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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Political Trust, the Challenges Faced by Democracies, and Democratic Innovations

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Abstract: *This special issue focuses on trust in political institutions, the challenges faced by democracies, and democratic innovations. Modern representative democracies encounter multiple challenges and criticisms associated with the quality of democracy and representation. Even though public opinion polls reveal a long-term trend of decline or low levels of trust in the most important representative bodies and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, citizens still believe that democracy is the most suitable form of government. In recent years, with the aim of responding to these challenges debate has intensified with regard to various democratic innovations, changes in media, the education system, together with new approaches to deal with the different system problems. Alongside all of this, new technologies and artificial intelligence have emerged as a particular challenge to democracy and representation. In this special issue, we look at various aspects of trust in representative institutions and citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, and in addition the challenges of and opportunities for increasing political trust.*

Keywords: *democracy, political trust, democratic innovations, artificial intelligence, social media*

Introduction

The most recent studies and reports show that modern representative democracies encounter multiple and increasing challenges. The quality of elections has been falling rapidly, electoral turnout has been shrinking, incidents of protests and riots are on the rise, while the quality of democracy is declining. Such descriptions not only apply to authoritarian countries but also to countries where the quality of democracy has traditionally been high (International IDEA 2024). Simultaneously, longitudinal public opinion polls around the world reveal a long-term trend of decline or low levels of trust in political institutions. Ever since 1990, trust in parliaments, governments and political parties has been

falling in democratic countries, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe. This growing political distrust is accompanied by populism and the success of illiberal political candidates (Valgarðsson et al. 2025). When citizens have low levels of trust in political institutions, this may be a sign that they perceive the political and economic system as well as decision-makers to be unresponsive and doubt that they are acting in line with their interests (Mikhaylovskaya & Rouméas 2024). Yet, trust is not decreasing in all institutions and civil services, which reveals the dissatisfaction of citizens in particular with how politics and policies are made. Public support for democratic principles and forms of government at the same time generally remain high and stable around the world (Valgarðsson et al. 2025).

Several solutions have been proposed to solve the problems described above. These include changes or reforms to systems (political, economic, media etc. systems), and alterations to regulation, while scholars have also promoted the introduction of democratic innovations and participatory democracy tools. Some proposed solutions address particular challenges, while others attempt to deal with several at once, e.g., democratic innovations have been suggested to deal especially with the decreasing political participation and political trust (Theuwis, van Ham & Jacobs 2025). Meanwhile, new technologies, artificial intelligence (Fink-Hafner 2025) and social media (Baboš & Vilagi 2024) have become pressing challenges for democracy, representation and political trust.

This special issue focuses on different aspects and challenges concerning trust in political institutions, the challenges to do with democracies and democratic innovations, along with the (potential) relationship between them.

The relationship between political trust and democracy

The political trust–quality of democracy relationship is important, albeit complicated. Democracy is a political system that builds and protects relationships of trust (Warren 2018). Political trust underpins democracy as a political system (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). However, the democratic political system paradoxically emerged from distrust in elite power holders (Warren 2018). In general, literature assumes that citizens should trust political institutions when they are performing well. Likewise, when government fails to meet the needs of citizens their trust in political institutions is likely to fall (Hardin 1999).

Since one may assume that decreasing political trust indicates political institutions are performing poorly, the phenomenon of growing political distrust raises concerns. Political trust is needed for a functioning democracy, while declining political trust can undermine the quality of a representative democracy (van der Meer 2017). Scholars have also repeatedly expressed concern with the consequences of low levels of political trust for the stability of democratic

political systems (Mariën & Hooghe 2011). Yet, as already noted, the relationship between political trust and democracy is complicated.

Even though citizens who are satisfied with the functioning of democracy express higher levels of political trust, trust is not always higher in political systems where the quality of democracy is higher, suggesting that the way democratic performances are assessed does not always correspond to their actual democratic quality (Mauk 2021). Several factors explain the discrepancy between the quality of democracy and citizens' assessments of democratic functioning and their political trust. Citizens may obtain different information about the political system, which they process in different ways, and adopt different standards as to what the quality of the democracy should be (Mauk 2021).

Still, the absence of political trust is not necessarily detrimental to democracy (van der Meer 2017). In some ways, distrust is just as important for a democratic political system as political trust (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Scepticism of political institutions can foster political engagement and civic criticism, and the assessment of political institutions on their own merits (Hooghe, Mariën & Oser 2016; van der Meer 2017; van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). At the same time, some scholars claim the falling political trust seen in the last 20 years, especially in newer democracies such as countries in Central Europe, is an outcome of the disappointment that followed after hopes had increased upon the changes to the political system and is not necessarily a result of the emergence of a critical citizenry (Catterberg & Moreno 2006).

Only when distrust turns into general distrust and cynicism can it affect the quality of a democracy (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Disillusioned citizens may decide to withdraw from politics completely. General distrust thus raises fears that the very existence of a representative democracy and its institutions could be under threat (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017).

General political distrust potentially holds a number of consequences for all levels of the political system. On the macro level, it could undermine the system's stability or indicate a need to transform the institutions involved in the system. On the meso level, low trust can lead to the electoral success of new parties, especially populist ones. On the micro level, low political trust can encourage support for democratic reforms and undermines citizens' respect for the law (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Here, it is necessary to point out that blind trust in political institutions could also be a side effect of authoritarian governments, and accordingly growing political trust might not have an unequivocal impact. What we should strive for is a balance of scepticism and trust (Valgarðsson et al. 2025).

The level of political trust is influenced by various factors, macro- and micro--level causes linked to an individual's views and status, as well as systemic variables. Political trust is positively influenced by well-being, political socialisation, higher level education, the holding of democratic views, and the political interests of citizens (Catterberg & Moreno 2006). Trust also increases

with macro-level causes, a fair electoral system and procedures for forming government, functioning of the government, procedural fairness, economic performance, inclusive institutions, procedural fairness of state bureaucrats with respect to citizens and inclusive and non-discriminatory welfare arrangements (van der Meer 2017; van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Beyond the characteristics of government, social capital associated with vibrant civil societies spills over in accountable political institutions, leading to increased political trust (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Likewise, corruption, political radicalism (Catterberg & Moreno 2006), political scandals, and the reduction of politics to entertainment can contribute significantly to the decline in political trust (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017).

Notwithstanding the long interest in changing levels of political trust and the trust–democracy relationship, understanding of the causes and impacts of political trust remains quite weak and not supported by robust findings, leaving evidence about its consequences partial and fragmented. The results of a recent meta-analysis show that political trust is weakly to moderately related to voter turnout, voter choice, policy preferences, and compliance, but not to informal participation. Trust is strongly related to what people expect from their political systems and governments, as well as how they interact with them (Devine 2024). Recently, the rising hopes of being able to effectively deal with the issue of political trust along with some other important aspects of democracy have been attributed to democratic innovations.

Understanding political trust and the search for solutions

This special issue offers important insights into the challenges of contemporary democracies, the issues involved in the declining political trust, and possible solutions. We approach these questions by looking at social media, artificial intelligence, the role of democratic innovations, the importance of the political and economic context, interpersonal traits, and the growing importance of conspiracy beliefs.

The changing economic and welfare context are important for understanding the problem of political (dis)trust. While considering the case of Slovenia, Marko Hočevar (2025) shows how political and economic context, such as the weakening of trade unions, the EU's stronger role in policymaking processes, and the shrinking differences between political parties in their social and economic policies following the global financial and economic crises have led not just to the high levels of political distrust shown in public opinion surveys or decreasing voter turnout, but in instability of the party arena as well. Slovenia is no exception to this. The declining trust in politics has been a common European trend that has only been added to by the polycrisis structural setting and the changes in power relations and political goals (Hočevar 2025).

Apart from context, personality traits also impact levels of interpersonal and institutional trust. Personal experience and anticipated adherence to norms are key drivers of trust. However, some population segments may remain distrustful, irrespective of efforts to build trustworthiness. As Cigáneková and Lukáč (2025) present, conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness are positively related to trust in certain institutions. Interpersonal trust is positively related only to openness and agreeableness, while neuroticism is negatively associated with both institutional and interpersonal trust. Yet, as these two authors mention (Cigáneková & Lukáč 2025), even though personality traits are not the only factor explaining levels of trust, they play a role.

Further, conspiracy beliefs produce an important negative impact on trust, as shown by Olszanecka-Marmola, Marmola and Niedbała (2025) with the case of Poland. Conspiracy theories often function as a compensatory control mechanism in response to complex and ambiguous situations that generate uncertainty. The Internet and social media have critical roles in disseminating misinformation and reinforcing conspiracy beliefs. Olszanecka-Marmola, Marmola and Niedbała (2025) also conclude that collective narcissism and populism drive generic conspiracist beliefs, whereas interpersonal and institutional trust have no significant effect when it comes to older adults in Poland.

Világi and Baboš (2025) deal with another challenge to the quality of democracy that has proven to be important recently: decreasing political participation. Some believe that solutions to these issues can be found in exploiting the potential held by new technologies and social media. Social media as a new form of communication offer a novel space for citizens to engage in political issues and the potential to encourage deeper democratic engagement. Analysis of Facebook comments on political leaders' posts in Europe reveals that the majority of Facebook interactions reflect low-effort and expressive engagement rather than deliberative participation. Only a small share of comments may be understood as forms of civic engagement or political participation. Contextual factors, such as economic development, political culture, institutional trust, and media literacy, have a significant influence on how citizens interact with political content online. This shows that a trustful environment is a prerequisite for citizens to become motivated to engage expressively online. While Facebook provides a space for public expression, this is not adequately exploited also because political leaders do not use it to promote participatory behaviour.

In recent times, the rapid development and use of artificial intelligence raises questions about how AI impacts political participation, elections and trust. Danica Fink-Hafner and Katarina Kaišić (2025) illustrate the complex relationship of the mutual impact of trust in AI technology on political trust and the impact of political trust on trust in AI technology. This relationship may be direct and two-way, but also indirect. What is potentially worrying is that the current fast development of AI may interfere significantly with the

present global trend of declining democracy in the direction of favouring authoritarianism.

A potential way for increasing political participation and developing political trust is to use the mechanisms of democratic innovations, as described in the article by Krašovec et al. (2025). Decision-makers, civil servants and representatives recognise that democratic innovations are connected to trust. However, in analysed interviews this connection was not further elaborated. This might also reflect the complexity of the interactions between democratic innovations and political trust (Addeo, Fruncillo & Maddaloni 2025). When it comes to use of democratic innovations, there is greater support for participatory practices in policy-making than in decision-making processes, while reluctance was more evident among civil servants and politicians than representatives of civil society, as shown by Krašovec et al. (2025). Addeo, Fruncillo and Maddaloni (2025) at the same time propose that for democratic innovations to be able to reactivate political participation they must be embedded in a broader project of institutional reform and democratic culture-building that integrates education, territorial networks, and institutional reform.

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ESSAYS

Engagement or Expression?
A Comparative Study of Facebook Politics
in Twelve European Countries

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Abstract: *This article examines how citizens engage with political actors on Facebook across twelve European countries, focusing on the nature and intensity of user interaction. Drawing on a dataset of over 70,000 Facebook comments on posts by national-level political leaders, we conduct a comparative content analysis to categorise digital expressions such as clicktivism, civic engagement or political participation. We also assess how political actors use Facebook to promote interaction and participatory behaviour. Our findings reveal that while Facebook provides a platform for political communication, most user engagement consists of low-effort, expressive behaviours with limited deliberative depth. Substantive forms of civic engagement and political participation are comparatively rare. The analysis also shows that few politicians use Facebook to encourage citizen participation or engage in two-way communication. These findings highlight the discrepancy between the platform's participatory affordances and their actual utilisation. Rather than driving transformative political participation, Facebook serves primarily as a space for symbolic and affective expression. By mapping variations across countries and political roles, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of digital engagement in contemporary democracies.*

Keywords: *political participation, Facebook, political engagement, social media*

Introduction

Social media[1] serves diverse political functions, including influencing public opinion, mobilising support, disseminating information (as well as misin-

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1   Social media are internet-based platforms for mass personal communication that facilitate interactions among users and derive their value primarily from user-generated content (van Bavel et al. 2024; Carr & Hayes 2015). As such, social media encompass various platforms, including social networks such

formation and disinformation), enhancing civic engagement, and shaping political campaigns and discourse (e.g. Bossetta 2018; Gainous et al. 2021; Vaccari & Valeriani 2021; Hunter 2023). Digital technologies play a significant role in shaping, transforming and challenging political ideas and participatory trends in modern democracies, even if they represent only one of many agents driving these transformations. As Botero Arcila and Griffin (2023) argue, digital technology exerts its influence through its affordances, which refer to the ways in which technological features enable or constrain particular actions and interactions. They note that 'different technologies make certain actions and interactions easier or harder to perform. All things being equal, things that are easier to do given particular affordances are likelier to be done, while harder things are less likely' (Botero Arcila & Griffin 2023: 19).

In general, social media's affordances play an integral role in shaping political participation by enhancing visibility (Kim & Ellison 2021), fostering interaction (Jenkins 2006), enabling community building (Vaccari & Valeriani 2021) and reducing barriers to engagement (Theocharis et al. 2022). As platform affordances vary considerably in how they influence political behaviour (Bossetta 2018), this article focuses specifically on Facebook (FB), the social network most commonly used both for news consumption (Newman et al. 2024) and political communication by politicians (Pedersen 2022).

Over the past decade, Facebook has maintained a prominent position among online platforms for news consumption. However, recent algorithmic changes introduced by Meta that deprioritise news have led to a decline in Facebook's use for this purpose – from 36% in 2014 to 26% in 2024. Despite this reduction, Facebook remains the leading platform for news consumption (Newman et al. 2024).

Drawing on a dataset of over 70,000 Facebook comments, this analysis reveals that while individuals do engage in political communication on social media, such interactions rarely qualify as substantive political participation. Although Facebook's technical features enable interactive communication and provide direct access to political actors, these affordances are seldom used to influence political outcomes – whether at the level of actors, institutions or structures. Instead, Facebook discussions predominantly serve as a platform for users to express emotions, opinions and concerns, rather than to advocate for or against changes to the political status quo.

This article has two primary objectives. First, it offers a descriptive and comparative analysis of how citizens engage with political actors on Facebook across twelve European countries. It examines the forms and intensity of user partici-

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as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and others. Despite the distinct features inherent to different platforms and applications, scholars commonly use overarching terms like 'social media' or 'digital media' in their analyses. In this text, we adopt the term 'social media' accordingly.

pation – ranging from low-effort clicktivism to more substantive expressions of civic engagement and political participation. Second, the article contributes to theoretical debates on digital political behaviour by applying an affordance--based framework to assess how Facebook's platform architecture enables or constrains different types of political engagement. Rather than evaluating Facebook's impact on political institutions or citizen attitudes directly, the study focuses on observable patterns of interaction and the extent to which platform affordances are leveraged by both users and politicians.

Social media as a tool for political participation

The interactive nature of social media platforms fosters civic and political engagement by enabling individuals to participate in political discourse, share their views and mobilise for causes they care about. Some theoretical frameworks suggest that this increased engagement can contribute to a more inclusive political process, making it more representative of diverse voices. Civic engagement and political participation are believed not only to revitalise democracy (Saud et al. 2023) but also to promote greater accountability and improve human well-being (Gainous et al. 2021).

The affordances of social media play an important role in shaping users' interactions with political content and their engagement in civic activities, thereby influencing democratic processes. First, social media enhances the visibility of political messages and events by enabling political parties and activists to quickly reach a broad audience. The platform architecture facilitates content sharing, which amplifies messages within users' networks. This phenomenon aligns with the 'two-step flow of communication' model (Soffer 2021), whereby information disseminates rapidly through interpersonal connections. Second, the affordance of persistent conversation on platforms like Facebook supports sustained dialogue on political issues, creating an environment for deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs 2013; Jennings et al. 2021). This interactive feature fosters deeper engagement with political content compared to traditional media or offline settings. Third, platforms such as Facebook and X facilitate the formation of associations and communities cantered around shared political interests. By joining such groups, users gain a sense of belonging and are often motivated toward collective action, effectively linking online interactions with offline political activities (see e.g. Contri et al. 2023). Finally, social media significantly lowers barriers to political participation (de Zúñiga et al. 2024) by reducing the logistical and financial costs associated with organising and disseminating information about political initiatives. Within this framework, it is reasonable to posit that the unique affordances of social media platforms substantively shape political participation by making it more accessible and efficient.

However, while social media offers unprecedented opportunities for civic discourse, it simultaneously presents challenges to meaningful political participation. Several scholars have pointed out critical limitations in social media's model of political engagement, raising concerns about deliberative quality as well as motivational and cognitive barriers. Online political discussions often lack substantive depth, with platforms potentially reducing complex discourse to superficial interactions (Schäfer et al. 2024). Moreover, political participation through social media is mediated by psychological factors such as self-efficacy and outcome expectancy. These cognitive mechanisms suggest that not all digital interactions translate into genuine political participation (Theocharis & Quintelier 2014).

Thus, central questions in the academic study of online political activity are: What types of political actions are occurring on these platforms? Can they be classified as political participation, or are they better understood as forms of civic engagement? Alternatively, are these online activities a distinct phenomenon that cannot be easily compared to offline political actions? (e.g. see Gibson & Cantijoch 2013; Theocharis et al. 2022). To address these questions, it is essential to clarify the conceptual differences between the terms *involvement*, *engagement* and *participation*, which are often used interchangeably. This distinction will be useful in categorising the types of political activities that take place on Facebook.

While this article highlights users' participatory affordances, it is also essential to acknowledge that political actors play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of engagement on social media. As early as 2000, Stromer-Galley noted that politicians were reluctant to use interactive features due to fears of losing control. Subsequent studies, such as Jackson and Lilleker (2009), found that political communication on social platforms often remained one-way, with parties prioritising control over interaction. This tendency continues today, as many politicians use social media primarily as broadcasting tools, bypassing traditional media to communicate directly through controlled channels. Acemoglu, Ozdaglar and Parandeh-Gheibi (2010) describe such actors as 'forceful agents' – those who seek to influence others without being influenced themselves. These practices significantly shape the nature and tone of user engagement.

That said, social media platforms – especially Facebook – also provide opportunities for political actors to promote genuine participation. For example, politicians may initiate online referenda or issue-based polls to gather constituents' opinions on policy proposals. Some organise live video discussions or Q & A sessions with their constituency, creating a more direct and interactive form of political dialogue. Others use chat-box features to allow real-time conversations with users, offering feedback or clarifying positions. Such efforts can encourage citizen involvement, increase transparency and strengthen the perceived responsiveness of political elites. While the present paper focuses

primarily on user comments, it is important to recognise that such engagement cannot be fully understood without considering the content and communicative strategies of political actors themselves. Therefore, the influence of the 'source' – what users are responding to – is a critical factor and is acknowledged here as a limitation, meriting further exploration in future research.

Conceptualisation of participatory political behaviour

The term 'political participation' encompasses a wide array of citizen activities aimed at influencing political processes. While early definitions, such as that by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995: 9), focus on 'activity intended to or having the consequence of affecting government action', contemporary scholarship broadens this scope to include both institutional and non-institutional acts. Sairambay (2020: 124), for instance, defines political participation as 'any action by citizens that is intended to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures', integrating both online and offline modes, and emphasising *intention* as the distinguishing factor.

Under this definition, not only is formal electoral participation (voting, working for political party) recognised as political participation but also a variety of activities with intention to influence political structures (e.g. working for trade unions, political protests, participating in specific social movements[2] or contacting people in power regarding a public matter).

This intention-based framework is crucial for distinguishing political participation from closely related concepts such as *civic engagement* and *expressive engagement*. Civic engagement refers to activities that may be socially meaningful or publicly oriented, yet lack a clear political objective (Adler & Goggin 2005; Ekman & Amnå 2012). It is a 'latent' form of participation (Sairambay 2020) – potentially political in consequence, but not necessarily in intent. This concept is not limited to political issues but encompasses a broad range of societal concerns. Ekman and Amnå (2012) characterise civic engagement as 'latent participation', emphasising that it is 'potentially political' in nature. This distinction acknowledges that individuals may 'engage socially in a number of ways, formally outside of the political domain but nevertheless in ways that may have political consequences' (2012: 288). Examples of such activities include consuming political news, engaging in political discussions or participating in boycotts or buycotts for environmental or human rights reasons. While these actions are linked to political outcomes, they do not directly aim to change political institutions or structures and therefore fall under the category of civic engagement rather than political participation.

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2   It is important that a social movement has a clear goal of influencing political structures.

Expressive engagement, particularly on social media, adds another layer: It involves articulating views on political or societal matters, but does not always include the structured argumentation or mobilisation-oriented purpose typically associated with civic or political acts (Keating & Melis 2017; Shola 2021). Social media platforms, defined as tools for mass personal communication that enable user interactions (van Bavel et al. 2024), are predominantly characterised by expressive forms of participation (Ruess et al. 2023). Expressive participation involves the public articulation of political thoughts (Boyle et al. 2006). For political communication to qualify as participatory behaviour, its public nature is a crucial factor. For instance, private discussions about politics among friends or family, while critical for fostering political identity and internal efficacy, are more appropriately categorised as civic engagement unless explicitly aimed at influencing political actors or institutions (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas 2007).

This study applies these distinctions to social media, especially Facebook, where engagement often blurs the lines between personal expression and political action. For example, expressing discontent in a comment about a government policy may qualify as *expressive engagement*, *civic engagement* or *political participation* depending on how the message is framed and what intent is inferred.

Why Facebook comments matter for studying political participation

The activities of social media users in political contexts can be broadly categorised into three types: consuming political information, reacting to and sharing political content, and creating one's own original political content.

Activities requiring minimal effort – such as passively consuming political information – can be categorised as **online political involvement,** indicative of basic attentiveness to politics. This includes behaviours such as consuming political news or visiting political websites. On social media, this translates into passive use, where individuals simply view political content without engaging with it. Gainous et al. (2021) label such individuals as 'lurkers', who follow updates and posts but refrain from participating in discussions or debates.

Expressive activities on social media, which involve active engagement, include posting political content, commenting on posts or participating in debates. These activities require more effort and are interactive in nature, reflecting what Verduyn et al. (2017) describe as 'activities that facilitate direct exchange with others'.

Further, we distinguish between expressive and civic engagement on social media. We base the distinction upon the literature pointing out that *civic engagement* uses argumentation constructively to achieve shared goals, while *expressive engagement* often prioritises personal perspective, which may result in less argumentatively structured, but more emotionally charged statements

(Keating & Melis 2017; Shola 2021). So, in effect, both types of engagement may involve using social media to express personal opinions, or identities related to societal and political issues, without necessarily aiming for direct action or societal change. However, civic engagement would include argument-like structure (premises) to support the respondent's statement, while expressive engagement may involve posting a personal opinion about a political event or venting frustrations about a policy, but will lack a structure of a logical argument.

The empirical focus of this study – Facebook comments – is motivated by the platform's dual role as both a *public sphere* and a site of *low-barrier participation*. Unlike private conversations, Facebook comments are inherently public and often aimed at broader audiences. This makes them valuable artifacts for analysing *expressive participation*, especially when users articulate political positions, critique policies or advocate specific outcomes.

To determine whether a Facebook comment constitutes political participation, civic engagement or mere expressive behaviour, we focus not on the form of the activity (i.e. 'commenting') but on its content and intent. For example, a comment saying 'This social policy is unfair; I'm not voting for this party anymore!' reflects a clear political intention – it seeks to influence institutional outcomes and would be coded as political participation. A comment such as 'I feel really hopeless about everything going on…' may reflect personal frustration with political conditions but lacks a directive or mobilising purpose; it fits best under expressive engagement. A comment sharing a news article on environmental issues with the caption 'We need to be more aware!' might reflect civic engagement, as it aims to raise awareness but does not propose or advocate a direct political action. What make the difference is if FB activity aims to influence political outcomes of political institutions or political structures (political participation) or such intention for influence would be missing and, in such case, expression of political thoughts would rather contribute to raise the awareness than to political change. Therefore, for expressive social media activity to be considered *political participation*, it has to advocate in favour or against some policy or concrete political action.

