 1997; Wood, 2021). These challenges sometimes generate a synergetic effect, emphasizing the changes in how politics is conducted.

In this paper, we observe personalization at the voter level and investigate the extent to which the main candidates of political parties affect vote choices (Zittel, 2017). Our argument posits cognitive mobilization as a pivotal factor influencing the inclination to rely on leaders—a cognitive process whereby voters’ capacity to reason and process information affects their proclivity towards shortcuts, such as placing trust in individual leaders. Quinlan and McAllister (2022) follow Inglehart (1997), assuming that increased education enables citizens to understand the complexities of politics without resorting to shortcuts such as relying on leaders. They also argue that a more ideologically polarized party system limits personalization; conversely, when ideological differences between parties are small, Quinlan and McAllister (2022) expect that leaders are likely to become more central. While personalization is acknowledged as context-specific and reportedly on the ascent in Central and Eastern Europe, our understanding of this phenomenon within polarized political environments still needs to be improved. As Pedersen (2023) argues, personalism is a time-specific situation. It should be investigated and measured across parties, as personalization may exist in some political parties at a given time but not in others.

## **EMPIRICAL STRATEGY**

The Serbian case is interesting as the electoral system (proportional vote, one electoral unit) promotes both parties and leaders/leadership, in contrast to candidates for MPs or local and regional branches. In other words, politics in Serbia is very centralized. Furthermore, the Serbian party system has been closest to Sartori’s (2002) model of the predominant party since 2014, as the ruling SNS (Serbian Progressive Party) has almost 50% of the votes and is led by popular leader Aleksandar Vucic (58,6% of votes in last presidential elections in 2022). Conversely, the opposition parties are atomized and in constant turmoil, making the political scene asymmetric. From the ideological perspective, the Serbian party system is centripetal, with blurred ideological positions. Based on the theoretical framework, the paper puts forward two hypotheses. Following the cognitive mobilization model, the more educated voters will have weaker leader preferences than the less educated. The literature also suggests that Serbia has undergone a significant polarization process, particularly since 2017 under Aleksandar Vučić. Based on the leadership style, the second hypothesis is that the supporters of the ruling SNS party have stronger leader preferences than other voters.

The empirical exploration of the factors driving the personalization of politics is complicated by hypothetical bias, where respondents exaggerate certain socially desirable preferences.

Admitting to relying on leadership shortcuts in evaluating politics might be seen as less desirable than appearing to have the capacity to compare and judge parties’ policies and values. This paper employs a unique empirical strategy to mitigate this bias, using two survey questions to compare stated and assumed preferences.

Two random phone surveys, representative of the Serbian population, were carried out in September (N=1544) and June 2023 (N=1063). In September, respondents were initially asked if they would participate in hypothetical parliamentary elections and were presented with a list of relevant political parties. Those who responded were directly asked why they would vote for that party and not others, with four options provided: policies, party leader, value proximity, and because the party is less bad than the others.

In the June survey, the respondents were also asked if they would vote in the hypothetical parliamentary elections, but the respondents were then not offered a list of parties, and they were asked, “Who would you vote for?” The surveyors were instructed to write down the respondent’s exact formulation in an answer. The answers were then coded as party leaders (e.g., Vučić, Đilas), political parties (e.g., SNS, SSP), or any other broader political constellation (e.g., the pro-European opposition, the ruling parties).

## MAIN FINDINGS

While respondents may not openly admit to voting based on the leader, their preferences may differ. Contrary to the structured, direct answers in the first model, the second model encourages unstructured, indirect responses, which can help uncover the underlying preferences of respondents. Interestingly, when directly asked, only one in five respondents said they would vote for the party because of the leader. However, when asked who they would vote for, without the options, more than half of the respondents mentioned the leader's name instead of the party's or any other name (Table 1). Even more strikingly, when analyzing the negative responses, where respondents said who they would not vote for, two-thirds said they would not vote for Vucic, and one-third said for the SNS or the ruling party.

<b>Table 1. Leader preferences</b>	<b>Direct question: "Why would you vote for that party and not others?"</b>	<b>Indirect question: "Who would you vote for?"</b>
Leader	10%	22%
Other	34%	21%
No answer	56%	57%
Total	100%	100%

Further, two logistic regressions were performed to assess the effects of standard socio-demographic variables (Gender, Age, Region, Education, Settlement type) and political preferences (voting for SNS or other parties) on the likelihood that respondents vote for the party leaders.

In the direct model, respondents from Southern Serbia, women, and those with less education have greater odds of voting for a party because of the leaders than party policies, values, or other reasons. In this model, political preferences are not statistically significant. In the indirect model, gender, educational, and regional differences have comparably high odds ratios for referring to a party leader in answering a question about their voting intention. However, the most important difference in the indirect model is that the odds for voting for leaders are 1.981 times greater for SNS supporters than for other parties.

## CONCLUSION

The findings support cognitive mobilization theory in explaining leader-centric voter preferences. Education is related to understanding the complexities of politics and resorting to shortcuts such as relying on leaders. However, findings also show that while education holds similar significance in different models, political preferences are significant only in the model in which attitudes are assessed indirectly.

The differences between the direct and indirect models, and the prominence of political preferences in the latter, points to two conclusions. The first relates to the polarized political environment, in which there is a strong asymmetry between a highly personalized dominant party and the rest of the political spectrum. In these circumstances, it could not only be said that the ruling party voters use cognitive shortcuts - they might be rationally assessing the hyper-centralized nature of policymaking in the party leader.

The second point that stems from the differences between the direct and indirect models is that even though voters might have leader-centric views, it is still more overall socially desirable to frame the advantages of the party in terms of policy or values. Even though the political environment has changed rapidly over the last decade in Serbia, the political parties have a legitimate role in shaping the political will of the citizens, while leaders still don't have such a role.

Finally, these findings also contribute to the methodological debate about the direct and indirect questions in survey design and the problem of low correlation. In this paper, the difference in how people respond to them is a useful analytical tool. In that respect, it also invites the discussion about the validity of findings based on direct questions about charged political topics.

# MANAGING THE GRUMBLES: HOW DO INTRA-PARTY DISSENT AND LEADER DOMINATION AFFECT SALIENCE STRATEGIES IN WESTERN EUROPE?

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## ABSTRACT

Rooted in the idea that political parties strategically emphasize issues advantageous to them while silencing topics that could favor their competitors, saliency theory (Budge and Farlie 1983) has long represented a magnifying glass into party competition. Despite continuous refinements, however, a critical gap persists in understanding the rationale informing party salience strategies. By relaxing the party-as-unitary-actor assumption, this paper argues that intra-party dissent significantly affects a party's issue attention profile. Specifically, parties facing internal dissent over an issue dimension, driven by the imperative to project unity and ensure survival, strategically lower the salience attributed to that divisive issue dimension. Nonetheless, its effectiveness hinges on the control party leaders wield over party strategy vis-à-vis activists. These arguments are tested through a series of OLS linear regression analyses, employing the latest wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES 2019) (Jolly et al. 2022), encompassing 15 Western European countries and 130 political parties. The findings suggest that higher levels of intra-party dissent on an issue dimension are associated with lower emphasis awarded to that issue dimension. Moreover, the evidence underscores the role of organizational characteristics in affecting party responsiveness to internal divisions and the notable distinction characterizing radical right parties vis-à-vis other party families.

## INTRODUCTION

As developed by (Budge and Farlie 1983), saliency theory features among the most prominent approaches to party competition. The theory claims that political parties selectively emphasize those issues on which they enjoy a reputational advantage. In turn, these often coincide with policy areas on which a party possesses a long history of "attention, initiative and innovation" (Petrocik 1996:826), constituting the core of its policy issue agenda. Over time, the literature has been increasingly devoted to elucidating the strategic considerations informing parties' decisions to either engage with or steer away from specific issues. For example, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015) have emphasized that parties are often limited in their ability to focus only on their own issues due to the presence of a broader party system agenda. In some cases, however, silencing an issue may represent the only viable option for a party. Challenged by opponents on an emerging issue, a party may deem it necessary to steer clear of it due to the risk of alienating its electorate (Rovny 2012) or compromising future coalition negotiations (Koedam 2021).

To be sure, those accounts widely overlook how internal party dynamics may ultimately affect the level of salience attributed to an issue or an issue dimension altogether. Doing so, the literature has disregarded the internal workings of a party as an invaluable vantage point for investigating party competition. Building on the theoretical assumption framing the party leadership and the activists as two conflicting groups struggling over the control of party strategy (Aldrich 1983; Kitschelt 1989; Miller and Schofield 2003; Schumacher et al. 2013), this study argues that intra-party dissent over an issue dimension significantly and negatively affects the salience attributed to that issue dimension. Firstly, leaders facing strong activists' discontent are incentivized to

steer public attention away from their divisions as voters may perceive these as an indication of unreliability to effectively implement the policy program put forward by the party (Greene and Haber 2015). Moreover, activists represent crucial labor and valuable personnel at leaders' disposal (Ceron 2012; Miller and Schofield 2003; Wagner and Meyer 2014). Refraining from acting upon a divisive issue, thereby ignoring disgruntled militants, may endanger their leadership role (Luebbert 1986) and ultimately favor party splits.

Furthermore, the findings add to recent insights treating party organizational characteristics as predictors of parties' varying responses to a range of (environmental) incentives (Koedam 2022; Schumacher and Giger 2018; Schumacher et al. 2013; Wagner and Meyer 2014). Notably, this study argues that whether leaders or activists exert greater control over party strategy significantly affects the party's responsiveness to intra-party dissent. Leadership-dominated parties – enjoying greater freedom of choice over policy choices vis-à-vis potential veto players – will be more effective in de-emphasizing a divisive issue dimension, as the hierarchical nature of the organization will facilitate internal decision-making procedures and substantially reduce risks of principled opposition (Pedersen 2012; Sanchez-Cuenca 2004).

Lastly, two interactive hypotheses are proposed concerning the role of party family in predicting differential responses to intra-party dissent. On the one hand, this study claims that Radical Right parties (RRPs) should be more successful in silencing internally divisive issue dimensions vis-à-vis other party families. Building on the literature depicting RRP leaders as strong charismatic figures (e.g. Mudde 2007; Pedahzur and Brichta 2002), it is argued that the uncompromised loyalty they exert towards the organization should ease changes in salience whenever internal disagreement arises. This is cross-checked against extant literature claiming leadership in RRP to lack intangible qualities required to manage the party's internal life (De Lange and Art 2011; Eatwell 2002).

These arguments are tested against unprecedented fine-grained measures on intra-party dynamics provided by the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al. 2022), through a series of OLS linear regression analyses with country fixed effects operationalized through country dummies and robust standard errors clustered by party. The cross-sectional analysis extends to 15 Western European countries and 130 political parties.

The paper is organized in the following manner. The subsequent two sections discuss the literature on issue salience and intra-party dynamics. After that, hypotheses are presented, followed by the research design and the analysis of the empirical results. Finally, a conclusion puts the findings in context and underscores potential limitations.

## **WHICH ISSUES DO PARTIES TALK ABOUT?**

Since Anthony Downs' seminal work (1957), there has been a flourishing of scholarly discussion about the mechanisms underpinning electoral competition. Inherent to the Downsian spatial model has been the idea of a 'confrontational mode' of party competition, for which parties contend voters by directly confronting their party opponents on every issue making up the political agenda. While still constituting the most structured theory of party competition (De Sio and Weber 2014), Downsian theory has come to face increasing scrutiny. One of the most influential challenges to the existing theory has been represented by saliency theory (Budge and Farlie 1983), which was later expanded by Petrocik's concept of issue ownership (1996). Far from arguing against their opponents – the theory argues – a party ignores them altogether while attempting to render salient its favorite issues, namely the ones on which it possesses a history of "attention, initiative and innovation" (Petrocik 1996:826). In short, issue prioritization rather than confrontation is claimed to govern party contestation.

Extant research has questioned some of those theoretical claims (see Dolezal et al. (2014) for an extensive review). For example, salience decisions may be shaped by voters' concerns, as parties could attempt to 'ride the wave' of public debate by focusing on those issues that are currently discussed by the voters and media (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Sides 2006; Wagner and Meyer 2014). Alternatively, parties may opt to emphasize only those issues integrating the concerns of their supporters with the preferences of the electorate at large (De Sio and Weber 2014). Lastly, rather than being fixed, parties' issue attention profiles may be influenced by other competitors' behavior (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Green-Pedersen 2007; Green-Ped-



ersen and Mortensen 2010; Meguid 2005). Common to this literature is the idea of a ‘party system agenda’ (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010, 2015) limiting the extent to which a party may evade specific issues, no matter how disadvantageous those appear to the party. Parties engage more with issues already discussed by their rivals – especially to those belonging to the same party family (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015) – as the election draws closer (Seeberg 2022), when facing competitive elections (Kaplan et al. 2006), as well as in response to media attention (Jones and Baumgartner 2005), public salience (Sides 2006), and real-world events (Seeberg 2023).

Sometimes, however, neglecting a certain issue may represent the safest strategy. First and foremost, parties’ issue attention responds to party-specific components such as its historical issue ownership and ideology (e.g. Budge 1994; Walgrave and De Swert 2007). It is reasonable to expect that a social democratic party would be electorally disadvantaged if it were to start advocating for tax cuts, given its history of prioritizing the expansion of the welfare state. Notably, the literature has enumerated additional factors influencing a party’s decision to eschew specific issues from their agenda. They may include a party enjoying a poor reputation on the issue, holding unpopular positions, or being crowded out by competitors (Ivaldi 2015). In turn, these may be driven by challengers (De Vries and Hobolt 2020) as well as niche parties (Meguid 2005, 2008) engendering competition on a new issue dimension in order to create divisions in their competitors (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Riker 1986). Lastly, such issues may risk alienating a party’s electorate (Rovny 2012, 2013) and compromising future coalition negotiations (Koedam 2021).

In short, neglecting an issue speaks to a distinct – and less risk-seeking – logic underlying party salience strategies (Koedam 2021). However, what is frequently overlooked by the literature on party behavior is that a party’s low-salience strategy may be motivated by intra-party dynamics. More specifically, this study argues that leaders in internally divided parties may have excellent reasons to try to eschew potentially divisive issues from their agenda to prevent the party from factionalizing, splitting, or losing their leadership status altogether. Nonetheless, the extent to which they succeed should depend on their degree of control over policymaking within the party. Despite being often enumerated among the potential factors influencing party behavior, internal party dynamics are seldom systematically investigated in relation to party saliency strategies. They thus constitute the focus of this study.

### **HOW DO INTRA-PARTY DISSENT AND ORGANIZATION AFFECT PARTY SALIENCE STRATEGIES?**

Parties are not unitary actors; instead, two main groups with often competing and diverging goals can be identified: the leadership and the activists. (Harmel and Janda 1994; Kitschelt 1989; Panebianco 1988). Generally, the former includes critical leader figures, professional politicians in executive roles within the central party organizations, as well as influential members of parliaments (Narud and Skare 1999). Given their reliance on re-election and office, the literature has often conceptualized party leaders as opportunistic vote-maximizers incentivized to formulate policies resembling as closely as possible the policy positions of voters (Downs 1957; Katz and Mair 1995; Strom 1990). Conversely, activists are those party members, sympathizers, or members of local branches who “invest blood, sweat and tears into the party while they do not directly benefit in economic or office terms” (Schumacher 2012:1028). Often depicted as policy-seekers (Kitschelt 1989; Strom 1990), they are primarily interested in voicing their often radical ideological views (May 1973; Panebianco 1988).

These conflicting incentives may affect party behavior. Spatial competition theories assume parties as rational actors interested in crafting strategies that attract the highest number of voters (Downs 1957). Yet, internal party conflict may erupt concerning the preferred policy position set forth by the party leadership, ultimately limiting the latter’s ability to pursue an optimal vote-maximizing strategy (Miller and Schofield 2003). This study understands intra-party dissent as the level of disagreement among party members and activists concerning the party line set forth by the leadership.

While extant literature has covered extensively the relationship between intra-party dissent and spatial strategies (e.g. Budge et al. 2010; Fagerholm 2017; König 2017; Miller and Schofield 2003), research on the former’s role over salience strategies has been strikingly limited and unsystematic, ultimately suffering from the paucity of appropriate data. The issue of data availability also explains why empirical evidence has been almost entirely

confined to the European Integration issue, which is far from conclusive. On the one hand, Steenbergen and Scott (2004: 189) found evidence suggesting that parties experiencing “modest amounts of internal dissent” downplay the European integration issue “as they may fear the consequences of discussing integration politics” (see also De Vries and van de Wardt 2011). On the other hand, a later study by van de Wardt (2014:335) found that intra-party dissent increases issue salience.

This study benefits from having access to finely detailed data on dissent within parties over a particular issue dimension. This enables the analysis to expand beyond merely focusing on the EU and provide a more comprehensive evaluation of multidimensional issue competition in Western Europe. Notably, intra-party dissent over an issue dimension is expected to be associated with lower emphasis levels attributed to that issue dimension. Several reasons support this argument. To begin with, flagging internal conflict to the public, over the media, in parliament, or party congresses (Greene and Haber 2016; Orhan 2023) may jeopardize a party’s survival (Greene and Haber 2015). Internally divided parties may risk splintering and losing the support of their core voters, ultimately curtailing their electoral appeal. Indeed, the extent to which a party is perceived as internally cohesive strongly affects voters’ assessment of party policy competence and, ultimately, their voting decisions (Wagner et al. 2020). Greene and Haber (2015:26) noted that “voters account for parties’ internal divisions or previous legislation at odds with their stated policy goals as they rank parties’ policy reputations”. This suggests that political parties should be mindful of their policy coherence and the image they project when seeking to increase voter support. Secondly, research has illustrated a dynamic process for which party competitors leverage their opponents’ internal quarrels to highlight their inconsistencies as well as lack of unity, ultimately aiming at discouraging electoral support for those parties (Carey 2008; Kam 2009). Lastly, greater levels of dissent have been shown to affect a party’s ability to influence public opinion in its favor (Ray 2003) and run the risk of steering supporters in undesired directions (Gabel and Scheve 2007).

This implies that divided parties will likely silence highly divisive issues, close ranks and command discipline over internal infighting (Castanho Silva and Proksch 2022).

H1: All else being equal, the higher the level of intra-party dissent on an issue dimension, the lower the salience attributed to that issue dimension.

However, do parties differ in how much they effectively de-emphasize an internally divisive issue dimension? This study claims that the success of such low-salience strategy strongly depends on the level of control the leadership wields over the party organization.

As previously stated, leaders cognizant of the electoral consequences of internal dissent should be expected to regulate discussion across political arenas and media outlets, dictate what may be addressed openly and what should remain silent, and ultimately attempt to downplay the salience of the divisive issue dimension. Nonetheless, party leaders differ substantially in their degree of freedom of choice over party policy vis-à-vis activists, rank- and-file, and other potential veto players. As noted by Panebianco (1988), party leaders in hierarchical organizations effectively shape party policy, thereby determining the platform construction, goal formulation, and candidate selection (see also Schumacher and Giger, 2017). In others, instead, policy is heavily influenced by a large plethora of veto players, limiting a leader’s freedom of choice (Sanchez-Cuenca 2004; Tsebelis 2022). Given the substantial variation between parties, the balance of power between the two groups may be conceptualized as a ‘leader domination’ scale stretching from ‘activist-dominated parties’ (ADPs) to ‘leader-dominated’ (LDPs) ones (Schumacher et al. 2013).

Extant research has extensively dealt with the impact of organizational characteristics on position change. For example, Schumacher et al. (2013) find LDPs to be more responsive to shifts in the position of the mean voter, whereas ADPs ones are more likely to follow changes in the mean party voter. Furthermore, LDPs are found to be more responsive as the party system becomes more polarized and following an electoral loss (Koedam 2022). Conversely, much less is known on how the internal balance of power affects party salience strategies. Indeed, while Wagner and Meyer (2014) show that activist-dominated parties tend to prioritize issues owned by the party, Schumacher and Giger (2018) find inconclusive evidence to support the idea that leader domination significantly affects issue salience.

Innovatively, this study argues that organizational characteristics do influence salience decisions by moderating parties' responses to intra-party dissent. More specifically, LDPs are expected to manage internal dissent more effectively than ADPs by downplaying divisive issue dimensions to a larger significant extent. ADPs comprise horizontal organizations in which decision-making is primarily dispersed across many actors (Kitschelt 1989). In turn, this decentralization of power produces more activists in positions in which they can block leader's action, engendering stability in the party agenda (Schumacher and Giger 2018; Tsebelis 2002). While this study assumes intra-party divisions to result from disagreement between leaders and activists (see also Kölln and Polk 2017), the latter are not a monolithic group and considerable variation exists in their preference distribution within the party (Kitschelt 1989; Norris 1995; Schumacher and Giger 2017; Valen and Narud 2007). Accordingly, well-structured intra-party (activists) factions with heterogeneous views on an issue dimension should render any salience change more convoluted. ADPs' leaders determined to downplay a conflictual issue dimension will thus be forced to carefully navigate between diverse and often dogmatic preferences (Panebianco 1988; Sanchez-Cuenca 2004) stemming from activists, ultimately hampering party responsiveness.

Leaders in LDPs, instead, enjoy greater leeway to pursue their vote-seeking and office-seeking goals. Given the daunting prospect of appearing divided before the electorate (Greene and Haber 2015; Lupia and McCubbins 1998), these parties should be more likely to (more) decisively tone down decisively the emphasis attributed to a divisive issue dimension.

H2: All else being equal, leader domination in the party significantly increases the negative effect of intra-party dissent on the salience attributed to an issue dimension.

Lastly, this study asks whether the effect of intra-party dissent varies across party families. More specifically, the analysis is interested in how RRP's strategically deal with internal dissent compared to other party families. On top of the degree to which power is shared among leadership and activists, additional factors, such as intangible leadership qualities, may influence how a party handles internal divisions and presents itself before the electorate. Scholars have often stressed how RRP's are generally led by a 'charismatic leader' possessing strong rhetorical abilities, who is an experienced media figure, and knows how to relate to the ordinary man (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2007). The literature has extensively debated the concept of political charisma since its original theorization (Weber et al. 1978). Importantly, Pappas (2016:2) highlights the nature of rulership – i.e. whether a leader exercises personal authority within the party organization – as a fundamental criterion to classify a leader as charismatic (see also Favero 2022). Furthermore, Pedahzur and Brichta (2002) underscore the role of personalized authority in developing the party's infrastructure, ensuring the cohesiveness of the party organization, and eliciting uncompromised loyalty.

Consequently, the study expects leaders in RRP's to be more successful than their competitors in de-emphasizing a divisive issue dimension. The solid bond characterizing the relationship between the charismatic leader and his/her followers should strengthen the former's ability to manage internal dissent on the party agenda, ultimately facilitating the adoption of a low-salience strategy.

H3a: Net of the effect of leader domination, RRP's exhibit a larger negative effect of intra-party dissent on the salience attributed to an issue dimension, vis-à-vis their competitors.

To be sure, this account clashes with a rich thread in the literature highlighting the detrimental effect of RRP's leadership in engendering party institutionalization. De Lange and Art (2011:1233) noted that "parties institutionalize more rapidly when they are led by party leaders who have not only strong external, but also internal leadership qualities". These encompass the ability to manage an organization that lacks coherence, communicate effectively with activists and administrative and political personnel, and possess the knowledge and interpersonal skills to choose appropriate candidates and staff. Leaders in RRP's, however, often lack precisely that 'cotierie charisma' required to organize the party's internal life and keep the party together if difficult times arise (Eatwell 2002; Mudde 2007). In turn – this study contends – this may well impact the effectiveness of any low-salience strategy employed to address intra-party dissent or even favoring the emergence of internal divisions to begin with. Consequently, this study puts forward a rival hypothesis for the conditional effect of party family on

salience change. While the negative effect of intra-party dissent on issue salience is expected to hold for RRP, it should be smaller in magnitude compared to other party families.

H3b: Net of the effect of leader domination, RRP exhibit a smaller negative effect of intra-party dissent on the salience attributed to an issue dimension, vis-à-vis their competitors.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

### Data and Case Selection

The empirical analysis relies on the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Rovny and Edwards 2012). With the help of political expert evaluations, CHES provides party position and salience data on ideological dimensions, specific policies, and other party characteristics. Arguably, the CHES also represents the only source with sufficient time-series cross-sectional data on internal party dynamics. Unfortunately, prior to the last wave, information on intra-party dissent – the study’s primary independent variable – was limited to the issue of European integration, ultimately hindering a more generalized analysis of the effect of internal dynamics on party salience strategies (for contributions on EU dissent see e.g. Koedam 2021; Van De Wardt 2014). Luckily, the 2019 iteration offers an unprecedented opportunity to gauge information on internal party divisions. Indeed, the dataset includes two items assessing the degree of intra-party dissent on the economic left-right and the GAL-TAN dimensions, respectively. The latter refers to socio-cultural issues, thereby distinguishing green, alternative, and libertarian parties (GAL) from traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist ones (TAN) (Dassonneville et al. 2024; Hooghe et al. 2002). Additionally, the survey contains one question evaluating the extent to which the power to make party policy choices rests in the hands of the activists/party members or in the leadership. The focus on activists and party members – rather than other potential veto players such as elite factions (Budge et al. 2010) and unions (Allern and Bale 2017) – enables an empirical re-assessment of their influence over party strategy. More specifically, it allows evaluating whether the organization’s balance of power moderates the association between intra-party dissent and salience change. The analysis extends to 130 political parties in 15 Western European countries<sup>1</sup>.

Besides the availability of fine-grained data, CHES represents an optimal choice based on several distinct advantages over other comparable sources, namely manifesto data. Compared to the latter, parties’ saliency evaluations derived from expert surveys incorporate a wider range of information, stretching from interviews, parliamentary debates, speeches held during party congresses, and programmatic policy documents. This privileged position makes experts more likely to grasp the whole picture than data derived from single sources. This should especially be the case for internal party dissent, for which first-hand knowledge derived from party meetings and speeches constitutes extremely valuable insights into intra-party politics (Greene and Haber 2016). On the other hand - as noted by Lo et al. (2016) - party manifestos may often consist of a mishmash of varying - or even opposing - viewpoints, resulting from a deliberate choice from the party elites to accommodate conflicting factions, activists and/or party members. However, the insights derived from the analysis of these official documents represent only indirect evidence of internal party dissent, whereas the ambiguity generated from the official statements may also conceal broader and varying party goals (Adams et al. 2014; Lo et al. 2016). To conclude, it is worth noting how several validation studies have found CHES data to be a reliable base of party measures (e.g. Hooghe et al. 2010; Whitefield et al. 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> These include Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

# WHEN CLIENTELISM IS IN CRISIS: BROKERS OF JDP DURING 2014 AND 2019 LOCAL ELECTIONS IN TURKEY

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## **WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?**

In this study, I aim to analyze the effects of “brokers” in local politics. I will focus on 2014 and 2019 local elections in districts of Artvin, a province of Turkey’s Black Sea region. In the 2014 local elections, JDP (Ak Parti or JDP in Turkish) won 7 out of 8 districts of Artvin. This success was unprecedented for any party in Artvin until then. The districts of Artvin were shared by several parties in the past local election. Therefore, JDP’s victory was a real success tale. In 2017, the JDP made a routine change in some district’s local branches and district presidents. In the local elections held 2 years later, in 2019, JDP lost 5 of the 7 districts it had previously won.

The first thing the JDP did after the defeat was to dismiss the presidents of the districts where had lost. Therefore, the JDP blamed the district presidents for the defeat. The reason why I think of this change as a change related to clientelist politics rather than an ordinary internal party affair is that district presidents are the most prominent and effective brokers in Turkey’s political culture. In Turkey’s social and political structure, the political elite is positioned against appointed bureaucrats and on the side of citizens. The citizen, who is an element of the “periphery”, seeks the patronage of party figures such as the district presidents in the face of state elites who represent the “center”.

What happened between and after the 2014-2019 elections should also be considered in the context of clientelism due to the structural features summarized above. In particular, in the current political structure of Turkey, I called “presidents’ regime”, mostly after regulation of Constitution in 2017, district/province presidents of JDP’s local branches are the most powerful brokers of provinces. Therefore, a study on the brokers who took Office in 2017 and lost elections in 2019 will allow us to understand the impact of clientelistic relations and brokers in local politics.

## **WHAT IS CLIENTELISM AND WHO ARE BROKERS?**

The clientelist relationship and clientelist policies can be thought of as a customs relationship between two countries that do not have equal resources and power. One country is the patron and the other is the client. Each country has its own needs and each can provide some of these needs through the other. There is, of course, reciprocity. The existence and continuity of the relationship depends on the consent of both parties, the interests they can derive from each other, the foreseeability of their needs and consent, and finally the repetition of the exchange. The most important figures in this customs metaphor are the customs officers who work at the customs gates of both countries and who can control the authorization and content of the exchange subject to customs. It can be argued that customs officers in the clientelist relationship are brokers. The main situation that reveals brokers and makes them important is the gaps between the two sides of the relationship. In the customs metaphor, these gaps can be thought of as differences in language and culture. Translated into the social sciences literature, it is a gap between the center and the periphery. Brokers fill this gap by making the clientelist relationship continuous, observable, transformable, efficient and effective.

In clientelism, parties benefit individuals and try to keep their votes calculable. Therefore, parties have to pay attention to which voters and families have what kind of needs. This is where monitoring, one of the most important features of clientelism, comes into play. Vote tracking requires parties to collect concrete information about individuals' behavior outside the center. This need for "local information" leads political parties to hire "armies of brokers". These brokers are people from the "neighborhood" and therefore can easily obtain insider information such as "whose child is sick, who went to vote in the last elections and who did not, whether a voter turned his back on the party, who voted for the rival party despite benefiting from party favors" (Stokes, et al., 2013, p. 19). Javier Auyero likens brokers in the "Peronist problem-solving relationship" to gatekeepers who control the flow between goods and services from local powers and administrators and support and votes from "clients" (1999: 303). Ersin Kalaycıoğlu makes a similar analogy to watchmen. According to him, brokers function "as a political hinge, providing political communication and connections between the masses and elites" (Kalaycıoğlu, 1998: 818).

The literature on clientelism takes brokers as a given when analyzing relationships and policies, but studies on brokers are limited (see Gay, 1994; Cornelius, 1974; Collier, 1976; Auerbach, 2016; Dawson, 2014; Poller 2014). These studies focus on the activities of brokers and their effectiveness. Brokers bring together "people and opportunities". They enable the circulation of resources and communication. According to Kettering (1986), brokers are often already important people with resources and personal reputations and therefore become brokers. Serving as an intermediary requires influence within the community and in the social and political structure. Through their relationships, which are the source of their power and legitimacy, brokers "fill the gaps in the connection between individuals, groups, structures and even cultures" (Boissevain, 1969: 380).

### **WHAT ABOUT TÜRKİYE?**

Based on what has been discussed up to this point, it can be summarized that brokers are obliged to fill a gap. In Turkey's political life, this gap is between the center and the periphery. This gap is fundamentally a gap between the state and citizens. Brokers are mechanisms that function as a prevention against the "lack of contact" between state and society, party and citizen, province and Ankara.

The most decisive element in defining Turkey's clientelistic structure is the influence of parties over the bureaucracy and public resources. As Berenschott and Aspinall (2020) note in their analysis, relational clientelism is prevalent in "countries where political parties have strong control over state resources" such as Turkey, Ghana and Malaysia. Parties in power hold resources and distribute them through local party networks. Based on these considerations, Berenschott and Aspinall distinguish between "party-centered" and "community-centered" patronage democracies. Historically, party-centered patronage democracy has been observed in India, Malaysia and Turkey, where bureaucracies have come under the control of parties.

In Turkey, where the control of public resources and bureaucracy in the hands of political parties has become a tradition, the most prominent role of the broker characters we have tried to identify is the role of "bridging", which we can think of as bridging the "distance between citizens and bureaucracy". Since the distance between the citizen and the bureaucracy is filled by political parties and the structures given control over public resources by them, it becomes inevitable for brokers to be directly associated with a current or past ruling party.

### **RESEARCH PROCESS**

I designed this research in 3 stages. In the first phase, through "participatory observation", I learned how the district presidents who took office in 2017 are perceived in their own neighborhoods. Although the clientelist literature emphasizes the importance of brokers for political parties and the determinance of the relationship of brokers with political parties, the local political scale tells a different story. Although it is the political party that appoints the broker, it is the opinion of voters or people in the neighborhood about the broker that evaluates the success or failure of the broker. Therefore, what people think about district presidents is very important. In second phase of the study, I interviewed party members who served in JDP district organizations between 2014-2019. Thus, I had the opportunity to see the effectiveness of brokers from both the voters' perspective and the political party's perspective. In the third stage, I interviewed the district presidents who took office in 2017 and were dismissed in 2019 and listened to their accounts of the process.

# **DEMOCRACY AS A JUSTICIABLE CONCEPT IN THE EU**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Although originally conceived in largely technocratic terms and subsequently subject to a critique for its own democratic deficit, the EU in more recent Treaty reforms has much more strongly articulated EU values in Article 2 TEU, including that of democracy, while introducing a new enforcement mechanism in Article 7 TEU. Recent developments concerning Poland and Hungary, on grounds of rule of law violations, for the first time illustrate the potential application of the procedure in Article 7 TEU, including by indicating the extent of the jurisdictional reach of the EU. However, both democracy and the rule of law, two of the key values in Article 2, are to some extent contested concepts, a point illustrated in the EU by a continuing critique of its democratic deficit notwithstanding defences of the EU on the grounds, for example, of output legitimacy. This paper considers how the Court of Justice might apply its jurisdiction under Article 7 TEU in the context of democracy as a value under Article 2, and given the role of the political institutions in the process of applying Article 7, and if and how democracy might become a justiciable concept beyond the application of Article 7, e.g. under Articles 263 or 265 TFEU. Amongst the points addressed are: differing conceptions of democracy in general and how these might be invoked under Article 2; the way in which the Council and European Council might formally invoke democracy under Article 7 and how this might connect with how the Court exercises jurisdiction; reliance by the ECJ on the Council of Europe for understanding democracy in terms of procedural requirements; and the way in which democracy might be linked to other values under Article 2.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper draws on secondary literature on the concept of democracy, the legitimate scope of constitutional review (generally and in the EU), and the issue of competence bases in EU law. In considering the potential or possible exercise by the ECJ of jurisdiction regarding Articles 2 and 7 TEU, it also considers the recent caselaw of the ECJ on the Rule of Law Conditionality mechanism for the EU budget. In addition, the paper considers how beyond abstract models of democracy, the work and practice of the Council of Europe has generated more practical indicators or measures of 'democracy', including caselaw of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on the concept of 'democratic society' as a ground for derogating from particular rights under the Convention. It also considers (i) the standards and guidance on democratic institutions developed by the Venice Commission, as an organ of the Council of Europe, supplements standards in ECtHR caselaw and (ii) the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession, which include 'stable democratic institutions' as part of Commission evaluations of candidate countries.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The first part of this paper first considers different conceptions, relatively abstract, of democracy in the theoretical literature (e.g. Held 2006; Lowenstein 1937) – republicanism, liberal democracy, competitive elitism, militant democracy, and deliberative democracy – and argues for a core concept of democracy as entailing parliamentary representation that can be accepted as relatively uncontested in light of the notion of essentially contested concepts (Gallie 1956, Gray 1977, Swanton 1986, Beck 2008). Given that systems of democracy vary in the EU, it is necessary that certain core principles of the concept of democracy are elaborated to allow for the measurement

of democracy in the Member States. The paper then considers to what extent a purely proceduralist concept of democracy can be considered in some way modified by substantive values and different substantive values in Article 2 might interact. Drawing on the academic literature on constitutional review (Fisher 1988, Waldron 2001, Kyritsis 2008) generally and in the EU (Conway 2012), the paper argues for a particular conception of the role of the judiciary in general and in the EU that acknowledges the ‘counter-majoritarian objection’, (Bickel 1962, Ely 1977) and points to the need for a particular approach to the judicial interpretative role that admittedly represents a minority view in the literature on the Court of Justice. The paper then seeks to apply this approach to the issue of defining the scope of democracy under Article 2. Some academic opinion has argued for a wide jurisdiction of the ECJ over Article 2 values, including linking this provision with other Treaty provisions to form composite legal grounds for adjudication by the ECJ (Kochenov 2015), which can be debated in light of concerns about judicial activism and the role of the ECJ in the institutional architecture of the EU (Conway 2018).

The second part of the paper considers the procedural steps for the exercise of jurisdiction by the ECJ on the ground of democracy in Article 2 TEU. First, it considers the relationship between the different stages of the procedure in Article 7 and how this might impact upon how the ECJ exercises any judicial review that could occur regarding Article 7, e.g. what conception of difference should the ECJ employ to the expression of political views of the Council and the European Council? Given that the ECJ has not exercised any substantive review under Article 2, the closest analogy to date in its caselaw may be its recent judgments on the Rule of Law Conditionality mechanism, one of the grounds of review under Article 2. The paper considers the view of Bonelli (2022) that the exercise of jurisdiction in these latter cases involved a bold assertion of a Union concept of the rule of law, as one of the values in Article 7, along with a careful assessment of specific competence bases in the Treaties. The caselaw itself suggests that the legislative requirement for a direct link between budgetary effects and the rule of law mechanism was necessary for the EU to exercise a competence related to the rule of law at least in the circumstances of the cases. This approach is compatible with a concern against judicial activism by the ECJ in general and a perspective of interpretative restraint and raises the question of how to characterise the Court’s method in these cases and how that might be generalised and related to other cases under Article 2, specifically, relating to democracy. Caselaw from the Court of Justice on refusal of European Arrest Warrants (EAW) on grounds of systemic breaches of judicial independence can also offer indications of how the Court may exercise review regarding articles 2 and 7 TEU.

In principle, Article 7 is not excluded from the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice under Articles 263-265 for review of legality (at least for privileged applicants), and such a (to date hypothetical) jurisdiction would clearly put the Court in a highly politicised situation were it to exercise review of an Article 7 procedure under the substantive grounds in Article 2. An evident question here is the kind of deference the ECJ would exercise in reviewing any review of the use of Article 7. To date, the Court’s jurisdiction has only been invoked regarding the procedural requirements of Article 7 in Case C-650/18, Hungary and Poland v. EP [2021], judgment of 3rd June 2021. Article 2 can also be related to a more general jurisdiction of the Court under its standard procedures – Articles 258-260 TFEU, in particular – and how Article 2 values might be invoked by litigants more generally. Article 7 does not confine the effect of Article 2 only to the procedure Article 7 specifies, and Article 2 in principle is not outside the general jurisdiction of the Court of Justice. The Commission therefore has a wide scope for seeking to enforce Article 2, which it has not exercised to the fullest to date, whether under (i) the more political and in extremis route of Article 7 and (ii) its standard procedures whether in enforcement actions under Articles 258-260 TFEU (against the Member States) or under Articles 263-265 TFEU (against EU institutions and bodies) (as a follow-on to the application of Article 7).

### **TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS:**

- The justiciability of Article 2 has not really been addressed to date, but is potentially considerable
- The concept of democracy can be defined in more abstract versus more procedural or concrete terms, and European practice provides plenty of indicia to help elaborate a more justiciable concept of democracy, including through practice of the Council of Europe
- The complexity of defining democracy as well as the institutional role of the Court of Justice itself point to a cautious interpretative method, which is to a large extent reflected in the exercise by the Court of ‘cognate’ jurisdiction to date regarding the Rule of Law conditionality mechanism and the EAW



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# MP'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS EUROPEAN AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS IN LIGHT OF THE RUSSO- UKRAINE WAR

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes MP's attitudes toward authoritarian and illiberal leaders abroad. A contributing mechanism to the growing crisis of liberal democracy in Europe is the spread of anti-democratic norms, ideas, and practices, also known as authoritarian diffusion. Understanding the normalisation of authoritarianism in European parliaments is critical as part of democratic erosion 'from within'. This study compares parliamentarians' attitudes toward European authoritarian leaders Russian President Vladimir Putin, Belarussian President Aleksandr Grigoryevich Lukashenko, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Based on parliamentary debates from 2010-2023 in Poland and the Netherlands, we map parliamentarians' attitudes towards these leaders in terms of salience (weak to prominent) and affection (negative to positive). Through qualitative content analysis of parliamentary debates, we compared MP's attitudes between party families, time periods, countries, and leaders addressed. We found two distinct developments in the discourse about authoritarian leaders. On the one hand, authoritarian leaders have become more prominent and relevant in political debates on foreign policy. On the other hand, however, this salience and contrast may not be motivated primarily by concerns about democracy – at least not democracy in the countries of those authoritarian leaders. Ignoring these developments risks the normalization and proliferation of authoritarian politics in Europe and beyond.

## **INTRODUCTION**

“There is internationalization, the dissolution of national borders, and the creation of ever-larger conglomerates of Western countries, which care less and less about their population and who have less and less interest in nationalities and nation-states. Led by the United States, that empire, “empire” in quotes, is being expanded further and further. In that sense, it is a blessing that someone now stands up and says: “That may be the case, but not here. This is our world and we do not simply accept the international order you think you should propose.” And that is indeed Putin.”

These words were spoken by Ralf Dekker, a Dutch radical-right parliamentarian, in the context of the war in Ukraine, during the discussion of the budget for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 9 November 2022. How common are statements like this? Are they unique to the Netherlands? Or to radical-right parties?

As of 2024, it has become almost common knowledge that a third wave of autocratization has started, which - as opposed to earlier periods of autocratization - affects liberal democracies in Europe as well. A difference with previous periods of autocratization is that instead of experiencing abrupt democratic breakdowns, for instance

by military coups, recent autocratization is characterized by a gradual top-down erosion of core institutional requirements for liberal democracy (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This sparked a new generation of research that focuses on explaining democratic setbacks in countries such as Hungary, Brazil, the United States, Serbia, and Turkey (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Whereas the shortcomings of democratic systems are often discussed as causes for democratic erosion, to paint a complete picture, research should pay more attention to authoritarian strength (Mounk, 2021). As Mounk (2021, p. 163) puts it “autocrats, long focused on bare survival, are now on the offensive”. One mechanism linking authoritarian strength to democratic erosion is authoritarian diffusion, or the spread of anti-democratic norms, ideas, and practices from one social system to another (Lankina et al., 2016). Authoritarian diffusion becomes visible through the growing illiberal discourse in Europe, which has become even more evident since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016).

Yet, it is not only external influence through authoritarian diffusion that is important, it is a combination with a rise of authoritarian tendencies at the national level that is detrimental (Kreuder-Sonnen, 2018). A commonly mentioned cause for the de-consolidation of liberal democracies in Europe is the rise of populist-authoritarian parties (Bochsler & Juan). Mostly far-right parties, whose electoral support has steadily grown, have undermined the rule of law and democratic institutions when in government (Daly, 2019). Two external shocks, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2015 immigration crisis gave rise to anxiety and social conflict in Europe (Bernhard, 2020). As this led to a growing dissatisfaction amongst citizens, it could explain the rise of populist and nativist politicians, and with them the rise of authoritarian tendencies as they enabled democratic backsliding.