While some may question whether Facebook comments can constitute political participation, we argue that *public digital expression* – when aimed at influencing political processes – meets the definitional criteria outlined by both classical and contemporary theorists. Given the public nature of the platform, the performative aspect of participation (Papacharissi 2010) and the increasing relevance of digital discourse in shaping policy debates (Theocharis et al. 2022), Facebook comments represent a meaningful site of analysis.

However, the boundaries are not always rigid. As Table 1 illustrates, certain online behaviours may straddle categories depending on context and content. Therefore, a *content-based interpretive approach*, rather than a form-based one, is critical for understanding the evolving character of digital political behaviour.

Table 1: Citizen's online civic engagement and political participation vs. cliktivism

Political Behaviour (activities)		
Online political participation	*Online civic engagement*	*Clicktivism (non-participation)*
voting (in e-elections)	–	–
party/campaign online activities including fundraising	social movements online activities including fundraising	
organising online political petitions	organising online societal petitions	signing online petitions
online organising[3] protest/support activities (against/for policy or politician or pushing for/against **political change** including topics like environmental problems, sexual violence, racism etc.)	online organising protest/support activities, including boycotting & buycotting & digitally native activism[4] (**raising awareness** of problems like environmental issues/ sexual violence/ rasism etc.)	liking information about protest/support activities on social media
Expressive participation - pushing for/against **political change**: • engaging in discussions regarding a public matter (via social media), articulating preferred outcome either supporting change or maintaining status quo • producing own written (blogs/post) or video content articulating preferred outcome either supporting change or maintaining status quo • contacting people in power regarding a public matter (via email, social media) articulating preferred outcome either supporting change or maintaining status quo	Expressive engagement – not pushing for/against political change (potential for **raising awareness**): • engaging in discussions regarding a public matter (via social media) • producing own written (blogs/post) or video content • sharing political content on social medi$_a$	Minimalist expressive engagement • liking political content on social media • commenting political statuses with minimum effort via emoticons, hashtagging or a few words/no opinions on substance • uploading pictures with no comments as reaction to political statuses
	joining a political group on social media	

Source: Authors

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3   Referring to activity of organisation taking place online even if the protest itself might take place physically in offline mode.

4   For instance, online movements could aim to counter online disinformation and hate speech by campaigning to withdraw advertising from certain websites.

Methodology

Selected empirical case

Facebook provides a valuable platform for analysing political behaviour on social media due to its popularity, flexibility and relevance to political communication. Politicians frequently use Facebook to engage directly with constituents, who are more active on this platform compared to X (formerly Twitter), Instagram or others (Pedersen 2022). Facebook's lack of restrictions on the length or type of post content further enhances its utility for actors, allowing them to tailor their messages freely.

This study focuses on public Facebook pages of high-profile political actors across the twelve TRUEDEM[5] countries: Austria, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and Ukraine. Our analysis included posts and publicly accessible comments on these posts throughout the period of July to December 2023. As the study utilised publicly available data, ethical approval was not required.

Dataset

The empirical analysis draws on a unique dataset comprising Facebook posts and comments from 36 politicians across the TRUEDEM countries. For each country, we selected the Facebook pages of three political figures: (1) the head of state (e.g. president or monarch); (2) the leader of the primary governing party (incumbent); and (3) the leader of the main opposition party. Ultimately, 34 profiles were included in the analysis (see Annex 1), as some politicians did not maintain a public Facebook profile (e.g. the Swedish head of state, King Carl XVI Gustaf). The data collection period spanned six months, from July to December 2023. This period included parliamentary elections in two countries (Poland and Slovakia), which resulted in changes to the positions of incumbent and opposition leaders.

For detailed analysis, a median Facebook post based on the number of comments was selected, and a content analysis of the comments on these posts was conducted. In total, the dataset comprises 15,983 Facebook posts and 70,267 comments. For the analysis of politicians' use of Facebook to increase citizen engagement, we used a random sample of 1,001 posts generated by software. These posts were manually coded by four human coders to determine whether they included calls for citizens to participate in any of the following types of activities: expressive online participation, non-expressive online participation or offline participation.

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5   TRUEDEM is the research project funded by European Union's Horizon programme.

Data were collected using the *ExportComments*[6] tool, which extracted text and embedded video links from posts, as well as associated comments and reactions. Posts, comments and reactions were initially collected in their respective national languages and subsequently translated into English using DeepL software.[7] Importantly, we distinguished between **comments** (direct replies to a post) and **reactions** (likes, emojis or responses to other user comments). This distinction is critical for our coding: Comments are more likely to contain substantive content and deliberate expression, while reactions typically reflect low-effort engagement.

The dataset includes 119,643 entries of comments and reactions. To ensure data validity, we excluded 2,936 suspected automated entries (e.g. where users made more than 100 comments on a single post). We also excluded duplicate entries in terms of identical comment left under the same post by the same user. This ensured a focus on authentic and meaningful user interactions. The resulting dataset contains 70,267 unique comments without reactions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Flow diagram of included FB content
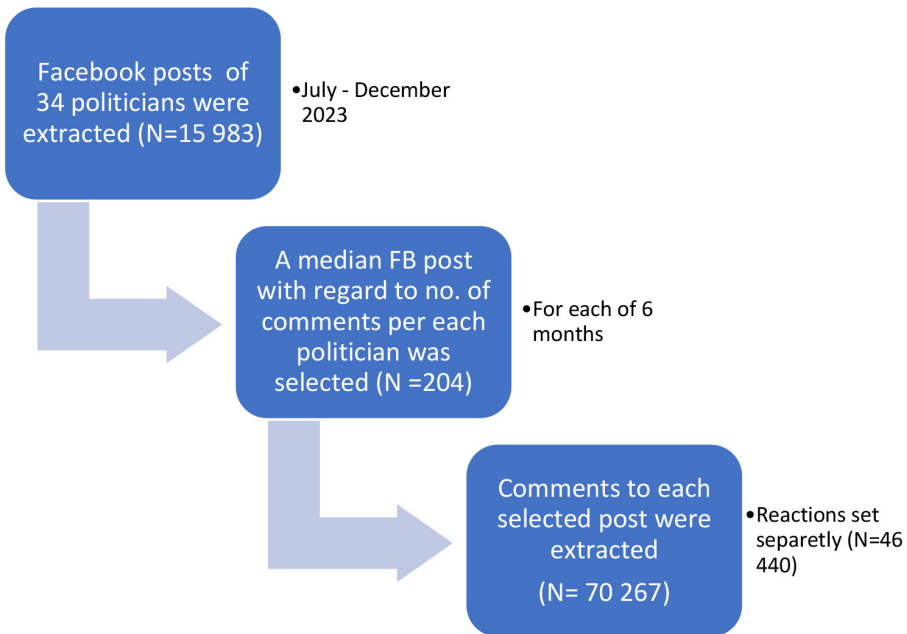
Source: Authors

Research questions and coding framework

This study investigates the following questions:
- To what extent does user interaction on Facebook – such as comments and reactions – reflect different levels of political engagement, ranging from clicktivism to substantive civic or political participation?
- How frequently do Facebook users employ reasoned argumentation to support their political opinions in response to posts by political leaders?
- To what extent do politicians use Facebook for dyadic (two-way) communication with citizens, and how might this influence the perceived trustworthiness of democratic processes?

We conducted a content analysis of comments to critically assess the characteristics of political usage on Facebook. Content analysis is defined as 'a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifested content of communication' (Berelson 1952: 18). Communication in this context can be text-based (e.g. news articles, website commentaries, social media posts), visual (e.g. photos, videos) or aural (e.g. radio broadcasts, speeches). In this study, we focused exclusively on text-based content, excluding videos and images, as content analysis is most suited to textual data that explicitly describe content and elucidate latent meanings (Krippendorff 2018).

Our analysis was guided by a conceptual framework distinguishing between **clicktivism**, **civic engagement** and **political participation**. As outlined in the theoretical section, these categories are not always exclusive based on *form* (e.g. commenting vs. liking), but instead are determined by *content and intent*. Therefore, a central methodological task involved content coding to classify comments according to these criteria.

We used **quantitative content analysis** to evaluate the **explicit content** of user comments – excluding latent interpretations. The procedure included three core coding dimensions:

1. **Level of Effort**: Low-effort expressions (e.g. emojis, hashtags, short interjections like 'Go!' or 'Shame!') were categorised as **clicktivism.**
2. **Expressive Purpose**: Substantive comments expressing political opinions without advocating for specific change were coded as **expressive civic engagement**. These comments often reflect personal attitudes or raise awareness without targeting political actors or demanding action.
3. **Advocacy for Political Change**: Comments that explicitly supported or opposed concrete political outcomes (e.g. policies, institutional decisions) and were directed at political actors were coded as **political participation**. These comments often contain calls to action, proposed solutions or direct appeals to politicians.

The coding phase included several steps. (1) **Exclusion of irrelevant content**: comments that lacked verbal responses to the politician's post or contained non-political content (e.g. unrelated information, shared videos or pictures) were excluded. Approximately 40% of all comments were removed at this stage. (2) D**istinction between political opinions and clicktivism:** comments were classified as expressing political opinions if they engaged substantively with the issue at hand. In contrast, 'clicktivism' was identified in comments consisting solely of emoticons, hashtags or brief expressions of agreement or dissent (e.g. 'OK!' or 'Go to hell!'). (3) **Coding for political participation and civic engagement**: expressive comments were categorised using deductive criteria. Comments were coded as **political participation** if they were directed at the politician and explicitly argued for or against a specific political outcome, such as a policy change or political action. For example, a comment from Sweden calls for action:

> *Dear Social Democrats, I turn to you today with a humble appeal... We must take the parliamentary chaos seriously and act with determination. We have to go out and get involved, talk to our fellow man and show them why we believe in a different path. Because if we fail, we risk: reduced freedom of expression, continued dismantling of democracy, further lagging behind in climate change, more sell-offs of state and municipal companies, poorer health and elderly care, continued profit taking in schools, continued tax cuts for the wealthy and increased taxes on work, worsened conditions for the unemployed and the long-term ill – with the probability of higher crime and crime as a result... We must convince, inform and inspire. We must be voices that are lifted, voices that reach out and that change. So I urge you all to go out and work. Work for the good of society, work for our future... Together for a sustainable and safe Sweden, vote red!*

Expressive comments that discussed political outcomes or expressed opinions on specific political issues, without articulating a preferred outcome (i.e. support for change or maintenance of the status quo), were categorised as **expressive engagement**. These comments are characterised by their potential to raise awareness rather than to directly influence political outcomes. For example, a comment from France reads: *'France lives under the joke of the capitalist specter of debt and submission to the infernal trio that are the USA, EU, and NATO. The people are nothing but a colony of media-hyped troubadours.'* While this statement clearly expresses an opinion on politics in France, it does not advocate for or against any specific action or policy outcome.

To further distinguish civic engagement, we coded whether comments included structured **argumentation** – reasons, evidence or justifications for the stated opinion. We argue that such reasoning contributes to the deliberative quality of public discourse and may raise awareness, even if no political demand is made.

We also recorded the ratio of comments to reactions (as an indicator of expressive vs. passive engagement), the frequency of responses from political actors, and their appeals to participatory behaviour. These measures were used to assess reciprocity, as well as contextual variation across countries and political roles.

To ensure reliability, four trained coders[8] participated in a multi-stage calibration process consisting of development of **detailed coding instructions, joint training sessions** using sample data and iterative coding rounds with **cross-checks for consistency.** Discrepancies were reviewed collectively to reach consensus and refine coding rules where necessary.

Findings

Facebook as a participatory tool for users

This section presents the findings from the analysis of Facebook interactions on posts made by politicians. A significant portion of the responses can be classified as expressive engagement, with an average of 37% of comments meeting this criterion. In contrast, approximately 63% of the comments were categorised as a form of clicktivism, even though they were text-based rather than relying solely on emoji reactions.

The distribution of these behaviours varied significantly across the twelve countries included in the study (Table 2). In eight of these countries, clicktivism predominated. Greece had the highest proportion of contributions classified as clicktivism (over 84%), followed by Ukraine (76%) and Slovakia (72%). Conversely, Germany exhibited the highest share of expressive engagement (76%), followed by Poland (70%), and Sweden and Austria (both 58%). These geographical disparities in engagement types underline the importance of contextual factors in shaping digital political behaviour. Such variation may be attributed to differences in political culture, media literacy or trust in traditional political institutions.

Regarding the political roles of the individuals posting, Facebook contributions from coalition leaders showed, on average, a 10-percentage-point higher share of clicktivism compared to posts by heads of state or opposition leaders. Additionally, posts by populist politicians attracted 13 percentage points more clicktivism than those by non-populist politicians.

Table 2: Share of expressive participation and clicktivism

COUNTRY	EXPRESSIVE COMMENTS (SHARE IN %)	CLICKTIVISM (SHARE IN %)	TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMENTS
ITA	28.52	71.48	20,224
SLO	30.35	69.65	1,281
POL	69.51	30.49	13,833
UA	23.84	76.16	3,349
FRA	40.52	59.48	6,996
ROM	40.44	59.56	6,060
DE	75.67	24.33	2,149
GRE	15.66	84.34	2,501
CZ	38.04	61.96	4,708
AT	57.72	42.28	674
SWE	57.98	42.02	2,184
SVK	27.55	72.45	7,552
Head of State	40.74	59.26	17,970
Leader of Coalition	32.49	67.51	36,815
Opposition Leader	43.22	56.78	16,726
NON-POPULIST	42.33	57.67	27,259
POPULIST	29.59	70.41	25,176
TOTAL	37.02	62.98	71,511

Source: Authors

The findings highlight the subtle role of political position and populism in shaping engagement patterns. Coalition leaders and populist politicians generate higher levels of clicktivism, suggesting that their communication strategies may resonate more with passive forms of engagement. Conversely, opposition leaders appear to foster slightly higher levels of expressive engagement, potentially due to their focus on critique and mobilisation.

The study also examined the extent to which Facebook activities could be classified as either civic engagement or political participation (Table 3). The results reveal that only a small proportion of comments met these criteria: 2.7% were categorised as civic engagement and 1.7% as political participation. These findings suggest that, while users often express opinions or statements about political issues, only a marginal proportion provide substantiated arguments to support their positions. Even fewer comments explicitly advocate for changes in political outcomes or defend the political status quo.

A closer examination of individual countries reveals notable variation in the intensity of civic engagement. Sweden demonstrated the highest share, with

nearly 8% of comments involving discussions of public matters and express-
ing the commenter's views, even when not advocating for or against specific
political outcomes. In contrast, civic engagement rates were below 3% in half
of the countries studied, with Poland displaying the lowest rate at under 0.5%.
This indicates a gap between users' willingness to express opinions and their
readiness to advocate for change or engage in structured, deliberative discus-
sions. Sweden stands out as an outlier, highlighting the potential influence of
a robust civic culture in fostering meaningful digital participation.

Interestingly, neither the political position of the individuals posting nor
their classification as populists appeared to significantly influence the rate of
civic engagement or political participation elicited by their posts.

Table 3: Rate of Expressive Engagement, Civic Engagement and Political Participation

COUNTRY	EXPRESSIVE ENGAGEMENT (SHARE IN %)	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (SHARE IN %)	POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (SHARE IN %)
ITA	28.52	2.45	2.04
SLO	30.35	5.86	3.08
POL	69.51	0.3	0.08
UA	23.84	3.22	2.5
FRA	40.52	3.94	1.9
ROM	40.44	2.94	1.28
DE	75.67	2.37	2.19
GRE	15.66	4.88	2.74
CZ	38.04	3.9	0.55
AT	57.72	1.78	2.07
SWE	57.98	7.96	3.48
SVK	27.55	1.97	2.83
Head of State	40.74	3.02	1.4
Leader of Coalition	32.49	2.33	1.72
Opposition Leader	43.22	2.8	1.92
TOTAL	36.99	2.65	1.69

Source: Authors

The findings demonstrate that Facebook serves as a significant medium for
expressive behaviour, yet this behaviour is primarily characterised by **low-
-intensity engagement forms**, such as clicktivism, rather than substantive
civic or political participation. This distinction is essential to understanding
how users engage with political discourse in digital spaces. While Facebook
provides a platform for public articulation of political sentiments, its potential

as a medium for substantive political engagement remains underutilised. The predominance of clicktivism over deeper forms of engagement reflects the ease of performing low-commitment activities and possibly a lack of digital literacy or trust in social media as a political space.

Facebook as a dyadic communication tool for politicians

Like citizens, politicians also have ample opportunity to use Facebook (or other social media platforms) as a tool to engage with the public and thus increase both the platform's attractiveness and its use among citizens. We examined the extent to which politicians use Facebook for these specific purposes. Whether through direct dialogue or appeals for citizen participation, the potential for Facebook to serve as a platform for two-way communication between politicians and citizens appears to be underutilised.

Table 4 indicates that politicians seldom engage in discussions within the comment sections of their posts. Of the 34 politicians analysed, only 12 responded to audience comments during the six-month period. Among these, only three – Marcel Ciolacu (prime minister of Romania), Giorgia Meloni (prime minister of Italy) and Andrzej Duda (president of Poland) – responded more than six times. This finding suggests that while Facebook facilitates public engagement, political communication on the platform remains largely one-sided, with minimal reciprocal interaction.

Table 4: List of politicians engaged in a dyadic discussion on Facebook

Politician	Replies	Politician	Replies
Marcel Ciolacu	89	Magdalena Andersson	2
Giorgia Meloni	16	Cătălin Drula	2
Andrzej Duda	11	Frank-Walter Steinmeier	2
Friedrich Merz	5	Alexander Van der Bellen	1
Saskia Esken	3	Robert Fico	1
Petro Poroshenko	3	Olena Shulyak	1

Source: Authors

We also analysed how politicians use Facebook to motivate citizens to participate in various activities, both online and offline. Table 5 presents the share of politicians' posts (aggregated at the country level) that included a call to action. In five of the twelve countries, there were no calls for any form of participation whatsoever. Politicians used Facebook to encourage expressive online political participation primarily in Austria and Germany, but even there, only 2.6% and 1.5% of posts, respectively, contained such appeals. The highest share of posts

inviting citizens to take action was observed in Poland, at nearly 10%. This can be attributed to numerous calls urging citizens to join protests against the government or to vote, as the parliamentary elections took place during the data collection period. However, the overall figures present a clear picture: Politicians rarely use Facebook as a tool to promote citizens' political or civic engagement.

Table 5: Share of politicians' posts including various calls for citizens actions (in %)

Country	No calls for action	Call for expressive online engagement	Call for non-expressive online engagement	Call for offline engagement
AST	96.1	2.6	1.3	0
CZE	98.6	0.7	0	0.7
FRA	95.8	0	4.2	0
GER	95.6	1.5	0	2.9
GRE	100	0	0	0
ITA	100	0	0	0
POL	90.3	0	0	9.7
ROM	99.2	0	0	0.8
SLO	100	0	0	0
SVK	96.8	0	0	3.2
SWE	100	0	0	0
UKR	100	0	0	0
Total	97.1	0.4	0.4	2.1

Source: Authors

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how Facebook is used as a space for political communication and citizen engagement across twelve European democracies. Drawing on content analysis of over 70,000 user comments on political leaders' Facebook posts, we examined how digital expressions vary in intensity and purpose – ranging from clicktivism to more substantive forms of civic engagement and political participation.

Our findings show that the majority of Facebook interactions reflect low-effort, expressive engagement rather than deliberative participation. Only a small share of comments met the criteria for civic engagement (2.7%) or political participation (1.7%), with wide variation across countries. While countries like Sweden exhibited comparatively higher levels of engaged discourse, most interactions across the sample lacked structured argumentation or clear calls for political change.

Moreover, the disparity in engagement patterns across countries suggests that contextual factors, such as economic development, political culture (includ-

ing institutional trust) and media literacy, significantly influence how citizens interact with political content online. Countries with robust civic cultures, such as Sweden, demonstrated higher levels of meaningful engagement, pointing to the role of offline democratic traditions in shaping online behaviour. Our findings are in line with research that points to the role of political trust in online expressive engagement. Trustful environment contributes to the motivation of citizens to engage expressively online (Demetriou 2012). Another contributing factor is the level of socio-economic resources. As argued by Vicente and Suenaga (2020), a certain level of socio-economic resources is necessary for people to politically participate in an expressive way.

The study also revealed that politicians seldom leverage Facebook for two-way communication or to promote participatory behaviour. This underutilisation of the platform's interactive affordances limits its potential to foster deeper democratic engagement. These patterns underscore the need to recalibrate expectations about social media's democratising potential: While Facebook increases visibility and provides a space for public expression, it does not automatically translate into meaningful political action.

This research contributes to broader debates on digital participation by offering a framework for distinguishing types of online engagement. Rather than assuming a normative progression from expression to action, future studies should explore the conditions under which expressive online behaviour may – or may not – translate into civic or political outcomes. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how platform design, algorithmic curation and political communication strategies shape user engagement across different socio-political contexts.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on public Facebook comments excludes private interactions that may reveal different patterns of political engagement. Additionally, the study's focus on textual content omits visual and multimedia elements that could contribute to political discourse. Future studies could adopt mixed-method approaches to capture the multidimensional nature of online political participation.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Annex 1: The list of analysed political actors

Country	Politician/ a leader of political party	Political Party	Incumbent/ Opposition	Populist/ Non-populist	Source
Austria	Alexander Van der Bellen	independent	president	-	-
	Karl Nehammer	Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	incumbent	Non-populist 4.1 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Andreas Babler	Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	opposition	Non-populist 3.3 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Czechia	Petr Pavel	independent	president	-	-
	Petr Fiala	Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	incumbent	Non- populist 1.4 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Andrej Babiš	Political movement ANO (ANO)	opposition	Non- populist 3.8 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
France	Emmanuel Marcon[9]	En Marche (currently Renaissance)	president	-	-
	Stéphane Séjourné	Renaissance	incumbent	Non-populist	PEW
	Marine Le Pen	National Rally (NR, previously the National Front)	opposition	Populist 7.8 Populist	CHES PEW

9   In this table we do not identify populism in the case of Head of states as in most cases, the run as independent or have only limited political power. However, Emmanuel Macron is not only President of France but also a chief of executive with significant political powers. In case of Macron, he is not a part of databases on populism and the political party established by Macron after he came into power (En March) is detected as non-populist (PEW). However, there are some scholars arguing Macron to be a specific case of populist (see e.g. Fougére & Barthold 2020).

Country	Politician/ a leader of political party	Political Party	Incumbent/ Opposition	Populist/ Non-populist	Source
Germany	Frank-Walter Steinmeier	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	president	Non-populist	PPDB
	Saskia Esken	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) (co-chairwoman)	incumbent	Non-populist 2.5 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Lars Klingbeil	Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) (co-chairman)	incumbent	Non-populist 2.5 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Friedrich Merz	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)	opposition	Non-populist 1.7 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
Greece	Katerina Sakellaropoulou	independent	president	-	-
	Kyriakos Mitsotakis	New Democracy (ND)	incumbent	Non-populist 1.6	CHES
	Stefanos Kasselakis (no public FB profile)	SYRIZA	opposition	Populist 7.4 Populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
Italy	Sergio Mattarella (no public FB profile)	independent	president	-	-
	Giorgia Meloni	Brothers of Italy (FdI)	incumbent	Populist 6.6 Populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Elly Schlein	Democratic Party (PD)	opposition	Non-populist 2.1 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Poland	Andrzej Duda	Law and Justice (PiS)	president	-	-
	Jarosław Kaczyński	Law and Justice (PiS)	incumbent[10]	Non-populist 4.5 Populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Donald Tusk	Civic Platform (PO)	opposition	Non-populist 4.3 Non-populist	CHES PPDB

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10 The position of Jarosław Kaczyński and PiS has changed during the monitored period as in October 2023 parliamentary election he did not defend the position of incumbent and Donald Tusk became leader of the governing coalition.