Katsambekis (2023) highlights that only a small part of the literature focuses on the latter when discussing recent autocratization. He stresses that what seems to be missing in the literature are discussions on the responsibility of political elites. There is a blind spot where “there are levels of analysis – such as that of political discourse, and communication, performance, and strategy, or overall political practice – that seem to be recurring, yet are under-theorized and under-studied” (Katsambekis, 2023, p. 431). Yet, parliaments are key gatekeepers to adopting more authoritarian policies and enabling the erosion of democratic institutions (Tolstrup, 2012). Thus, whether authoritarian diffusion feeds into the narratives of politicians in Europe, is key to understanding the link between authoritarian diffusion and democratic erosion. Shapiro (2003) mentions that while it may not be easy to influence the cause of a transition, democratic institutional engineers can focus on those things that increase the chances for democracy. It is, therefore, crucial to know under which circumstances democracies’ survival chances are higher as this knowledge can be used to counteract the recent democratic setbacks.

To get a better understanding of how far-spread authoritarian narratives are within EU countries, in this paper, we describe and analyze how MPs position themselves vis-à-vis authoritarian leaders abroad. As such, our research question is: What are European parliamentarians’ attitudes toward European authoritarian leaders? Focusing on the Netherlands and Poland, we analyze parliamentary debates from 2010 until 2023 while examining MPs’ attitudes towards Russian President Vladimir Putin, Belarussian President Aleksandr Grigoryevich Lukashenko, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

## **AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS**

To examine authoritarian narratives among European parliamentarians and more specifically our focus on European authoritarian leaders, it is crucial to explain when narratives are considered authoritarian. Because there exists a universal positive connotation of the term democracy as opposed to authoritarianism (Ulbricht, 2018), narratives that oppose liberal democratic values are seen as authoritarian. While what is considered liberal values change over time, core contemporary liberal values are understood as political liberties, participation rights of citizens, equal justice before the law, equal rights for minorities, and media independence (Diamond, 1999; Rhoden, 2013). The current trend of autocratization in democracies mostly consists of the erosion of these core liberal values (Mechkova et al., 2017). Authoritarian narratives are therefore defined as narratives that are hostile to the core principles of liberal democracy. Within our research, this is visible in parliamentarians expressing support for authoritarian leaders.

Whereas we acknowledge that authoritarian narratives are broader than narratives on authoritarian leaders, we chose to narrow this concept for the sake of relevance and thoroughness. First, the choice to focus on MPs’

attitudes towards authoritarian leaders is because of the important role leadership plays in international politics. While there exist dissimilarities in the literature, the general trend shows that there has been an increased focus on individual leaders at the cost of collective institutions, due to personalized media coverage, also called individualization (van Aelst et al., 2012; Langer & Sagarzazu, 2018). Moreover, considering the scope of this paper, by narrowing our focus, we allow for a more in-depth analysis of MP's attitudes towards authoritarian leaders. As the paper focuses on MP's attitudes in European countries, the authoritarian leaders that are subject to study are European leaders. The four leaders - Russian President Vladimir Putin, Belarussian President Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán - are chosen because of their importance in European politics, which makes it likely that they are discussed in national European parliaments.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

### **Case selection**

Our study focuses on the attitudes held and expressed by members of parliament in the Netherlands and Poland in the years ranging from 2010 to 2023. The countries of the Netherlands and Poland are chosen for this study to allow for a comparison between different European liberal democracies, taking into account contexts from both western Europe and central and eastern Europe. We focus on statements made by members of the Tweede Kamer, the lower house of parliament in the Netherlands, and the Sejm, the lower house of parliament in Poland.

Furthermore, we have chosen the time frame of 2010 to 2023 as throughout this period, democracy has come under increasing pressure in western countries, both from within as well as from outside (Katsambekis, 2023). In order to capture the full extent of this development, we choose to study a broad range of years across this period. To compare the findings between Poland and the Netherlands, we decided to divide this time frame up into four periods. The breaks between these periods roughly follow two international events that had a large impact on the foreign policy of both countries and their interaction with European authoritarian leaders, namely the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As such, the four time periods are 2010-2013, 2014-2017, 2018- 2021, and finally 2022-2023.

Finally, as our study is exploratory in nature, we investigate statements made by MPs from across the political spectrum - rather than focusing on specific parties or party families.

### **Data collection and segmentation**

MP statements were retrieved from parliamentary debates in the lower houses of parliament in the Netherlands and Poland. For this study, we have selected two series of annually recurring debates on foreign policy: for the Netherlands, we studied the annual debates by the Tweede Kamer on the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ('behandeling van het wetsvoorstel Vaststelling van de begrotingsstaat van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken' or colloquially 'begrotingsbehandeling Buitenlandse Zaken'). These debates take place around November of each year and formally concern the approval or amendment of a ministerial budget for the subsequent year, yet, in practice, are a moment of general reflection on the country's foreign policy. For Poland, we studied the annually recurring debate by the Sejm on the state of Poland's foreign policy ('Debata nad informacją ministra spraw zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej'). These debates are held at the start of each year, around February or March, and concern the general state and direction of Poland's foreign policy in the upcoming year. These debates have been used to study foreign policy attitudes by, among others, Zuba (2021).

Both series of debates follow a similar format and scope, namely as plenary debates on foreign policy in general (rather than on a specific issue). As these debates are not restrained by a specific agenda, they allow for a wide range of topics - and thus authoritarian leaders - to be addressed. Moreover, both series of debates are annually recurring<sup>1</sup>. This makes the debates comparable across time. All things considered, these debates provide a com-

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<sup>1</sup> By exception, the foreign policy debates in Poland did not take place between 2020 and 2022 - supposedly due to the pandemic and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This means that there is a gap in the data for Poland for these years.

prehensive and representative sample of MP statements which is both comparable between countries as well as between years.

The official transcripts of the respective debates were prepared to be studied through qualitative content analysis. In order to consistently apply codes and allow for intercoder comparison, the paragraphs in the transcripts were taken as the units of analysis for our coding exercise (see Schreier, 2014). Only units which make explicit reference to any of the selected authoritarian leaders by name were taken into account. In case a unit mentioned multiple leaders, the unit would be coded separately multiple times, once for each leader. It is important to note that units referencing only a country, government or their (symbolic or rhetorical) representations were not studied - and thus no conclusions can be drawn from our analysis about attitudes towards specific countries and their governments. Once coded, a unit was assigned to its respective year and the MP's party family, as defined by the Chaper Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022). An overview of parties and their respective families is included in the appendix.

### **QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS**

To analyze the debates, we chose to use qualitative content analysis, following the approach of Schreier (2014). Qualitative content analysis shares with quantitative content analysis that it focuses on systematic text analysis using a 'coding frame' (or 'coding scheme'). This allows for a reliable comparison between the Dutch and Polish debates. Moreover, qualitative content analysis has particular concern for the interpretation of the meaning of said material, including "latent and more context- dependent meaning" (Schreier, 2014, p. 173), which we deem important in order to provide as complete a picture as possible of MP attitudes toward European authoritarian leaders.

Summarized, our study of the material entailed the following steps: having first determined our research question, scope, and data to be studied, we decided how the material would be segmented and organized and defined our initial coding frame. This coding frame contained one main category, namely "Attitude". 'Attitudes' are understood as "evaluative reactions associated with a target object" (Meffert et al., 2004, p.63). The main category of "Attitude" captures whether the unit reflects a (largely) positive, negative or neutral attitude held by the MP towards a leader, and as such contains the subcategories "Positive", "Negative" and "Neutral/Other". After a first round of coding of the material, each of these three categories received additional subcategories, more precisely identifying the nature and motivation of these attitudes. For example, these additional subcategories distinguish between negative attitudes based on the idea that the leader is anti-democratic and those based on the idea that they are hostile towards the MP's country, among others.

[ ... ]

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# ADDRESSING THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND BEYOND: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EU'S DEMOCRACY PROMOTION STRATEGIES IN HUNGARY, TURKEY AND UKRAINE

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes how the European Union (EU) has been addressing the crisis of democracy both internally and internationally. For that purpose, it articulates a multi-level governance lens of analysis with a process tracing methodology. Multi-level governance is here understood both as an analytical framework seeking to explain the vertical and horizontal exercise of authority in complex structures composed of multiple actors, and as an answer to the challenge posed by the management of “transnational common goods” or global threats. It implies an attempt to establish a delicate balance promoted by sufficiently decentralized governance that does not, however, fail to provide networks of interactions and good practices capable of promoting collective action. This approach assesses the distribution of authority across different levels.

Based on these definitions, the paper seeks to identify the EU's democracy promotion strategies in: Hungary, as a Member State whose democratic performance has been regressing considerably; Turkey as the most complex candidate state; and Ukraine, which was previously part of the European Neighborhood Policy and is now on a fast track to enlargement. The goal is to understand how EU's actions towards these case studies have contributed to address the crisis of democracy both within Europe and beyond.

## **RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

The goal of this paper is to analyze how the European Union (EU) has been addressing the crisis of democracy both internally and internationally.

The crisis of the sovereign state is an empirical and academic observation that is a few decades old and it is noticeable the strengthening of a consensus regarding the root cause of this phenomenon: transnational challenges that put the survival of the sovereign state at risk, at least in the way it is currently organized. Faced with this broader scenario, academia has been developing prolific work on reflection and scientific research into possible solutions to this challenging reality. In a nutshell, proposals emerged that defended the delegation of competences to intergovernmental, supra-state structures, at the same time that others were devoted to analyzing the effectiveness of a logic of devolution of competences to subnational levels.

In the 1990s, theorists essentially linked to European Union (EU) studies, such as Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks<sup>1</sup>, proposed the concept of Multilevel Governance (hereinafter, MLG). With the advancement of the single market project, the growing role not only of European institutions, but also of subnational economic agents, was recognized. Drawing inspiration from neofunctionalist proposals seeking to explain the process of European integration, these authors - and those who followed them - began to overcome the then traditional tension between neofunctionalists and intergovernmentalists, understanding the EU as a political system whose form of exercising authority it would have to be framed within another – and more innovative – theoretical proposal. This approach began to generate major academic debates, successive contributions of conceptual delimitation and a broad set of categorizations; in such a way that one of the criticisms recognized in the meantime is that of its dispersion or excessively abstract character.

Thus, the MLG came to be understood as an analytical framework that aims to explain the vertical and horizontal exercise of authority, in a complex structure, with multiple actors and a challenge to the management of “transnational common goods” and where it seeks to establish a delicate balance promoted for a sufficiently decentralized form of governance that does not fail, however, to provide networks of interactions and good practices capable of promoting collective action.

Michael Zürn identifies the following as constitutive elements of governance: a plurality of actors; a set; set of agreed or agreed standards; the exercise of authority; common goals; agreements not necessarily global, they can be regional. Now, this set of governance pillars results in the structuring of three layers of the global political system: i) normative principles; ii) specific political institutions; iii) interactions between different spheres of authorities. It should be noted, in this same line of reasoning, that the MLG necessarily involves the devolution of power from central national authorities to peripheral or subnational ones; a sharing of power with civil society and its non-political representatives; and the decrease of state sovereignty in the opposite direction, that is, towards international structures.

In fact, it is inferred that this new form of governance necessarily implies the shift of states’ competences upwards, to the supranational level, but, at the same time, downwards, to the subnational level. The MLG thus describes the coordination of the exercise of political authority through different levels of jurisdiction and in different functional areas, including, for this purpose, an analysis of governance structures and processes that cover overlapping territorial units: local, regional, national, continental and global.

By positioning themselves in the international system, at the supra-state level, international organizations have played an especially proactive role in this domain and, more recently, their direct connection with subnational levels (federated states, provinces, municipalities) has attracted the attention of academia, with very relevant conclusions for the constant construction and consolidation of the architecture of the exercise of governance today.

The European Union has been widely recognized as a unique case in promoting democracy abroad and within its borders, namely through an innovative set of institutional and legal mechanisms. Combining its assumed responsibility as a democracy promoter, its willingness to stand for Western- democratic values, its own evolution towards a “community of values” and its military weakness, the EU has reinforced its economic and trade ties, as well as its capability to offer attractive incentives. Therefore, what is called EU’s pan- European vocation is translated into a democracy promotion strategy that is based on three pillars (Youngs, 2008): positive incentives to promote changes, careful use of sanctions and diplomatic pressure, and funds for democracy programmes.

Therefore, this proposal intends to start from an initial question related to this concern: how has the European Union (EU) been addressing the crisis of democracy both internally and internationally?

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<sup>1</sup> For example, key initial works published in 1996, such as “European Integration since the 1980s. State-Centric versus Multi-Level Governance” or “Cohesion Policy and European Integration. Building Multilevel Governance”.

For this purpose, three case-studies were selected to identify the EU's democracy promotion strategies: Hungary, a Member State whose democratic performance has been regressing considerably; Turkey, the most complex candidate state; and Ukraine, which was previously part of the European Neighborhood Policy and is now on a fast track to enlargement.

Within this scope, the paper stresses the idea that governance is not solely the domain of a single central government but involves various levels of government, including national, regional, and local authorities, as well as supranational organizations – such as the EU. By using multilevel governance as an analytical framework and engaging with some of its major characteristics, such as:

- Supranational Governance
- Interdependence: Different levels of government are interdependent, meaning they rely on each other to address various policy issues and challenges.
- Policy complexity: require cooperation and coordination between multiple levels of government. We bring this complexity into the analysis of the 3 case studies selected for their different types of relationship and history with the EU in order to search for patterns of behavior that may allow some insight on the role of the EU as an actor with a MLG approach to democracy promotion.

To do so, we will engage with the analysis of the European Union's actions towards the selected case studies, using a process tracing methodology, combined with a comparative approach under the multi-level governance lens, in order to figure out how relevant this more recent strategy has been used by this sui generis actor in order to deal with the challenges that these three States pose to democracy both within and in the nearby of the EU's borders.

Some examples include:

- Financial and technical support including funding for civil society organizations, election monitoring missions, and projects aimed at strengthening democratic institutions at levels beyond the formal state.
- Structured Dialogues: with civil society organizations as a platform for civil society to engage in discussions with EU institutions, share their perspectives, and provide input into policies and reforms related to democracy and governance.
- Civil Society Forums: bring together civil society representatives, EU officials, and other stakeholders to exchange ideas, share best practices, and discuss challenges and opportunities in the promotion of democracy.
- Capacity Building: for civil society organizations, empowering them to play a more active role in advocating for democratic reforms and holding governments accountable: include training, technical assistance, and resources to strengthen civil society's capacity
- Public Awareness and Mobilization: Civil society organizations also play a role in raising public awareness about democracy and human rights issues.

# **IS THE EUROPEAN UNION IN CRISIS? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EU CITIZENSHIP AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY**

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## **THE MAIN CONCEPT OF THE PRESENTATION/RESEARCH**

The crisis situation caused by pandemic COVID-19 and the effects of the war between Russia and Ukraine are also affecting the functioning of the European Union. From time to time, voices are raised questioning the existence of democratic legitimacy in the European Union. It is therefore important to examine how the concept of EU citizenship relates to the concept of right to vote, in particular direct democracy. The primary instrument for the exercise of power by the people is representative democracy, so the direct exercise of power is an exceptional instrument. The institutions of direct democracy, and in particular referendums, are therefore the most general and most powerful form of direct exercise of power, since they enable the people themselves to decide directly on a matter. When looking at the system in the EU Member States, it is worth examining the issue of referendums at national and local level, in particular the importance of the concept of EU citizenship in determining the voters who participate in the referendum. In this context, it could be asked as a preliminary question whether it would be possible to introduce an EU referendum in which EU citizens could decide on an issue falling within the EU's competence, or whether, similarly, a cross-border regional referendum could be envisaged in which EU citizens living in several countries could decide on a regional issue affecting several countries. It is also necessary, however, to examine an institution that is already in operation: the past, present and future of the European Citizens' Initiative, with a view to whether it could in future become a kind of European referendum.

## **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

In order to answer the questions posed in the research (as defined in the previous point), I will primarily use a comparative legal method. In this context, I will analyse the electoral law and referendum rules in the EU Member States and draw on statistical data on referendums in the countries concerned. I also analyse EU normative rules (regulations and directives) and the practical experience of the European Citizens' Initiative. In addition to the above, I will, of course, draw on secondary, literature-based views in my research.

## **MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH**

The institutions of direct democracy are of great importance for the functioning of a democratic country. The effectiveness of the EU could also be undoubtedly be enhanced if the institutions of direct democracy functioned well in the EU. In the case of the only current institution of direct democracy, the European Citizens' Initiative, the conclusions are mixed. On the one hand, the content of the legislation on the European Citizens' Initiative can be regarded as basically adequate (in particular the geographical and quantitative conditions for the initiative). On the other hand, however, the European citizens' initiative is in fact a kind of 'toothless lion', mainly because the Commission, which has a monopoly on initiating EU legislation, can in fact be seen more as a counter-party, since every successful European citizens' initiative also shows that the Commission has failed to



initiate legislation on an important issue. And the success rate of the European Citizens' Initiative (if this term is to be understood when there have been only two cases of EU legislation out of more than 100 initiatives) is, on the whole, more indicative of the failure of the European Citizens' Initiative than of its success.

The situation is somewhat different with referendums, which do not currently exist at EU or regional level. Given that in EU law the European Parliament is not in essence the sole legislator (but acts as co-legislator with the Council in the ordinary legislative procedures) and that the essence of a referendum is inherently that the people 'take back' the power to decide on an issue from their elected representatives, the institution of a European referendum is not dogmatically meaningful. That said, there would of course be little obstacle to the Member States deciding to create the institution of a European referendum, mainly with a view to breaking through the Commission's monopoly on legislative initiative and the European Parliament's dominant role in the legislative process. In theory, there is already no obstacle to holding national referendums on a violation of the subsidiarity principle (the so-called yellow card procedure) on an EU legislative issue at roughly the same time in those states where a national referendum exists. Such a referendum, which would be held at approximately the same time in almost all Member States, could in time even become a 'European referendum', with all the theoretical and practical difficulties that entails.

The situation is different in the case of referendums at the level of the Euro-region, which could also be considered in theory, as the definition of the framework of the legal institution itself is fraught with practical problems. While a 'European referendum' could be modelled on the national referendums already existing in some Member States, a referendum at regional level would have to take place at the level between national and local referendums, but in such a way that it would also affect several Member States. The creation of a regional referendum would, however, reflect a 'real market need', a classic example of which is the case of environmentally damaging investments in a river basin, where a referendum would be a much stronger instrument than the public hearings that might be held as part of the environmental impact assessment procedure. While the creation of such an institution could therefore be justified, it could also be dangerous (from the point of view of national governments), since the referendum is by its very nature not only a means of getting the legislator to do something, but also of doing the opposite, i.e. preventing certain acts from being adopted.

For all these reasons, it can be said that a strengthening of the institution of direct democracy in the context of EU citizenship would be absolutely justified, but in the current framework, which can be traced back to EU primary law in particular, it is unlikely to be achieved in the near future.

# BUILT IN CRISIS ENHANCING MECHANISMS IN DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS AND HOW DEMOCRACIES DEAL WITH THEM – A COMPARISON BETWEEN USA AND EUROPE (PRESIDENTIAL VS. PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEMS)

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This paper is devoted to a comparative analysis of built in tensions in two dominant types of democratic systems: presidential and parliamentary. By analyzing how such natural tensions emerge and how they are dealt with in each type of a system we can reach a better understanding of what constitutes stability/equality in democracy as such. We are also going to compare equilibrating mechanisms which exist in each type of democratic systems which bring them into some kind of stability. The focus is going to be on behaviors and processes which are internal disturbances of equilibrium. Some of them are natural for democracies and are generated by electoral processes, modes of elite and leadership selection, competition between institutions of government, or coexistence of written and unwritten rules of political game. At the same time democracies have built in cultural and institutional “regulations” there MAY lead to restoration of equilibrium in the system and prevent disturbances from becoming crises.

Exemplification for the theoretical points will come from American and a “typical” European democracy (with some Polish input). In a macro scale, this paper raises a question about the nature of “normalcy” in democracy as it inevitably contains forces triggering both crisis and stability.

The issues to be covered in the presentation and subsequent text:

1. **Basic differences between the presidential and parliamentary political systems which affect their stability**
  - a. formal aspects of each type of system: separation of powers; connections between branches of government; connections between levels of government; electoral rules;
  - b. informal relations between main actors in the system (succession; financing, representation)
2. **Conceptualization of stability – equilibrium relations in political systems. Exploration of dynamic nature of equilibrium as a “political space” rather than a line or point.**
3. **Centripetal and centrifugal forces in the system which protect equilibrium**
  - a. institutional cooperation
  - b. Elite collusion and cooptation
  - c. public attitudes
  - d. socio-economic factors
  - e. factors external to the system

**4. forces which disturb equilibrium**

**5. forces which restore equilibrium (the role of elections, impact of leaders, role of parties and non-governmental actors, role of media and new communication possibilities, political culture)**

**6. the continuity of equilibrium (how long, by what means, by which mechanism, by whom)**

**7. the role of political culture in the dynamics of equilibrium in political systems**

**8. Reactions to persisting disequilibrium in systems:**

- a. rewards
- b. punishments

**9. Consequences/the meaning of disequilibrium**

- a. as a therapeutic mechanism when forces inducing conflict can be managed by mainstream actors. In such case conflict need not lead undermine the institutional-cultural
- b. as a harbinger/signal in the system of a coming crisis. A force preceding serious crisis in the system, leading to redefinition of power relations in it, including institutional discontinuity.
- c. as a normal phase of development of a political system.
  - a situation always accompanying significant changes in the environment of the political system.
  - a situation accompanying a shift in relations between major actors and the publics: a manifestation of new dealignment/ realignment,
  - a factor contributing to the re-definition of the character of a particular system (fusion of powers; emergence of new institutions;

Disequilibrium as new normalcy in polarized political systems. Any treatment of disequilibrium must be done in a comprehensive way which will address changes happening I other parts of the system and in its environment. Equilibrium cannot be “restored” until there is a cooperation (be it inadvertent) between various key elements/actors in the system. Selective (disjointed) treatment of disequilibrium may lead to its persistence (usually undesired).

# THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRATIC BLISS: WHICH DIMENSIONS HOLD THE KEY?

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## **ABSTRACT**

According to the findings from the European Social Survey, the majority of Europeans place importance on living in a country governed by democratic principles. It is argued that satisfaction with democracy plays a pivotal role in ensuring its functioning and viability. When queried about the significance of specific indicators of democracy such as free and fair elections, equality before courts, and freedom of press, most respondents select a considerable and similar level of importance for each indicator. However, the overall significance of democracy and its dimensions in principle does not necessarily indicate the measure of its perceived quality within a certain nation. In order to assess the determinants of satisfaction with the state of democracy accommodating from cross-national variation, a multilevel regression analysis is employed to investigate the degree to which specific democratic criteria fulfil particular assertions (e.g., “In [country], national elections are free and fair”) and the relative impact of these criteria on satisfaction with democracy. The comparative data come from the ESS Round 10 Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy module.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Democracy, derived from the Greek words *demos* (i.e. people) and *kratos* (power), is commonly understood as a political system based on the principle of rule by the people. The concept has been celebrated, reconsidered, and evolved over centuries, but its core remains the same. Indeed, as noted by Parry et al. (1992:3), “government by the people’ is the fundamental definition of democracy, and one which implies participation by the people” in deciding on key decisions on how to run a polity and whom to elect as its leaders. At the same time, democracy is not a monolith. It embraces an array of dimensions and meanings that have been interpreted and implemented in various ways across different cultures, nations, and historical periods.

The importance of democracy extends beyond the mere mechanics of voting and governance. It is a reflection of the collective aspirations of a people for self-determination, dignity, and freedom. Democracies have been linked with a myriad of positive outcomes, including better protection of human rights (De Mesquita et al. 2005), more effective governance (Gisselquist 2012; however, see also Ishiyama 2019 for a more critical assessment) and higher levels of human development (Gerring et al. 2012; Liotti et al. 2018). Yet, the mere establishment of democratic institutions does not guarantee these outcomes. Their functionality and perceived legitimacy are important as well (Thomassen, 2007).

Studying the understandings and evaluations of democracy is crucial for a number of reasons. It allows for the evaluation of how core democratic principles are translated into practice – e.g. whether the public believes that the elections are free and fair, or whether people are equal before the law. On the other hand, assessing public (dis)satisfaction with democracy and its various dimensions offers insights into potential disconnects between citizens’ expectations and the political realities. This is critical for maintaining democracy in good health, as dissatisfaction with it may lead to apathy (Mavee 2015), clientelism (Gherghina, 2022) or, conversely, to radicalisation and polarisation of society (Alenda, 2023).

The dimensions of democracy are multifaceted, and scholars propose various sets of democratic dimensions, often used as criteria for assessing whether and to what extent a certain polity may be described as democratic

(e.g. Dahl, 1956; Diamond, 1999; Morlino 2009; Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016). Typical examples include citizen participation in politics, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, and equality before the law. Some sets are more 'minimalist', i.e. more or mainly concerned with how elections are organised (Schumpeter 1947; Lipset, 1960); other underscore the importance of civil liberties (Diamond, 1999); and more recent and elaborate sets include features such as social justice and economic equality (Morlino, 2009) and direct democracy through referendums (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016). It can be argued that each dimension serves as a pillar that upholds the structure of democratic governance, ensuring that the power derived from the people is exercised in a manner that is fair, just, and accountable. The essence of democracy is not solely in the existence of these dimensions but in their effective functioning and the harmony between them (cf. Dahl, 1956).

This article adopts the theoretical framework proposed by researchers Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016), which was initially tested in Round 6 of the European Social Survey (2012). It presents a series of criteria that are categorised into four main aspects of democracy: electoral, liberal, social, and direct. The electoral dimension highlights the principles of freedom, fairness, and competitiveness in elections. The liberal dimension centres around an impartial judiciary, freedom of the press, and safeguarding minority rights. The social dimension encompasses ideas of social justice and economic equality. Lastly, the direct democracy dimension prioritises referendums and the supremacy of the popular will. The article's Data, methods, and variables section provides a comprehensive discussion of the questionnaire items related to each dimension.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What is the overall assessment of satisfaction with different aspects of democracy in Europe?
2. Which aspects of democracies exhibit the highest and lowest levels, as well as the most and least variation across countries?
3. How are factors like social trust, subjective political efficacy, satisfaction with different aspects of political governance, and belief in conspiracy theories connected to satisfaction with democracy and its fundamental components?

## **HYPOTHESES**

H1 External political efficacy (i.e. belief in responsiveness of the political sphere and institutions) is positively related to satisfaction with all four dimensions of democracy.

H2 Internal political efficacy (i.e. the belief one's capable of political activism) is positively related to satisfaction with satisfaction with all four dimensions of democracy.

H3 Satisfaction with the state of health services is positively related to satisfaction with social democracy.

H4 Satisfaction with the state of education is positively related to satisfaction with social democracy.

H5 Agreement with conspiracy beliefs is positively related to dissatisfaction with all four dimensions of democracy (as an indirect manifestation of political disengagement).

H6 Social trust is positively related to satisfaction with electoral and liberal democracy.

H7 Lower levels of political trust are associated with lower levels satisfaction with all four dimensions of democracy.

## **DATA, METHOD, AND VARIABLES**

In order to investigate the research question, I employ data from the European Social Survey Round 10, which covers the years 2020 to 2022, depending on the data collection period in each country participating in the ESS (ESS, 2020). This is the latest ESS dataset available, which includes indicators on the perceptions and assessments of democracy in Europe. The dataset consists of responses from 31 countries, with a total of 58,810 individuals who were selected using nationwide representative sampling methods. The data were gathered through in-person interviews conducted at the respondents' place of residence. Self-completion fieldwork was allowed in nine countries as a result of the recurring Covid-19 pandemic outbreaks. The extensive amount of data from different countries necessitates the use of a multilevel approach for their analysis.

Evaluations of democracy were operationalised with eleven statements requesting the respondents to assess how much each of them applies to their country on a 0 – 10 scale (0 – does not apply at all; 10 – applies completely). The statements were as follows, listed in the order mentioned in the ESS Round 10 questionnaire:

1. National elections in [Country] are free and fair
2. Different political parties in [Country] offer clear alternatives to one another
3. The media in [Country] are free to criticise the government
4. The rights of minority groups in [Country] are protected
5. Citizens in [Country] have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums
6. The courts in [Country] treat everyone the same
7. Governing parties in [Country] are punished in elections when they have done a bad job
8. The government in [Country] protects all citizens against poverty
9. The government in [Country] takes measures to reduce differences in income levels
10. In [Country] the views of ordinary people prevail over the views of the political elite
11. In [Country] the will of the people cannot be stopped

Following Ferrín and Kriesi (2016), questions 1, 2, and 7 fit neatly into the electoral dimension of democracy. Not only the election should be free and fair, but also the selection of the competing parties or candidates should enable voters to identify clear alternatives between their programmes and promises. The fairness of elections also implies that losers must leave the office if voted out by the people. Items 3, 4 and 6 embody the equality of everyone before the law and that no one can be arbitrarily and unjustly persecuted or deprived of their rights by authorities and politicians. The socioeconomic dimension of democracy is presented by items 8 and 9 on this list, thus adding the living conditions and economic circumstances to the political and legal dimensions of equality. Finally, items 5, 10, and 11 reiterate the general conception of democracy as ‘power by the people’, emphasizing the importance of referendums and the unacceptability of overriding plebiscitary decisions by political bodies such as parliament or the executive.

Hypotheses 1 – 7 necessitate the introduction of explanatory variables which are expected to affect satisfaction with democracy and its dimensions. The definition of political efficacy as feeling that individual action can have an impact on the political process is borrowed from the seminal work of Campbell et al. (1954). According to Seligson (1980), political efficacy can be split into external and internal aspect. External political efficacy refers to the political system’s responsiveness to citizen political participation. It can thus be operationalized by a summated index created from ESS Round 10 questionnaire items How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does? and How much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics? Both indicators are measured on a five-rank scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). Similarly, internal political efficacy represents the citizen’s self-assessment of his/her ability to influence political decisions and can be empirically represented by another two items, How able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues? and How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics? Likewise, the response options for these items range from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely).

Satisfaction with health services and education is measured by two single indicators for each attitude, namely, What you think overall about the state of health services in [country] nowadays? and What you think overall about the state of education in [country] nowadays? The response scale is interval, ranging from 0 (extremely bad) to 10 (extremely good).

The Covid-19 outbreak has sparked conspiracy theories surrounding the origin of the virus and the hidden motives of those believed to be responsible for initiating the pandemic. In accordance with Mari et al. (2022), conspiracy theories are characterised as the tendency to ascribe notable political and societal events to a clandestine and powerful group’s malevolent plot, aimed at accomplishing a particular objective by intentionally deceiving the general public. This belief can be assessed using three statements from the ESS questionnaire, which are rated on a five-point scale (1 – strongly agree, 5 – strongly disagree; lower numbers indicate a stronger belief in a conspiracy). The statements are, Small secret group of people is responsible for making all major decisions in world politics; Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public; and Coronavirus is the result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organization. For data

reduction purposes, these items are pooled into an aggregated index rather than used as separate explanatory variables.

The final two hypotheses focus on social and political trust as possible determinants of satisfaction with democracy. In plain but academic terms, social trust can be defined as “the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm, if they can avoid it, and will look after our interests, if this is possible” (Newton, 2007). Social trust is operationalized as an index of three items: Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people; Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair; and Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves? Another important measure to include is the political trust, defined by Citrin and Muste (1999) as “the degree to which people perceive that government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations”. Following the established practice (cf. Reher 2020; Vilhelmsdóttir 2020), the political trust index is formed from the ESS questionnaire items measuring trust in the country’s parliament, politicians, and political parties. All six trust items are measured on an 11-point scale from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust).

Freedom House scores of political rights (PR) and civil liberties (CL) for each country are added as contextual, country-level variables to account for differences in the quality of democracy.

Respondents’ gender, age, education, and the subjective perception of their household income are added as control variables.

# ARE ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BODIES (EMBS) READY TO MITIGATE NEW ELECTORAL RISKS?

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## **ABSTRACT**

The phenomenon of disinformation and electoral interference has escalated dramatically over the last few years. This greatly reduces the level playing field that allows for fair competition between candidates and informed voting by citizens. This represents an increasing threat to electoral integrity in all democracies. Disinformation takes two forms in the context of elections: partisan and procedural. Partisan disinformation targets candidates and voters with false information to influence their voting preferences. Procedural disinformation aims to disenfranchise certain electors or to discredit the entire electoral process, in an attempt to increase the electoral fortune of a given candidate. Are Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) prepared to address these risks? The answer is complex. However, I hypothesize that no. It is not a lack of willingness that limits their ability to act. Rather, there are a series of legal and technical constraints that act as a barrier. Firstly, EMBs cannot amend electoral laws to make them more robust against this threat. Secondly, disinformation rarely constitutes a criminal offence, as it usually falls outside of most legislation. Foreign interference can hardly be prosecuted for it falls beyond national jurisdiction. Thirdly, EMB's range of action is severely limited by their obligation of independence and impartiality. Fourthly, even if the online advertising space was better controlled, this would have little impact on the spread of disinformation and malign foreign electoral operations. Fifthly, social media's contribution to mitigating these risks is limited by the fact that they have very poor control over the content circulating on their platforms.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Electors are increasingly exposed to new risks that can undermine the integrity of free and fair elections. Until a decade ago, electoral fraud mostly took the shape of vote buying and voters, candidates and electoral staff harassment to attempt to manipulate results. The enactment of more robust electoral laws and the professionalization of Electoral Management Bodies (EMB) have gone a long way towards eliminating these risks and making elections safe. However, these measures appear to provide a frail line of defence against new electoral risks. Disinformation and foreign interference, both phenomena that have escalated dramatically over the last few years, greatly diminish the level playing field that allows candidates to compete fairly and voters to make informed choices. They constitute a growing threat to electoral integrity in all democracies. Current electoral events provide abundant examples of the scale of this problem.

To mitigate new electoral risks actors of the electoral cycle have adopted different measures. National security communities have endorsed a new defence posture. Germany passed the Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz), which aims to tackle disinformation and hate speech. France's set up Viginum to safeguard against digital foreign interference. Canada established the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol to notify citizens of a threat to the integrity of elections. Estonia created a network to combat disinformation (McBrien 2020).

The U.S. Department of State recently introduced the "Framework to Counter Foreign State Information Manipulation" with a similar purpose. Countries like Zambia, Honduras and Kenya take advantage of programs



such as IVerify a UNDP- run initiative to counter disinformation. The private sector is active and offers tools and services to combat disinformation such as Aos Fatos in Brazil. Online tools - Bot Sentinel, PolitiFact, FactCheck.org and AFP Factual for instance – are also now widely available to Internet users and they yield assistance geared towards contributing to eliminating online disinformation. Social Media platforms have introduced measures to curb the spread of disinformation on their sites. (S. A. Thompson 2022) Facebook specifically bans such disinformation from its ads market by distinguishing between “procedural” and “substantive political ads” (Marks 2021, 393). X adopted in August 2023 the Civil Integrity policy to limit any attempt of “manipulating or interfering in elections or other civic processes, such as posting or sharing content that may suppress participation, mislead people about when, where, or how to participate in a civic process, or lead to offline violence during an election” (X 2023). YouTube adopted in June 2023 a set of Election misinformation policies in support of similar objectives (YouTube 2023). Since March 2021, TikTok has provided tools in support of election integrity within its Community Guidelines (TikTok 2021). And the list of private, non-for-profit and state-run technical and non-technical measures to cleanse elections is continually growing. All this shows that this threat is taken seriously.

On the front line of disinformation and foreign interference, EMBs have also adopted risk mitigation measures or are planning on doing so. Elections British- Columbia in Canada is recommending legislative changes to impose restrictions on electoral advertising and campaign finances to Canadian residents (Boegman 2020). Others have also launched fact-checking platforms and have put together public awareness campaigns against the dangers of disinformation and how to protect oneself from it. Elections Canada recently launched an online disinformation tool called “ElectoFacts” to provide factual information to voters during the next federal elections. The German Federal Returning Officer also adopted a similar strategy by launching a fact-checking site on procedural disinformation (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2021) and so does Australia which created in June 2018 the Electoral Integrity Task Force (Australian Electoral Commission 2018). The Australian Electoral Commission also implemented the Disinformation Register, which “lists prominent pieces of disinformation the AEC has discovered regarding the electoral process” (Australian Electoral Commission 2023). Since March 2020, The Electoral Service of Chile (Servicio Electoral) offers electors a fact-checking page with an electoral “Fake news repository”. In October 2023, The Electoral Tribunal of Panama (TE) offers a similar service on its website “VerificadoContigo” (verified with you). In November 2021, participants at the XV Conference of the Inter-American Union of Electoral Bodies (Uniore) established the Inter-American Observatory for Combating Disinformation whose function is to build strategic alliances with fact-checking agencies and social media platforms. Peru’s National Elections Jury (JNE) and the National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE) implemented before the regional and municipal elections of 2022 a bot service on WhatsApp to provide information about voting, such as polling places, to fight electoral disinformation (Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales 2022). They also added a fact-checking component to the channel, with the support of a fact-checking initiative called ONPEChequea (ONPEChequea 2022). This service is aimed at countering partisan disinformation, and is somehow an exception, as most other EMB strategies have targeted procedural disinformation while leaving out partisan disinformation to other actors.

The literature on disinformation and foreign interference is rich today. Researchers took up this matter in particular after the Russian operations during the 2016 US presidential elections, which were well documented in *The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election*. Defence measures against these new electoral risks have also been the subject of publications. Their authors mainly draw on the framework of hybrid warfare. On the other side, as much as EMBs play an important role in ensuring secure elections, somewhat surprisingly, very few studies explore this element.

Will the risk mitigating measures EMBs have implemented or plan on doing so protect and secure elections against disinformation and foreign interference? I hypothesize that they will mostly prove ineffective. First, they largely reflect a lack of understanding of the digital environment in which such information circulates, as well as the miscellaneous actors seeking to influence foreign electoral outcomes. Expedients put forth would not make it possible to clean up electoral campaigns and curb this threat, as they are aimed too indiscriminately at different targets. To be effective, any response would need to carefully distinguish between the various hazards posed by disinformation and foreign interference. Second, besides those technical and legal

aspects, in an even more fundamental way, several legal and technical constraints also severely limit and restrict the capacity of EMBs to act.

My paper is organized as follows. In the first part, I briefly outline what disinformation and foreign interference are in an electoral context. In the second part, I list the reasons why measures adopted by EMBs do not provide adequate protection against new electoral risks. Third, I conclude.

### **WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?**

Disinformation is “[i]nformation that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 20). In the context of an election, disinformation aims to influence either public opinion in general, so as to undermine the sincerity of the vote or, more specifically, a group of electors, in an attempt to alter their voting preferences and behaviour. Producers and sowers of disinformation employ a variety of technical and communication stratagems and artifice. They can spread false or misleading stories and credit distorted statements to a candidate to erode his credibility and arouse disapproval. They can publish online images and videos that have been manipulated by editing and processing software, such as replicas (Garnett and Pal 2022). With the same objective in mind, they may exploit coordinated inauthentic online behaviour, by feeding several fake social media profiles. To bolster a candidate’s popularity, they may resort to astroturfing – the process of wrongfully implying that a successful event is of spontaneous citizen origin (Boulay 2015). The disinformation modus operandi also involves nourishing trolls by stoking online debates on divisive topics with false or partially fabricated information (Clucas 2020). They can also use whataboutism, which is an attempt to turn the discussion on another topic while slipping in disinformation (Gu, Kropotov, and Yarochkin 2018).

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, TikTok, WeChat and Telegram, are the main vectors of disinformation. It circulates there abundantly due to the ease with which anyone can make use of this digital space. Platforms also implement various techniques such as micro-targeting (Crain and Nadler 2019; Kusche 2019), which consists of personalizing users’ content based on the fine segmentation of their online behaviours and the wide operationalization of recommendation algorithms (Pariser 2012).

Although disinformation bears numerous causes that are no doubt linked to today’s geopolitical tensions, it also happens to be one of the main consequences of the business model of digital platforms which entirely rests on user engagement – engagement that platforms can subsequently monetize (Brown 2021). Disinformation circulates as much in public and semi-public spaces of digital platforms – as in a post, video or message published for online friends (or the general public, depending on privacy settings). Actors involved in disinformation campaigns can operate from any country, as the web is borderless. As we have just seen, disinformation travels in a variety of content and forms, and more rarely is it at the heart of advertising – we will get back to this topic later. Sometimes, too, traditional print media and broadcast media can contribute to spreading disinformation by publishing articles containing misleading claims. This is the case, for example, of the Russian state-funded media RT and Sputnik, which were banned by the European Union following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, because Brussels suspected them of “systematic information manipulation and disinformation” (Union europe enne 2022).

### **THE TWO TYPES OF ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION**

Electoral contests are a host of two types of disinformation. Partisan disinformation, by far the most frequent form, aims to manipulate public opinion to influence voters’ choices. It targets candidates, political parties and citizens. Examples during recent elections, in both stable and well-established democracies as well as in emergent democracies, are almost infinite (ADF 2023; Jalli 2023; Osborn 2023). The perpetrators employ the panoply of stratagems listed above in an attempt to reduce the electoral fortunes of select candidates. They may also be aimed specifically at driving electoral abstention among voters who have shown their support for a candidate, or who are inclined to do so given their socio- economic profile – the latest research in electoral sociology has illustrated, for instance, that better-educated voters tend to back left-wing parties (Gethin, Martî nez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021).

Procedural disinformation, the second type of disinformation, targets electoral administrations, political parties and voters (Boston Globe 2022). It consists of circulating false information about voting procedures, such as polling station opening hours, documents electors must present to vote or the list of candidates, to damage the credibility of election results. Procedural disinformation mostly aims to disenfranchise certain voters to reap electoral gains. It could also be used in an attempt to question the sincerity of the election or the conditions in which the ballot is held, as the outcome looks unlikely to be favourable to the candidates of their choice. As in the case of the 2016 US presidential elections, it can also harbour the ambition of undermining social cohesion by promoting divisive issues such as race, LGBT rights, and immigration. These are just some of the many objectives of this type of disinformation. Sometimes its true motivations are hard to identify, as the sole purpose seems to be making as much noise as possible. (Gessen 2018). During Brazil's 2018 presidential elections, for example, the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (TSE) was the target of a disinformation campaign on platform X that suggested that the electronic ballot boxes used had been hacked (Recuero 2020; Taboada et al. 2023). During the Tunisian presidential elections in October 2019, opponents of Salma Elloumi's candidacy circulated the information that she had withdrawn in favour of another candidate in an attempt to influence voters' choices (Business News 2019). During the 2021 US presidential elections, false information was abundantly relayed on social networks concerning postal voting to restrict the participation of voters deemed more inclined to use this voting device (Censky 2021; Qiu 2021). These examples show the variety of strategies that malevolent actors can deploy to try to win the vote or to try to breed mistrust into the electoral process.

### **WHAT IS FOREIGN INTERFERENCE?**

Foreign election interference campaigns pursue similar objectives, using partisan and procedural disinformation as their main informational component. They also use other more technical means, chiefly illicit, to gain influence over the verdict of the ballot box. By hacking into the computer systems of electoral administrations and political parties, foreign agents can attempt to modify electoral data – by making certain votes disappear or by altering election results. They may set out to render computer systems inaccessible by carrying out denial-of-service attacks or by infecting computers with malicious software. Estonia was the subject of a cyber-attack during the parliamentary elections of March 2023 (Martin 2023). In 2023, hackers managed to gain entry, via a very sophisticated attack, to the electoral registers of the UK Electoral Commission (Seddon 2023). During the 2019 Kosovar parliamentary elections, the online election results display systems also suffered a major denial-of-service attack from Russia (Ahmetaj 2021). Hackers can try to influence voters' opinions, by making public information on candidates that they have allegedly stolen, as was the case during the 2017 French presidential elections, when Emmanuel Macron's campaign team (MacronLeaks) fell victim to leaked emails (Vilmer 2019) or the Hillary Clinton email controversy (Cheney and Wheaton 2016). Foreign interference can also be motivated by an attempt to discredit the electoral process as a whole, by relaying the rumour that the electoral outcome has been doctored. More traditionally, it can take the form of financial support for a candidate or political party, or harassment of a candidate or members of his or her family. In the case of state-orchestrated campaigns, the range of strategies that can be employed is even wider, given the resources available to the perpetrators.