Country	Politician/ a leader of political party	Political Party	Incumbent/ Opposition	Populist/ Non-populist	Source
Romania	Klaus Iohannis	independent	president	-	-
	Ion-Marcel Ciolacu	Social Democratic Party (PSD)	incumbent	Non-populist 3.4 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Cătălin Drulă[11]	Save Romania Union (USR)	opposition	Populist 6.0 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Slovakia	Zuzana Čaputová	independent	president	-	-
	Igor Matovič	Ordinary people (OĽaNO, currently Slovakia)	incumbent[12]	Populist 8.5 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
	Robert Fico	SMER – social democracy (SMER-SD)	opposition	Non-populist 2.9 Non-populist	CHES PPDB
Slovenia	Nataša Pirc Musar	independent	president	-	-
	Robert Golob	Freedom Movement (GS)	incumbent	See footnote[13]	
	Janez Janša	Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)	opposition	Populist 5.3	CHES
Sweden	Ulf Kristersson	Moderate Party (M)	incumbent	Non-populist 2.5 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
	Magdalena Andersson	Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP)	opposition	Non-populist 2.7 Non-populist Non-populist	CHES PEW PPDB
Ukraine[14]	Volodymyr Zelenskyi	independent	president		
	Olena Shulyak	Servant of the People Party (SN)	incumbent		
	Petro Poroshenko	European Solidarity (YeS)	opposition		

Source: Authors based on CHES, PEW, PPDB database

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11 In this case, the databases on populism are contradictory in assessment of USR. However, as there are academic articles considering USR as populist political party (Dragoman 2021), we consider them to be populists as well.

12 The position of Igor Matovič and OĽaNO changed during the monitored period, as he did not defend the position of incumbent in the September 2023 parliamentary election, and Robert Fico became the leader of the governing coalition.

13 The Freedom Movement as a new political party is not included in either database of populism used in this deliverable. However, various experts refer to GS as to centre-left political party, a most important counterpart to the populist right-wing SDS (see e.g. Krašovac 2023).

14 The Ukrainian political parties are not a part of databases on populism included in this deliverable. Based on academic sources, we can assume, that president Zelenskyi use populist rhetoric (Kulyk 2023), Servant of the People Party is an example of valence populist party (Yanchenko & Zulianello 2024). In case of YeS party, some scholars consider them national democrats (Kasianov 2024), while others point at their populist strategies without embodying the full essence of populism (Kulyk 2019).

Artificial Intelligence and Political Trust

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Abstract: *This article is based on understanding political trust as a relational concept. In the frame of liberal democratic thought, the article refers to the relationship between citizens and political institutions, and the role played by political trust as the crucial glue that holds it together, thereby enabling the democratic political system to function successfully. Based on a narrative literature review, we have developed a conceptual model that illustrates the complex relationship between trust in artificial intelligence (AI), political trust and the broader context in which these relationships are co-constructed by various actors.*

Keywords: *political trust, artificial intelligence (AI), democracy, AI governance*

Introduction

Issues involved in the relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) and political trust have been overlooked for a long time (Robles & Mallinson 2023a) but have appeared on the public and research agenda recently for multiple reasons. Among these issues are increasing concerns about the negative impacts of AI technologies on human rights and security (Gillespie et al. 2023: 7), the inclusion of such technologies in public administration (Kleizen et al. 2023: 10) and the impacts of biases in AI-supported policymaking and implementation (Valle-Cruz et al. 2020: 5). This article focuses on the relationship between trust in AI and political trust, as both have faced significant challenges (Nie 2024). The central research question is: What factors influence the relationship between trust in AI and political trust? The aim is to develop a conceptual model, grounded in a literature review, that identifies the factors affecting trust in AI and political trust, and the relation between the two.

While public trust and political trust are often confused in public discourse – especially since in literature, the former is sometimes used synonymously with the latter – this article emphasises the need to distinguish between them. Our understanding of political trust is relational, reflecting the connection between citizens, political institutions and democracy – a concept that draws on Easton's (1975: 437) view of political support as citizens' perceptions of the outputs and performance of political authorities. Easton's definition of political support is also widely used in empirical social science research through indicators of trust in specific political institutions, while we use the term 'public trust' in relation to AI in terms of citizens' trust in new technologies grouped under the term 'AI'. This differs from political trust.

Recent literature on AI has shown a growing but delayed interest in the relationship between AI and democracy (Nie 2024); however, systematic research on general or specific connections between them is still lacking. Existing studies either note some links between trust in AI and political trust (see, for example, Kreps & Kriner 2023; Nie 2024) or highlight contextual factors affecting trust in AI (e.g. Afroogh et al. 2024; Li et al. 2024). Furthermore, most empirical research focuses on individual citizens' trust in AI and political institutions (e.g. Nie 2024; Zuiderwijk et al. 2021), while other works also recognise other actors that influence this relationship (e.g. Ryan 2020). The fragmentation of literature has made it difficult to fully grasp the complex interplay of various factors impacting the relationship between trust in AI and political trust.

This study aims to address the existing gap in literature by organising ideas around the complex relationship between trust in AI and political trust, and the broader context in which this relationship is co-constructed by various actors. We do this by developing a conceptual model based on a literature review related to AI, findings from literature on political trust and expert judgments drawn from long-term academic experience. At this stage, the model provides a foundation for more systematic empirical research, but also further theoretical and conceptual developments in the field.

This article begins with the theoretical and methodological framework, where we explain how we found the literature included in our research and define the two main concepts from the title (AI and political trust). We follow this with a literature review divided into subsections, with each subsection covering a particular segment of the studied relationships. These segments are then synthesised into a model. We conclude with suggestions for further research.

Theoretical and methodological framework

Trust and trustworthiness

Trust is a relational concept. In psychology, it entails the intention of a truster (A) to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour (X) of a trustee. However, in some other disciplines, context is also exposed as a factor impacting this relationship (Pillulta 2005: 406).

In research, trust is usually viewed as a quality of an individual. On the other hand, trustworthiness is defined as 'an informal social contract where principals authorise agents to act on their behalf in the expectation that the agent will fulfil their responsibilities with competency, integrity, and impartiality despite conditions of risk and uncertainty' (Norris 2022a: 3).

Defining AI and trust in AI

There is no universal definition of AI. For the purpose of this article, we use a more recent maximalist definition of AI by Rai, Constantinides and Sarker (2019: iii) as 'the ability of a machine to perform cognitive functions that we associate with human minds, such as perceiving, reasoning, learning, interacting with the environment, problem solving, decision-making, and even demonstrating creativity'.

In defining a trustworthy AI, an increasingly long list of criteria has been developed that a particular AI system needs to fulfil to earn trustworthiness. In 2019, three main criteria seem to have prevailed in the policy arena: AI needs to be lawful, ethical and robust (European Commission 2019). In 2022, researchers published a more detailed list of criteria: robustness, generalisation, explainability, transparency, reproducibility, fairness, privacy preservation and accountability (Li et al. 2022). These criteria also resonate with more recent lists of criteria published to guide enterprises, which include accountability, explainability, fairness, interpretability and transparency, privacy, reliability, robustness and security (Gomstyn, Jonker & McGrath 2024). Nevertheless, critics have exposed a tendency for regulators to narrowly understand 'trustworthiness' in terms of the 'acceptability' of the risks associated with AI (Laux, Wachter & Mittelstadt 2024).

Defining political trust

In the literature on AI, the term 'public trust' is often used. Usually, it is not conceptualised in more detail; however, when looking at elements related to public trust, we can say that it is a synonym for the political science term 'political trust'.

Political scientists have distinguished political trust from legitimacy. The concept of the latter refers to the whole permanent political system, while political trust refers to the rulers in power (Dogan 1992: 121). The concept of political trust has survived despite its fuzziness and elusiveness (Carstens 2023: 298), as well as criticism that it has been theoretically dubious (Hooghe & Zmerli 2011: 1–2). It has been continuously used in empirical research as an important indicator of the relationship between citizens, political institutions and democracy.

Easton's (Easton 1975) understanding of political support is still valued as a definition of political trust. Easton stressed the uniqueness of the relationship between political support and citizens' feelings about obtaining it from what they see as the outputs and performance of political authorities (Easton 1975: 437). The citizens' perceptions may or may not be correct in some objective sense (Easton 1975: 438).

In the 1970s, researchers found that political trust as an affective orientation towards government can be traced on various levels, from high trust to high distrust or political cynicism (Miller 1974: 952). In addition, a healthy mistrust has also been considered an important factor in a healthy democracy (Carstens 2023). Nevertheless, political trust has been valued as an important source of liberal democracy. At this level of analysis, political trust refers to citizens' assessments of the core institutions of the polity and entails a positive evaluation of the most relevant attributes that make each political institution trustworthy, such as credibility, fairness, competence, transparency in its policymaking and openness to competing views (Zmerli 2014).

More recently, researchers have pointed to political trust as an indicator of political legitimacy, and empirical research has revealed that political trust is more or less as stable as some other attitudes, such as those exhibited towards immigration and redistribution (Devine & Valgarðsson 2024). Although a decline in political trust might signal a legitimacy crisis, this is not always the case (van der Meer & van Erkel 2024), and since political trust can have both positive and negative impacts on the development of democracy, it has been suggested that healthy political scepticism or sceptical trust (Norris 2022b) is supportive of democracy.

For our research, we also drew on literature on political trust to identify its key factors (see the section 'Factors impacting political trust').

Methodological approach

This article is based on a qualitative narrative literature review conducted between July and December 2024. We opted for a narrative literature review (Arksey & O'Malley 2005) due to a lack of systematic focus in the existing literature on the relationship between political trust and AI, and because of the aim to explore the topic more broadly. The qualitative approach has allowed

us to capture the complexity of perceptions, emotions and contextual factors, which quantitative methods often overlook.

While this type of review does not adhere to specific guidelines, we used a semi-structured approach to gather the literature, consisting of the following steps. First, we used Google Scholar and Cobiss+ (a digital catalogue of Slovenian libraries) as the two main search engines for finding literature. Units were selected by using the following English keywords in our searches: 'Artificial Intelligence', 'Artificial Intelligence and Trust', 'Trust in Artificial Intelligence', 'Artificial Intelligence and Political Trust' and 'Artificial Intelligence and Institutional Trust'.

Additionally, we used the snowball effect method for identifying additional sources on lists of references in the previously found units. To ensure that only credible sources were used for analysis, we included in our search results only academic articles, books, book chapters, and selected conference proceedings and expert reports. We mainly relied on peer-reviewed sources, and titles, abstracts and keywords from these sources were reviewed to determine the relevance and comprehensiveness of the uncovered literature. Some sources were excluded due to the inaccessibility of the full texts, and the final selection was focused on literature addressing the intersection between AI and political trust.

Findings from the literature review were synthesised and organised according to the commonalities found in the literature in the form of a research report (Kaišić & Fink-Hafner 2025), which served as the foundation for building the novel conceptual model from the bottom up. Given the complexity and interdependence of factors shaping both trust in AI technology and political trust, the conceptual model offers a clear and structured way to capture these dynamics and guide future research.

Building a model of the relationship between trust in AI and political trust

Trust in AI and factors affecting trust in AI technology

Trust in AI technology is not a constant; rather, it can be built and destroyed, because many factors co-determine such trust (Table 1).

Demographic factors. Demographic elements, such as gender, age, education and managerial roles, play a significant role in shaping individuals' perception of AI, as highlighted by Li et al. (2024). With regard to age, younger generations tend to show greater trust in AI globally, although the opposite is true in some countries, such as China and South Korea, where older populations demonstrate higher trust levels. Gender differences in trust are quite minimal, according to a worldwide survey conducted by Gillespie et al. (2023), apart from in the United States, Singapore and South Korea, where notable gaps were

Table 1: Factors affecting trust in AI technology

Factors	Variables in more detail
Demographic factors	Gender, age, education, managerial roles
Factors related to the user	Personality Context Norms, values, ideology Users' attitudes towards AI technology Users' perceptions of machine–human relationships in the case of AI Reviews of AI from other users Confidence in institutional safeguards
Technology-based factors	***Basic AI technological qualities:*** – robustness, accuracy, reliability, trialability – transparency and explainability of AI and AI outcomes – trustworthiness of AI – usability, including competence, functionality, performance, helpfulness, reputation ***Characteristics of AI with ethically burdened social impact:*** – privacy protection – fairness – accountability ***Human face of AI technology:*** – anthropomorphism and warmth – AI personality
Contextual factors	**Social context:** level of economic development, sociocultural factors including values and norms **Organisational context:** team characteristics, task risk **Social representation of AI:** – particularly AI representation in mass media – image of AI in sci-fi books and movies – government interference – regulation of media for accurate AI representation
Factors of control over technology and its use	**Technological/technical:** – verification tools **Governing:** – governance – regulators – auditors

Source: Authors

observed. Education is also a crucial factor, as individuals with university-level qualifications tend to trust AI more. Similarly, those in managerial roles exhibit higher trust in AI, reflecting how work positions can influence someone's perception of AI technology (Gillespie et al. 2023).

User-related factors. Based on a literature review, we revealed six user-related subgroups of factors. The first refers to factors linked to individuals' personalities (including psychological traits), which co-determine individuals' trust in

Artificial Intelligence and Political Trust   Danica Fink-Hafner and Katarina Kaišić

AI. There is also a general willingness to trust AI technology, and hedonic motivation is driven by the enjoyment of using AI (which further enhances trust). Furthermore, the image and perception of AI also influence how users connect emotionally to it and how they evaluate its trustworthiness (Duenser & Douglas 2023; Li et al. 2024).

Second, trust in AI is also shaped by individuals' past experiences and cultural norms, which define and guide users' attitudes towards AI (Duenser & Douglas 2023). According to Kleizen et al. (2023), these factors – along with pre-existing values, ideologies and political orientations – can vary widely among individuals. For instance, people may hold conflicting views on issues such as privacy versus safety, which can significantly affect how they perceive and trust AI systems.

The third subgroup of factors includes users' overall acceptance and confidence in the technology, as individuals' familiarity with the way in which AI works enhances trust (Gillespie et al. 2023; Kleizen et al. 2023). More precisely, it concerns users' knowledge, expertise and understanding of the design, applications and limitations (benefits and risks) of AI (Gillespie et al. 2023; Kleizen et al. 2023). It is about a sense of control over AI's decision-making, self-efficacy or confidence in using it effectively, all of which are linked to a better understanding of AI (Gillespie et al. 2023; Kleizen et al. 2023). A clear comprehension of how AI is designed, how it functions, and the benefits and risks of AI systems make users more confident in how the technology will perform (Banavar 2016; Kleizen et al. 2023). A sense of control over the AI decision-making process can enhance trust, as users have a feeling that they can influence actions taken by AI (Kleizen et al. 2023; Li et al. 2024).

The fourth subgroup of user-related factors includes the influence of other users of AI systems on how individuals perceive and trust AI (Siau & Wang 2018). The fifth subgroup tackles issues concerning the relationship between humans and machines, bearing in mind that users' perception of AI as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for human expertise fosters trust in AI (Li et al. 2024). The sixth and final subgroup concerns users' confidence in institutional safeguards (i.e. regulatory frameworks, oversight mechanisms), which enhances users' trust (Gillespie et al. 2023).

Technology-based factors

Technological characteristics of AI also matter in shaping individuals' trust in it, and there are three sets of factors that relate specifically to technology. The first includes the perception of the main technological qualities of AI, including its robustness, accuracy, functionality, reliability, trialability and explainability (Siau & Wang 2018; Kleizen et al. 2023; Afroogh et al. 2024). Trialability allows users to engage with AI, fostering trust through first-hand experience (Siau & Wang 2018), while the competence (ability to fulfil AI's

functional claims) and performance (actually fulfilling AI's functional claims) of AI validate its ability to meet expectations (Li et al. 2024). Transparency and explainability enhance trust by making AI processes clearer, enabling users to understand its decision-making process (Siau & Wang 2018; Li et al. 2024). All the above-listed characteristics of AI ensure consistency in its performance and also that errors are minimised (Kleizen et al. 2023; Afroogh et al. 2024; Li et al. 2024). Its reputation depends on the experience with multiple AI technological characteristics, which enhances its trustworthiness (Afroogh et al. 2024).

Second, several factors are rooted in the characteristics of AI that have ethically burdened impacts on society, particularly privacy protection, fairness and accountability (Li et al. 2024). Ensuring privacy protection and fairness in using AI through data security can enhance trust in such technology, while accountability emphasises clear roles and mechanisms for addressing AI malfunctions (Emaminejad, North & Akhavian 2022; Li et al. 2024).

The third set of factors comprises human-like factors related to AI traits, including anthropomorphism, warmth and personality (Li et al. 2024). These traits enhance trust in AI by encouraging emotional connections, creating positive perceptions of AI intentions and ensuring relatable and/or supportive interactions with such systems (Glikson & Williams Wolley 2020; Lockey et al. 2021).

Contextual factors

The context of the development and use of AI matters in terms of trusting such technology. Perceptions of and trust in AI are influenced by levels of economic development and sociocultural factors, including values and norms within a particular society (Afroogh et al. 2024; Li et al. 2024). Individuals who perceive the use of AI as socially acceptable are also more likely to express positive attitudes towards it (Kleizen et al. 2023; Li et al. 2024).

On the organisational level, team characteristics and task risk also contribute to the whole dynamic of trust in AI technology (Afroogh et al. 2024).

Finally, social representation of AI is also a relevant factor regarding trust in such technology. Media, in a broad sense, portrays AI in a particular way, and not only mass media but also science fiction books and movies can contribute to either fear of or fascination with AI (Siau & Wang 2018; Lockey et al. 2021). Since media can spread both accurate and inaccurate information on AI technology, proper media regulation is vital (Li et al. 2024).

Factors of control over technology and its use

With the rapid development and spread of multiple AI technologies, issues concerning biases and misuse have evolved. AI regulation has become essential for mitigating public risks and impacting trust in such technologies (Li et al. 2024).

Based on experiences with state intervention lagging behind real-life processes, authors increasingly call for proactive regulation, including methods for certifying, explaining and auditing AI systems. National governance of AI is not sufficient; rather, global governance needs to be developed together with verification tools used by regulators and auditors (Siau & Wang 2018; Butcher & Beridze 2019), as these are vital for fostering trust both domestically and internationally.

The reviewed literature has pointed out the rapidly evolving global regulation of AI using different approaches. The European Union (EU) has been highlighted as a leader in establishing a comprehensive legal framework with its EU Artificial Intelligence Act, which emphasises trustworthy AI based on principles of legality, ethics and robustness. This includes key pillars such as technical robustness and safety, transparency, human agency and oversight, privacy and data governance, non-discrimination, accountability and societal well-being (Neuwirth 2023: 10). The EU model has been exposed for building on proactive and precautionary principles, applying a risk-based classification of AI systems (e.g. high-risk versus low-risk) and setting explicit legal obligations for high-risk AI systems (Gillespie et al. 2023: 70).

In contrast, the United States (US) has been characterised as adopting a more decentralised and sector-specific approach, often focused on guidelines and principles rather than binding laws (Lockey et al. 2021). For example, the US Defense Advanced Research Project Agency's explainable AI initiative reflects the emphasis on technological transparency and control, aimed at making AI systems understandable and manageable, particularly in military contexts (Butcher & Beridze 2019). US governance focuses more on remaining flexible and promoting innovation, with less emphasis on prescriptive regulation, relying instead on initiatives with specific agencies and private sector self-regulation (Butcher & Beridze 2019; Li et al. 2024).

Besides the US and EU, countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and China are also beginning to approach AI regulation, although in a less regulatory way (Butcher & Beridze 2019; Li et al. 2024).

Negative and positive impacts of various factors on trust in AI technology

Here, previously presented findings are summarised into two sets of factors impacting trust in AI technology. The first includes those with a positive impact on trust in AI technology, and the second covers those factors that negatively impact trust in such technology.

Factors with a negative impact. Unsupportive social context matters. Pre-existing negative opinions, beliefs and attitudes, and a negative cultural influence on attitudes towards AI technology constitute an important basis for

further shaping attitudes toward this technology. More narrowly, a general mistrust of technology, the perception of AI as a danger and a lack of trust in AI systems together constitute an overall technological distrust.

Additionally, there are unacceptable characteristics of AI technology that work against trusting it. Among them are characteristics that raise privacy and security concerns, the autonomy of AI itself, AI bias and erratic behaviour, the non-transparency of AI, issues related to the explainability and interpretability of AI, misperformance of AI and non-compatibility with human values, and the lack of accountability.

Another negative set of factors includes a scarcity of information and education, which contributes to the lack of understanding of how AI works and limited citizen knowledge of ethical AI. As already mentioned, biased information with negative connotations, along with negative media and press influence (e.g. media reporting, fake news and misinformation, news media attention on negative aspects of AI) may represent a negative set of factors on its own. Additionally, the spread of AI technology and its impact on job security raise negative economic concerns related to the AI technological revolution.

The way in which AI is governed also matters. The exclusivist governance and lack of open dialogue, along with clear and transparent information sharing, lead to the exclusion of citizens from developing AI policy, and because of citizens' perception that their policy concerns are not heard, distrust in AI tends to increase. Similarly, poor regulation of AI, including a lack of ethical guidelines and hard-to-comprehend policies, is a significant negative factor.

Factors with a positive impact. As mentioned previously, contextual factors are important. Supportive pre-existing opinions, beliefs and attitudes, as well as a supportive cultural influence, help in developing trust in technology in general and AI technology in particular.

Supportive trust is as complex as distrust, and an overall trust in technology, confidence in government and technological organisations, and trust in AI engineers positively impact trust in AI. Technological adequacy also supports trust in AI, including key factors such as the safety, good performance, transparency, and explainability and interpretability of AI, compatibility with human values, and a belief in having control over AI alongside appropriate safeguards. As expected, a positive impact is also found in cases of supportive information and education variables, and where accountability is established in relation to the development, use and misuse of AI.

Furthermore, inclusive governance supports trust in AI, and open dialogue, transparency and clarity of information sharing, citizens' inclusion in AI policy development and addressing citizens' policy concerns are all important factors. Acceptable regulation of AI means understandable and ethical AI regulation, which is committed to societal values. Human oversight and the ability to challenge AI-related policy decisions also need to be available after adopting such

policies. Economic factors matter as well, as when people perceive economic benefits, they tend to put more trust in AI technology.

The interfering variables – actors. In the reviewed literature, actors are not systematically addressed as factors in shaping trust in AI technology. Researchers have mentioned various actors when tackling a variety of issues so far, and both AI engineers and producers have been exposed when mentioning technological issues. AI users develop their attitude toward AI technology based on their experience with it. As a rule, governments and citizens are revealed as important actors when it comes to making and implementing particular public policies related to AI governance.

Factors impacting political trust

Various factors impact political trust, and in political science literature, micro factors are often distinguished from macro ones.

Micro factors. Researchers have focused predominantly on micro factors of political trust, i.e. those that shape individuals' personal characteristics and perceptions. Among the most cited are personal characteristics (individual psychological or biological characteristics) and socio-economic factors (an individual's position in the labour market in connection with their education and skills, experiences of unemployment, financial distress and the welfare system) (Carstens 2023).

Macro factors. Macro factors can be understood broadly as a context (Zmerli & Hooghe eds. 2011; Eder, Mochmann & Quandt 2015; Martini & Quaranta 2020). More specifically listed factors often include corruption, macroeconomic performance, the inclusiveness of institutions, socio-economic inequalities among people and regions, and divisions among economic winners and losers, as well as cultural and social norms and values (Newton 2015; Uslaner 2015; Dodsworth & Cheeseman 2020). However, it is important that political trust is related to perceptions of these macro factors and not necessarily their objective characteristics (Carstens 2023), particularly when it comes to the government's responsiveness in times of various crises and natural disasters. Also, poor quality of public services at the local and national level, as well as low inclusivity of welfare policies, negatively impact political trust (Newton 2001; Carstens 2023).

Furthermore, there are also political factors in a narrower sense that impact political trust, such as democratic development and stability, the rule of law, effective institutional checks and balances, belief in democracy, satisfaction with how democracy works (Newton 2001) and the transparency of governments' decision-making (Robles & Mallinson 2023a: 11). Very specific factors are also linked to politicians – namely, their competence (Uslaner 2015), trustworthiness (Newton 2001), predictability, intrinsic commitment, competence and responsiveness (Winsvold et al. 2024). What is particularly interesting in

relation to the (mis)use of AI technology is the media's coverage of individual politicians' conduct (particularly scandals) and the media's framing of political events, which may shift people's trust (Devine & Valgarðsson 2024: 482).

Additional factors. Researchers have found that various kinds of trust are interconnected (Newton 2001), with some factors supporting political trust and others damaging it. Nevertheless, political trust is not only a dependent but also an independent variable (Carstens 2023).

Impacts of trust in AI on political trust

As shown in previous sections, researchers have pointed out many factors that co-shape people's trust in AI; however, as trust in AI is formed, it does impact political trust. With a dynamic change of trust in AI, its impact on political trust may also change. The factors that impact trust in AI can be both positively and negatively attributed (Table 2).

Table 2: Impacts of trust in AI on political trust

Impact of trust in AI on political trust	Variables related to the impact of trust in AI technology on political trust	Interfering variables: characteristics and behaviours of actors
Negative	Distrust in AI technology per se AI eroding trust in media, representation, accountability, government AI destabilising democratic societies AI complicating political engagement and participation	Citizens Users Stakeholders Governments Media
Positive	AI trustworthiness Transparency in the use of AI in the public sector Platforms designed to boost trust in AI Effective institutionalised human oversight of AI	

Source: Authors

Negative impacts of (dis)trust in AI on political trust. In literature, the negative impacts of (dis)trust in AI on political trust dominate over revealing the positive impacts of such trust, due to a significant distrust of AI and challenges preventing the development of (positive) trust in such technology. In this context, researchers expose in particular AI's problematic practices of reinforcing biases, infringing on privacy and fairness, spreading misinformation, contributing to job displacement and enabling malicious uses among the risks of AI failures (Gillespie et al. 2023). Kreps and Kriner (2023) also find that AI has an indirect negative impact on political trust, which it generates by complicating political engagement and participation, damaging trust in media, representation, accountability and government, and by destabilising democratic societies

(Kreps & Kriner 2023; Nie 2024: 2). The unclear accountability and the risks of AI failures (Zuiderwijk, Chen & Salem 2021) are additional factors that support the above-described causal relationships.

Positive impacts of trust in AI on political trust. When people trust AI, it is expected that this will have a positive impact on political trust, with positive attributes of such technology including the transparency of AI algorithms and AI outcomes (Gillespie et al. 2023; Kleizen et al. 2023). The lack of some negatively evaluated factors may work in a similar fashion, such as AI's lack of infringement of privacy and fairness, and not spreading misinformation, endangering jobs or enabling malicious misuses (Gillespie et al. 2023).

AI's trustworthiness is a crucial element in being able to trust it (Zuiderwijk, Chen & Salem 2021), and algorithmic transparency has been particularly important in using AI in the public sector (Robles & Mallinson 2023a: 12). Institutionally supported trust in AI is helpful, as are accountability, consent and intermediaries (e.g. platforms, human oversight of AI), which enhance trust in AI (Gillis, Laux & Mittelstadt 2024).

While looking at the positive and negative impacts of trust in AI on political trust, it should not be overlooked that such technologies are not (yet) fully autonomous and that they differ among themselves in terms of levels of autonomy. Researchers highlight the important role of various actors involved in the development, production, spread and use of AI technologies, as the characteristics and behaviours of these actors impact both trust and distrust in AI, as well as affect political trust (Omrani et al. 2022).

With growing awareness of ethical issues related to AI, authors increasingly point out characteristics and behaviours of a wide range of actors impacting the (non-)ethical use of AI, particularly among citizens, users, stakeholders, government and media (Zuiderwijk, Chen & Salem 2021; Kleizen et al. 2023). There are particularly high expectations that the government should act in favour of both trust in AI and political trust by introducing regulations designed to prevent breaches of trust (Butcher & Beridze 2019; Zuiderwijk, Chen & Salem 2021; Kleizen et al. 2023). On the one hand, governments are pressured by the technology industry, which offers AI solutions for enhanced delivery of public goods and services; on the other hand, governments need to ensure that citizens are satisfied with the delivery of such public goods and services. A positive public attitude is of critical importance for introducing and expanding the use of AI in governance, especially in the public sector (Zuiderwijk, Chen & Salem 2021; Gutierrez Gaviria 2022; Wilson 2022). Such attitudes are not a given; therefore, positive experiences with the use of AI are important (Kleizen et al. 2023).

Characteristics of technology may also contribute to positive experiences with AI, one example being platforms that are designed to boost trust in AI (Gillis, Laux & Mittelstadt 2024: 187). However, human oversight of AI supported by effective institutions and their activities are very important for enhancing

trust in such technology (Gillis, Laux & Mittelstadt 2024: 187), and indirectly political trust as well.

Impacts of political trust on trust in AI technology

Research on the response to a particular innovation has revealed that acceptance of such an innovation and the policies related to it may be largely determined by socio-interactional factors (Oudshoorn & Pinch 2003; Silverstone & Hirsch 1992; Veen et al. 2010: 811). However, there has been a delay in studying the relationship between political trust and public trust in technology (Robles & Mallinson 2023b).

Trust is vital for public acceptance of AI (Robles & Mallinson 2023b), as well as being essential for its societal adoption (Kreps et al. 2023). Gillespie et al. (2023) warned that without public trust, the adoption of AI technologies would be limited and that this would restrict the opportunities for AI to have positive societal and economic impacts.

Governments' experimentation with AI impacts trust in AI (Zuiderwijk, Chen & Salem 2021: 1), and it should be borne in mind that increasing political trust can improve people's attitudes towards new technologies in general, and AI in particular (Wilson & van der Velden 2022). The government needs to invest in building both political trust and trust in AI (Flynn, Ricci & Bellaby 2012; Ahmed, Wahed & Thompson 2023), which could be achieved by developing and implementing strategies and procedures for managing AI risks (Robles & Mallinson 2023b), encompassing the government's inclusiveness (citizen involvement in policymaking and public service delivery), transparency, accountability, enhancing public debate (Tambotoh et al. 2017; Criado & Gil-Garcia 2019; Kemper & Kolkman 2019; Wilson 2022), ensuring ethical AI regulation in their implementation (Criado & Gil-Garcia 2019), and educating people about the benefits and drawbacks of AI (Ahmed, Wahed & Thompson 2023).

Political trust can impact trust in AI technology both negatively and positively. When political trust is low, it is not realistic to expect people to trust the government's use of AI in policymaking and policy implementation processes; this is because perceptions are critical for legitimacy. More precisely, perceptions of the government's bias will inevitably undermine the perceived legitimacy of its use of AI (Robles & Mallinson 2023a: 12). In contrast, when citizens trust the government, they exhibit more trust in the government's AI policy and the instrumentalisation of AI in the public sector.

A model of the relationship between trust in AI and political trust

We have developed a model of the relationship between trust in AI and political trust in an inductive, bottom-up manner. As shown in Figure 1, the relationship between trust in AI and political trust may be direct and two-way, but also indirect.

Figure 1: Model of the relationship between trust in AI and political trust in the frame of a broader context
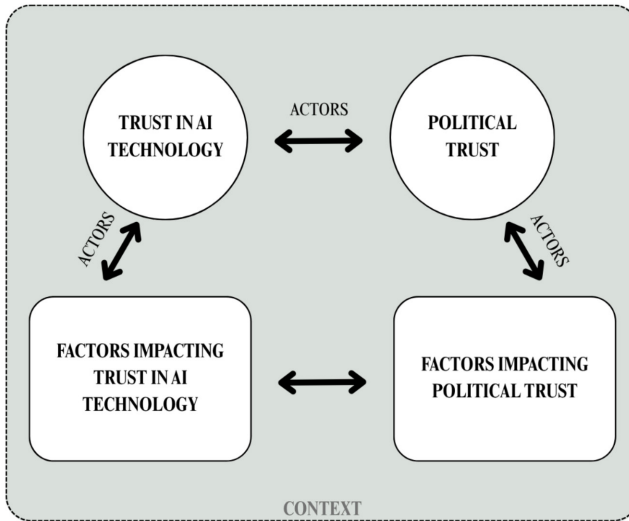
Source: Authors

Based on the AI-related literature review, the complexity of variables and relationships includes the following: 1) the revealed factors impacting trust in AI (Table 1); 2) the revealed factors impacting political trust (section under the subtitle 'Factors impacting political trust'); 3) the reverse impact of trust in AI as an independent variable on factors of trust in AI (Table 2); 4) the reverse impact of political trust as an independent variable on factors of political trust (section under the subtitle 'Impacts of political trust in AI technology'); and 5) the overall contextual factors relevant for both trust in AI and political trust (multiple factors including various types of social trust, socio-economic factors, cultural factors, various crises) (see Table 1 and the section under the subtitle 'Factors impacting political trust'). Characteristics of actors and their behaviour co-shape the causal relationships (see Table 1, Table 2 and the section under the subtitle 'Factors impacting political trust').

From the literature on political trust, additional variables and relationships need to be taken into account in the model. Due to limited space, we only mentioned those that are part of the context and, at the same time, impact each other. These are as follows: socio-economic stakes, market relations, relations between generalised trust and particular trusts, reciprocity issues, social (including political) divisions and conflicts, power relations, available public spaces, social capital (Warren ed. 1999), accountability (Sztompka 2022), (multiple) levels of government (Kappler et al. 2024), models of governing (van der Meer 2017), international factors such as global interconnectedness (Fisher 2012) and (management of) international crises (Weinberg 2022).

Conclusions

In this article, we have focused on the mutual impact of trust in AI technology on political trust and the impact of political trust on trust in AI technology. The reviewed literature that connects AI and political trust has been limited by the scope of English language and the cited sources. Nevertheless, we have been able to reveal a complex set of actors and other factors that impact on trust in AI, on political trust, and the relationship between the two. A disciplinary inclusive research approach has further allowed us to develop the presented novel research model. We hope it will spark further theoretical developments, empirical research in the form of case studies and cross-country studies as well as disciplinary (political science) and interdisciplinary research.

Further research is needed to incorporate literature in other languages and regions – particularly in China and other parts of Asia where the development of AI has been especially dynamic. More research could provide additional insights for our model by examining AI governance in authoritarian regimes and established democracies, but also in backsliding democracies.

It should be taken into account that the current accelerated technological development may significantly interfere with the present global trend of declining democracy in a context that favours authoritarianism (including unprecedented social inequality gaps in particular states and on a global scale). It is also important to systematically take into account political science literature that finds that political trust can have positive and negative impacts on the development of democracy.

From the policy relevance perspective, the reviewed literature supports a thesis that at this stage there are still people (citizens, users), stakeholders (developers, companies, other actors) and governments who have the upper hand in the development and use of AI technology. Therefore, they are responsible for the development and enforcement of ethical AI technology and its use. In order to support socially responsible and ethical policies in this field, researchers need to focus on comparing different governance models (including frameworks for AI oversight in democratic, democratic backsliding and non-democratic settings), and on identifying their sources, consequences and characteristics of trust in AI governance. Such research should not overlook the relevance of context, particularly rapidly increasing social inequalities and political power inequalities.

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Democratic Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe – The Perspective of Policymakers and Civil Society Organisations

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Abstract: *Political representation and democracy in several European countries have faced considerable challenges in recent decades. Especially worrying are the decline in electoral turnout and party membership, along with the decline in political trust and growing dissatisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy. These are all linked to the quality of democracy. Many scholars believe that a possible solution to such problems is democratic innovations, largely due to their participatory nature. Although in recent times democratic innovations have been put into practice, and analysed from multiple perspectives in multiple European countries, this has not happened with regard to Central and Eastern European countries. Based on face-to-face interviews conducted in 2024 with policymakers as well as representatives of civil society organisations in four Central and Eastern European countries, exploratory analysis reveals (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives concerning the meaning and importance of democratic innovations, including for maintaining/increasing political trust. The analysis points not only to differences among countries, but also between the groups of respondents.*

Keywords: *trust, democratic innovations, Central and Eastern Europe, policymakers, civil society organisations*

Introduction

The crisis of democracy is talked about a lot these days, with many researchers referring to trends in longitudinal data. In recent decades, all manner of data

have shown a decline in electoral turnout in European democracies. However, the decrease is more evident in post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries than elsewhere in Europe (see Fruncillo et al. 2023; International IDEA n.d.; Kuzina et al. 2023). At the same time, multiple sources reveal a similar trend in declining party membership, notably aggregate country-level data (see van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke 2012; van Haute, Paulis & Sierens 2018). A similar situation may be observed regarding the satisfaction of citizens with the functioning of representative democracy, as well as their confidence and/or political trust. Concerns about political trust, especially in the last two decades, are further reflected in the rise of academic articles dealing with the topic. Still, cross-nationally there have been notable differences in the decline in political trust (Brunkert et al. 2023; Tufiş, Ghica & Radu 2023). Even though satisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy and political trust are important pillars of modern democracies, it seems that trust is a more fundamental phenomenon associated with normative expectations to do with political institutions while satisfaction is more strongly connected to how citizens view policy outputs (Goldberg, Lindell & Bächtiger 2024). Norris (2023: 4) states that the conventional view has overwhelmingly celebrated the positive impacts of trust, and generally expressed deep concerns with the signs of decreasing political trust, but more recently scholars have identified blind or uncritical trust as equally problematic. Some level of scepticism/mistrust in political institutions is an inherent part of modern representative democracies. Many scholars have shown that political trust together with different forms of political participation are pivotal in modern representative democracies, although the intricate nature of the connection between the two remains a subject of debate (Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024: 4). The participation/inclusion of citizens is particularly important for political trust in discussions of the process-based type of trust – namely, procedures of involvement and those processes on the input side of modern representative democracies (Kumagai & Iorio 2020; Mazeaud & Gourgues 2023; Norris 2023). Font and Blanco (2007: 558) argue the introduction of the new forms of citizen participation has (among other things) been justified by the need to create political trust, although this is not the sole reason for their development.

More recently, democratic innovations have gained attention as a popular means of restoring citizens' participation and involvement in politics and decision-making. Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas (2024) claim that different types of participatory initiatives and democratic innovations can be used to connect citizens with policy- or decision-making processes, strengthen citizens' participation in these processes, and boost their trust in political institutions and representative democracies. Indeed, democratic innovations have manifested in different variants and processes, e.g. direct, deliberative and participatory. Elstub and Escobar (2019) noted that important and considerably large variations exist among them in terms of participants, mandate, delibera-

tion techniques, etc. They referred to four groups of democratic innovations: referendums and citizen initiatives, mini-publics, participatory budgeting and collaborative governance. The issue of how democratic innovations impact participation and/or political trust, as well as policies, actors and institutions, is hardly new (Jacquet, Ryan & van der Does 2023). Still, it is necessary to first talk about democratic innovations generally, especially the views and preferences held by policymakers regarding participatory democracy processes (Mikhaylovskaya & Rouméas 2024) since the outcomes of these are linked to the impact of democratic innovations.

The aim of this article is to present an exploratory analysis that reveals different views of policymakers (politicians and civil servants) along with representatives of civil society organisations concerning the meaning and importance of democratic innovations, specifically with respect to maintaining or increasing political trust.

Although many studies have considered citizens' views and preferences regarding democratic innovations, this article looks at the (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives of both political elites/policymakers – an aspect that has only recently received greater attention despite them being the main actors in the reform processes (Núñez, Close & Bedock 2016) – and the representatives of civil society organisations, who are simultaneously representatives of different kinds of elites. Civil society organisations are also often participants in, or a medium through which citizens become involved in, democratic innovations, which explains why their perspectives on these issues are important as well. In addition, focus in this article is given to four Central and Eastern European countries, a region that has been largely overlooked in research on democratic innovations (Gherghina, Ekman & Podolian 2019: 3). This is despite the fact that many of these countries have experienced important declines in electoral turnout and party membership coupled with a decline in political trust (or encounter relatively consistent low levels), along with increasing or persistently high levels of dissatisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy and/or a deterioration of the quality of democracy, with some even facing democratic backsliding (see Nations in Transit report by Smeltzer & Karppi 2024; V-Dem by Nord et al. 2025).

The (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives of policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations used while dealing with the issue of democratic innovations were revealed in an analysis of 133 face-to-face interviews conducted in 2024.

Democratic innovations

Several scholars, including Ryan (2023: 15), claim that one of the most influential and oft-cited definitions of democratic innovations is that provided by Smith (2009: 1), who defined democratic innovations as novel institutions spe-

cifically designed to increase and deepen citizens' participation in the political decision-making process. Smith (2009: 2) stresses that democratic innovations directly engage citizens and are institutionalised forms of participation that give citizens a formal role in policy, legislative or constitutional decision-making. Also frequently cited is Elstub and Escobar's (2019: 14) definition of democratic innovations as processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for their participation, deliberation and influence.

Jacquet, Ryan and van der Does (2023: 1) describe how fostering the participation of ordinary citizens in politics, not simply the representatives of civil society organisations or experts (apart from politicians), has indeed become a *leitmotif* of contemporary governance. Here, one should not overlook the fact that the current debates on democratic innovations build on earlier democratic theories, e.g. Pateman's theory on participatory democracy (Holdo 2017: 2), which means that ideas about increasing the political participation of citizens in various ways are not new. In fact, these ideas have now moved into the mainstream of democratic theory and inspired practices (Ryan 2023: 15) or, as Jäske and Setälä (2020: 470) claim, democratic innovations are no longer seen as alternatives to representative democracy, but are supposed to complement it (Geissel & Michels 2023: 285). It should also be noted that these democratic innovations are governance-driven.

In his seminal work, Smith (2009) was already interested in the ways these innovations contribute to the six goods of democratic institutions. Geissel and Michels (2023) mention a wide variety of (potential) impacts of democratic innovations and four types of impact: on policies, on actors, on institutions and on democratic and social performance. Indeed, one can find many discussions on the roles and impact of democratic innovations. Jäske and Setälä (2020) caution that different innovations can have different functions, and that a single innovation is clearly unable to resolve all the challenges faced by democracies, also given that different democratic innovations have varying theoretical and genealogical origins. It has been argued that even different variants and processes of democratic innovations can contribute in different ways to various aspects of democratic processes.

The issue of how they impact political trust is frequently addressed (e.g., Boulianne 2019; Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell 2016; Jacquet, Ryan & van der Does 2023; Jäske & Setälä 2020). Nevertheless, although it is precisely democratic innovations and citizens' increased participation in them that are frequently expected to impact political trust (Boulianne 2019; Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell 2016; Font & Blanco 2007; Goldberg, Lindell & Bächtiger 2024; Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024), for a long time the possible link between them remained empirically unexplored (Font & Blanco 2007). Yet, more

recently, even though several theorists and practitioners have suggested that democratic innovations can positively impact political trust, thus far evidence of this in the literature remains mixed (Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024). The absence of any clear pattern of the impact of democratic innovations on political trust suggests that distinct types of innovation, along with unique designs, produce different outcomes among citizens (Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024: 17). Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas (2024) mention another aspect in this regard, claiming that reciprocal political trust is particularly important for the successful implementation of democratic innovations. Without decision-makers' support for participatory democracy, the implementation of democratic innovation tools is unlikely to be successful or influential, or to lead to greater political trust. In this respect, decision-makers' (dis)trust in participatory democracy processes can hold major consequences for whether the implementation of democratic innovation mechanisms is successful, as well as for the impact of such innovations. When decision-makers lack trust in the mechanisms of democratic innovations, they are less likely to implement the contributions generated by participatory processes. Thus, when citizens sense that their recommendations have been disregarded, this could deepen the crisis of legitimacy, lower trust and see citizens disengage even more from political participation. Citizens need to feel that they can influence decisions by participating in the mechanisms of a democratic innovation. However, when inputs are not implemented, feedback with a justified explanation of the decision should be provided.

Further, Geissel and Michels (2023: 292) state that it is difficult to identify a causal relationship between any potentially influential variable (like democratic innovations) and subsequent changes, and there is a danger of overemphasising or even generalising particular impacts of given democratic innovations in a certain context.

Smith (2009) already found not only enthusiasm for democratic innovations, but criticism and scepticism as well, especially concerning extending participation, since democratic innovations do not affect all citizens in the same way. Jacquet, Ryan and van der Does (2023: 2) warn that democratic innovations can fail to deliver on their promise of offering truly deeper citizen involvement in policymaking and remain 'ripe for abuse' by politicians and other actors that seek to employ innovations to advance their own interests. In that sense, democratic innovations function as mere window-dressing strategies that do not genuinely empower citizens in policymaking. Here, we can add Ryan's (2023) doubts about whether we can expect incumbent political decision-makers to voluntary give up power. In any event, they must have trust in democratic innovations if the mechanism is indeed proposed to be implemented (Yang 2006).

Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas (2024) identified several views held by political decision-makers with respect to participatory democracy processes or democratic innovations. First, many of them feel that citizens are incapable

or not knowledgeable enough to make a valuable contribution to the process. Second, while decision-makers find interactions with citizens important, they mostly support informal interactions with them, not their formal involvement in the decision-making process. Third, decision-makers may feel that the more citizens have a say, the more their own competencies and legitimacy come into question. Fourth, decision-makers may use democratic innovation mechanisms to provide legitimacy for their policies by implementing those recommendations that align with their policies or promote their image and popularity.

Democratic innovations were primarily developed on the local level (Font & Blanco 2007) and were for the most part initially introduced there (Geissel 2009; Smith 2009). In contrast, their implementation on the national level remains scarce, notwithstanding politicians being willing to discuss the implementation of democratic innovations not only on the national, but on the supranational level as well (Núñez, Close & Bedock 2016: 342).

Methodology

The presented analysis is based on qualitative data gathered via face-to-face semi-structured interviews with policymakers (politicians and civil servants) as well as representatives of civil society organisations in four Central and East European countries: the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Data were gathered as part of the Horizon Europe project Trust in European Democracies (TRUEDEM) financed by the European Commission. All four countries have a parliamentary system and a socialist past, and have recently faced challenges to the quality of democracy (see Nations in Transit report by Smeltzer & Karppi 2024; V-Dem by Nord et al. 2025), indicating that challenges to democracy seem bigger and more serious for them than for many other European countries.

In each country, a very detailed, purposive cluster sample was used that ensured the participation of policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations active on different institutional levels (local, national, European). In addition, respondents were different types of policymakers, politicians and civil servants from legislative and executive branches, along with representatives of civil society organisations (see Table 1). According to the project guidelines, respondents were divided into two main groups: policymakers and politicians (including elected representatives of legislative bodies, representatives of executive bodies, civil servants and political party officials/leaders) and leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs) (including trade unions/social partners, grassroots organisations and social movements, and democracy advocacy organisations). Altogether, 133 interviews were conducted in selected countries and analysed.

To preserve anonymity while maintaining analytical value, the quotes in this article specify the country and a broad role category (e.g. politicians, civil servants or representatives of civil society organisations). For clarity and read-

ability, country and role information is provided either in the text or in brackets, depending on the narrative flow. Where analytically relevant, the level of government (local, national or European) is also indicated.