[ ... ]

# CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN POLAND – DOES IT AFFECT THE SUBNATIONAL LEVELS?

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## ABSTRACT

Most current studies on the democratic or de-democratic changes in Europe have concentrated so far on the national level, while they are also important at local and regional levels. The proposed paper is aimed at investigating: 1) changes going in either democratic or autocratic direction within the subnational structures in a state as well as 2) their relationship with the similar processes at the central level – focusing on the impact of the national tier on lower territorial levels. The case of Poland will be studied, focusing on the years 2015-2023 (the period of Law and Justice ruling in the country) but also taking into consideration previous years to identify a possible change concerning the investigated issues taking place since 2015.

The paper will present a part of research within the NCN pilot project carried out at the University of Warsaw. It takes mainly a qualitative approach and is based on the following data sources: local media materials, data from in-depth semi-structured interviews of sub-national politicians and national experts as well as data from focus group interviews – local journalists and NGOs members.

## INTRODUCTION

Most studies on the democratic or, in recent years, de-democratic changes have concentrated so far on the national level, while they are also important at the local and regional levels. There are just single and not necessary comprehensive studies on the relationship between the territorial levels in this regard (e.g. Charron, Dijkstra and Lapuente 2014; Heinelt 2015; Saikkonen 2016; Graham et al. 2017; Tomini and Sandri 2018; Charron, Lapuente, Bauhr, and Annoni 2022). The proposed paper is aimed at investigating: 1) changes going in either democratic or autocratic direction within the local and regional structures in a state as well as 2) their relationship with the similar processes at the national (central) level – focusing on the impact of the national tier on lower territorial levels.

The case of Poland will be studied, focusing mainly on the years 2015-2023 - the period of Law and Justice (PiS) ruling in the country but also taking into consideration previous years to identify the possible change concerning the investigated issues taking place since 2015. This state has been selected because it is an interesting case of a EU member having three subnational levels and combination of centralized and decentralized model of administration. The reform from 1999 introduced three subnational territorial levels - municipalities - gminy, districts - powiaty and provinces – voivodeships, województwa and led to the development of process of decentralisation and a relatively strong territorial self-government - with a high autonomy of local and regional authorities in terms of tasks and competences but limited financial autonomy - related among others to the presence in the administrative model at the level of provinces of voivodeship governors – representatives of the central administration (Regulski 2003). In Poland, there are also various political profiles of local and regional authorities (including politically non-aligned persons) and models of their political relationship with central authorities, not to mention the process of de-democratization, observable particularly in the aforementioned period 2015-2023 (e.g. Grzymała-Busse 2017; Przybylski 2018; Sadurski 2018; Szymański and Zamęcki 2022).

The paper will present the assumptions and first findings of the research within the 4-year project carried out at the University of Warsaw within the OPUS 20 program of the National Science Centre. It is a pilot study which

covers selected 5 voivodeships (provinces) in Poland (Lublin, Lubusz, Masovian, Silesian and Subcarpathian) and several cities within these provinces. The project stems from a general main hypothesis that decentralization processes constitute an opportunity for subnational authorities to become more democratic but also more autocratic, as they may enhance the divergence in democracy levels between different territorial tiers of governance.

The following questions are posed in the paper (also in the project): What is the state of democracy in Poland at a subnational level? Can we observe any changes in this regard, particularly after 2015? Are there any patterns between changes towards democracy or autocracy and those in the decentralized or centralized direction? Are the decentralized territorial structures “democratic enclaves” in the case of de-democratization starting at a national level? What is the impact of the national level on the democratization/de-democratization at subnational levels?

The paper (as well as the whole project) is based on the theoretical framework concerning two pillars: democracy/(de-)democratization and territorial dimension of politics. Conceptually, it goes beyond the liberal model of democracy (as some democracy indexes such as V-dem) and takes into consideration also the participatory and deliberative democracy – both very important from the angle of local democracy (more about it in the separate section of this paper).

The paper takes mainly a qualitative approach. There is a lack of sufficient detailed data on the state of local and regional democracy; the existing indexes, e.g. V-dem democracy index, have many deficits in this regard, i.e. a limited number of items, no consistency of data and deficits concerning particular countries (McMann 2018). It is then difficult to use quantitative methods for this study. For analyzing links between territorial dimension and democratization/autocratization in Poland the following sources were selected within the multi-stage research process (apart from desk research): local and regional media materials, data from two focus group interviews – with local journalists and NGOs members (conducted in Autumn 2022) as well as from about 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with sub-national authorities (from cities and provinces and different political parties and local committees – to have different perspectives) and experts - in May 2023-January 2024 period. The following methods of analyzing data are used: content analysis (with a use of MAXQDA Plus software) – to find out if we can observe at subnational levels any non-democratic legislation and practices and to investigate the local and regional groups’ perception of the state of democracy in their cities or regions; process-tracing of the paths through which the national level affects the subnational structures – to investigate the causal chains leading to democratic or autocratic changes.

## **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### Two-Pillar Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study is based on two main pillars. The first one refers to democracy and changes of political regimes (approaches to democratization/de-democratization and more static issues of the quality of democracy and local democracy), the second one - to the territorial politics, accounting for the multi-level and network governance as well as theories of decentralization (see Figure 1 below).

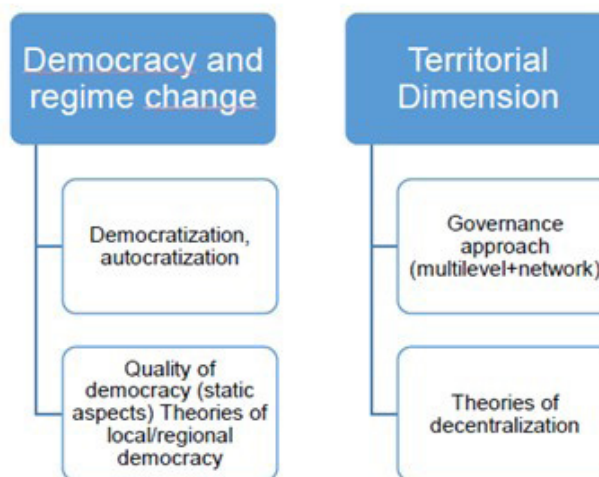


Figure 1 – Two-pillar Theoretical framework

Source: Author’s work

Middle-range theories of democratization, especially the concepts of consolidation of democracy (Linze and Stepan 1996) and the quality of democracy (Morlino 2011), can be used to study de-democratization changes at the national and subnational levels, provided that they are accompanied by the use of local democracy theories that take into account the specificities of democracy at these levels, e.g. specific forms and mechanisms of direct democracy (Hendriks et al. 2010).

However, these theoretical approaches cannot provide a sufficient theoretical framework for analyzing democratization and de-democratization at subnational levels. They must be linked to approaches that also make it possible to study the interactions and links between the national, regional and local levels – in order to check whether, in the context of democratization or de-democratization, there is an impact of these processes at one level on their development at another level. For instance, it is important to analyze the impact of such important political phenomena at the national level as politicization, participatory, corruption or clientelism on the local or regional level.

Governance theories (structural aspects) may be a starting point in this context. They enable the presentation of a network of connections between different actors at national, regional and local levels. Multi-level governance must be mentioned first (Kohler-Koch and Larat 2009; Piattoni 2010). However, in order to analyze the interaction of institutions and actors at different territorial levels, multi-level governance should be combined with a network approach (Kriesi and Silke 2007). The theoretical framework for analyzing democratization and de-democratization at subnational levels should also include more specific approaches than multi-level or network governance in order to analyze a very important democratic relationship between central and local/regional authorities – primarily from the point of view of the separation of powers and competences. In this connection, there are very useful theories of decentralization, including its conceptualization, causes, effects and the relationship with democracy and (de-) democratization (Saito, 2001; Falleti, 2014; Antwi-Boasiako and Csanyi, 2015; Mbate, 2017).

A summary of the usefulness of the components of the adopted theoretical framework is provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 – Usefulness of Components of the Theoretical Framework in Brief**

<b>Research agenda</b>	<b>Useful in investigating</b>
Democratization and de-democratization	Dynamic change
Quality of democracy Local democracy	Static dimension + regime dimensions More static approach – components and mechanisms of local democracy
Governance approach	Relations between different national, regional and local actors and institutions
Theories of decentralization	Causes, modalities, and consequences of the process of decentralization

Source: Author's work.

## **TWO-STAGE CONCEPTUALIZATION**

The conceptual framework worked out within the study consists of two main components, being a result of the two stages of conceptualization (Jaakkola 2020). The first one is the identification of models of democracy and its main elements. The second component is a set of items that can be studied on different levels – from national to local, while investigating democratization and de-democratization.

In order to analyze democratization and de-democratization trends in a multi-level democracy, it is first necessary to precisely define what kind of democracy we mean and identify the models of democracy that will come into play, along with their basic elements.

Firstly, the electoral democracy and liberal democracy – two main components of the V-dem liberal democracy index should be taken into consideration. The electoral democracy is identical with Robert Dahl's polyarchy (Dahl 2000) and includes such elements as: elected representatives, fair and competitive elections; freedom of speech and freedom of the media as well as freedom of association. In order to talk about the liberal democracy, such issues should be added to the list as guaranteeing the rights of individuals and minorities, ensuring the rule of law, the functioning of the checks and balances mechanisms, first of all to control the executive power, and ensuring the independence and impartiality of the public administration (Antoszewski 2016).

However, in order to investigate the democratization and de-democratization at the subnational levels, two other models must be taken into consideration. The first one is the participatory democracy, reflected among others in the V-dem participatory democracy index (Uziębło 2009). It includes such important elements as: functioning of direct democracy mechanisms – referendums, functioning of semi-indirect democracy mechanisms – citizens' legislative initiative, right to petition, public hearings (as well as elements specific for subnational levels – e.g. participatory budgets and panels), participation and representation of citizens in local and regional authorities; citizen participation in civil society organizations and different forms of partnership (at local level, e.g. youth and senior councils, urban movements and Local Action Groups respectively).

The second important model of democracy which should be taken into consideration is the deliberative democracy, reflected among others by the V-dem deliberative democracy index (Bachtiger et al. 2018). It covers such issues as the presence of citizens in decision-making processes and public management, mechanisms and forums of dialogue, consultation mechanisms and forms of e- democracy.

After identifying the models of democracy and indicating the elements in these models, which is important from the point of view of the main research question, it is necessary to reflect on the elements within these models that can be subject to de- democratization not only at the central level, but also at the subnational levels in Poland (taking into consideration some differences at these levels).

When it comes to the electoral democracy, while investigating democratization and de-democratization in terms of elections at the national and subnational levels (Johansson, Ronblömm and Öjehag-Pettersson 2021) - taking into consideration the differences between these levels, such as different parties holding power as well as more non-affiliated candidates and local electoral committee at the subnational levels (Gendźwiłł, Żółtak i Rutkowski 2015), the elements to be investigated are particularly: integrity and competitiveness of elections, including the questions of presence of electoral malpractices, using incumbent advantage by governing parties and authorities or role of clientelism in elections (Gendźwiłł 2020).

And in the case of freedom of speech, the focus must be on the operation of local and regional media, i.e. if we observe media bias and their excessive politicization/partisanship (influence of parties and local/regional authorities), restriction of media pluralism, censorship/self-censorship, fake news and hate speech, use of regional and local media by local politicians to develop populist rhetoric (Krysiak 2014). As far as the freedom of association is concerned, the following questions must be posed: Are pluralism and the activity of political groups or civil society organizations restricted by local and regional authorities (whether the influence of the government and parties on these organizations is growing excessively)? How is the party system shaped? - whether we are dealing with its increasing concentration or even domination of some parties; whether the ruling party at the national level, also in power at the subnational levels, does not apply similar (legal) measures limiting the ability of opposition parties to act at the national level (e.g. limiting the possibility of debating, proposing legislation or taking part in decision-making) (Jakli and Stenberg 2020).

In the case of ensuring freedoms of citizens and rights of minorities, researchers investigating the model of liberal democracy (Tomini and Sandri 2018) must ask whether at regional and local levels the exercise of civil rights

and freedoms is increasingly restricted and whether there is a growing intensity of activities of state and local authorities raising doubts in terms of respecting the rights of minorities – religious, ethnic or LGBT.

While investigating the question of rule of law, it is important to ask whether the decision-making and adopting regulations are based on legal provisions and are consistent with the constitution and laws; whether we are dealing with an increasing number of cases of illegality or doubts in this matter; whether the transparency of the decision-making process is not decreasing; whether the number and scope of consultations with relevant regional and local institutions is not decreasing; whether practices from the national level (night sessions, etc.) are not duplicated at subnational levels; whether the problem of acting in accordance with the law of regional and local authorities and being responsible for its violation is intensified.

The checks and balances system is analyzed in terms of democratization/de- democratization by asking whether decision-making (legislative) and controlling bodies at subnational levels retain their position and competences and tools vis-à-vis the local and regional executive bodies; what is the position of decision-making and controlling bodies of local/regional government in relation to state administration bodies (provincial governors in Poland); whether mechanisms and institutions of control over the executive, including media, courts and civil society organizations, are not undermined; whether the problem of accountability (political and legal) for the actions of regional and local authorities is growing (Krysiak 2014).

In the case of last component of the liberal model of democracy, i.e. ensuring transparent, citizen-friendly, independent and impartial administration researchers ask questions about growing problems in maintaining the so-called good administration and in enabling wide access to public information as well as in ensuring the impartiality of local government administration bodies (lack of political or party influence) and independence from state administration bodies (Grzyb and Gendźwiłł 2019). They also investigate the development of clientelistic structures and nepotism in this regard (Krysiak 2014).

Since the participatory and deliberative democracies are taken into consideration, elements of these models should be also the research subject in the context of democratization/de-democratization, recognizing at the same time the relatively early stage of consolidation of local democracy in Poland.

In the case of the former model, researchers investigate first of all the functioning of the mechanisms of direct and semi-indirect democracy and ask: whether they are not limited (if they have existed so far); whether the importance of such instruments of citizen participation as participatory budgets is not weakened, e.g. through politicization, partisanship and excessive influence of the political authorities; whether the actual functioning is not replaced by a fake one as a result of the use of slogans of reinforcement of direct democracy by populist political forces (Paxton 2020). Moreover, they analyze other forms of citizens participation, in order to find out whether the participation of citizens in different types of civil society organizations and partnerships is decreasing, or, at local level, the development of urban movements or Local Action Groups is restricted.

The analysis of deliberative democracy at subnational levels in Poland requires, in turn, posing questions about the presence of social consultation mechanisms in decision-making processes and public management, i.e. whether there are growing problems of local government units in fulfilling obligatory consultations, whether optional public consultations on important issues (concerning local laws, financial matters, investment and infrastructure projects, etc.) are not limited; whether certain groups of residents are not omitted in public consultations; whether consultations are becoming more and more superficial and ostensible (Czopek and Żońnierczyk 2017).

## **FIRST FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

After the desk research, focus interviews with local journalists and NGOs representatives as well after the advanced phase of local/regional media analysis and in-depth interviews, several important preliminary findings can be presented in this part of the paper.

The main observation is that there are problems with respecting the relevant models of electoral, liberal, participatory and deliberative democracy at the local and regional level in Poland. These problems are an outcome of



both not sufficiently high quality of the Polish local/regional democracy - both before and after 2015 (but with increasing improvement in the case of large cities) and de-democratic changes at the national level after 2015, which strengthened many undemocratic tendencies at the subnational levels.

The democratic deficits at the level of the Polish cities and provinces were observed before 2015, i.e. before Law and Justice (PiS) won presidential and parliamentary elections. It shows that irrespective of the party holding power at the central level (Civil Platform - PO or PiS), there are problems with local/regional democracy which is still at not sufficiently advanced stage of the democratic consolidation. However, many undemocratic tendencies at the subnational levels in Poland, having the source at the national level, have been developed since 2015. The following parts, based mainly (but not only) on the investigation of the local territorial level (level of provinces was still investigated at the stage of writing of this paper), will present arguments to support these observations.

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# LEVERAGING LOCAL INTERESTS? A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS IN SERBIA, MONTENEGRO, CROATIA, AND SLOVENIA

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Do electoral systems influence the roles that elected representatives play in the legislative arena? Do electoral institutions lead to specific foci or styles of representation? Despite existing research showing systematic behavioral differences among voters, candidates, and political parties across various electoral systems, insights into legislative roles are comparatively limited. Can we expect different legislative roles to emerge in candidate-centered systems (such as first-past-the-post, two-round systems, single transferable vote, and open-list proportional representation) compared to party-centered systems (including closed-list and flexible-list proportional representation), in single-member districts versus multi-member districts, and within at-large electoral systems? This paper delves into these often overlooked theoretical and empirical puzzles by examining how members of parliament adapt their legislative behavior within a highly party-constrained institutional context in four post-communist countries: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro. More precisely, our focus lies in the representation of specific narrow territorial and local interests within parliaments elected under rules that largely lack electoral incentives to cultivate personal votes.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In the legislative arena, roles constitute a coherent set of norms and behavioral expectations associated with being a legislator (Wahlke, 1962). The foci of representation denotes whose opinions and interests legislators primarily consider representing, while the style of representation relates to the extent of leeway they perceive in interpreting these interests (Anderweg, 2012). Style of representation distinguishes trustees, who act upon their own mature judgment to determine their principals' interests, from delegates, who act upon their principals' instructions. Additionally we can differentiate between party delegates, who pursue the interests of their political party, and district delegates, who prioritize the concerns of their specific constituency (Converse & Pierce, 1986). On the other hand, foci of representation can be meaningfully categorized along two dimensions (Wessels, 1999). Along the group dimension, members of parliaments may focus on representing a particular functional group (such as women, minorities, youth, seniors, or labor unions) or the broader collective interests of all party voters and their diverse and aggregated group interests. Along the regional dimension, legislators may concentrate on representing the constituents residing in their districts or even specific geographical subregions within the district (Andre & Depauw, 2016), their nation/country, or, in the case of supranational legislative bodies like the European Parliament, whole EU.

According to the neo-institutionalist paradigm, institutional rules condition and constrain legislators' role orientations as they pursue individual goals (Strom, 1997; Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Andeweg, 2014). However, evidence on how electoral systems influence representation styles and focuses continues to be mixed and sometimes contradictory (Wessels, 1999; Searing, 1994; Jewell, 1970), especially regarding representational styles and interpreting citizens' opinions. The one consistent finding in the literature thus far is that, along the regional dimension, a strong district focus is closely associated with FPTP and two-round majoritarian systems. Yet scholars disagree whether the electoral formula or district magnitude is the relevant component driving the observed relation. Some have found a legislator's district focus to be shaped by the binary distinction between single-member and multi-member districts across different countries and within them (Dudzińska et al., 2014; Pilet, Freire & Costa, 2012; Koop & Kraemer, 2016). Also, mixed-member systems have been argued to effectively balance different role orientations: district members focusing on constituency interests and list members on representing citizens on the big national issues of the day (Shugart & Wattenberg, 2001; Klingemann & Wessels, 2001; Zittel, 2012; Chiru & Enyedi, 2015; Ilonszki, 1998). Therefore, we can expect that, as district magnitude grows larger, legislators tend to trade in their district focus (Wessels, 1999; Andre et al., 2016) which will probably result in representing the nation as a whole in at-large PR systems (Thomassen & Andeweg 2004). Finally, evidence of ballot structure effects on foci of representation is scarce and inconsistent. Pilet et al. (2012) found national orientations to be more important in the closed-list PR system of Portugal, compared to Belgium and France, but there is evidence that even in Portugal highly-party constrained environment, legislators' actions were driven by district concerns (Fernandes et al., 2017; Borghetto et al., 2020; see Russo, 2011 for Italy, Daubler, 2020 for Belgium).

Theoretically, several causal mechanisms have been proposed to explain the diverse representational roles emerging from different electoral systems (Andre & Depauw, 2019). In low magnitude districts, where electoral competition is highly personalized, legislators tend to prioritize cultivating personal votes. However, personal vote-earning attributes diminish in value in larger districts with closed lists, whereas they may increase in open-list systems. This variation stems from voters' differing information needs and the shortcuts they employ in decision-making under diverse electoral rules. (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Shugart et al., 2005; Andre & Depauw, 2013). A second mechanism is the legislators' uncertainty regarding their constituents' opinions. In smaller districts, with more homogeneous opinions, legislators find it easier to grasp and represent the collective district viewpoint. Conversely, larger districts feature a broader diversity in constituents' interests and preferences due to their larger populations. To mitigate this uncertainty, legislators might realign their focus towards broader partisan positions or narrow it down to specific sub-district localities. Lastly, the high re-election threshold in single-member districts necessitates securing a substantial portion of the vote for victory. This compels legislators in these districts to focus on representing the interests of the entire district. However, a similar rationale can also apply to multi-member districts under open-list proportional representation. Under these conditions, candidates may target specific sub-units, like towns or cities, within the district, aiming to win a significant number of preferential votes and thereby secure a parliamentary seat. Once in parliament, these MPs are likely to advocate for the interests of these sub-districts. Thus, theoretically, the ballot structure can mediate how district magnitude influences legislators' focus on district interests.