Table 1: Details of the sample of respondents

	Expert interviews with policymakers and politicians*												Σ	Expert interviews with CSO representatives**									Σ	Total
	Elected representatives of legislative bodies			Representatives of executive bodies			Civil Servants			Political party officials/leaders				Trade unions (social partners)			Grassroots organizations and social movements			Democracy advocacy organizations				
Czech Republic	4			5			4			3			**16**	4			5			5			**14**	**30**
Loc/Nat/Eur	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	0		0	2	2	3	2	0	2	2	1		
Poland	4			4			3			3			**14**	6			5			5			**16**	**30**
Loc/Nat/Eur	1	2	1	2	2	0	1	2	0	1	2	0		0	4	2	2	2	1	2	2	1		
Slovakia	4			3			5			3			**15**	4			5			8			**17**	**32**
Loc/Nat/Eur	1	2	1	2	1	0	0	3	2	1	2	0		0	3	1	3	2	0	2	5	1		
Slovenia	5			5			7			4			**21**	5			7			8			**20**	**41**
Loc/Nat/Eur	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	2	2	0		0	3	2	2	5	0	2	4	2		
Total	17			17			19			13			**66**	19			22			26			**67**	**133**

* QUESTIONS:
 - Thinking of citizens' involvement in policymaking, what role do you think citizens should play in making decisions that concern them?
   Do you think people are ready to/willing to participate in such decision-making?
 - Have you or your organisation been involved in any consultations or participatory democracy processes (such as citizen assemblies, local citizen councils)?
   Do you think such processes are a useful practice to build citizens' trust in the political system?
** QUESTIONS:
 - What role do you think organizations like yours should play in political decision-making?
   How could the interests you represent be better considered in policymaking?
 - What role do you think citizens should play in making decisions that concern them?
 - How important is for you / your organization the involvement of citizens in policymaking?

Source: Authors based on Kizilova, Belot, Haerpfer, Gonthier & Palt 2024

All interviews were transcribed, anonymised (in the quotes below, the content in square brackets was anonymised) and translated into the English language by artificial intelligence tools like Chat GPT and DeepL. All research teams within the TRUEDEM project that opted for the AI-assisted translation approach with ChatGPT worked with the same uniform prompt, ensuring consistency and minimising variation in outputs. All translations were double checked by members of the research team. For the purposes of this article, the interview quotes were not proofread to ensure the traceability and transparency of the research process, except that the spelling was adjusted to British English. The interviews generally focused on different aspects of political trust and trustworthiness.

In the next stage, we divided the interviews into sections, selecting those dealing with the rather broad question of the (expected) role of citizens in policymaking and in decision-making processes that affect them, and a more specific sub-question about the importance of democratic innovations for maintaining/increasing political trust, i.e. trust in different political institutions (only policymakers were asked this sub-question).

The answers to selected questions were manually compiled and organised in Excel, grouped by type of actor and, where relevant, by institutional level (local,

national or European). Through careful reading of all the respondents' answers we focused on respondents' (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives concerning the meaning and importance of democratic innovations, including for maintaining/increasing political trust. We identified eight topics: a) representative democracy vs democratic innovations and b) importance for trust; c) reservations and limitations vis-à-vis democratic innovations; d) the competencies of civil servants; e) the extent to which actors support participatory democracy; f) attitudes concerning the most common democratic innovations, referendums and participatory budgeting; g) the conditions for democratic innovations to be successfully implemented; and h) the importance of the local level for democratic innovations. All topics were inductively identified from the translated interviews transcripts. While the overarching conceptual framework influenced the design of the interview guidelines, the themes analysed in this section were mostly not derived from theoretical categories but emerged from the empirical material. This enabled us to perform an exploratory comparative analysis and identify various perspectives among the policymakers and civil society organisation representatives in (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives concerning democratic innovations, together with their importance especially for maintaining/increasing political trust in the four countries under study.

Democratic innovations in the four countries

As expected, regardless of whether they were policymakers or representatives of civil society organisations active on the local, national or European level in each selected country, the respondents in principle and/or *de facto* mostly support the idea of involving citizens in policymaking processes, yet to a lesser extent do they support including them in decision-making processes. In this section, we present several types of (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives they relied on while dealing with the issue of democratic innovations.

Representative democracy and democratic innovations

Several respondents (policymakers and civil society organisation representatives) pointed out that participatory processes via democratic innovations to complement representative democracy are seen as important and/or beneficial for democracy today from different points of view. A very broad idea was presented by a Slovak civil servant, who is simply aware that 'we need to give people the sense that they are involved. Four-year or five-year cycles are no longer sufficient. People need to have the feeling, and we need to restore that feeling, that they are engaged.'

A similar opinion was expressed in a statement made by a representative of a Slovak civil society organisation:

> I think that citizens should still have a say in some way outside of elections. Also by way of some associations that represent different areas. So yes, I think that the citizen's voice should be heard because at the end of the day politicians are just elected by the citizens.

At the same time, another representative of a Slovak civil society organisation was convinced that democracy calls for tough, demanding discussions. In contrast, a Polish politician succinctly stated that 'involving citizens in decision-making makes them, as I say, feel that something depends on them'.

Further, a Slovak politician was not happy with the dominant belief in Slovakia that only parties are important, expressing that s(he) has a problem

> when certain political parties today are talking about the fact that policy should only be made through political parties... And so I fundamentally disagree with that. I think that politics is a matter that concerns all of us... It is essentially a way of managing public affairs, and that is what civil society exists for, and civil associations, and interest groups, and trade unions, and just the whole of civil society. And they have a right to participate in politics because politics comes into their lives.

Similarly, a Slovenian politician referred to a link between citizens' involvement and the impact of measures on their lives: 'Indeed, involving citizens is very, very sensible. When we implement measures that, of course, impact their lives, their work, etc.'

A Slovenian civil servant saw the participation of people as a normal characteristic of modern democracies. A representative of a civil society organisation noted that solutions accepted following consultations are not seen solely as an act of the authorities:

> And actually, I think that they can lead to solutions that then people are more likely to accept, because they know that this was not just some authoritative arbitrary will adopted past the opinion, or even despite social partners. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Scholars (e.g. Albareda 2018; Greenwood 2007; Kröger 2008; Putnam 1993) have often shown how the participation of civil society organisations in policy/decision-making processes brings concrete benefits because their input can provide missing knowledge and information for the process. This view was

also expressed by some respondents, including a Polish representative of such an organisation:

> I think that in terms of political decision-making, our association should play the role of such, let's say, a provider of possible solutions. That is, information and ideas actually from the public. And I don't want to say a negotiator, but a voice, that of the public, a representative of that public voice in terms of shaping solutions to problems that sometimes are not apparent in advance.

A Slovenian politician similarly believed that public debate as a democratic innovation institution makes law more robust and adds to legitimacy: 'I think this system is good because then [authors' note: the law] is robust, the system is such that people believe in it and it works if it is coordinated with them.'

One can often find another argument in the literature as to why the involvement of other actors, not just state actors, in policymaking processes can prove beneficial. This includes the argument that civil society organisations have information stemming from everyday life and can help policymakers form (more) feasible policies. A Polish representative of a civil society organisation neatly summarised this by saying 'that without the participation of organisations... these political decisions, in my opinion, are sometimes completely detached from reality'.

Trust and democratic innovations

As mentioned above, building trust is just one argument used to explain the importance of democratic innovations. A Slovak representative of a civil society organisation referred to effectiveness, yet also trust, when it comes to democratic innovations:

> The feeling that at least they will consult with us, that someone will listen to us, is very important from the perspective of the effectiveness of democracy or the perception of the state... If someone feels that their opinion or the opinion of a wider group is not at all interesting to the state, then they will very easily lose trust.

As exposed above, the involvement of citizens in different kinds of processes is important from different perspectives, obviously including the aspect of building trust. A Polish politician stated that 'one of the key elements of consultation and conversation, and through consultation, talking to residents, listening to residents, listening to residents' needs the whole stage, that would be key in building trust'.

In comparison, a Slovak representative of a civil society said:

I don't mean they should accept every suggestion we make, but the understanding of citizen participation – whether from our organisation or any other, including ordinary citizens – in the exercise of power outside of election periods is, in my view, what builds trust.

Also in connection with trust, another respondent pointed to the complexity of policy problems these days that cannot be addressed effectively without involving those possessing experience with the issue: 'Direct democracy isn't a cure-all, given the complexity of modern issues, but thoughtful, practical participatory tools can improve decision-making and trust' (CSO representative from Slovakia).

Even though many authors have some doubts about a link between democratic innovations and trust, two Czech politicians evidently connect the involvement of citizens in different processes as a way to strengthen trust. One argued that 'each one of us, when we are involved in a community, has much higher confidence in the whole system because we don't feel isolated, so actually indirectly just being involved in that community increases the feeling of being well'.

A Slovak representative of a civil society observed a clear link between trust and the possibilities of participation, notably on the local level:

We see this on the local government level: when municipalities operate more openly, listen to citizens, allow them to participate in processes, and involve them in co-deciding and co-creating their small community or city, citizens have much greater trust in their local government than in the national parliament.

On the other hand, several Slovenian respondents from different spheres noted the importance of including citizens as a way of assuring transparency in policy/decision-making processes, which in turn can maintain or help to build trust.

Reservations with democratic innovations

Above, we presented several critical statements concerning democratic innovations mentioned in the academic literature. In the interviews, it was also possible to detect (potentially) similar reservations regarding the (greater) inclusion of citizens in policymaking processes in general, and specifically decision-making processes. In the four countries, a number of respondents exposed obstacles that are also quite frequently mentioned by scholars more sceptical of democratic innovations, like time constraints, the complexity of issues, the lack of skills or qualifications of citizens, their low interest in participating in such processes, as well as the political culture that could prevent democratic innovations from being used more broadly. Reservations with the use of democratic innovations

were also identified by the representatives of civil society organisations, and not just by policymakers as one might expect. One civil servant in Slovenia stated:

> Naively, it would be to claim that they can participate equally in all the policies we make at the European level. Sometimes the nature of the problem is such that there isn't time for all these kinds of consultations.

One Polish politician noted that decision-making powers also bring responsibility, pointing out that 'the issue of responsibility is very important; if we think only about expanding participation without creating such a field for people to feel responsibility, then it will be a bit misguided.'

Similarly, a representative of a Slovenian civil society organisation remarked:

> I think here lies our biggest challenge. It's not so much that decision-makers don't understand that policies need to be created differently, as much as it is that we people are not used to the responsibility that the participatory process carries... We would of course prefer to even have a say in it, and for only us to be listened to, but then one must also take responsibility, which is the downside.

A Slovak politician referred to the significance of direct democracy and its tools, while adding a reservation concerning the excessive use of democratic innovations: 'On the other hand, I recognise that some issues are so challenging and complex that excessive trust in direct democracy tools could backfire.'

A Slovenian politician very inclined to participatory processes in any case warned that it is different if we are talking about the inclusion of individual citizens or advocacy groups because citizens are less likely to possess the competencies and skills needed for meaningful participation:

> It is a fact that we need to adjust the inclusion processes to the level of competence of citizens for participation in these processes. When we have advocacy organisations that advocate, I will say and have competencies even in writing laws, ordinances, and so forth, they can of course participate in this phase of the process together with, I will say, professional services, politics, however, to create new regulations. But if we talk generally about citizens who do not have these competencies, I will say, this involvement must be at the ideational level.

A sceptical stance toward the active involvement of citizens generally or for dealing with many issues is apparent in the words of one Slovak politician:

> We can actively involve people in a few things... And at some point, it may not lead to burnout, but simply people will say, 'I no longer have the capacity for this, I need to focus on other things. I have my work, my family, and my

hobbies'… And relying on people to solve everything for us through direct democracy tools, I am very sceptical about that. (politician from Slovakia)

Another Slovak politician said 'whether, to some extent, at least for certain issues, we should differentiate the phases of involvement and the degree of engagement'.

Several respondents in the four countries also noted that some/many citizens do not participate and even do not want to participate, showing a lack of interest in politics altogether. One can also frequently find such reservations in the literature.

As mentioned, some actors believe that civil society organisations are better qualified to participate in policy- and/or decision-making processes than individual citizens. A Czech civil servant expressed this succinctly with 'consultations yes, but with stakeholders'. A similar view was indicated by a representative of a civil society organisation in Slovenia:

> I think that especially non-governmental organisations and social partners are equipped and ready. And maybe also have the capacities for this. And when it actually gets closer to individuals, these capacities and this knowledge increasingly decrease.

Likewise, in Czechia several respondents highlighted the importance of the (civic) education of citizens and linked successful use of democratic innovations to it. For instance, 'the quality of education has to be improved at all levels, so that people are educated from an early age to be able to participate, to be able to change things' (politician from the Czech Republic).

However, it was possible to also identify a very critical stance on the inclusion of NGOs and not citizens in various participatory activities, as one Slovak politician expressed 'in favour, but not in these forms. Not always in these artificial uniforms, which actually favour only NGOs over real mass participation.'

As already noted by Mikhaylovskaya and Roumeas (2024), reservations about democratic innovations especially on the side of decision-makers may arise from scepticism concerning the competencies held by citizens. It was also exposed that decision-makers are sometimes more inclined to support informal than formal interactions with citizens and also some such statements were identified by the interviews.

In search for the competencies of civil servants

Several respondents also identified obstacles with the qualifications of policy-makers, more concretely of civil servants, to deal with democratic innovations. This is an important point, with Geissel and Michels (2023) stressing that democratic innovations are governance-driven.

Even though the question of (introducing) democratic innovations is sometimes seen as a kind of a play among two types of actors – politicians and citizens, the thinking expressed by a representative of a Czech civil society organisation also shows that bureaucracy/civil servants are important parts as well in the processes:

It's not civil society against some kind of politics, but it's like a triangle where there's civil society, politics and the bureaucracy, which sometimes has an advantage over politics and informational know-how, sometimes even a power advantage. So, it's a kind of triangular game.

A Slovenian politician even observed some:

clash between political bureaucracy and civil society... this clash between political bureaucracy and civil society is actually sometimes greater than between the political class and civil society, because political bureaucracy reacts much more difficultly to the demanding and all too often necessary changes that civil society demands. So mainly, what a responsible politician in these times should do is empower civil society to talk to the political bureaucracy.

Another Slovenian politician stated it is important for politicians or civil servants to be active in these processes:

I think it now demands a lot from the decision-makers too, to structure, lead this process in such a way that they do not demand too much from citizens, that the whole process is really transparent, in short, that it isn't just some consultation and no one can tell you... you come, express your opinion and no one can tell you what will happen with it... But the longer I am a politician and the more I see how demanding this process is and how much damage you can do if you approach it the wrong way.

Some respondents referred to the important, but in reality not necessarily positive, role/input of civil servants since they are not always very supportive in such processes:

I would turn this question around because I think the real question is whether our officials are trained to carry out inclusive processes. But this isn't just a joke; it's a serious concern when it comes to legislation preparation... So definitely, one comment is that we don't even have a bureaucracy trained to implement participatory processes. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Is there genuine support for more participatory democracy?

When talking about the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, some (more normative) stances against a too-broad inclusion in them were revealed by the policymakers as well as the representatives of civil society organisations. This issue is particularly important with Mikhaylovskaya and Roumeas (2024) who note that the successful implementation of democratic innovations not only depends on citizens' trust in the process but also the support of policymakers. A Czech politician indicated they are a fan of classical representative democracy, and along similar lines a representative of a Czech civil society organisation stated 'We have a representative democracy, we elect our representatives to represent us and work for us', as did a Slovak civil servant: 'Citizens should participate through elected representatives.'

In Slovakia, some politicians have taken a firm stance against the delegation of decision-making powers to citizens, and exposed the need to focus on elections, which are the most important for democracy and acquire such powers:

> I'm not in favour of letting the people decide... I'm asking on what grounds? What's their background? What is that their expertise to be able to make a decision on any particular thing? If there is, then let them run and let them show what their ability is and then let them translate that into decision-making positions and then let them be legitimately elected and do the best they can. (politician from Slovakia).

Another politician from Slovakia commented similarly, 'but in a democratic state, citizens are always given the greatest opportunity in elections'.

In contrast, a Slovenian politician explained similar reluctance again arising from scepticism concerning the competencies held by citizens, but somewhat more broadly and in a softer way:

> We were directly elected by the citizens, so we perform this decision-making function because citizens are neither trained for this nor is it their duty to decide on our behalf. Of course, we do have contact with citizens and must listen to what problems they have, what they want, how they envision things.

Another Slovenian politician agreed that decision-making should be left to politicians: 'That is, the political class must exist, some decisions must be left to it. This seems logical from the perspective of the integrity of the state', despite, as they stated, being a strong supporter of democracy and the inclusion of citizens on all levels. A representative of a civil society organisation in Slovenia also believed that decision-making powers should rest in the hands of politicians:

Political decision-making is the affair of the executive and legislative branches of government, and these are elected politicians who go to democratic elections every four years, and then they have that mandate. The non-governmental sector has no role here.

Here we can add the clear distinction between involvement in policy- and decision-making processes:

It must be understood that politician is elected at the state level. We are elected at a smaller scale. And, of course, those elected at the state level must have greater weight, that's completely clear – in decision-making. Political decision--making should remain exactly as it is today. Government, parliament, I mean... political institutions. In policy formation, however, we want to be active. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Other statements reveal similar ideas:

So let's say involvement, collaboration in the processes of creating and adopting legislation, but what is ultimately adopted is the government's responsibility. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Coordination procedures are very important, but in the end, those who are competent decide. And that's right. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

A statement made by a Czech representative of a civil society organisation about the potential decision-making powers of citizens is very interesting, possibly even some kind of warning, and directly aimed at such powers given the current state of society: 'But the idea that the majority of Czech society would be more involved in some decision-making processes scares me to be honest.'
A local politician mentioned 'organisational problems':

Which representatives are representatives of the citizens? If there were 100 in the hall, and everyone voiced their opinion, you wouldn't get anywhere. Let them choose representatives, and let these representatives decide what show they will watch next time. (politician from Slovenia)

In Slovenia, there are many institutionalised ways to involve citizens in policy- or decision-making processes, and thus one civil servant claimed 'if there were even more, then also, considering that we are a parliamentary democracy, then parliamentary democracies could no longer function. Because then we could have, if I may joke a little, direct democracy' (civil servant from Slovenia).

Referendums and participatory budgeting

While talking about decision-making processes, referendums and participatory budgeting were mostly mentioned. It seems that participatory budgeting was more exposed in Poland because the Solecki Law from 2009 has obviously placed it on the political agenda across the country. Interviews conducted in Poland revealed that participatory budgeting has generally been accepted by policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations. Moreover, a survey conducted in the framework of the DEMOTEC project showed that over 40% of Polish respondents had participated at least once in participatory budgeting (Tisserand et al. 2025: 21). Nonetheless, in the other three countries respondents also frequently referred to participatory budgeting as a well-known democratic innovation.

Referendums are also well known, even though attitudes to them vary widely, mostly across countries. This can probably be linked to legal norms or legislation but also to the historical tradition of referendums. In Slovenia, more than 20 referendums have been held on the national level since 1990. The legislation until 2013 was very favourable for the possibility of requesting a nationwide referendum, also as a remnant of the self-management system from the socialist period, and while since 2013 some limitations have been imposed, referendums on laws with obligatory consequences for policymakers can still be demanded by voters. Poland, Slovakia and Czechia have decided to limit opportunities for nation-wide referendums (in Czechia, indeed only one referendum has been held), but are more open to sub-national referendums (Tisserand et al. 2025).

It is interesting that in these three countries some scepticism about referendums among different types of respondents can be detected. For instance, a Czech politician said 'I don't entirely lean towards referendums at the national level because I believe that on many complex issues, it should belong to those who are involved and who understand things more.'

And as noted by a civil servant from the Czech Republic:

> As far as referendums are concerned, that's something I don't like. Citizens don't have objective information about what's most important to the state... So, I really don't think a referendum is a good tool, although it can work great in Switzerland.

While discussing referendums, other respondents also made a reference/comparison to Switzerland (and cautioned about taking the same approach to referendums). For example, one CSO representative from the Czech Republic said, 'but I wouldn't follow Switzerland and referendums... Until we are more intelligent about democracy, we cannot go in this direction'.

Or as a Polish CSO representative indicated, 'in Switzerland it works, but also not for everything'. Another Polish CSO representative suggested:

Referendums, as you can see from the example of Switzerland, are an interesting tool for the receipt of certain... reaching solutions, but we are not Switzerland, but a different country. We don't have a historical continuity too long when it comes to tools of civic influence, so maybe not, though.

The representative of a Slovak civil society organisation was critical of the possibility of using referendums given the present state of affairs in their country:

Increasing direct democracy elements like referendums is not beneficial given the current political climate and public disinterest... Discussions where citizens can participate are beneficial.

Still, some cautious predictions about the need for change, regardless of the type of respondent, were seen. For instance, a Czech politician claimed 'I think that we should gradually start using referendums'. Further, the representative of a Czech civil society organisation stated that 'in terms of, say, a referendum at the national level, I think it should really be only on the most important issues, and who knows if at all'.

A statement by a representative of a Czech civil society organisation interestingly reveals greater scepticism with direct democracy tools today than was the case in the past:

Even 15 years ago, I would have said a definite 'yes' to strengthening the elements of direct democracy and introducing referendums. Today, I think no. There is a reluctance of people to try to understand the issues... But, people's initiatives look good to me.

On the other hand, a Polish representative of a civil society organisation called for as many referendums as possible, while adding some words of caution: 'I think, depending on the issue.'

It is interesting that some respondents saw referendums as a tool with which politicians can avoid taking responsibility; as noted at the start of this article, this is hardly surprising. For example:

I think we have representatives, political representatives, whom people have authorised to make decisions for them... On the other hand, in some serious questions that touch everyone... it seems right to me that people are asked. I don't know, some extreme measure that politicians resorts to [sic] when it really doesn't know [sic] how to decide. It seems to me there's too much passing the buck. When politicians can't decide, and then says, [sic] your citizens will tell. (politician from Slovenia)

Conditions for the successful implementation of democratic innovations

While generally speaking about the participation of citizens or civil society organisations in policymaking processes, the respondents agreed on the positive aspects of it even though many also identified certain obstacles or problems in this regard, as already mentioned. Before we consider them, it is worthwhile to look at a statement by a Polish politician as they referred to the importance of procedures in this regard:

> Certainly, the institution of public consultation is important, only that in our experience, everything that is subject to consultation is most often not a matter of people's interest; it is a procedure.

Here, we wish to accentuate one point mentioned by several Slovenian respondents (both policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations) – namely, the need or wish to involve citizens/civil society organisations in earlier stages of policymaking processes.

Otherwise, one Slovenian politician illustratively described inclusiveness in the policymaking process:

> Now, their opinions must be considered to the maximum extent possible, but the fact is, as soon as you open such a process, you'll get a salad of opinions, just opposing, diametrically opposite ones. It can't be otherwise.

A representative of a Slovenian civil society organisation warned that 'it's not just about consultation but about truly listening and finding some compromise and taking into account the proposals that come'.

A Czech representative of a civil society organisation saw the considerable potential of participatory mechanisms in certain policy sectors and issues, but not generally:

> I imagine that people can make decisions about things that are close to their hearts and that are easy to grasp. But on some issues, like macroeconomic issues, it's going to be very difficult for the majority of the population.

Several respondents in the four countries also mentioned the problem frequently exposed in the literature concerning someone opting for democratic innovations, especially those more deliberative in their nature – that is, how the active involvement of citizens and/or civil society organisations in policymaking is taken into account in the final decisions of decision-makers, or in the political reality. A Polish representative of a civil society organisation sum-

marised the problem by simply saying 'but the problem is that our comments are not being listened to'.

Another Polish representative expressed something very similar by commenting 'I definitely think that there is a lack of even adequate use of such an issue as local referendums and citizen panels, which also their findings would be binding on decision-makers'.

Another representative of a civil society organisation from Poland believed that public participation in decision-making faces an additional problem:

> It is very important, and I think it's marginal. And it's not marginal because no one would probably want to listen to the public because there are such people; it's marginal because, in my opinion, there are two reasons: the first is that this public voice does not have adequate power. The second is that this social voice is rarely expressed properly.

A Slovenian politician saw a simple solution to such dilemmas by advocating representative democracy:

> So, I think I would stick to the standard principles of democracy, which means that citizens still express their will primarily through elections via their elected representatives... But in directly exerting pressure on your elected representative, who then proceeds in institutions that have real power. Such a system, I see, will be the only one that will bring about serious changes. Everything else will be a nice facade of how we all co-decide, how we are all involved, but there will be no real changes.

A representative of a Slovenian civil society organisation pointed to other problems when the participation of civil society organisations/citizens is at stake – namely, that they have been competing with state actors that possess much greater resources:

> That will be thousands of volunteer [sic], unpaid hours, on one side, and on the other side, a complete governmental structure with a full bureaucratic infrastructure, and these two are opposed, those are impossible conditions.