## **CASES AND DATA SOURCES**

A primary challenge in researching parliamentary representation styles and focuses involves selecting the appropriate data sources. The literature highlights various research approaches, including elite interviews (Müller et al., 2001; Searing, 1994), surveys (Farrell & Scully, 2007; Katz, 1997; Scully & Farrell, 2003), quantitative analysis of parliamentary debates (Laver & Benoit, 2002; Monroe & Schrodt, 2009; Proksch & Slapin, 2010; Quinn et al., 2010), roll-call voting records (Carey, 2007; Carson et al., 2010), analysis of travel records and expenses (Ingall & Crisp, 2001; Johnston & Pattie, 2009). Opting against these traditional methods, we align with recent studies on legislator behavior in party-dominated European electoral systems by choosing parliamentary questions as our primary data source (see Russo, 2011; Zittel et al., 2019; Borghetto et al., 2020; for candidate-centered systems see Soroka et al., 2009; Martin, 2011; Blidook & Kerby, 2011; Saalfeld & Bischof, 2012). Our selection of data sources is tailored to the specific countries in our study. We believe that legislators exhibit more independence when posing parliamentary questions than in roll-call votes, where party influence and adherence to group leaders' guidance are more prevalent. Furthermore, to circumvent biases like respondent selection and varying response

rates, and to not depend solely on legislators' self-reported behaviors and orientations, we opted out of using interviews and questionnaires. Compared to those methods, parliamentary questions provide an unfiltered insight into legislators' roles and priorities, bridging the gap between their perceived and actual behaviors. Moreover, this approach enables comprehensive analysis of all legislators, with publicly accessible data across Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro.

We have selected Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro for several compelling reasons. These countries share similar institutional and political backgrounds and traditions. Crucially, each of these four countries has enacted regulations to ensure minority representation. This leads us to expect that minority MPs might focus more on local issues, reflecting the geographical distribution of ethnic groups. This is largely due to the geographical concentration of almost all ethnic groups within specific regions of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro. Furthermore, these countries enforce electoral rules for gender representation, with women making up 25% to 40% of parliamentarians in recent terms. All these countries are unitary states, a fact that is mirrored in the structure of their legislative bodies. However, Slovenia is unique with its bicameral parliament; not only is it asymmetric but also incomplete, consisting of the National Assembly (lower body) and the 40-member National Council (upper body), which includes 22 representatives of local interests. At the same time, the proportional electoral system used in all four countries varies based on two crucial electoral institutions: the magnitude of the electoral district and the ballot structure. Parliaments of Serbia and Montenegro are elected in at-large districts with closed lists. The Croatian Sabor is elected in ten 14-member electoral districts with flexible lists and a high intra-party threshold (10% of votes). Finally, the Slovenian National Assembly is elected in eight 11-member electoral districts, but simultaneously every multi-member district is divided into 11 single-member districts where voters cast their votes for individual candidates. Therefore, if electoral rules matter, we can expect different representational styles and foci in Serbia and Montenegro compared to Croatia, and especially Slovenia.

If MPs tend to prioritize their local communities by engaging in home-style politics, providing constituency service, implementing pork barrel redistribution policies, and other politically advantageous strategies aimed at cultivating a personal vote based on territorial considerations (Carozzi & Repetto, 2016; Crisp & Simoneau, 2018), the Slovenian open-list proportional representation system with single-member districts at the voting level is likely to result in a parliament composed of legislators who prioritize their districts. Since their future re-election largely relies on direct votes won in single-member districts (SMDs), they will show their commitment to local constituents through 'local' parliamentary questions. The bond between MPs and SMDs in Slovenia is expected to be even stronger due to Slovenia being one of the few countries in Europe that legally mandates candidates to reside in their respective constituency. Since the 2015 elections, Croatia has adopted a flexible-list proportional representation system with a high intra-party threshold (10% of list votes). However, in practice, it is possible for a candidate on the list of smaller parties to win a direct mandate with just a few thousand votes, whereas on the lists of larger parties, receiving around ten thousand votes almost guarantees winning a mandate, regardless of the candidate's position on the electoral list. Even though incentives to cultivate personal votes are not as high as in Slovenia, signaling concern for the local interests of specific sub-regions of the district could be an electorally profitable strategy. In contrast to Slovenian and Croatian legislators, MPs from Serbia and Montenegro have limited incentives to cultivate personal votes. They are elected at the national level, on closed lists organized solely by party leaders or elites. As a result, their representational style and foci are expected to be partisan and national. However, considering that a portion of the electorate's voting behavior is influenced by candidates' qualities, there are compelling reasons to believe that parties will make efforts to select candidates with the appropriate attributes. As long as candidates with a local focus continue to be a valuable electoral asset, parties will be inclined to support them. Consequently, even in a closed-list and at-large PR system, where the national party has a monopoly in selecting and ranking candidates, legislators seeking re-election will have a motive to demonstrate their commitment to specific localities.

We have already emphasized several methodological reasons for selecting parliamentary questions as an indicator of the style and focus of representation. Nevertheless, the most important reason is contextual. When it comes to voting, political parties in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro enforce strict discipline, and parliamentarians almost always vote with their group. In these highly party-constrained parliaments, it is more useful to examine the content of non-legislative activities, such as asking oral or tabling written parliamentary questions, which offer more opportunities to advocate for and represent narrower territorial interests. Under-

stood in this way, parliamentary questions are not just an institutional mechanism to hold the executive branch accountable. Representatives use them for a wide range of purposes: to request information from the executive, to gain publicity, to tap into anti-governmental popular sentiment, to enhance their reputation in a particular policy field, as well as for strategic electoral signals to the selectorate and the electorate (Bailer, 2011; Proksch & Slapin, 2011; Russo & Wiberg, 2010; Wiberg, 1995). Therefore, in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro, MPs can ask and table locally defined parliamentary questions, cater to their geographical constituents, and still remain loyal to their political party. In this manner, territorially focused parliamentary questions are employed as signaling tools to local electorates and as a supplement to the partisan representation characteristic of traditional legislative activities, such as roll-call voting.

One of the key issues in our empirical analysis is the variation in procedural rules regarding parliamentary questions in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro. The Rules of Procedure in the Croatian Sabor, the National Assembly of Serbia, and the National Assembly of Slovenia stipulate that parliamentary questions can be presented either orally or in writing. In Slovenia, MPs also have the option to submit a distinct type of question known as a 'parliamentary motion.' These motions are used to address specific issues or implement particular measures within the jurisdiction of the Government, a ministry, or a Government office, and they must be submitted in writing. However, the procedures for submitting written questions (including motions) are explicitly outlined only in Slovenia and Croatia. In Serbia, it is mentioned that parliamentary questions can be submitted in written form between two sessions of the National Assembly, but this is not elaborated upon. On the other hand, the internal rules of the National Assembly of Montenegro solely acknowledge oral questions. Unlike oral questions, which must be answered verbally during designated sessions such as question hours, written questions do not consume significant resources in parliamentary proceedings. As a result, they are subject to fewer restrictions imposed by informal party regulations. The second difference in the rules of procedure pertains to the ability of parliament members in Serbia to ask questions on current topics during a special session. In Montenegro, in addition to questions related to specific topics, the rules of procedure also allow members of parliament to pose questions to the Prime Minister during the 'Prime Minister's hour'. The third difference concerns the frequency of sessions during which parliamentary questions are entertained. In Slovenia, this occurs once a month; in Croatia, it takes place at the beginning of each session of the Parliament (typically 4-5 times annually in practice); in Serbia, questions are entertained every last Thursday of the month during the ongoing session or at least once a month upon the proposal of a parliamentary group, specifically for questions related to current topics (although this rarely occurs in practice, as sessions are typically not held on Thursdays); in Montenegro, parliamentary questions in practice can be asked once a month. Special session of the Assembly for PQs is held at least once every two months, but in months when these special sessions are not convened, the parliament organizes sessions where legislators can ask questions on specific topics (the Prime Minister's hour is held at the beginning of both types of sessions).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Different internal procedures result in significant variations in the number of parliamentary questions asked in the four countries. In Slovenia and Croatia, over a single four-year parliamentary term, up to 3,000 questions can be asked or tabled, whereas in Montenegro and Serbia, the number remains around a few hundred. Consequently, our dependent variables are not measured as the absolute number of parliamentary questions per legislator with geographic references. We have two dependent variables (PercentLocal and PercentTrueLocal). PercentLocal represents the number of locally defined questions asked or tabled by a legislator calculated as a percentage of the total number of questions asked or tabled by that member. PercentTrueLocal indicates the percentage of questions posed about the municipality, town, or city in which the legislator resides or neighboring local governments. We have constructed these two dependent variables because we anticipate a more pronounced effect on PercentTrueLocal. To simplify, even in at-large closed-list PR systems like those in Serbia and Montenegro, legislators can ask locally defined questions, but they are rarely about the local issues and problems of their friends and neighbors. The data have a multi-level structure (level 1 – individual; level 2 – parliamentary term; level 3 – country), especially since some politicians served as MPs in different legislative periods, and changes in electoral system rules occurred within one country (e.g., the transition from a closed-list to a flexible-list PR system before the 2015 elections in Croatia). To assess the effects of various electoral, contextual, and individual factors on legislators' district focus, we will employ a linear mixed-effects model (LMM).

As previously mentioned, we anticipate that Slovenian MPs, who are elected through an open-list PR system combined with single-member districts, will exhibit a stronger focus on local issues compared to MPs from Croatia, especially before 2015 when Croatia introduced flexible lists, and particularly in comparison to Serbian and Montenegrin legislators. Additionally, we have introduced a dummy variable called “political localness”. This variable represents the political ties MPs have with local communities, which provide a valuable source of firsthand knowledge about local affairs and establish enduring personal, professional, and political connections with local-level elites and ordinary citizens. Our assumption is that legislators are most closely aligned with their own local units and neighboring areas, as evidenced by higher values for Percent Local and PercentTrueLocal, when they have previously held legislative office in those regions and have also assumed executive positions. The “minority representative” dummy variable takes on the value 1 when a legislator is elected on a minority electoral list or in a minority constituency, and 0 in other cases. We expect a greater local focus if an MP represents ethnic groups that are predominantly concentrated in specific territories in all four countries. Two additional dummy control variables have been included: “government” and “female”, with the expectation that legislators from government parties and female parliamentarians will prioritize policy issues over local concerns.

Our model also includes the variable ‘seniority,’ which measures the number of terms served in a parliament. However, the direction of causality in the relationship between legislative experience and a narrower territorial focus is not straightforward, especially in our sample. In Slovenia, continuous electoral success can be attributed to a strong emphasis on local representation. However, junior MPs may also prioritize building personal voter support to strengthen their recently acquired positions. In Croatia, lawmakers can secure repetitive parliamentary terms through preferential votes (potentially indicating a local focus) and by attaining high positions on electoral lists (indicating a partisan and probably national focus). Only in Serbia and Montenegro should we expect a negative effect of seniority on local focus.

Unlike many individual electoral studies that assess how electoral vulnerability influences legislators’ behavior, our empirical analysis requires a combination of multiple approaches. This is because Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Croatia use different types of electoral lists. In closed-list systems, we adopt the approach of Andre et al. (2015) to calculate vulnerability. It involves determining the ratio between a candidate’s position on the party list and the number of seats won in that district by the candidate’s party. For instance, a candidate ranked second on a party list that secures ten seats would have a vulnerability ratio of 0.2, while a candidate ranked fifth would have a ratio of 0.5. The candidate placed tenth on the same list would have a ratio of 1. In Slovenian elections, the post-election list is formed after the election in each multi-member constituency based on the votes received by individual candidates in single-member districts. For example, if a list wins five seats in a multi-member district, the candidate with the most preferential votes will have a vulnerability value of 0.2, while the fifth-placed candidate will have a value of 1. In the Croatian case of flexible-lists, we calculate electoral vulnerability by combining a candidate’s position on the list with their rank based on the number of preferential votes received. Our belief is that legislators in relatively safe electoral seats have less incentive to focus on cultivating personal votes. Conversely, electorally vulnerable candidates are more likely to concentrate on their electoral districts to maximize their chances of re-election. This logic primarily applies to candidate-centered systems where voters directly impact the selection of candidates who win mandates. However, even in closed-list proportional representation (PR) systems, MPs may have incentives, although less significant ones, to work for their local communities. They can achieve this by emphasizing the party’s commitment to local interests and thereby enhancing their chances of being re-selected. Some studies demonstrate that even in at-large closed-list PR systems, such as those in the Netherlands and Israel, certain political parties value regionally balanced lists (Hazan, 1999; Latner & McGann, 2005). These parties may include strong local candidates either as part of their vote maximization strategy or due to intra-party competition.

We are investigating two variables that assess the center-periphery divide. The first variable is a dummy variable “capital city.” Our hypothesis is that MPs from Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Podgorica primarily prioritize national issues. However, drawing on comparative research that has revealed a stronger focus on constituency concerns among legislators situated farther from the government’s central headquarters (Heitshusen et al., 2005), we have included the “distance from the capital” variable. We anticipate that legislators representing more peripheral municipalities, towns, and cities will demonstrate a higher level of dedication to their local constituents compared to those residing in areas closer to the central hub. Given that our sample comprises four coun-

tries of varying sizes, we have standardized this variable. Capital cities are assigned a value of 0, while the value of 1 is designated for the municipalities farthest from the center in each country (e.g., Preševo in Serbia, Konavle in Croatia, Hodoš in Slovenia, Pljevlja in Montenegro). Values for other municipalities are determined as a ratio between the center and the farthest municipality. Additionally, we have incorporated several control variables, including the level of development of the municipality where the legislator resides, municipality population, and municipal electoral turnout. We anticipate a higher district focus among legislators living in underdeveloped and smaller municipalities, as well as in municipalities with a turnout higher than the national average.

# EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

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## INTRODUCTION

Four rounds of European elections have taken place in Romania since the country's integration into the EU in 2007. It is therefore a long enough experience to be able to try an analysis in terms of political participation, electoral volatility, stability of competitors, characteristics of electoral campaigns, results and European affiliation of the winning parties. The purpose of this paper is the comparative analysis of the four rounds of European elections held in Romania, based on the official results, the legislation in the field, the electoral programs of the competitors and the campaign manifestos. Although a single case study, the analysis could have an explanatory power for a broader area and may be relevant and for other countries as well, by identifying some common features of these elections.

## ELECTORAL SYSTEM

From a legal perspective, the four rounds of European elections were organized based on the Law 33/2007. It establishes a proportional electoral system, with blocked party lists (candidates are elected in the order in which they appear on the list, the voter cannot change the order of the candidates from the list), with a single constituency (the territory of Romania represents a single constituency) and with an electoral threshold of 5% of the total valid votes cast at national level. Independent candidacies are also accepted, from any Romanian citizen or citizen of another European Union member state who has the right to be elected and is supported by at least 100,000 voters, while a political party, in order to register its list of candidates, needs 200,000 signatures of support. To obtain the mandate, the independent candidate must collect a number of valid votes cast at least equal to the national electoral coefficient ("The national electoral coefficient represents the whole part of the ratio between the total number of validly cast votes and the number of MEPs belonging to Romania" -art. 51, second paragraph).

The law was often criticized, either for the large number of supporting signatures required from independent candidates when registering in the competition, or for the election of MEPs in a single constituency (a system also practiced in other member states). There were alternative proposals to divide the national territory into several constituencies (for example, in 8 regional constituencies, according to the development regions model). Other criticism referred to the blocked party lists, which do not give the voters the possibility to rank the candidates on the list in order of their preferences. Moreover, debates and proposals for electoral reform also take place at the level of the European Union (which currently leaves the voting systems used and the methods of allocating mandates to the discretion of the member states), including the introduction of a transnational ballot, with transnational semi-open lists, consisting of candidates from several European countries, as a way to combat the democratic deficit and to reduce absenteeism (Matiuta, 2018: 25-26).

## A GLIMPSE AT THE RESULTS

Having become an EU Member State on January 1st, 2007, Romania organized the first elections for the selection of its 35 representatives in the European Parliament (for a partial mandate of two years, the next European elections for a full mandate of 5 years to be held in 2009) in November 2007. Thirteen political parties and an independent candidate entered the race. Five of them, all represented in the national parliament, managed to cross the electoral threshold (see the Table 1).



**Table 1: Competitors joining the EP in 2007 (Parties, alliances, independent candidates)**

Party	Votes (%)	No. of mandates
Democratic Party (PD)	28,82	13
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	23,12%	10
National Liberal Party (PNL)	13,45	6
Liberal Democratic Party (PLD)	7,79%	3
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	5,52%	2
Tokes Ladislau (Independent candidate)	3,45%	1
Others (below the electoral threshold)	17,85	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>35</b>

Source: The Central Election Office

Several trends can be observed following these elections. The first one is that there is a reversal of positions between the two successor parties of the National Salvation Front (the main heir of the former communist party), compared to the previous national elections: PD gains 28.81% of the votes (13 mandates), and PSD - 23.11% (10 mandates). The PNL is in the third position, with 13.44% of the votes and 6 mandates, while the PLD, a party separated from the PNL a year ago, obtained 7.78% and 3 mandates in the first and only elections in which it participated, before its absorption by the PD, just a few days after these elections. The UDMR is slightly above the electoral threshold, with 5.52% and two mandates, and the Hungarian bishop Laszlo Tokes obtains a mandate as an independent. The second trend is the decrease of support for extremist parties, PRM missing the entry to the European Parliament (with 4.15% of the votes). The third trend, worrying for the quality of a democratic regime and the legitimacy of the elected representatives, is the decrease in voting participation compared to all previous rounds of local and national elections: only 29.47% of Romanians voted in the first European elections, after an electoral campaign in which European themes were almost absent. It should be mentioned that almost 18% of the votes (17.85%) were wasted, so given to parties that did not pass the electoral threshold and distributed to the winning parties in proportion to their scores.

At the European level, PD and UDMR joined the European People's Party group, PSD the Socialist group, and PNL the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

The second round of European elections, held in June 7th, 2009 showed that the balance of power between the two main political parties, PDL and PSD, had remained almost unchanged compared to the national legislative elections of 2008. With a voter turnout of only 27.67%, the results looked like this: Electoral Alliance PSD+PC- 31.07% of votes and 11 mandates; PDL- 29.71%, 10 mandates; PNL- 14.52%, 5 mandates; UDMR- 8.92%, 3 mandates; PRM- 8.65%, 3 mandates. A mandate was assigned to an independent candidate, Elena Bănescu (the daughter of the country's president Traian Basescu), who obtained 4.22% of the votes and who joined the PDL group after the elections (Table 2).

The PDL and UDMR joined the EPP group in the European Parliament, PSD+PC the Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D); PNL kept its affiliation with the ALDE group, while the newly entered PRM joined the group of independents and unaffiliated.

The third round of European elections, held on May 25, 2014, took place in a context marked by the breaking the governing alliance USL- Social Liberal Union (formed by PSD and PNL). In the race to occupy the 32 seats allocated to Romania in the European Parliament, 15 political formations and 8 independent candidates were registered. The voter turnout, of only 32.44% (5,566,616 votes), still higher than in the previous European elections, was far below the European Union average (quite low as well, of 42.54%). PSD, remaining in alliance with UNPR and PC, after a campaign in which it induced the voters the idea of continuing USL, with the slogan "USL lives!", with its president Victor Ponta as the main image vector (an useful exercise in view of the upcoming presidential elections), got a better score than in 2009: 37.6% and 16 mandates, half of the total. PNL, returned to its identity before the establishment of USL, to its traditional colors, blue and yellow, to liberal programs ("Liberal economy.

**Table 2: Competitors joining the EP in 2009 (Parties, alliances, independent candidates)**

Party	Votes (%)	No. of mandates
Electoral Alliance Social Democratic Party (PSD) + Conservative Party (PC)	31,08%	11
Democratic Liberal Party (PDL)	29,71%	10
National Liberal Party (PNL)	14,52%	5
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	8,92%	3
Great Romania Party (PRM)	8,66%	3
Băsescu Elena (Independent candidate)	4,22%	1
Others (parties + independent candidates)	2,89	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>33</b>

Source: The Central Election Office

By ourselves”), emphasized the expertise and professionalism of its candidates (one of its slogans, perhaps too inspired by football, being the Eurochampions) and had the party president Crin Antonescu and especially its first vice-president Klaus Iohannis, mayor of Sibiu, as vectors of credibility, creating a national profile for the latter. However, PNL won only 15% of the votes (and 6 mandates, one more than in the 2009 European Parliament elections), less than Crin Antonescu had staked (who had declared at the beginning of the electoral campaign that he would resign if his party did not get 20 % of votes in the elections, resignation presented the very next day after the elections). The PNL percentage, lower compared to its representation in the national parliament (almost 25%), was also explained by the fact that at least part of its potential voters directed their votes towards the independent Mircea Diaconu, former liberal Minister of Culture and senator PNL, excluded from the list of PNL candidates as a result of a process in which he was declared incompatible by the National Integrity Agency. Diaconu, however, decided to run as an independent and, due to his personal merits, media support and the repulsion of a part of the electorate towards the traditional parties, he managed to win a seat as a member of the European Parliament, with 6.81% (379,582 votes). The PDL also obtained a much lower score than in the previous European Parliament elections, when it won almost 30% of the votes and 10 mandates: only 12.23% and 5 mandates. The decrease to less than half is explained not only by the erosion of its popularity following the governments led by Emil Boc, but also by the split it had recently been affected by and the orientation of part of its electorate towards the new Popular Movement Party (PMP), detached from it. PMP gathers 6.21% of the votes, sending two deputies to the European Parliament. Finally, with a very close percentage of 6.29% and two mandates, the UDMR no longer managed to mobilize its voters as good as in 2009, when it obtained almost 9% of the votes and 3 mandates as a member of the European Parliament (Table 3).