The lack of support for civil society, especially professional support in drafting legislation, can be a further problem:

> I think the problem is that the legal system is very complex... But here the big problem is that civil society basically lacks the expert support from institutions that know how to write legislation. (CSO representative from Slovenia).

A representative of a Czech civil society organisation showed some inclination to involving citizens in policymaking processes, but at the same time a need to limit it, based on experience:

> On one hand, more participation certainly makes sense, be it participatory budgeting or any other tool. On the other hand, I think we have to be able to draw a line... In other words, intuitively I'd say let's involve as much as possible, but since I'm already 50, I know from experience that you have to set some kind of limit.

A Slovak politician also held some strong reservations based on their experience of participatory democracy:

> I have been involved in several participatory projects, including the [named programme] programme, carried out by [organisation], building capacities in municipalities and ministries for participatory public policy creation. I must say, however, that internally, I am an advocate of representative democracy.

It seems that the question of tradition can also be important while discussing deliberative democratic innovations, as one civil servant from the Czech Republic noted 'we don't have much of a tradition, we don't know how to discuss. We can often talk about these things, but I think we lack the art of discussion'.

However, for a Slovak representative of a civil society organisation some kind of hindrance in this respect is a different tradition, referring to the fact that:

> We have one of the highest rates of civic disengagement in Europe. I think more than 75 percent, maybe even more, of people are not organised in anything – whether it's in unions, clubs, interest groups, anywhere, be it a fishing club or anything else. And to some extent, this affects the quality of public policies and the quality of life. Because to live a quality life, I first need to start influencing the environment in which I live, meaning my immediate surroundings.

Notably, for some politicians launching a survey can substitute democratic innovations: 'We simply ask people for their opinion, so we use the survey system to allow people to express themselves' (politician from Slovakia).

First and mostly on the local level

Given the presented importance of the sub-national, local levels for democratic innovations, it was not surprising that in many interviews it was also revealed that this is supposed to be the most appropriate level for such tools of citizens' participation in policymaking processes. Hardly any differences were found

here among respondents active on the local, national, even EU level. A Czech representative of a civil society organisation simply stated that 'this makes sense to me at the local level'. While another respondent perceived 'huge potential in it, especially at the municipal level, where I think it should work' (CSO representative from the Czech Republic). Yet another representative of a Czech civil society organisation argued that 'direct democracy has more potential at the local level than in national politics, where I am more afraid of it'.

A Slovak representative of a civil society organisation believed that 'things could be handled much more flexibly and quickly at the local level' and a similar opinion was seen among Slovenian politicians:

> The fact is that involvement is much easier to achieve at the local level than, say, at the national level, and in this context, local levels should also be empowered, now talking about institutions for including citizens in decision-making.

Another Slovenian politician stated:

> Personally, I find there is a lack of this at the national level, while at the local level, the direct influence of the population on municipal policies is greater. This is not necessarily because it's the local level per se, but because local politicians must be more sensitive to the residents' views due to their proximity.

On the local level, it seems that people are also more interested in dealing with politics and issues: 'If you ask them how they live and what's bothering them in their neighbourhood, they are interested' (a politician from the Czech Republic).

One Slovak civil servant largely referred to challenges for democratic innovations on the EU level:

> At the European level, it's the most challenging, but at the national level, let's say in the Slovak context, it's more feasible and, at the regional level, even more so. And locally, it's already being done to a large extent. [while adding] I think it's important to work on the legitimacy of those panels. To ensure that it's not just a consultation where a representative of a group comes to say their view, but that it should somehow have legal legitimacy, that this decision, or this opinion, becomes a legal opinion.

A Czech politician held a similar view, saying that 'at the European level it is of course more difficult, but at the municipal level it is relatively easy to do a participatory budgeting project'.

Another Czech politician claimed it is simply easier to deal with participatory democracy in smaller communities:

Democratic Innovations in Central…   Alenka Krašovec, Meta Novak, Anja Kolak and Damjan Lajh

I am rather in favour of the idea that participatory democracy or direct democracy can work well at the local level, where there is a certain ability of that community of a few thousand citizens to come together, to agree, to consult, to communicate with each other… But once you don't have that ability of several million voters to communicate directly with each other, then I think that the elements of direct democracy are not effective and can be more of a threat to the stability of democracy.

Conclusion

Democratic innovations are often viewed as a cure for many of the deficiencies and challenges encountered by modern representative democracies. Multiple European countries have introduced several forms of these innovations on different levels, although they have mostly appeared on the local level. Still, Central and Eastern European countries seem to be lagging behind in this respect.

There is accordingly a need to examine (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives on the meaning and importance of democratic innovations of those supposed to be responsible for governance-driven processes, i.e. policymakers, but also the representatives of civil society organisations as mediating actors through which citizens may also become involved in democratic innovations. To that end, qualitative analysis of face-to-face interviews made with each type of respondent in four once-socialist countries was performed.

The use of an inductive approach led to eight elements of the attitudes held by policymakers and civil society organisation representatives concerning participatory democracy being identified: a) representative democracy vs democratic innovations and b) their importance for trust; c) reservations and limitations vis-à-vis democratic innovations; d) the competencies held by civil servants; e) the extent to which actors support participatory democracy; f) attitudes concerning the most common democratic innovations, referendums and participatory budgeting; g) the conditions for democratic innovations to be implemented successfully; and h) the importance of the local level for democratic innovations.

The presented exploratory analysis considers different perspectives of respondents from four Central and Eastern European countries (reflecting the legislation, historical tradition, political culture and current state of society), but also types of respondents and their views, rhetoric, sentiments and narratives while dealing with democratic innovations, which range from very positive to more sceptical. In the analysis, despite several similarities observed in the attitudes held by politicians, civil servants and representatives of civil society organisations to participatory democracy and democratic innovations, considerable differences also exist.

By way of a summary, we note that all respondents were generally supportive of participatory democracy tools. In particular, actors from Slovakia pointed to

the need for citizens to be involved in policymaking beyond elections and political parties. In the views of Slovenian respondents, this is important because public policies impact the everyday lives of citizens, and including citizens in policymaking adds to the legitimacy of policy decisions. Some actors in Poland regarded such involvement as meaningful since citizens and civil society may have available different information and solutions to policy problems, which may be closer to real-life circumstances. Simultaneously, such involvement also increases the responsibility and accountability of citizens and civil society organisations.

By and large, in all the countries under study we found that respondents see democratic innovations as being connected to trust. Nevertheless, we note that the ideas on this issue held by the respondents were in principle not (very) elaborated. It is interesting that respondents from Slovenia specifically also mentioned that participatory democracy increases transparency, which in the end builds trust.

When it comes to the respondents' reservations with the use of democratic innovations, it was largely the case that there was greater enthusiasm for participatory practices in policy-making than in decision-making processes, while reluctance was more evident among civil servants and politicians. Several political actors (but also some representatives of civil society) from different countries mentioned that the main tool for citizens to change policy outcomes is them participating in elections. And once representatives of citizens have been elected, decision-making should be left to politicians. It is interesting that civil society representatives from Slovenia in particular clearly distinguished policymaking from decision-making processes, and more firmly advocated the idea that citizens and civil society should participate in the policymaking process while decision-making powers should continue to remain in the hands of politicians.

A number of obstacles or reservations were detected across countries, although they were largely similar to those mentioned in the literature (which mostly focuses on other European countries). Political actors mainly hold reservations due to the lack of information and skills of citizens when complex questions are entailed. Czech respondents drew attention to the need for citizens to be given an adequate education. Slovak actors more frequently noted how including citizens in participatory democracy in an excessive way could overburden the citizens, and thus the degree to which they can be included is limited. Respondents from all countries stressed that they were strongly in favour of including civil society actors over citizens because organised civil society can have important information and competencies available. Here, Polish (and Slovenian) respondents highlighted the need for citizens and civil society organisations to be more responsible and accountable while participating in democratic innovations.

Respondents in Slovenia in particular (yet also in the Czech Republic) pointed out that civil servants – specifically at the bureaucratic level – are important when it comes to the organisation and implementation of the democratic innovations. Empowered and trained civil servants are indeed essential for the implementation of the participatory processes to be effective.

The most recognised forms of democratic innovations in all countries were shown to be referendums and participatory budgeting. Stark differences were apparent while talking about nationwide referendums. Czech, Slovak and Polish respondents were quite reluctant concerning the use of referendums, even though individual actors expressed more support for referendums provided that they are used with caution and/or on the sub-national level. While in Slovenia, with its long tradition in the practice of self-management and where nation-wide referendums are more commonly used, such reluctance was not observed. However, here it was argued that politicians may be too frequently placing the responsibility for making (difficult) decisions into the hands of citizens via the referendum mechanism.

Success with implementing a democratic innovation often depends on the procedure involved. In particular, Slovenian representatives of civil society argued it is necessary for citizens and civil society organisations to become involved as soon as possible in the process, while also observing that they lack professional support and resources for them to participate in policymaking efficiently. In these conditions, state actors can easily overpower them. Slovenian and Polish representatives of civil society emphasised the importance of genuine consultations, not consultations organised just to comply with the requirements. Czech respondents in particular warned that the inclusion of citizens only makes sense for certain policy questions, typically issues that are close to the public and not too complex. At the same time, respondents from Slovakia and Czechia mentioned that for participatory democracy to be successful such a tradition is also important, while critically noting the lack of such a tradition in each country.

Finally, it is evident for various reasons that the local level is the best for attempts to introduce and/or implement democratic innovations. This was explicitly mentioned by respondents in Slovenia, Slovakia and Czechia. Some also claimed that even the national level is more appropriate than the European one.

Before concluding, we wish to express some reservations with the results revealing differences/similarities between countries since we are aware that more in-depth interviews focused solely on democratic innovations and participatory democracy in the countries under study must be conducted to arrive at any more solid conclusions.

Aware that our approach is only suitable for exploratory analysis, we still managed to obtain valuable insights into how democratic innovations are viewed. A different kind of analysis, possibly a more quantitative one, could provide for even more robust findings.

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The Political and Economic Context Contributing to the Problem of Political (Dis)Trust in Slovenia

MARKO HOČEVAR

Abstract: *The article analyses the political and economic context of the growing distrust in politics in Slovenia over the last 15 years. Focus is given to the changes in the power relations, policy changes and roles of different national and international institutions. It is established that the fundamental element of the specific class trade-off which underpinned the broader political legitimacy from the early 1990s up until 2008 – a strong welfare state and low economic inequalities – was partly dissolved after the crisis of 2008. However, no new joint programme emerged to replace it due to the weakening of the trade unions, the EU's stronger role in policymaking processes coupled with the shrinking differences between political parties in their social and economic policies. These changes are not only seen in the high levels of political distrust in public opinion surveys or decreasing voter turnout, but in the instability of the party arena as well.*

Keywords: *political legitimacy, (dis)trust, Slovenia, democracy, capitalism, welfare state, inequalities*

Introduction

This article looks at the political, economic and social processes that have occurred in Slovenia over the last 15 years, focusing on the relationship between structural changes, changes in power relations among social classes and groups, changes in policy frameworks and actual policies on one hand, and the declining political trust in the country on the other. Upon joining the EU in 2004, Slovenia was economically the most developed of the post-socialist countries and the first new member state to adopt the euro, while maintaining a stable and consolidated liberal democracy. It seemed that political stability and trust in political institutions would last. However, since 2008 and the start of the financial and

economic crisis, considerable political changes have been observed in Slovenia, accompanied by a marked decline in trust and satisfaction with how the main political institutions are functioning (Krašovec & Johannsen 2016; Krašovec 2017; Malčič & Krašovec 2019; Novak & Lajh 2023; Fink-Hafner 2024).

The aim of this article is to examine the reasons for the rise in political trust in Slovenia and explain the political and economic processes that have helped lead to the different emanations of the problem of political distrust. Within a neo-Marxist analysis of the contradictions of political democracy and the imperative of capitalist accumulation (Wolfe 1980; Offe 1984; Habermas 1988; Streeck 2011, 2014), we argue that the growing political distrust and dissatisfaction with the way political institutions are working are the outcome of the decoupling of capitalism from the welfare state in Slovenia following the 2008 crisis, accompanied by rising inequalities and the isolation of capitalism from democratic politics. A contribution is thus made to the discussions on the nature and crisis of Slovenian democracy and to the broader debates on the problems around the world of political trust and legitimacy in the 21st century within the framework of the rise and crisis of neoliberal politics.

After the introduction, we outline the theoretical framework based on neo--Marxist scholarship, which has focused on the political contradictions of the democratic capitalist state. In the third section, we explain the political and economic conditions in Slovenia until 2008. The fourth section presents opinion poll data concerning (dis)trust in political institutions and voter turnout, while we also examine qualitative changes in the party landscape since 2008. The fifth section considers three important elements following the 2008 crisis: the transformation of corporatist institutions and the declining strength of trade unions; the role of the EU, and the shrinking differences between political parties; along with the rising economic inequalities and shift from the welfare to the workfare state. In the discussion, we locate our analysis within the broader scholarship regarding ongoing political and economic processes in Slovenia and the world and additionally reflect on recent political and economic changes in Slovenia. In the conclusion, the trends observed in Slovenia are considered within the broader perspective of the decoupling of capitalism from democracy.

Contradictions of liberal democratic capitalist states

The problem of declining political trust as an important element and indicator of the crisis of democracy in the 21st century has been identified by multiple scholars (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011; Hooghe & Marien 2013; van der Meer & Zmerli 2017; Hooghe & Dassonneville 2018; Bertsou 2019; Valgarðsson et al. 2021; Berg 2021; Devine 2024; Dawson & Krakoff 2024). After the Cold War came to an end, liberal democracy and a capitalist market economy became the universal form of political and economic organisation of societies (Fukuyama

1992; Linz & Stepan 1996; Hadenius 1997). The 'third wave of democratisation' (Huntington 1991) was to provide citizens with broader opportunities to assert their interests. It was assumed that democracy would lead to the greater responsiveness of political institutions and broader political legitimacy, which is crucial for trust in political institutions (Mishler & Rose 1997; Offe 2000; Uslaner 2018; Newton, Stolle & Zmerli 2018; Hooghe 2018; Warren 1999, 2018). However, political, economic and social development in the last two decades suggests that instead of political stability, improved political responsiveness, and broader political trust and legitimacy, citizens' mistrust and dissatisfaction with political institutions and the overall political order is on the rise at the same time as populist movements, parties or politicians (typically from the right spectrum, but also from the left) have become more important political actors across the world (Torcal & Montero 2006; Behnke 2009; Parvin 2015; Schäfer 2015; Schäfer & Zürn 2024). This has prompted various scholars to analyse the crisis(es) of democracy (Mounk 2018; Runciman 2018; Merkel & Kneip 2018; Przeworski 2019; Ginsburg & Huq 2020). Nevertheless, the question of political trust and its relevance for political legitimacy already emerged in the 1970s in the face of the particular political and economic developments occurring then.

Universalisation of the liberal democratic political form in the West following the end of the Second World War led to the growing participation of the masses in politics. Faced with strong left political parties, trade unions and the possibility of a revolution, the capitalist class was prepared to make concessions, and the governments – led by left, liberal or right-wing parties – were pushed into the role of mediator between the interests of the capitalist and working classes. A crucial political and economic outcome of the established class compromise was the welfare states in the West and the politics of full employment. Political legitimacy was closely linked to the reduction and limitation of economic and social inequalities, which were a consequence of the capitalist mode of production, and an improvement in the living standards of the working masses (Offe 1984; Streeck 2014).

This structure remained stable as long as profit margins in the West were high and the working class was willing to trade its revolutionary ideals for social security through productivity gains. As it had become clear in the early 1970s that the Fordist mode of production was starting to stagnate, governments could no longer raise enough money via taxation. The globalisation of capitalist production led to the greater mobility of capital, while the pressure remained on governments to continue to provide social benefits and welfare networks – the essential element for political legitimacy (Hirsch 1995; Jessop 2002). This makes it hardly surprising that the issue of political trust became one of the key issues in the 1970s (Cole 1973; Miller 1974; Citrin 1974; Easton 1975).

It was within this framework that neo-Marxist scholars considered the internal structural contradictions of capitalist liberal polities. They noted the irreconcilable contradiction between the promise of political equality in the

political system and the fundamental economic inequalities and exploitation in the capitalist mode of production that underlie liberal-democratic polities. The universalisation of political citizenship and the rise of the welfare state seemed to be the cure for the structural contradictions of class societies and democratic politics, but the crises of the 1970s proved that this equilibrium was far from permanent. The structural crisis of capitalism prevented governments from delivering social and economic policy outcomes like they could in the era of welfare capitalism; welfare provisions were limited while mass expectations rose. The capitalist class was no longer willing to pay through taxes as much as before, while the strength of the working class had started to crumble and the class composition began to change. This led to growing problems for the legitimacy of the politico-economic system.

Wolfe claimed that the curtailment of the welfare state has been a 'two-edged sword for ruling classes, enhancing immediate flexibility at the cost of longer run legitimation problems' (Wolfe 1980: 334). Offe argued that the political contradictions of late capitalism lay in the fact that the welfare state's mediation role had been changing, leading to problems of legitimation and political trust (Offe 1984: 182–194).[1] Habermas observed that due to the economic crisis and the crumbling of the class compromise, another of whose outcomes was the rise of the welfare state, the state had to fulfil the expectations due to the 'pressures of legitimation' while 'mass loyalty' had to be 'secured within the framework of formal democracy' (Habermas 1988: 58).

The subsequent neoliberal revolution – as a specific response to the crisis of welfare capitalism – and the implementation of neoliberal policies since the 1980s have led to a further curtailing of the welfare state and increasing class selectivity of political decisions that were oriented to the interests and needs of the richest (Harvey 2005; Streeck 2014). These shifts had further negative effects on political trust and fuelled even more contradictions within the political and economic systems, especially the declining voter turnout and social selectivity of voting (lower classes are increasingly not voting) (see: Bonica et al. 2013; Schäfer 2010).

The empirically rooted investigation of Wolfgang Merkel, even though he does not work within the neo-Marxist theoretical framework, showed that disembedded capitalism (neoliberal capitalism) has an important influence on democracy and 'poses considerable challenges' to it (Merkel 2014: 126). This is especially because there has been a specific social selectivity of voter turnout ever since the 1980s – i.e. the lower classes do not vote – and due to the rising precarity in the labour market, the declining organisational and ideological strength of left-leaning parties and trade unions, which have played a signifi-

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1   Even Dahl claimed that democracy in the form of polyarchy has emerged and been sustained only in capitalist market economies. However, not in completely free market or pure competitive market economies, but specifically in mixed market economies where governments play an important role in correcting the markets and market outcomes (Dahl 1971, 1998).

The Political and Economic Context…   Marko Hočevar

cant role in the political participation and rise in the working class' political consciousness. Wolfgang Streeck analysed the transformation of the state and the imperatives of the capitalist accumulation within a globalised and neoliberal economy. He claimed that the curtailment of the welfare state due to the second fiscal crisis of the state has been a consequence of the interests and ability of capital to avoid taxes and due to the tax competition among states. Streeck (2014: 4) thus claims that 'legitimation problems therefore arose time and again' after the 1970s, although primarily it was the problem of the capital, which faced accumulation crises, and in order to solve it they put the entire system's democratic legitimation under question. Instead of trying to reinstall democratic legitimacy, governments pursued policies of winning back 'the confidence of "the markets" in the system' by introducing additional liberalisation processes.

In the empirical analysis, we draw on the insights of neo-Marxist scholars and look at the structural contradictions of the capitalist liberal democratic system in Slovenia, which were intensified during the 2008 crisis and, subsequently, when the entire world entered a situation of polycrisis. This led to serious changes in trust in political institutions and also the broader problem of political legitimacy.

The political and economic transition in Slovenia

To understand the changes that have occurred since 2008 in the political and economic processes and policies in Slovenia, it is necessary to explain the Slovenian political and economic transition. On the political level, Slovenia has had a very stable parliamentary constitutional democratic system based on a proportional electoral system. In the political sphere, parties from left to right are present, but the strongest party up until 2004 was the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS), which acted as a cornerstone of political stability and created broader coalitions with right-wing and left parties. The country's accession to the EU and long-standing hegemony of the LDS coincided. Yet, from 2004 until 2008 a new right-wing government assumed office led by the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and Janez Janša (Fink-Hafner 2024).

On the economic level, following the breaking up of Yugoslavia, Slovenia managed to avoid a long-lasting war and quickly sought to cooperate with Western markets, which caused a short recession. The export-based growth model and incremental introduction of capitalist markets and relations was based on the conscious decision of the policymakers to sustain Slovenia's export-oriented companies, while the privatisation model was based on an incremental and internal privatisation. The country's accession to the EU and the new right-wing government in 2004 attempted to implement more radical neoliberal policies, but were soon blocked and mitigated by the trade unions (Podvršič 2023; Hočevar 2024a).

Six crucial elements were required for the stable and successful political and economic transitions in Slovenia. First, gradual market economic policy reforms

were introduced, while the mode of privatisation was in fact not neoliberal in its essence, despite the conservative political parties and foreign advisors strongly pushing for a neoliberal transition based on a quick privatisation (Mencinger 2012; Bembič 2017; Podvršič 2023).

The second was the prevailing role of the liberal and left political elite, many of whom had played important roles in the final decade of socialist Yugoslavia. The critical political party up until 2004, the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia and its leader – as well as the prime minister of Slovenia, Janez Drnovšek – were actually the successors of the League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia, whereas Drnovšek himself was actually a member of the last collective presidency of Yugoslavia. Moreover, the president of Slovenia up until 2002 was Milan Kučan, the very last president of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia (Žerdin 2012; Fink-Hafner 2024).

Third, the specific privatisation carried out in Slovenia was in fact based on the primacy of internal ownership – the workers and management of the companies received most of the shares in the companies. Successive governments have not been particularly favourable to either foreign direct investment or the sale of banks and companies to foreign investors. Moreover, since the directors were closely linked to the ruling groups – the government played a decisive role in their appointment – a specific, politically determined accumulation process commenced. This project reached its peak after 2003 when cheap money began to flow into Slovenia (Žerdin 2012; Hočevar 2025).

Fourth, the transition was possible due to the very strong trade unions that were able to mobilise their membership in order to prevent the most radical neoliberal economic and social reforms from being adopted. The high trade union density rate gave the labour movement a strong organisational base, while the clear political goals and scopes had a great sway on the acceptability of specific policies. After the late 1990s, the trade union density rate had begun declining, the unions themselves became more closed and concentrated on the immediate interests of their membership, whereas the strength of the trade unions in the public sector easily exceeded the importance of trade unions in the private sector. Crucially, in 1995 the unions managed to pressure the government to adopt minimum wage legislation, which was a big success for the unions (Stanojević 2014, 2015).

Fifth, as an institutional outcome of the trade unions' strength, the Economic and Social Council (ESC) was established in 1994. The dominant social bloc, consisting of the political bureaucracy and representatives of domestic companies (especially exporters), was pressurised into accepting the position of the trade unions at the policymaking table since they also needed the trade unions' support – the state bureaucracy was to limit inflation while the representatives of capital were to promote the export competitiveness of their companies for their very survival. The trade unions accepted wage moderation along with the specific privatisation model, while the representatives of the capitalist class accepted the introduction of a statutory minimum wage and numerous other

social and labour regulations. This was important for employers as they could either (re)strengthen their position in European markets by way of price competition or barely survive the opening-up of the country's markets. This was, as is usual in a capitalist society, also in the interest of employees since the higher unemployment in the early 1990s greatly destabilised the economy and society and it was also in the interest of workers that these companies could either resume international competition or survive the market pressure as such (Stanojević 2014; Podvršič 2023). In this way, a specific *quid pro quo* relationship was established that mimicked the Western class compromise of the post-war period, albeit in a very different political, economic and social environment.

The ESC served as a typical neo-corporatist tripartite social dialogue institution where representatives of employers, unions and the government negotiate, formulate and adopt crucial economic and social policies. Within the ESC, the unions gained access to political and policymaking processes, while the representatives of capital gained an instrument to soften the resistance of labour through bargaining processes. By the turn of the millennium, the decline in the union density rate had also resulted in a more defensive and narrow focus of the unions, while EU accession led to increased deregulation and liberalisation of the markets in line with the EU rules and convergence policies (Stanojević & Krašovec 2011; Podvršič 2023).

Sixth, a strong welfare state featuring important social and economic rights was created, including universal social rights, paid leave arrangements, child benefit payments, unemployment benefits, social assistance and the universal public provision of healthcare and public schooling system (including a cost-free university) (Kolarič 2012; Filipovič Hrast & Kopač Mrak 2016). Further, the transition to a capitalist market economy did not lead to an explosion of inequalities – the opposite was true. Slovenia has remained one of the most egalitarian countries with respect to income inequality, although certain increases were seen after the mid-1990s, but the overall picture was much better than in other post-socialist countries or when compared to any other country in the world. As concerns wealth inequality, Slovenia was a very equal country, with very stable levels of inequality up until 2008 (Hočevar 2024a; World Inequality Database 2025). These policy outcomes fostered a broader social and political legitimacy within the processes of the consolidation of a liberal democracy.

The political and economic transition in Slovenia was thus a specific case of the organised, institutionally embedded and gradual introduction of a capitalist economy. Political legitimacy and trust were based on the political mediation of market forces and the creation of a universalist welfare state. Governments rarely pursued overtly neoliberal policies, at least not before 2004, which marked an important turning point as the right-wing neoliberal government took office, but its ambitions were quickly curtailed by strong trade unions in 2005, leading to much more nuanced reforms.

Although trust and political legitimacy was stable throughout the period of transition and until 2008, the respective figures were never very high in public opinion surveys. Nevertheless, the share of those who were either satisfied with the government and democracy and who trusted or were neutral in relation to the crucial political institutions was significantly higher than of those who clearly expressed dissatisfaction and distrust (see: Toš 2018, 2021). This changed considerably in the subsequent years while at the same time other quite specific and peculiar new symptoms emerged.

Political ruptures and problems of political legitimacy in Slovenia since 2008

The 2008 crisis led to an important break – the class compromise, already crumbling under the liberalisation pressures set by the EU, began to fall apart, with successive governments implementing strict austerity measures, and the EU advocating strong fiscal consolidation, liberalisation and privatisation. The trade unions, even though the ESC was still functioning, had lost their power in the policymaking processes.

The 15-year period following the start of the economic and financial crisis in 2008 saw important shifts, turns and disruptions within the Slovenian political and party arena. The sharp rise in distrust in political institutions and dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and the government were accompanied by a steady decline in voter turnout. Moreover, an important permanent qualitative disruption within the party arena has featured the recurring creation of new liberal parties that either win the elections or become the biggest coalition party, only to lose (almost) all of their support by the next election cycle.

Rising distrust and dissatisfaction with politics?

Even though it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from opinion polls, they remain the best tool for assessing how citizens generally view various important issues. Trust in the key institutions of liberal democracy is essential for determining the quality of democracy. It can provide specific insights regarding how people judge the functioning of key political institutions. The data presented below are all based on various surveys of the Slovenian Public Opinion research programme (Toš 2018, 2021; CRJMMK 2023), which provides the most reliable data. The fact that the surveys are repeated allows changes over time in terms of citizens' attitudes to politics and the main political institutions to be observed.[2]

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2   We recoded all the variables since they were all on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 indicating complete distrust/dissatisfaction and 10 complete trust/satisfaction. We organised the variables by aggregating values from 0 to 3 (dissatisfaction/distrust); 4–6 (neither trust nor distrust/neither dissatisfied not

Figure 1 shows satisfaction with how democracy works. It is clear that before 2008 the level of those dissatisfied with democracy was much lower than of those who were indifferent or satisfied. During the crisis years, this trend was changed drastically, with those dissatisfied outnumbering the other two groups. Still, a reversal of this trend has been witnessed since 2016. The number of dissatisfied people fell, only to rise again in the pandemic years. In 2022, the number of people dissatisfied with democracy was on the same level as before the 2008 crisis, while the number of satisfied people also increased sharply to reach its highest level since 2002.

Figure 1: (Dis)satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Slovenia
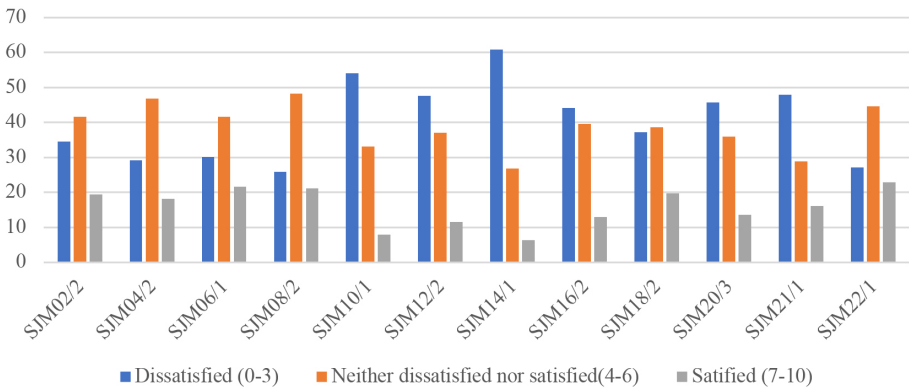
Source: Author's own compilation based on Slovenian Public Opinion Research programme data (Toš 2018, 2021; CRJMMK 2023)

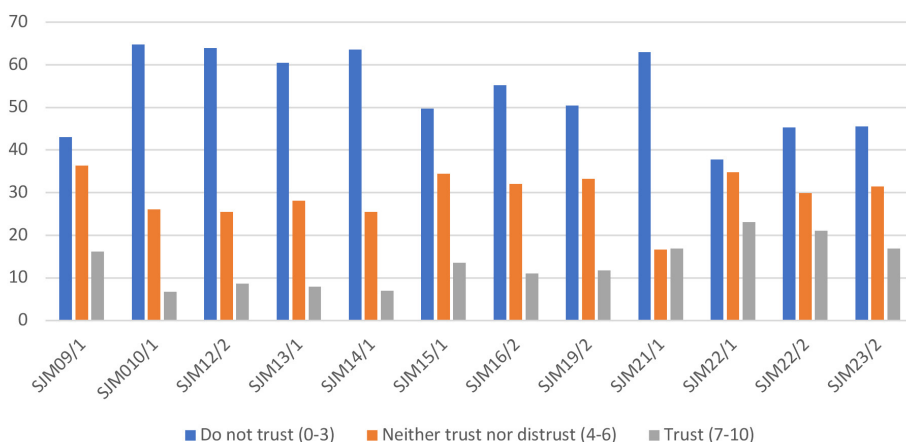**Figure 2: (Dis)trust in the National Assembly in Slovenia**

Source: Author's own compilation based on Slovenian Public Opinion Research programme data (Toš 2018, 2021; CRJMMK 2023)

satisfied) and the values from 7 to 10 (trust/satisfied). This was done with all the variables presented here, making the data more comprehensible.

Figure 2 displays data concerning trust in the National Assembly, the most important political institution and the one with the most important legitimising function in the institutional framework of the liberal democracy in Slovenia. The data show that after 2002 the share of those without trust in the National Assembly was quite high at around 40%, but that the other two blocs combined were larger; whereas the share of those who neither had trust nor distrust was at least as high as the share of those expressing distrust. Further, the proportion of those who distrusted the National Assembly dropped to just above 30% shortly before the outbreak of the crisis, while the share of those distrusting the National Assembly remained consistently above 50% between 2010 and 2021, rising to almost 70% in 2018. Consequently, the share of those trusting the National Assembly fell significantly – in 2008, when the new social democratic government assumed office, it increased to almost 20%, only to drop to below 10% by 2021, while the share of those trusting the National Assembly has remained above 10% since 2022.

Figure 3: (Dis)trust in the government in Slovenia

Source: Author's own compilation based on Slovenian Public Opinion Research programme data (Toš 2018, 2021; CRJMMK 2023)

Figure 3 presents data regarding trust in the government in Slovenia. It is evident that from 2010 to 2022 (when the new liberal government took office) the share of those distrusting the government constantly exceeded 50%, and in many years even 60%. This changed in 2022 with the new liberal government assuming office, when the share of those who expressed trust went up to above 20%, while the share of those who distrusted was below 40%, and since 2022 the share of those distrusting the government has increased to around 45%.

Figures 4 and 5 show data from opinion polls concerning (distrust in) politicians and political parties. Distrust in politicians and political parties

Figure 4: (Dis)trust in politicians in Slovenia

Source: Author's own compilation based on Slovenian Public Opinion Research programme data (Toš 2018, 2021; CRJMMK 2023)

Figure 5: (Dis)trust in political parties in Slovenia
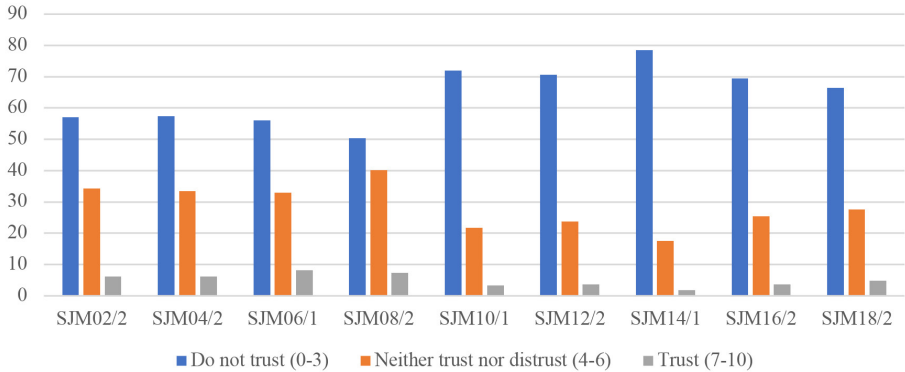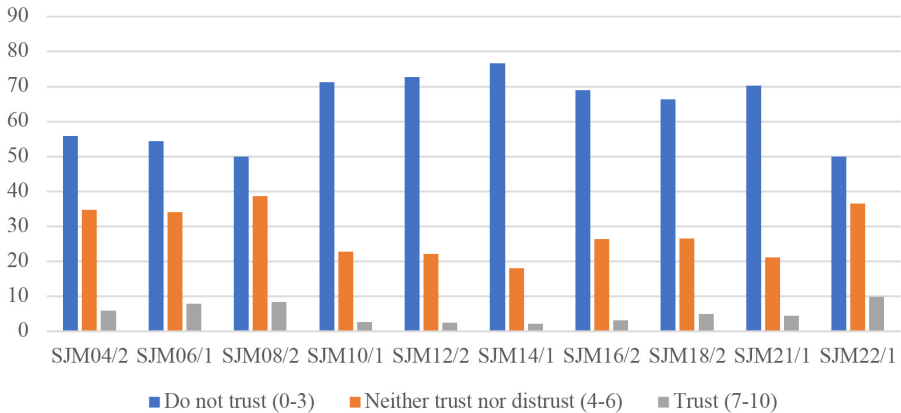

Source: Author's own compilation based on Slovenian Public Opinion Research programme data (Toš 2018, 2021; CRJMMK 2023)

was already very high before the crisis, although the proportion of distrustful people was just over 50%. In these two areas, however, the proportion of those distrusting politicians and political parties increased sharply during and after the 2008 crisis. The data suggest that the share of those who distrusted politicians and political parties exceeded 60% or even 70% between 2010 and 2021, while the share of those distrusting political parties dropped to 50% in 2022.

Distrust in the crucial liberal-democratic institutions in Slovenia is very pronounced, yet distrust in politicians and political parties has been even more apparent. There is an overlap between the period of the 2008 crisis and

the years immediately following and the highest levels of distrust/dissatisfaction with key political institutions and democracy. Moreover, these trends did not change much before the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though some decrease in levels of distrust/dissatisfaction may be observed, they were generally still importantly higher than prior to 2008. More importantly, although since 2013 onwards Slovenia has been doing better economically, it only reached the pre-2008 crisis GDP level in 2017. Some shifts occurred in the period 2020–2022 and after 2022. Initially, the trends changed during the pandemic and due to the particular militaristic way the right-wing populist Janša government was dealing with the pandemic (mistrust in the both government and the National Assembly rose strongly again). After the elections in 2022, levels of political distrust decreased to reach similar levels to those before the 2008 crisis for the first time, while increasing again since 2022.

In addition, there is a clear trend towards declining voter turnout up until the elections to the National Assembly in 2022. At the first democratic elections in 1990, voter turnout was very high at 83.5%, while in 1992 – the first elections since the country's independence – it rose to 85%. After the 1996 elections, however, there was initially a gradual and then a steep decline: from 73.7% to just 51.73% in 2014 and 52.64% in 2018. In 2022, given the special situation, dissatisfaction with the management of the pandemic and the scandals affecting the third government under Janez Janša, coupled with the strong mobilisation of civil society against the Janša government (ongoing protests against the government lasted over 1 year), voter turnout increased to over 70%, which

Table 1: Voter turnout in Slovenia (in %)

Year	National Assembly Elections	Year	Presidential (first round)	Presidential (second round)
1990	83.5	1992	85.84	
1992	85.6	1997	68.29	
1996	73.7	2002	72.07	65.39
2000	70.14	2007	57.67	58.46
2004	60.65	2012	48.41	42.41
2008	63.1	2017	44.24	42.13
2011	65.6	2022	51.74	53.6
2014	51.73			
2018	52.64			
2022	70.97			

Source: State Election Commission (2025)

was a very important change. A similar situation occurred with the presidential elections. In the 1990s and up to the 2002 elections, voter turnout was quite high, above or around 70%. At the 2007 elections, it dropped to below 60%, while in 2012 and 2017 it was well below 50%. Only the most recent elections saw an increase, with turnout just exceeding 50% in both rounds, which is in line with the repoliticisation of society that was also observed during the 2022 National Assembly elections.

Changes in the party arena: The rise of new liberal parties and their quick demise

Apart from the quantitative changes reflected in opinion polls and derivable from voter turnout, there have been qualitative changes in the functioning of the democracy that call for separate consideration. Since 2007, a new liberal party has emerged before every election to the National Assembly that has either won the elections or became the largest coalition party.

This trend began with the split of the newly founded Zares from the LDS in 2007. Zares was a party led by Gregor Golobič, who for many years was a prominent member of the LDS and a close ally of Janez Drnovšek. In the 2008 elections, the LDS won more than 9% of the vote and became the second biggest coalition party after the SD. Nonetheless, the government collapsed under the pressure of the 2008 crisis, the many internal disputes and problems within the government, and the strong trade unions that were able to block several important austerity measures.

After it became clear that the LDS was unable to reinvent itself politically, and that Zares had also lost its support, a new party was founded just a few weeks before the 2011 elections: Zoran Janković's list – Pozitivna Slovenija (PS). This novel party managed to win the elections despite not having any real party infrastructure and only a very broad and vague party programme. The party won 28.5% of the vote, mainly thanks to the strong support of the liberal intellectual and cultural elite, while its leader, the former CEO of Mercator, the country's largest retail company, has served as the mayor of Ljubljana since 2006. In addition, another important party emerged in the political centre – Gregor Virant, a former minister in the government of Janez Janša in the 2004–2008 term, established his own party and attracted 8.37% of the vote. This was remarkable given that these two completely new parties together received almost 37% of the total vote. Notwithstanding its election victory in 2011, PS did not manage to form a government, but the second-placed SDS was able to form a broad coalition. Yet, this coalition barely lasted one year, and when it fell apart a new government was established under the leadership of PS – but now it was Alenka Bratušek rather than Janković who became the prime minister, which also created intra-party divisions (Fink-Hafner 2020; Hočevar 2020).

The split within the party founded by Zoran Janković already hinted at possible new shifts on the liberal political spectrum. The 'danger' of the possibility of a new government led by Janez Janša saw history repeat itself. Immediately before the new elections, another two new important political parties emerged. Following the split in PS, Alenka Bratušek, the then prime minister, set up her own party: Zavezništvo Alenke Bratušek (ZAB). Yet, since it was clear that PS and the newly founded ZAB could not repeat the overwhelming victory of PS in 2011, Miro Cerar, a well-known law professor, established a new party called the Party of Miro Cerar, which was later renamed the Party of the Modern Centre (with both names using the acronym SMC in Slovenian). The party managed to win a large majority under the proportional representation system and attracted 34.5% of the vote. ZAB, in contrast, achieved 4.38% of the vote and only just managed to enter the National Assembly. The government managed to hold on almost until the end of its term, but a few months before the official end the prime minister resigned and opinion polls in spring 2018 revealed a sharp drop in support (Malčič & Krašovec 2019; Fink-Hafner 2020; Krašovec & Broder 2020).

After the opinion polls showed a drastic decrease in support for SMC, the mayor of Kamnik and loser of the 2017 presidential elections – Marjan Šarec – stepped onto the national political stage with his new party Lista Marjana Šarca (LMŠ). Still, LMŠ did not manage to achieve a similar share of the vote as PS in 2011 or SMC in 2014. It received a mere 12.6% of the vote, while the victorious right-wing SDS attracted almost 25%. However, since SMC had not (yet) completely disappeared – it received almost 10% – and SAB just over 5%, the liberal parties managed to form a minority party together with the Social Democrats, which was supported by The Left. Prime Minister Šarec resigned in early 2020, only days before the COVID-19 pandemic began, over the failed healthcare and health insurance reforms that paved the way for the two years of the third Janša government at the time of the pandemic.

In the 2022 elections, when it seemed that no new party would emerge and the Social Democrats could be victorious again on the liberal spectrum, Robert Golob entered the political stage, took over a smaller quasi-green party, and renamed it Gibanje Svoboda, which won 34.5% of the vote and became the biggest coalition party. It should be noted, however, that the three former liberal parties – ZAB/SAB, SMC and LMŠ – did not manage to clear the 4% threshold and did not enter the National Assembly. After the elections, SAB and LMŠ merged with the new Gibanje Svoboda (Fink-Hafner 2024).

This pattern clearly shows that the dynamics and changes in the party-political arena in Slovenia have been rapid and radical: New parties emerge just a few months or weeks before elections, win them or become the largest coalition party, only to quickly lose voter support and disappear. While this trend indicates important distrust in politics, the pattern has continued for over

a decade now, and thus the question arises: What is the cause of this pattern? And why have we seen a dramatic rise in political distrust and dissatisfaction and a significant drop in voter turnout since 2008?

Why the distrust in politics in Slovenia since 2008?

To explain the above-mentioned tendencies with regard to (dis)trust in political institutions, one must focus on the social and economic processes in Slovenia and the growing tensions between social expectations and the policies implemented. Indeed, the social and economic dimensions that were the vital elements of Slovenia's transition to a capitalist economy have been transformed since 2008.

Political and institutional changes influencing the welfare state

In our empirical analysis, we first discuss three institutional changes that clearly signal the crumbling class compromise and the changes in the political goals of the key political actors. The changing balance of power, the shrinking differences between the parties and the special role played by the EU since 2008 have substantially influenced the political decisions and policy options in Slovenia.

The qualitative change to the corporatist institutional framework

Changes in the balance of power within society have contributed significantly to the political developments in Slovenia. Union density has declined since the mid-1990s and today is only around 20%, with considerable differences between public and private sector unions (union density is much lower in the private sector and much higher in the public sector). Critically, unions have become more focused on the institutional arrangements and access to elite political networks, neglecting broader working-class coalitions while concentrating on the narrow interests of their membership. Despite initially blocking the austerity measures during the government of Borut Pahor, after 2011 they accepted the cuts, austerity, privatisation and liberalisation. The social partnership position of the trade unions became ever more counterproductive for their members during the crisis as they negotiated concessions and prioritised the interests of capital, the EU and the financial markets. The social pacts of the 1990s were replaced by fewer concessions for the working class (Stanojević & Krašovec 2011, 2022; Stanojević 2014, 2015).

The institutional framework has remained intact – the Economic and Social Council was not dissolved, and cooperation between trade unions and employers' representatives remains in place. However, the most important political decisions in the period 2008–2011 were generally made outside this framework,

while the 2012 pension reform and 2013 labour market reform were adopted following social dialogue. Since then, all important labour market, employment and social policy measures have been implemented within the neo-corporatist framework after a lengthy consultation phase (Bembič 2018).

While the trade unions maintained their formal social partnership role, their actions shifted to narrow economism. Moreover, the strength and role of the trade unions was altered, while their subsequent involvement of public sector trade unions in the austerity measures since 2012 have eroded the legitimacy of the trade unions, in turn destabilising the entire neo-corporatist system. The declining trade union density and the external pressures during the crisis years (2008–2013) have importantly reduced the unions' capacity to influence the agenda setting of the policymaking processes. The trade unions were those fostering the implementation of strong social-democratic values, as may be seen in the different surveys. The social-democratic policies, based on the coincidence of the interests of the dominant social bloc and the strength of the unions, were in step fostering the relatively high trust, or at least lower levels of distrust in political institutions. Once the strength of the unions started to decline following the changes in the sphere of production, their capacity to actively influence the policymaking decreased which, during the 2008 crisis and the external pressures, led to the curtailment of the welfare state.

Crucially, while since 2017 the Economic Social Council has again started to adopt more social policies, this has not been the result of strong trade unions, but mainly the important position held by the party of The Left (the minimum wage law was passed without interference from the ESC), which initially supported the minority government until 2018–2020 and has been part of the new liberal government since 2022 (Hočevar 2024a, 2024b).

Role of the European Union

The country joining the EU was one of the most important international political goals of successive governments, and its realisation also added to trust and legitimacy. Yet, it also led to a shift away from the neo-corporatist class compromise towards greater liberalisation and deregulation even before the 2008 crisis, although that crisis brought about important new changes. The EU has served as an '"engine" of liberalisation' (Streeck 1998: 430) since its inception, always calling for more market-friendly policies and reduced union strength. Although the EU advocated for institutional tripartite bodies, the primacy of economic and fiscal policy and austerity demands during and after the 2008 crisis never truly allowed organised labour to achieve the policy outcomes typical of the post–Second World War period (Baccaro & Howell 2017).

In the 2008 crisis and thereafter, the EU demanded strict austerity measures and cuts in social benefits so as to stabilise the euro and make countries comply

with the Maastricht criteria (Hočevar 2024a, 2024b). Since 2017, the EU has taken a pro-social stance by adopting numerous directives. In addition, the EU was the key player in securing employment during the pandemic by setting up the SURE mechanism and helping the member states survive the economic shock (Huguenot-Noël & Corti 2024). Nevertheless, the fundamental element of the EU remains the liberalisation and deregulation of markets, while the infamous flexicurity concept, which in reality promoted less employment security in order to strengthen economic competition, still lies at the core of the EU's employment policy (DIGI EMPL 2025).

EU rules and policies provided an external framework for the particular policy choices in Slovenia, although the main political actors also tended to have pro-market policies or had no political programme of their own and adopted technocratic, never-neutral, but mostly pro-market reforms. On the other hand, the so-called liberal and left-wing parties held a decisive role in these processes.

Shrinking differences between parties

The changing balance of power between the trade unions and capital and the EU's political framework have played an important role in the Slovenian political context and in the diminishing differences in social and economic issues and goals among the political parties. At least since 2004, and certainly 2008, the biggest and strongest political parties have had very similar economic and social policies and political goals (Hočevar 2025).

It should not be overlooked that the crucial changes in the social, labour market and employment policies – which initially led to an increase in precarity, unemployment and flexibility – were later eased due to the structural needs of the labour market (not enough workers) and curtailment of the welfare state. However, some important measures have still been in place, like the reduced period of eligibility for unemployment benefits, stricter eligibility conditions for unemployment benefits, conditionality of social assistance for ALMP – all were actually adopted and implemented by different liberal governments (Hočevar 2024a).