The European elections confirmed the status of PSD as indisputable leader and highlighted the need to mobilize the voters, especially that part of them not traditionally associated with one or another of the parties. For

**Table 3: ELECTORAL COMPETITORS joining the EP in 2014 (Parties, alliances, independent candidates)**

Party	Votes (%)	No. of mandates
Electoral Alliance Social Democratic Party (PSD) + The National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR) + Conservative Party (PC)	37,6%	16
National Liberal Party (PNL)	15,01%	6
Liberal Democratic Party (PDL)	12,23%	5
Diaconu Mircea (Independent candidate)	6,82%	1
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	6,3%	2
The Popular Movement Party (PMP)	6,22%	2
Others (parties + independent candidates)	15,82%	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>

Source: The Central Election Office

the PNL they brought a wave of resignations, (of the president Crin Antonescu and the entire leadership) and marked the transition from the political group of European Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) to the EPP. The elections also kicked off the negotiations with PDL for the reunification the Romanian right under the logo of a single party. However, the idea of the PNL-PDL merger was not accepted by all liberals. Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, former president of the party, who had resigned from the PNL in February 2014, dissatisfied with the liberals leaving the USL, launched the Initiative group for the preservation of liberal unity, to which several liberal MEPs joined (Renate Weber and Norica Nicolai). The members of the Group considered that joining the EPP and merging with the PDL was equivalent to renouncing 139 years of liberal tradition and proposed stopping any negotiations regarding the merger of the two parties.

Finally, the fourth round of European elections took place in May 26, 2019. Thirteen political parties/alliances and three independent candidates joined the electoral competition, whilst another ten parties and four independent candidates were not validated by the Central Electoral Bureau, because they did not meet the eligibility criteria imposed by the law (mainly due to supporting the lists of candidates by at least 200,000 voters in the case of parties/alliances and by 100,000 voters in the case of independent candidates). There were no significant variations in the number of competitors compared to previous European elections, but there were several changes in the structure of participants, such as parties formed in recent years and taking the start of the electoral campaign with good chances to join the European Parliament. It was the case of the Union Save Romania (USR), a party created in 2015, with a civic origin, placing itself in opposition with the existing parties and which, following the national legislative elections in 2016, became the third force in the Romanian Parliament with 9% of votes. In these elections, the USR has run in the alliance with the Party for Freedom, Unity and Solidarity (PLUS), founded in autumn 2018 by Dacian Cioloș, former Prime Minister (November 2015- January 2017) and former European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development (2010-2014). Other new parties, but with a different genesis being formed by detachment from an existing party, were the Pro-Romania (founded in 2017 by the former Prime Minister Victor Ponta, mainly by the separation of a group from the Social Democrat Party) and the Alliance of European Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), born in 2015, after a year earlier the former Prime Minister and leader of the National Liberal Party, Calin Popescu Tăriceanu, left this party together with a group of liberals.

Several remarks can be made following these elections. First of all, it is worth mentioning the increased voter turnout (51,07%) compared to previous rounds of European elections. The trend was the same at the EU's level: while between 1979 when the first elections to the European Parliament took place and 2014 turnout declined gradually, falling from 62% to 42%, these elections showed spectacular reversal, with a voter turnout reaching more than 50% across the EU. Secondly, the elections brought a clear defeat of the government coalition. For PSD (which obtains 22.50%, see the table below ) they mean a loss of almost 15% compared to the European elections of 2014 (when they had allied with two small parties and obtained 37.60%) and a decrease by almost half in the number of MEPs (from 16 to 8; 9 after Brexit). For its ally, ALDE, the situation looks even worse, failing to cross the 5% electoral threshold, despite optimistic pre-election polls, which credited it with 10% or more. For the opposition parties these elections meant a great victory. PNL ranks first, with 27% of the vote, well above its performance in the previous rounds of European elections, in which it never exceeded 15%. The USR-PLUS Alliance also achieved a big success (with only 12,500 votes less than PSD), sending 8 MEPs to the European Parliament. The three small parties (Pro Romania, PMP and UDMR) succeeded to cross the electoral threshold and to obtain two mandates each. Both the increased turnout and the hierarchy of competitors were the result of deep discontent and polarization of the society after two and a half years of PSD governance. The PSD leader, Liviu Dragnea (jailed the day after the elections in a process dragging for a long time) became the main politician of these years, being able to remove his rivals and to obtain the monopoly of decision within the party, replacing prime-ministers and governments, leading a permanent fight with the “deep state”, concerned with “reforming the justice” for solving in this way his own problems with the law, stirring up the population revolt and the largest protests since the fall of communism in December 1989. The mobilization to the vote was exemplary not only within the country, but also in diaspora, where queues were formed at the polling stations, people giving a signal against a way of doing politics, devoid of moral values and threatening the constitutional basis of the rule of law.

The definite victory of the pro-European parties can be seen as a sign of trust in the EU and as desire to belong to the EU, in the context of sovereigntist, nationalist and Eurosceptic messages from the governing coalition

(among the countries of the former communist bloc Romania registered the second highest turnout, after Lithuania). Last but not the least, the results indicate that new parties, in this case USR and PLUS, are gaining ground over the traditional ones, due to the need to renew the political class. This need has also been felt in other Member States, leading to the weakening of traditional political groups and the emergence of new ones. The two new parties in Romania, USR and PLUS, have joined the new Renew Europe Group, led by Dacian Cioloș, while PNL, UDMR and PMP have maintain their affiliation to European People’s Party (EPP) and PSD remained the member of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, to which the two MEPs of Pro Romania also joined.

**Table 4: ELECTORAL COMPETITORS joining the EP in 2019 (Parties, alliances, independent candidates)**

Party	Votes (%)	No. of mandates
National Liberal Party (PNL)	27%	10
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	22,50%	8 (9 after Brexit)
2020 USR-PLUS Alliance	22,36%	8
Pro Romania	6,44%	2
People’s Movement Party (PMP)	5,76%	2
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	5,26%	2
Others (parties + independent candidates)	10,68 %	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>

Source: The Central Election Office

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The four rounds of European elections held in Romania allow us to draw some conclusions. First, the low degree of electoral participation, with an average of 35.14% for all these polls. The increase in participation in the last European elections proves that they gain in importance when the internal political stakes are higher. Secondly, beyond the electoral programs, the debates and speeches of the candidates are focused on topics of internal politics (the one related to the independence of justice occupying a special place in the last round). The very little focus on European matters is also encountered in the other Member States, turning the European elections into 28 national elections. Without a common campaign in all Member States and without common parties (but hundreds of parties affiliated to several European political groups) or transnational lists, these elections reflected mainly the themes of national political concerns. Thirdly, the increased degree of electoral volatility, almost 12% of the votes (as average for the four polls) were awarded to parties that did not pass the electoral threshold. In three out of four polls, independent candidates manage to enter the European Parliament, and in the last European elections newly formed parties occupy the third position and win a quarter of the mandates. The low degree of electoral participation and the preferences for non-mainstream electoral actors confirm the theory that classifies the European elections as second order elections (Reif, Schmitt, Norris, 1997). Last but not least, even if the traditional parties PSD and PNL remain dominant, the last round of elections shows the potential for a structural change because new “anti-system” political parties (USR and PLUS) have managed to impose themselves in the political arena. But if so far the radical-extremist and Eurosceptic parties have not been successful in the elections for the European Parliament in Romania (except for three mandates won by the Greater Romania Party in 2009), recent forecast for the 2024 European elections show the a major shift, with populist radical right parties gaining votes and seats across the EU, including Romania (Cunningham, Hix, Dennison, Learmonth, 2024).

# UNCIVIL SOCIETIES IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (2013–2022)

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the late 1980s and 1990s, academic discourse viewed civil society from a neo-Tocquevillian perspective: organizations that are ontologically distinct from the state and resist any form of political hegemony, including authoritarianism. In other words, civil societies were viewed as fairly autonomous agencies that support and foster democratization. Amidst the worldwide wave of democratic backsliding and the subsequent rise of authoritarian governments in the last decade, civil society autonomy and the simple linkage between civil society and democratization have faced severe scrutiny. As a result, both in academic literature and public discourse, the term “uncivil society,” roughly defined as organizations with non-democratic, anti-democratic, or sometimes extremist ideas, has been fairly used. Despite ample scholarly contributions on the topic, the empirical manifestation of uncivil society is still opaque and disputed. Using a systematic literature review, this study attempts to investigate the who, what, and how of uncivil society in 49 contemporary literatures. It suggests that although uncivil society is a value-laden concept, its uniqueness cannot be overlooked. It also argues that in most of the literature under review, the idea of uncivil society is utilized informally, without enough conceptualization or proper operationalization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the ongoing and considerable positive scholarly attention, there is still a lack of a comprehensive analysis on how the concept of uncivil society is being examined in contemporary literature. Therefore, the primary question of this investigation is: how does the literature published between 2013 and 2022 portray the concept of uncivil society? This study includes articles and book chapters from 2013 because December 2012 is arbitrarily marked as the end of the Arab Spring, arguably the end of the last democratic surge and the beginning of a new worldwide democratic backsliding that is still ongoing.

To answer the question as objectively as possible, three additional questions are asked that structure this current systematic literature review. These three questions revolve around the who, what, and how of uncivil society. The first question (Q1), ‘who is portrayed as the uncivil society in the literature?’, attempts to identify the characteristics of uncivil society. The second question (Q2), ‘what exactly does the uncivil society try to achieve?’, aims to find out their purpose, if mentioned. The last question (Q3), the ‘how’ of uncivil society is analyzed by asking ‘through what means uncivil society achieve its goal?’ It should be noted that this study does not envisage defining uncivil society. Rather the main target is to review the relevant literature, to critically analyze the contributions to the concept and to suggest areas of further research.

The rest of the article is divided into three sections. The next section explains the methodology of the systematic literature review. Then, the findings of the review are discussed in detail. The last section concludes with some scopes of further research.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A systematic literature review method has been used, instead of the traditional literature review due to its comparative strength to establish a “reliable evidence base” (Davies et al., 2013, p. 81) and it uses “a standardised, structured, protocol-driven methodology” (Jesson et al., 2011, p. 103). The procedural rigidity reduces the risk of personal bias and specific selection, which is not uncommon in the traditional reviews (Andrews, 2005).

### **Identifying the literature**

To identify peer-reviewed literature with an international scope on uncivil society, two electronic databases were taken into account: Scopus and Web of Science. The initial search, performed in October 2023, was not limited to any specific journal or any subset of literature. Different spellings of “uncivil society” were searched in the title, abstract, and/or keywords of all documents in both the databases. The electronic searches revealed a total of 451 papers (230 Web of Science and 221 Scopus documents) of possible significance. Titles, authors, and years of publication were transferred to an Excel file, and duplicates were removed. After removing the duplicates (n = 43) from the dataset, the primary dataset consisted of 378 documents.

### **Screening and selection of the literature**

In order to assess the eligibility of the 378 papers, specific criteria for inclusion were developed. Articles published before 2013 (n = 93) and after 2022 (n = 37) were excluded. Then, studies published in languages other than English (Spanish, Hindi, Portuguese, and Russian) were excluded (n = 8). This literature review included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers, and the rest of the documents were excluded (n = 35). Following the initial screening, a total of 205 papers were selected for additional examination based on their abstracts. Out of these, 57 materials were specifically focused on the topic of uncivil society as it

**Table 1.** Data on the who, what, and how of uncivil society.

Question	Attribute	Number of studies
	Structure	8
Who	Agent	
	Right-wing or fundamental groups	20
	Conservative groups	26
	Authoritarian, nativist and populist groups	16
	Groups engaged in illegal drugs, laundering money and terrorism	10
	NGOs	12
	Online and offline vigilante groups	7
	Groups with a lack of commitment to the existing rules and regulations	23
What	Challenge secular and democratic policy principles	30
	Othering disadvantaged groups/polarization	29
	Regulate ideas about the “normality” of behavior	25
	Undefined	5
How	Aggressive and extremist behavior	18
	Identify violators, criminals, victims and punish them	16
	Connected with international right-wing populist movement	6
	Collaboration with business groups, similar-minded organizations, and lobbying	11
	Collaboration with government agencies	18
	Mimics civil society/NGO activities	12
	Use of media and propaganda	21
	Interactions in social networks	9

relates to this study. The excluded studies (n = 148) were mostly on incivility in digital space, uncivil behavior, workplace incivility, uncivil cities, and the notion of “uncivilized,” “primitive,” or “savage” communities during colonial periods (Ferguson, 2007), which do not have any direct connection to the concept of uncivil society. Those articles might cause the “phenomena under investigation to be misinterpreted” (Watts & Robertson, 2011). Moreover, this whole screening and selection process was not without challenges. The author did not have full access to 8 documents, which resulted in a final database of 49 articles.

### **Analysis of the literature**

All 49 articles were read fully, keeping the three guiding questions in mind. This was done because information is often found in sections other than abstract, introduction, discussion, result, and conclusion. To analyze the documents, a new “who–what–how framework” is introduced. This framework is inspired by a similar framework developed by Gjaltema et. al. (2020). In that study, the authors attempted to conceptualize meta-government in a similar fashion to this present study: through a systematic literature review. However, they included the “why” question, which is not considered in this present work, because uncivil society and meta-government are characteristically different. Meta-government is essentially a practice undertaken by public authorities, while uncivil society, in general, includes different kinds of interest groups. Based on the who–what–how framework, an extraction table was constructed to identify the characteristics, purposes, and means of achieving those purposes of the uncivil society mentioned in every study. For example, to answer the “who” question, two categories were developed, because most of the studies identified uncivil societies as either a structure or an agent. The agent category is then further divided into seven subcategories [Table 1]. Then the author identified which article defined uncivil society as a structure or agent, and if it was defined as an agent, out of the seven subcategories, what kind of agent that was. After that, the data on the categories and sub-categories in the extraction table were counted, resulting in the identification of the defining characteristics of uncivil society. A synthesis of findings in relation to the three research questions was then conducted, followed by a discussion of the key themes.

### **FINDINGS**

The central question of this systematic literature review was: how does the literature published between 2013 and 2022 portray the concept of uncivil society? To answer this question, a new “who–what–how framework” is introduced. In other words, three aspects of uncivil society were asked to better understand the term uncivil society: who they are, what do they try to achieve, and how do they try to achieve their objectives. Investigating these questions enabled us to synthesize the literature, reflect on the concept’s contribution, and identify areas for further research. This study draws four particular points from the review of the literature.

Firstly, it is not necessary to strangle the concept of uncivil society in the crib. Uncivil society is an essential concept and its uniqueness cannot be overlooked. Many scholars consider uncivil society as a subset of the broader civil society, and it is safe to consider the same.

The second argument is that the term “uncivil society” is an umbrella term that ties together different forms of entities. It encompasses right-wing or fundamental groups, conservative groups, authoritarian, nativist, ultra-nationalist and populist groups, groups engaged in illegal drugs, money laundering, and terrorism, vigilante groups, and NGOs.

The third argument is, in order to increase the explanatory relevance of uncivil society, future research should pay more attention to the correlation between uncivil society and public policy instruments.

The final argument is, uncivil society is a value-laden concept. The secular and democratic values differ markedly from left to right. The “goodness” of democracy is essentially a neoliberal disposition, and what is good from a democrat’s view might not be desirable to a theocrat, for example. Similarly, the position held by neoliberal scholars that uncivil society holds down democratization has been criticized by the conservatives.

Nonetheless, this systematic literature review demonstrates that the literature on uncivil society is still in its infancy. In case studies of the literature, the idea of uncivil society is utilized informally, without enough conceptualization and without proper operationalization. This is problematic because it does not allow us from accurately reflecting on what it means in practice and from theoretically advancing with it.

# THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CONCEPT OF ROMANIAN PEOPLE AND HIS ENEMIES IN AUR'S LEADERS' DISCOURSES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND RUSSIAN WAR IN UKRAINE

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## RESEARCH OUTLINE

The research paper proposed concerns the rise of the Romanian nationalistic anti-EU party, Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), during the Covid-19 pandemic and then the consolidation of his position during the Russian war against Ukraine.

The interest for this research was given by the fulminant rise of the political Party AUR and the electoral performance of the party in the first election participation in December 2020, but also by the political strategy used by their leader, George Simion.

In December 2020, AUR, a party with a conservative populist doctrine, founded just a year before, managed to wins 10% of the votes in elections for Romanian Parliament. With a hybrid electoral strategy, rallies organized in the main Romanian cities during the period of restrictions antiCovid-19 and an online campaign supported through social networks, especially on Facebook, AUR has managed to bring together the interests of several different social groups, all touched by the effects of pandemic and dissatisfied with political climate in Romania.

Concerning political strategy, during the electoral campaign of the 2020 legislative elections and after then throughout the period 2021-2023, George Simion entertained, through Facebook live sessions from the Parliament or from the middle of some groups of protesters, the feeling of fear of certain Romanian citizens against the measures antiCovid-19 adopted by the Government or against the Russian-Ukrainian war in which Romania could be involved as a NATO member.

Playing with the feelings of panic and fear of a part of the Romanian people, produced by the Covid pandemic and the war on the eastern border, George Simion succeeded in politically mobilizing a part of the marginalized electorate through populist rhetoric and style. The hypothesis taken into account for the research is that the political leaders of the AUR, especially George Simion, are performing a populist political style as it was theorized by Benjamin Moffitt.

For the purpose of this research, an exploration of the use of emotions in post- communist Romanian politics as a political strategy will be undertaken. More precisely, the exploration will deal with the way in which the post-communist Romanian parties, the Greater Romania Party (PRM) or the Dan Diaconescu People's Party (PPDD), used the media to operate emotions as a political strategy. Also, for the purpose of the research, the populist theories formulated by Cas Mudde, Pierre Rosanvallon or Jan Werner Muller on the concept of the people will be used, in the sense in which the opposition people <> elite was formed and defines the concept of populism. In essence, the research addresses the way in which the leaders of the AUR party frame the Romanian people in opposition to the elites. What are the values and identity assigned to each category by the populist



rhetoric of AUR leaders. A special attention will be paid to the theory developed by Benjamin Moffitt and Frank Ankersmit on political style as part of populist communication, since the research is built around the populist concepts of people and political style. Thus, the populist theory surrounding the political style allows us to understand the creation of the populist concept of the people as a result of a crisis.

According to Ankersmit, the political style is no more than the medium of connection between political representatives and voters. Consequently, Ankersmit explain that the political space has become so complex that it becomes almost impossible for most citizens to understand all the political mechanisms and procedures. Thus, the political style represents the more accessible aspect of politics, namely the aesthetic part: the way politicians present themselves, how they address themselves and how they are perceived by citizens. For Moffitt, the populism is “a political style that is performed, embodied and implemented in diverse political and cultural contexts”. Then, continuing the argument, Moffitt states that the political style can be understood as “the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life”. Moffitt proposes to analyze contemporary populism as “a performative political style in which the leader is seen as the actor, the ‘people’ as the public and the crisis, and the media as the stage on which populism is played out”. Through this approach, the author wants to capture the inherent theatricality of modern populism and its mechanisms of representation and performance that underlie its central appeal to the “people”. The theory of populism as a political style is characterized by three dimensions: the opposition people-elite, the “bad manners” of political leaders and their tactical use of the themes of crisis, decline and danger.

The research proposes an analysis of the discourses of the AUR’s leaders concerning the construction of the concept of the Romanian people and their enemy. In this sense, a number of 5 speeches (Facebook live sessions) will be chosen from the period of the debates for the adoption of the Green Anti-Covid Certificate (November-December 2021) and 5 speeches from the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war (February-April 2022). The selection criterion of the speeches is given by the number of views of each speech, and the first 5 with the most views from the indicated periods will be selected. The methodology used for the analysis of the speeches will be a qualitative one. The approach will be top-down, starting from the theoretical framework used and then going to the discourses to research and reveal the identity construction of the concept of the people as well as the mechanisms used in this construction.

The goal of the research is to discover the populist mechanisms and how AUR, credited with 20% voting intentions for 2024 parliamentary elections, construct the Romanian people identity and which are the enemy.

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# THE EVOLUTION OF THE ‘CARPATHIAN BASIN’ DISCOURSE IN HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENT (1998-2020)

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## ABSTRACT

We explore the use of the term “Carpathian Basin” in the Hungarian Parliament 1998-2020. The “Carpathian Basin” is a term of Hungarian geography, historically used to justify Hungary’s territorial claims during the interwar period. While it was absent from official discourse for decades, it has recently gained traction among Hungary’s politicians. Processing 1525 speeches, we examine the discourse of three major political blocs (conservative/right, liberal/left, and Fidesz), to capture linguistic representations of political polarization, identify politically driven identity patterns, and framing differences.

We employ both supervised and unsupervised modeling approaches. The supervised classification was used to examine changes in the polarization of discourse, while the unsupervised tool (Structural Topic Model) supported a more nuanced, qualitative interpretation of the results. According to our results, the political ideology of the speakers of the speeches can be predicted more effectively, i.e. a kind of polarization-growth can be detected, while at the same time the deeper analysis shows that parallels can be detected in the changing discourse of different ideological sides. One such common feature is a more concentrated focus on our own nation, as opposed to neighboring peoples and the European Union. We also found discourse traits of both the left’s rapprochement with the right (as an imprint of the left’s opening up to Hungarians beyond the borders after 2010) and the moderation of the far right.

*“So when we talk about Hungarians beyond the borders, we should always put this adjective in brackets; let’s talk about Hungarians, let’s talk about Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin and in the world, let’s talk about our annexed or separated brothers and sisters, but I think that we cannot go in the direction of what, among others, the policy of abandoning national interests has embodied [...].”*

**Dr Tamás Gaudi-Nagy, parliamentary speech, far-right party Jobbik, 2013**

## INTRODUCTION

The quote from the motto shows the stakes of our research, the concept of Carpathian Basin is not a neutral term, as it is loaded with geopolitical intentions, and actors in political discourse are conscious of their choice of words (see the proposal of ‘Hungarian living in Carpathian Basin’ instead of the neutral ‘Hungarians beyond the border’).

The research is at the intersection of sociology and regional studies: the use of the term Carpathian Basin in public policy discourses in the Hungarian Parliament in the period 1998- 2020. In our analysis, we use databases of the ELTE Research Center for Computational Social Science ([rc2s2.elte.hu/en](http://rc2s2.elte.hu/en)), on which the most important

preprocessing and cleaning tasks have already been carried out by the research group. The aim of our research is to identify changes in (geo)political intentions through the changing use of the term, and, in this context, the changing relationship between ideological sides. In the previous phase of our research (Németh, Katona et al, 2023) we have investigated the political determination of the discourse, in this phase we will focus on its change over time.

The ‘Carpathian Basin’, the most important Hungarian geographical concept, is linked to the historical process of (self-)recognition and (self-)definition of Hungary (Balogh, 2021). Although the concept of the Carpathian Basin was rarely used between 1960 and 1981, it has since been increasingly back on the political agenda, becoming a central element of the governmental narrative. Based on Balogh (2021) the concept played a vital role in demarcating Hungary during disputes over its boundaries and legitimizing territorial claims lost during the interwar period. While the term fell out of use between 1960 and 1981, it resurfaced after political changes, fueled by Hungary’s interest in the fate of ethnic relatives in neighboring countries. Counter-discourses, both foreign and domestic, emerged, with the latter addressing overlooked issues in mainstream Hungarian geography and politics. Foreign counter-narratives mirrored the interests of their respective countries.

Nowadays, there is a noticeable resurgence in the usage of the term “Carpathian Basin” within the government narrative as “an unquestionably cohesive political geographical entity”. This strategic use of language is underscored by the presence of a dedicated program on public television titled “Carpathian Basin News.”, that the news is about “Hungary, the Carpathian Basin and the world at large”, and even the weather forecast is for the whole of the Carpathian Basin.

The significance of this research lies in the fact that while the research of other authors on the topic, e.g. Balogh (2021), is based on the texts of geographical authors, this analysis examines the official political public sphere, and thus directly the geopolitical self-image of the country.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research divides the parliamentary speeches from 1998 to 2020 by the date of the 2010 election, thus comparing two time periods. Our aim is to investigate the change in speech styles of the three major political entities (conservative/right, liberal/left and Fidesz) in relation to the discourse of the Carpathian Basin:

RQ1. Can we capture a change in the linguistic representation of political polarization?

RQ2. What changes in content can be detected across ideologies? (Changes in party discourse) RQ3. What changes can be detected in the discourse of each political-ideological bloc? Is there divergence or homogenisation? (Dynamics of differences between parties)

In the context of the changing framing of political blocs, there are two more general background processes that are related to our research question.

1. “Two-way mainstreaming” means the radicalisation of the traditional right and the strategic refinement of the extreme. This leads to a blurring of the boundaries between the classical far right and the centre right, and extreme narratives become part of the public discourse and even the norm (Hunyadi, 2022). A good example of the strategic refinement of extremism is the moderation of Jobbik<sup>1</sup> which has been observed since 2013: the party’s campaign messages have been significantly moderated, statements have been made distancing themselves from their racist and anti-Semitic manifestations, and the declared goal has become to become a “real people’s party” (Kovarek-Farkas, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Jobbik is a Hungarian political party that has experienced ideological shifts· initially known for its right-wing and nationalist stance· but later undergoing a moderation process to present a more centrist and moderate image·

<sup>2</sup> The Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt· MSZP) is a center-left political party in Hungary· historically associated with socialist and social democratic principles·

2. The left-wing's turn in its attitude to national identity. Since the regime change, the left has been constantly on the defensive against the right in the discourse on national identity. The socialists began to focus on renewing their attitude towards national identity after the 2010 election defeat, which brought a radical turnaround in the assessment of the attitude towards Hungarians beyond the borders. This consciously prepared turnaround is based on the MSZP's<sup>2</sup> attempt to get out of the box into which Fidesz and Jobbik tried to force the socialists. The policy of reaching out to Hungarians beyond the border can be seen as the symbolic beginning of this shift (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung-Policy Solutions, 2013).

## **DATA AND METHODS**

A total of 1,525 speeches were analyzed, we only examine the parliamentary speeches that include the term 'kárpát\_medenc\*', the preprocessed, standardized Hungarian form of the Carpathian Basin.

In our analysis, we explore the temporal dimension through two categories, using the 2010 national elections as a dividing point. Fidesz changed government in that election year, and from then on the government radically transformed the public law system and declared its system-building intentions from the beginning. Since 2010, there has been a hegemonic party system in Hungary.

Besides the temporal dimension three groups of parties active during the observed period were identified: Fidesz; right-wing conservative (Jobbik, MDF, FKGP, KDNP, MIÉP); and left-wing liberal (SZDSZ, MSZP, DK, LMP, PM, Együtt.). The last two political groups, especially the parties in the left-liberal bloc, have diverse ideologies. They don't have a clear ideological stance; instead, they are used in relation to Fidesz, the dominant party. Table 1. shows the number of speeches made by each of the three blocks at each of the two time points.

	25.06.1998 - 11.04.2010	12.04.2010. - 23.11.2020
Fidesz	153	397
right-wing/conservative	161	490
left-wing/liberal	161	163

**Table 1. The number of speeches by ideological block and date**

In our analysis, we consider parliamentary speeches as the unit of analysis. Data cleaning and preprocessing have also been done on the above data to clean and preprocess the corpus. We developed a convention-based cleaning and preprocessing pipeline for the Hungarian language adjusting to the research questions. The different stages of this process were: character standardization, filtering of the texts according to certain aspects, word cleaning (deletion of non-linguistic signs, irrelevant parts), defining and removing stop words (too common words), word lemmatization (deleting conjunctions) and unification (name recognition, essentially unification of proper names).

Research questions are addressed using two approaches: fitting both supervised and unsupervised models. The speeches are classified into one of the three ideological blocks using traditional machine learning tools and the topics of parliamentary speeches are analyzed using a structural topical model (STM).

[ ... ]

# THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC FACTORS ON THE MIDDLE POWER STATUS: EXAMINING TURKEY’S PRESIDENTIALISM TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE COUNTRY’S DEMOCRATIC BACKLASH AFFECTS THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EU

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## **ABSTRACT**

Turkey as a middle power has manifested a growing assertive behaviour towards the EU after the failed coup of 2016, and it has also shared a skeptical attitude towards European interferences in its domestic dynamics. While the referendum of 2017 allowed the still on charge President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to transform Turkey into a Presidential Republic, the Neo-Ottoman Ideology contributed to use the nationalist feeling for gathering a populist consensus and then using it to polarise domestic and foreign antagonists. These unit-level factors have changed how Ankara has been understanding its Middle Power status, directing its foreign policy also on a security dimension. To explain how these factors have determined a new dimension of Turkey’s role as a middle power in both its domestic and foreign politics, the article adopts a neoclassical realist framework. It focuses on a historical representation, which starts from the aftermath of the Arab Spring and ends with the rise of Presidentialism in 2018. It concentrates especially on the importance of domestic two factors that shape the current domestic governance and the complicate EU-Turkey relationship: a strong nationalism as a symptom of the neo-ottoman ideology, and the political polarisation as a symptom of the domestic backlash. The article shows how Turkey, guided by the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), finds in its new executive presidentialism and its practices the legitimising source to apply political polarisation of domestic and foreign threats to act as a security actor in the region and use its policies as leverage tools against the EU. Moreover, the paper concludes that Turkey has decreased the democratic grade of its governance, favouring the birth of a strong nationalist leadership represented by the President Erdoğan that has diminished the bureaucratic dimension of the government and has used the nationalist element of its foreign policy to strengthen Turkey’s middle power status.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The ‘decline of democracy’, as well as the universalisation of authoritarian modes of governance has been the concern of leading scholars of democratization lately (Diamond & Plattner 2015; Diamond, Plattner, & Walker 2016). In particular some studies have started to concentrate on how the growing phenomena of democratic backlashes affect the hierarchical order of states. In particular, the interest is directed towards authoritarian turn of the middle powers, since their potential authoritarianisation, “poses a challenge to their international and regional commitments, and question further development of regional cooperation” (Grzywacz & Gawrycki 2022: 2629). Among these middle powers, Turkey generates a strong attraction from the scholarship, which has analysed the gradual loss of democracy in the country after the coup attempt in 2016, especially in the light of its bilateral relations with the EU. Indeed, the relationship between Turkey and the EU has often been rocky, but they drastically deteriorated following the coup attempt in July 2016. While Turkish authorities voiced national

frustrations toward the absence of an European condemnation of the coup, contrary the EU has been raising questioning criticism with the democratic backsliding and the growing authoritarianism of the Turkish government (Dursun- Özkanca 2022: 746). Contributing to aliment these assumptions, the constitutional referendum in April 2017 replaced the parliamentary system with a strong presidentialism, which has helped President Erdoğan “to further consolidate his executive powers in the country’s domestic politics and foreign policy matters” (Kara 2023: 435). Moreover, the Neo-Ottoman ideology, previously developed in the 1980s, utilised the nationalist and pro-Islamic elements recovered from the Ottoman past to legitimise the new system and criticise the former Kemalist view of Turkey. In foreign policy, Ankara has utilised these domestic factors to legitimise its security policies against the perceived domestic and foreign threats, but in doing so, it has ultimately embraced a DeEuropeanisation process, colliding with the EU while seeking to use its middle power role according to its own understanding.

This article proposes to answer the following questions: How has the constitutional referendum impacted on the authoritarian framework? What domestic factors have contributed to the democratic backlash of the Turkish governance? How has the role of Turkey as a middle power changed after the rise of Presidentialism? How has Turkey used its domestic centralisation of power and political polarisation to pressure the EU in foreign policy? By answering these questions, the article contributes to share new insights about a neighbour state that has experienced a DeEuropeanisation process, to expose how its democratic backlash has been used in security policies and how these policies have impacted on the country’s middlepowerness towards the EU. Since few studies expose how the domestic and regional factors related to the new Presidential system of Turkey have changed Ankara’s Policy towards EU, the paper considers Neo-Ottomanism and Presidential Turn as the two main domestic factors that have influenced such behaviour. Secondly, it investigates how these two factors have created a polarising ground to direct the security policies towards domestic and regional threats that would menace the new centralised system. Thirdly, this article exposes how the AKP’s adoption of these two elements in its foreign policy have altered the country’s middle power status towards the EU, evidencing the bargaining usage of security policies to receive and pretend political legitimation. To cover such gaps, the article utilises Neoclassical Realism as the theoretical framework, focusing on the impact of a nationalist ideology, leadership and governance shift. Moreover, it elaborates Turkey’s status and role as a middle power for adding a descriptive layer that allows a wider comprehension of how the recent democratic backlash in the governance experienced by Turkey and the necessity to recalibrate its middlepowerness by using the domestic consensus and institutional capacity are due defining elements of the AKP and Erdoğan’s Presidentialism.

In regards of the methodology, this paper follows mainly a qualitative framework based on a positivist understanding of the subject, and adopts a historical representation as the main qualitative method to reconstruct Turkey’s democratic backlash and its consequences at the geopolitical level with the EU. Additionally it considers also another qualitative method, the normative approach, due to the fact that this paper aims to understand if the centralisation of the Turkish governance in the biennium 2016-2018 can be considered as determining feature of Ankara’s assertiveness towards the EU and of its middlepowerness. Structurally, the article provides firstly an overview of the theoretical framework followed by a literature review of Turkey’s image as a middle power, of the conceptualisation of the authoritarian grade and finally of Neo-Ottomanism. In the core sections, the article evidences the foundational bases of Turkey’s democratic backlash referring to the DeEuropeanisation process and to the crushed coup of 2016. Then the analysis proceeds to evidences the institutional functioning of the current presidential system and the use of political polarisation as the two domestic factors that characterise the current democratic downgrade of Turkey. Finally, the paper shares the explanation of how Turkey foreign policy has impacted over EU security and migration policies, evidencing the use of domestic polarisation and migration concerns as leverage tools to increase the country’s agency towards the EU.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEOCLASSICAL REALISM**

With the end of cold war and the growing sensation that multipolarity would have affected IR and states’ foreign policy behaviour, neorealism became an opaque theoretical framework. In 1998, the political scientist and journalist Gideon Rose introduced a new foreign policy theory called Neoclassical Realism (NCR) in an article entitled ‘Neoclassical Realism and Foreign Policy Theory’. He combined the theories of classical realism and neorealism to analyse the foreign policy of the state in a multi-level and multifaceted way, using systemic

aspects, the international level, the national group and the individual. According to Rose, NCR scholars were attracted by the need to elaborate a new theory, which determines that although a “country’s foreign policy considers its relative material power...foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being” (1998: 147). NCR contends “states respond to the uncertainties of international anarchy by seeking to control and shape their external environment” (Rose 1998: 152). Cerioli in this sense affirms that “NCR renounces Neorealism’s parsimony for the additional explanatory value of intervening variables. This way, factors such as identity, leadership or strategic culture create meaning for decision-makers to detect interests amidst uncertainty” (2023: 3). Broadly NCR scholars recognise international geopolitical phenomena and systems over single environments, but they do fill intellectual gaps by bringing insights about domestic elements (Kitchen 2010; Rose 1998). In such epistemic analysis, unit-level factors “are intervening variables that fill the gap between systemic stimuli and concrete policies, handling practical problems concerning how actors perceive and respond to the structure” (Cerioli 2023: 3). Indeed, this foreign policy theory stresses that international system and the states that composed it are reciprocally intertwined by two variables: permissive/restrictive nature of the strategic environment (states’ ability to use material power) and systemic clarity (clarity about the nature of threats and opportunities) (Ripsman et al. 2016).

Given its complexity and wide research scope of NCR, it was in the late 2000s when scholars such as Ripsman, Lobell, and Taliaferro (Lobell et al. 2009) progressed NCR value as a foreign policy theory, arguing that it could also decipher the decision-making mechanisms during international crisis or major power shift. The country’s foreign policy and national strategy shift from adjusting to accepting the influence of the international system and eventually becoming part of the international system. Kozub-Karkut (2019) affirms that NCR’s central point “is that unit-level (domestic) variables are influencing states’ effectiveness of responding to the international system incentives. The systemic pressures are not (as Waltz claimed) immediately transformed into states’ actions, but the translation process is a very complex and indirect one (2019: 208). This aspect becomes an analytical advantage for NCR, since it identifies which domestic politics affect a state’s behaviour, for then analysing the systemic and regional variables. Hereby, NCR appears as straightforward theory where “unit-level variables are subsequential to systemic-level variables because agency is only possible within a perimeter of powerdefined options” (Cerioli 2023: 3). Hence, NCR aims to revise neorealism with the inclusion of the state level, increasing the analysis on how states deal with the threats or take the opportunities brought by the international political environment and, eventually formulate foreign policy accordingly under the combined influence of the international system and domestic factors. With this regard, NCR elevates the role of the domestic factors and variables demonstrating as Schweller explains, that “whether states [choose to] balance against threats is not primarily determined by structural-systemic factors” but rather, “by the domestic political process” (2004: 9). Being framed within the neoclassical realist theory, ideational factors like nationalism help middle powers and small states “extract, mobilize, and direct societal resources and cultivate support among its power base” (Lobell et al. 2009: 38) to gain advantage from great powers’ competition. Here, domestic dynamics such as governance, ideational factors and power shift become empirical explanation that NCR uses for ‘emphasizing the complex relationship between the state and society, without sacrificing the central insight of neorealism about the constraints of the international system (Lobell et al. 2009: 13). In this sense, in power shift phenomenon at the regional or global level, middle, regional and small powers always aim for preserving their autonomy of agency, or if the situation allows it, to increase their influence. States balance “both, internally by devoting more resources to national defense and externally mostly through alliances and similar strategic arrangements” (Duan & Aldamer 2019: 116). NCR scholars agree consequently that state’s perceptions about the geopolitics “shape its international behaviour because... the set of international priorities a country can pursue varies according to how permissive or restrictive the environment is perceived” (Cerioli 2023: 4).

A clarification is however needed in this analysis: there is no academic consensus on theorising how NCR should investigate states’ behaviour in foreign policy, or on which systemic variables or unit-level factors should be framed in the analysis. This aspect of NCR could be considered as a limit, since could lead this theory “to generate ad hoc explanations” (He 2008: 50). Indeed, NCR is not a defined foreign policy theory, but rather a mixture of different frameworks, which encompass domestic and systemic factors, uniting the human nature criticism of classical realism with the imperative role of the system of neorealism. With this regard, it must be also mentioned that the way of research through a neoclassical realist framework takes the systemic assump-

tions for granted, questioning immediately how states react towards them asks only the question (Wæver 2009: 213-214) causing problems regarding which between domestic and systemic or regional variables has a major importance. For example, while Kozub-Karkut (2019) underlines the importance of NCR to develop the theoretical framework about perceptions and ideas on the domestic and external level of Foreign Policy, on the other hand, more recently, Steinsson refers to the neoclassical realist framework by asserting: “the effects of anarchy on state behavior are affected by internal factors, such as elite worldviews, ideology, national character...” (2017: 601). Hereby, it is plausible to suggest that adherents of NCR would receive an immediate approval “for the incorporation of any sort of domestic factor [...] without constraint” (Narizny 2017: 170). Although “the main challenges of the NCR’s foreign policy analysis are related to the possible blend of different levels of analysis as well as different kinds of factors defined as intervening variables” (Kozub-Karkut 2019: 216), the theory possess an unique characteristic that assists this research. It “introduces another level of analysis – that of domestic politics of states, which involves scrutiny of how state decision-makers react to imperatives that stem from the international system” (Antonovič 2021: 5). As Kitchen asserts “what makes neoclassical realist theory ‘new’ is its ongoing attempt to systematise the wide and varied insights of classical realists within parsimonious theory, or to put it in reverse, to identify the appropriate intervening variables that can imbue realism’s structural variant with a greater explanatory richness” (2010: 118). Moreover, “flexibility in specifying the unit-level variables becomes an advantage rather than a weakness as a mid-range research approach focussing on specific issues and particular scope conditions for making foreign policy decisions” (He 2008: 50).

### **CONCEPTUALISING TURKISH UNIT-LEVEL FACTORS**

Before explaining how the literature conceptualise Turkish democratic backsliding, it is necessary to premise that there is a pauper literature that explores how middle powers and small states use hybrid regimes, where democratisation coincides with nationalism and assertiveness in foreign policy. Given the current status of the literature, crowded by a series of definitions that aim to display what kind of regime currently is ruling Turkey, dedicating section to explain such debate is essential for later understand how the variable of the Presidential Turn has become a unit-level factor that defines Turkish attitude towards the EU and strengthens its image as a middle power. Castaldo and Pinna assert that categorising which middle powers rely on such regime is complicate since “there is confusion about the defining features of this concept and its empirical referents: for example, it is not clear if illiberal democracies should be included in this broad category” (2019: 488). Albeit most of the scholarship focuses on democracies when exposing middle and great powers’ behaviour, there is a nascent body of research which explores authoritarian regime’s impact on opinion-foreign policy nexus (Weiss & Dafoe 2019: 963), like Turkey. For a middle power, “the more conflict-oriented a domestic political context is, the more likely it is to introduce changes in foreign policy” (Grzywacz & Gawrycki 2021: 2631). Using the concept of conflict-oriented of Grzywacz and Gawrycki to define the democratic backlash of Turkish governance, this article agrees with their statement that depicts a conflict-oriented domestic politics as “a preference towards a competitive design and a tendency to uphold divisive debates bringing polarisation into play” (Grzywacz & Gawrycki 2021: 2631). In this sense, NCR differentiates the relationship between ideas and power from the relationship between money and power, or military hardware and power. Whereas material capabilities’ power is easily defined due to its empirical data, the power of an idea, and how such idea performs that the domestic and foreign level and variable. According to Kitchen, there are locations where it is possible to describe how ideational factors determine domestic and foreign policy of small and middle states. He finds that idea become central “through the specific individuals that hold them; through institutions in which they may become embedded; and through the broader culture of the state” (2010: 130). Some ideas are better outlined than others, and possess a deeper ontological background that enables them to progress the country in the international system, and to react towards systemic changes. At the same time, it must be remembered that state actors are not always rational or able to utilise the country’s resources and ideologies to respond uniformly to systemic pressures (Magcamit 2019: 419-420). Whilst the intrinsic power of a particular idea makes its progress into such positions more likely, the ideas that will impact most upon foreign policy are those held by those in decision-making positions in the state and those who directly advise them (Kitchen 2010). In this sense, it is necessary to comprehend how Turkey portrays its middle power role, how the literature has elaborated the democratic backlash as an empirical proof of authoritarianism and finally how the neo-ottoman ideology has pushed the state to distance itself from Europeanisation towards a MiddleEasternisation of Turkey’s domestic and regional policies.

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CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији  
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

321.7:32(4)(048)(0.034.2)

323(4)(048)(0.034.2)

316.4(4)(048)(0.034.2)

INTERNATIONAL Academic Conference Elections – Democracy – Crisis EDC (2 ; 2024 ; Warsaw)

Conference Proceedings [Elektronski izvor] / Second International Academic Conference Elections – Democracy – Crisis EDC 2024, February 29 – March 1, 2024, Warsaw ; organised by the Faculty of the Political Science and International Studies of the University of Warsaw and the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade ; [edited by Spasimir Domaradzki]. - Warsaw : Faculty of the Political Science and International Studies of the University ; Belgrade : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University, 2024 (Beograd : Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Univerziteta). - 1 elektronski optički disk (CD-ROM) : tekst ; 12 cm

Sistemska zahteva: Nisu navedeni. - Nasl. sa naslovne strane dokumenta. - Tiraž 50

ISBN 978-86-82324-58-4

a) Демократија -- Политички аспект -- Европа -- Апстракти б) Европа -- Политичке прилике -- Апстракти  
в) Европа -- Друштвене прилике -- Апстракти

COBISS.SR-ID 143454473