Even though it is true that the largest austerity package was adopted by the right-wing government in 2012, it was not until 2018 that these effects were eased, notwithstanding that liberal governments had an opportunity to change the direction of the policy interventions. These decisive fiscal austerity measures were all implemented by governments led by liberal parties or the Social Democrats, and were also supported by the two biggest right-wing parties (SDS, NSi). Accordingly, the content of the political ideas, programmes and proposals did not vary so much, while the tone and extent to which they supported pro-capital policies did (Hočevar 2021; Hočevar 2024a).

One area revealing a big difference between the liberal parties and the right--wing parties is the minimum wage. The right-wing parties strongly resisted the new definition and such large increases, whereas the liberal parties were pressured to accept the increase as they needed support from The Left (Hočevar 2025).

Social and economic outcomes amid the crumbling class compromise since 2008

The three political and institutional changes explained above have triggered very important changes in Slovenia since 2008. The nature of the welfare state began to change rapidly after 2008, while some noteworthy provisions adopted during the crisis remain in force. Critically, the specific policy measures imposed since 2008 have led to a substantial increase in social and economic inequalities, while the number of people living below the poverty line has gone up since 2008.

From the welfare state to the workfare state after 2008

The earliest response to the 2008 crisis was neo-Keynesian – the Social Democrat–led government first introduced a short-time working scheme and lifted the minimum wage, which was seen as a compromise with the trade unions, which were expected to accept other austerity measures and workfare reforms. Yet, in 2010 the government wished to introduce wage cuts in the public sector, but the trade unions were opposed to those measures. This led to the unilateral termination of public sector collective agreements (which, however, was quickly, overturned) and the introduction of wage freezes, promotions and lower holiday pay in the public sector (Bembič 2017, 2018).

Simultaneously, the government intended to adopt and implement structural reforms. First, the government introduced important changes to the social security system aimed at introducing activation principles, limiting transfers and tightening eligibility criteria. Most importantly, social benefits were transformed to some kind of credit system, with the state becoming entitled to the beneficiaries' assets after their death: 'According to the new law, people were not allowed to sell, donate or encumber their real estate. As a result of such a policy, fewer and fewer people applied for a welfare allowance and there was a sharp drop in the amount of such funds paid out' (Hočevar 2024a: 178). Second, the left-wing government wanted to introduce a labour market reform with the goal of greater employment flexibility. It sought to implement the 'small work' law following the German example. The third reform was reform of the pension system, which aimed to extend working life. These second and third reforms were blocked by the trade unions, yet the government managed to push through the new social security system.

After the Budget Balancing Act in 2012, Janez Janša's government introduced a strict austerity programme. The new law introduced a series of wage cuts, pension cuts, cuts to parent benefits and other social benefits, as well as a tightening of eligibility requirements for social transfers. In 2013, when the new government led by Alenka Bratušek assumed office it decided on a new linear cut in public sector wages. Further, the changes in labour market regulation and collective bargaining led to greater decentralisation and the liberalisation of employment (Hočevar 2024a, 2024b).

In this period (2008 to 2013), there was a substantial rise in atypical employment (precarious employment) (Kanjuo-Mrčela & Ignjatović 2015) and unemployment as such (notably among young people). The reforms 'in the labour market went in the direction of greater flexibility and the loss of some established rights (less protection for workers with open-ended contracts)' (Filipovič Hrast & Kopač Mrak 2016: 714), although the 2013 reform also introduced greater protection for atypical forms of employment. The country repeatedly fell into recession due to the austerity measures, problems with the export sector (following the crisis in other countries) and low investment and bank lending (Bembič 2018; Hočevar 2025).

Still, since 2016 and especially 2018, certain important changes have been made in the area of the welfare state. First, a new definition of the minimum wage was introduced. In 2019, a new minimum wage regulation was passed, but without it having been discussed in the Economic and Social Affairs Council. The minority government, which was supported by The Left, introduced these changes. During the pandemic, the government spent considerable sums of money on promoting employment (two different employment promotion programmes were introduced). If we focus on the government's various expenditures in the different areas of social care, we can obtain a picture of the financial provisions and expenditures of the state.

If we observe general government expenditure, it becomes clear that the share of GDP accounted for by the various types of expenditure has not increased over the years, but declined. In 2000, government social protection expenditure was 17.8%, while in 2022 it was 17.6% and has never risen above 19.6%. Healthcare spending was consistently below 7% until the pandemic, before increasing for obvious reasons. General government spending on education as a proportion of GDP has fallen to below 6%, while spending on housing has remained at around 0.5%.

However, the data do not reveal all there is about the functioning and performance of the welfare state. Several subsystems have changed dramatically in the last three decades, and notably since the 2008 crisis, where the lack of regulation and proactive government action have caused very serious societal problems. Two areas stand out here: the health system, its privatisation, and the problems with accessibility to health services, medical examinations and

Table 2: General government expenditure by function (as % of GDP) – Slovenia

	Social protection		Healthcare		Education		Housing	
	EUR million	% of GDP	EUR million	% of GDP	EUR million	% of GDP	EUR million	% of GDP
2000	3363.4	17.8	1249.2	6.6	1155.8	6.1	120.7	0.6
2001	3738.0	17.7	1415.5	6.7	1354.1	6.4	135.9	0.6
2002	4170.6	17.7	1582.3	6.7	1512.3	6.4	132.6	0.6
2003	4514.4	17.6	1701.7	6.6	1617.5	6.3	137.5	0.5
2004	4831.5	17.5	1790.3	6.5	1760.1	6.4	150.4	0.5
2005	5149.9	17.7	1872.9	6.4	1895.2	6.5	158.3	0.5
2006	5397.0	17.1	1989.8	6.3	1997.9	6.3	192.6	0.6
2007	5690.0	16.2	2077.5	5.9	2059.9	5.9	206.6	0.6
2008	6251.2	16.5	2340.6	6.2	2290.3	6.0	300.6	0.8
2009	6667.9	18.4	2513.7	6.9	2402.4	6.6	287.9	0.8
2010	6979.1	19.2	2493.3	6.9	2351.7	6.5	251.0	0.7
2011	7247.6	19.6	2587.6	7.0	2368.0	6.4	234.8	0.6
2012	7059.3	19.5	2511.2	6.9	2314.4	6.4	272.1	0.8
2013	7115.5	19.5	2472.8	6.8	2342.9	6.4	267.3	0.7
2014	7055.7	18.7	2440.5	6.5	2246.1	6.0	330.8	0.9
2015	7103.4	18.3	2591.8	6.7	2168.7	5.6	222.2	0.6
2016	7132.3	17.6	2709.5	6.7	2240.2	5.5	161.6	0.4
2017	7326.7	17.0	2821.6	6.6	2338.0	5.4	208.0	0.5
2018	7610.3	16.6	2994.5	6.5	2467.1	5.4	205.8	0.4
2019	7976.3	16.4	3230.9	6.7	2607.1	5.4	201.2	0.4
2020	8763.8	18.6	3763.5	8.0	2641.6	5.6	273.2	0.6
2021	9228.1	17.7	4303.8	8.2	3036.9	5.8	279.7	0.5
2022	10032.1	17.6	4344.4	7.6	3217.8	5.6	272.4	0.5

Source: Eurostat (2025)

interventions; and the provision of public housing, given the complete takeover of the housing market by private investors and the large rise in the price of housing and rent, which is a major problem for young people.

Rising inequalities during and after the 2008 crisis

A look at the Gini coefficient of income inequality shows Slovenia is one of the most egalitarian countries in the world. The coefficient was stable at around 0.23. During the crisis and immediately thereafter, it rose to 0.25, but since 2015 it has fallen back to the pre-crisis level.

Figure 6: Gini coefficient of income inequality in Slovenia

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income after social transfers	0.238	0.237	0.232	0.234	0.227	0.238	0.238	0.237	0.244

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
0.25	0.245	0.244	0.237	0.234	0.239	0.235	0.23	0.213	0.234

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2025a)

Figure 7: Poverty in Slovenia

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
At-risk-of-poverty rate (% of persons)	12.2	11.6	11.5	12.3	11.3	12.7
Number of persons at-risk-of-poverty	238,000	233,000	225,000	241,000	223,000	254,000

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
13.6	13.5	14.5	14.5	14.3	13.9	13.3	13.3
273,000	271,000	291,000	290,000	287,000	280,000	268,000	268,000

| 2020	2021	2022	2023
12.4	11.7	12.1	12.7
254,000	243,000	251,000	264,000

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2025b)

Still, a longer view reveals a slightly different picture. Between 1980 and 2017, the average real income (after taxes) in Slovenia increased by 12%. This paints quite a bleak picture of just 0.3% per year. Those in the top 1% of the population, i.e. the 1% with the highest income, however, received 128% more in 2017 than in 1980 whereas the bottom 40% of the population received 7% less in 2017 than in 1980. Looking at the period from 2007 to 2017, the picture again differs from the general picture of low income inequality. In this 10-year period, the top 1% received 35% more than in 2007, while the bottom 40% received around 6% less. This shows the winners of the 2008 crisis were those already with the highest incomes (Klanjšek 2020).

The number of people at risk of poverty has risen considerably. In 2005, 238,000 people were at risk of poverty, while in 2023 there were 264,000 such people, with the percentage of people at risk of poverty being stable having increased during the crisis but returning to pre-crisis levels today.

The top 1% of society saw a significant rise in their wealth share during and after the 2008 crisis, and the top 10% of society also saw their wealth share increase. In comparison, the bottom 50% saw a decline in their wealth share and the middle 40% of society a sharp decline in their wealth share, clearly indicating the decline of the middle class and the end of the specific class compromise established in the 1990s.

Figure 8: Wealth inequality in Slovenia
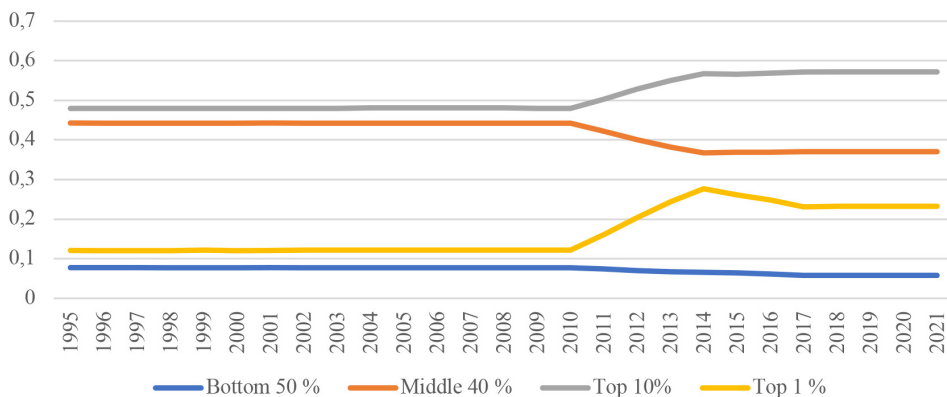
Source: World Inequality Database (2025)

Figure 9: Gini coefficient of wealth inequality in Slovenia

Source: World Inequality Database (2025)

It is thus no surprise that the Gini coefficient of wealth inequality is much higher than that of income inequality. This is the case in all countries around the world. Nonetheless, the trend with wealth inequality is clear – i.e. wealth inequality has increased significantly. The Gini coefficient for wealth inequality rose from 0.66 to 0.74 between 2009 and 2017 and has remained stable ever since.

These processes are in stark contrast to the strong egalitarian values present in Slovenian society. Observing the survey data from the Slovenian Public Opinion Research Programme, the majority of respondents have consistently expressed the feeling that inequalities are too high, that taxes are too low for those on the highest incomes and that they expect the government to take action and reduce income inequality in the population (Toš 2018, 2021).

Political distrust and the problem of political legitimacy in Slovenia

Several authors have already pointed to important changes that have appeared since the 2008 crisis, while trust and satisfaction with the functioning of key political institutions have fallen significantly in public opinion surveys. Arguments such as problems with responsiveness, corruption, crisis, the EU, political representation and populism have all been discussed in the context of the rise of political distrust in Slovenia (Krašovec & Johannsen 2016, 2017; Haček & Brezovšek 2013; Fink-Hafner & Novak 2021). Our analysis sheds light on new elements that explain the rise of distrust in political institutions.

We identify three factors (declining strength of the trade unions, role of the EU and the shrinking inter-party differences) that have contributed to the mentioned political outcomes and changes (changes to the welfare state and the increase in economic inequalities). These processes have been in stark contrast to the class compromise from the 1990s and created the specific framework in which political mistrust and discontent are expressed, leading to the broader problem of political legitimacy.

Beneath these changes in Slovenia have been policies aimed at neoliberalisation of the economy and society (Podvršič 2023; Hočevar 2024a). As we have

demonstrated, the core Slovenian political actors – not out of will – but because of the specific structure of the Slovenian economy and the power resources possessed by organised labour (Crowley & Stanojević 2011; Stanojević & Krašovec 2011) were actually trying to recreate a developmental trend which had come to its end in Western Europe by the 1990s. Yet, since 2004 and especially 2008, as a result of the EU's policy framework, the unions declining strength and the shrinking differences between political parties, which accepted the neoliberal credo in an ever changing political landscape, the prevalence of market logic, non-interference in the regulation of the markets and the fear or self-interest of politicians not to introduce higher taxes for the wealthiest so as to secure more funds necessary for the welfare state's sustainability and to reduce inequalities have led to rising distrust.

In this respect, the crisis of 2008 appears to be a critical breaking point, even though important changes had already begun to appear before (Podvršič 2023). However, it is not the crisis itself that has led to the greater distrust, but the policy choices made within the particular international and national political framework and the political and social power relations that have produced such policy outcomes, which have been detrimental to trust in political institutions. This is a consequence of the 2008 crisis, which has been used in Slovenia to distance the distributional conflict away from popular politics.[3]

What we can also observe is that even though the public opinion survey figures show a decline in political distrust and dissatisfaction, these numbers are very volatile and vary depending on the respective governing coalition. Other important aspects of political distrust and problems of legitimacy reveal more robust trends – especially the element of the high volatility of liberal political parties. The current liberal government also enjoys a low support among the population, while new (possibly strong and important parties) are already emerging and the biggest coalition party has lost over half of its votes since the last election (CRJMMK 2023; Božič 2025).

In any case, this is not surprising given that the rise of the new liberal parties has also been a consequence of the importance of the political figure and strength of Janez Janša, who has been a constant in the Slovenian political arena since the late 1980s. Janša has sparked considerable controversy with his right-wing populist rhetoric that also served as one of the main means of mobilising voters against him. Due to dissatisfaction with the freshly formed and ruling liberal parties, which pursued policies that added to inequalities and reshaped the welfare state – which also led to the distrust in politics as such and problems with political legitimacy – new political actors sensed an opportunity to take their place without investing in a party structure or coherent political programmes, but mainly playing the card that voting for them would prevent

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3   For the general argument, see Streeck 2011, 2014.

Janez Janša's victory. This was most evident in the 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2022 elections, which has caused the hollowing out of the political and ideological orientation of the liberal political parties that were pursuing very similar economic and social policies to Janša, while clearly differing from the right-wing SDS in its minority and identity politics (Hughton, Krašovec & Cutts 2024; Fink-Hafner 2024; Novak & Lajh 2023; Hočevar 2025).

The declining political trust in Slovenia has also paved the path for the rise of populist parties that exploit the dissatisfaction and disappointment with the existing political institutions, especially their social and economic outcomes. This may be seen in the persistently strong voting base of Janez Janša, who has combined strong anti-minority politics, nationalist and traditionalist welfare policies with a view to regaining additional voter support (Benczes 2022, 2024; Šiljak 2024).

While the rise in inequalities and changes to the welfare state have been taken up by political parties or state authorities, the reforms they have introduced are quite limited or do not significantly alter the situation in terms of inequalities. The most recent examples of such reforms, which did not have any great impact on inequalities, were adopted by the current government. The original proposal (which is under public discussion) to implement a new property tax would not tax the richest more – those living in multi-million-dollar homes – on the condition that the owners have also registered their residence there. In contrast, those who own two or more smaller and low-value homes would pay additional tax on those homes where they are not registered as living. The proposal would in fact be used to increase the incomes of the richest through tax cuts for those on the highest incomes (this proposal would give even more to the richest than the tax reform from the third Janša government, which was much more openly neoliberal) (Tarča 2025). A similar situation occurred with the case of the mandatory health insurance contribution introduced in 2024: Supplementary health insurance was transformed to become a mandatory health insurance contribution, but those on the highest incomes actually pay the least because it is deducted from personal income tax (Kordež 2025).

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the structural context and policy outcomes that have caused the rise of political distrust in Slovenia and the multidimensional nature of this problem. The presented analysis shows the importance of the changing economic and welfare context for understanding the problem of political (dis)trust in Slovenia. One of the main pillars of political stability and the democratic transition was the specific class compromise and the construction of a strong welfare state and egalitarian society. These underlying pillars have been dismantled since the country joined the EU and, notably, since the crisis

of 2008 due to the changes made to the political and institutional settings as well as the altered class power relations.

Slovenia is certainly not a unique case given that declining trust in politics has been a common European trend, which has only been exasperated with the poly-crisis structural setting and changes in power relations and political goals. Still, certain unique trends can be observed in Slovenia, especially the trend of the new (victorious) liberal parties having been established before every parliamentary election. Moreover, the changes in the political structures and policy outcomes were serious – the strong welfare state and corporatist institutional arrangements were adapted to new neoliberal and crisis-induced realities, resulting in less pro-social policies while transforming the welfare state more into workfare arrangements. Ever since the crisis, economic inequalities in Slovenia have also grown significantly, which contradicts the egalitarian social and economic values held in society. The class compromise began crumbling after at least 2008 (although the first cracks already started appearing around 2004) and has never been restored and a new developmental and social consensus has not been formed. The decoupling of the welfare state and the rising inequalities within a fairly egalitarian society, the hollowing out primarily of the political parties, along with their ideological similarity, have thus triggered broader problems with political trust and political legitimacy.

Although no attempt was made in the article to find any statistical (causal or correlational) explanation for the declining political trust, this might be a future step in this area as part of broader comparative research. Different elements of welfare state spending, the class position of different persons and their political preferences and attitudes to the main political institutions should be included in future (comparative) research so as to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the topic.

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Personality Traits, Trust in Institutions and Interpersonal Relationships Insights from Slovakia

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Abstract: *This paper examines the association between personality traits and trust. In this paper, trust is divided into two types: interpersonal and institutional. Both are fundamental for cohesion, reduction of social fragmentation, effective governance and institutional legitimacy. The literature primarily identifies personal experience and anticipated adherence to norms as key drivers of trust. In this context, understanding whether and how personality influences trust is crucial, as trust may be partially hereditary and thus only partly shaped by behaviour. This suggests that some population segments may remain distrustful, regardless of the efforts to build trustworthiness. Hence, this paper examines the effect of personality on trust in diverse entities. Personality traits are operationalised through the Big Five personality model. Effect of personality on both types of trust, i.e. institutional and interpersonal, is measured. For both types, subcategories of trustees are examined; for instance, friends and family are included in interpersonal trust subcategories. This paper focuses on the Slovak population and uses data from the World Values Survey. The results show that conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness are positively related to trust in certain institutions. On the other hand, interpersonal trust was positively related only to openness and agreeableness. Neuroticism has been negatively associated with both institutional and interpersonal trust.*

Keywords: *interpersonal trust, institutional trust, drivers of trust, Big 5 personality model, personality traits*

Introduction: Trust and personality

Trust is essential for social cohesion and democratic governance. It refers to the belief that the entity in whom we place our trust (hereby referred to as the trustee) – be it an individual, a group of people, or an institution – will uphold their commitments and act in good faith. Indeed, the social science literature divides trust into two types: interpersonal (Simpson 2007; Borum 2010; Rotter 1967; Larzelere & Huston 1980) and institutional (Bornstein & Tomkins 2015; Hudson 2006; Sønderskov & Dinesen 2016; Norris 2022). Both are necessary for an effectively functioning country. Interpersonal trust describes how people trust each other and is usually further divided into trust within the family, among friends and finally among people we do not know. This type of trust is foundational to personal interactions and relationships as well as social harmony in general. A deficit in interpersonal trust impedes communication and collaboration which often leads to the fragmentation of society into small camps (Kosnáč et al. 2024). In contrast, institutional trust describes the level of this sentiment towards various political and apolitical institutions, whether it be the government, parliament, political parties or more apolitical institutions like universities, courts, businesses, municipalities, religious organisations, media or scientific institutions. Trust in these institutions is crucial for their legitimacy and the general effective functioning of the society. A lack of trust in state institutions can, for instance, significantly hinder crisis management efforts. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, institutional mistrust led to resistance against public health recommendations such as quarantine guidelines or vaccination campaigns. Many individuals turned to alternative information sources which often amplified misinformation, further eroding public confidence. In contrast, trust in institutions facilitated greater acceptance of protective behaviours (Majid et al. 2021). Furthermore, trust is generally important with regards to citizens' political actions and decisions. A meta-analysis' findings indicate a weak to moderate correlation between trust and a range of outcomes, including voter turnout, voting choices, policy preferences and compliance with law (Devine 2024).

The literature has mainly identified personal experience and expected adherence to norms as the main drivers of trust (Brezzi et al. 2021). This paper explores the relationship between personality traits and trust, with a particular focus on the Slovak population. Investigating the potentially hereditary nature of trust is crucial, as some population segments may never trust institutions or other individuals regardless of their actions. We examine the influence of one's character, operationalised through the framework of the Big Five personality model, on trusting diverse institutions and the populace. The Big Five personality model, also known as the Five-Factor Model, is a widely recognised framework for understanding human personality. It measures personality traits

across five broad dimensions: 1) openness, characterised by inventiveness and curiosity as opposed to consistency and caution; 2) conscientiousness, marked by efficiency and organisation as contrasted with an easy-going and careless nature; 3) extraversion, defined by outgoingness and energy in contrast to solitude and reservedness; 4) agreeableness, reflecting compassion and cooperativeness as opposed to antagonism and detachment; and 5) neuroticism, denoting sensitivity and nervousness in contrast to resilience and confidence. Importantly, according to the theory underlying this model, all individuals possess each of these five traits but to varying degrees. Hence, our personalities are a unique blend of these dimensions.

The Big Five model is often considered the most robust model explaining personality (Poropat 2009) and it has been replicated across various demographics and cultures (Digman 1997; McCrae & Costa 1997). Unlike socioeconomic factors, which can shift rapidly and largely contextualise opportunities for trust, personality traits remain relatively stable over time (Costa & McCrae 1988; Costa 1992; Specht et al. 2011; Roberts et al. 2006). Thus, incorporating personality into the study of trust offers complementary insights that help explain individual differences in trust propensity even under similar structural conditions. By analysing how these psychological traits relate to trust in both institutions and other people, this study tests whether personality serves as a significant explanatory factor for trust at the national level.

Literature review

In this part, we will first present the literature review of personality's impact on social and political attitudes, which will lead us to hypotheses about their impact on trust. We are looking at both interpersonal and institutional trust. Since the analysis will use data from the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al. 2022), hypotheses will already include relevant existing categories of trustees from the survey.

Openness

Openness has been associated with higher levels of creative behaviour, willingness to try new things and social efficacy (Mondak 2008; George & Zhou 2001; Mak & Tran 2001). People who score high on the trait of openness tend to be more imaginative and have broader interests. They are often described as curious and adaptable and eager to engage with new ideas or environments, which enables them to flourish even in complex social and cultural settings. In contrast, low scores were associated with a practical and grounded approach (Costa 1992; Gerber et al. 2011). Furthermore, open people are more likely to embrace a cosmopolitan culture with diverse communities, practices and

perspectives (Gallego & Oberski 2012). Their openness often translates into a greater willingness to understand and appreciate viewpoints different from their own, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect. Research has also shown that openness relates negatively to discrimination against marginalised and historically oppressed groups (Cullen, Wright & Alessandri 2002; Duriez & Soenens 2006; Flynn 2005).

Aligned with these reasons, it is expected that people with higher levels of openness should also have higher levels of interpersonal trust. Indeed, Freitag and Bauer (2016) have shown this in a sample of the Swiss population. Their results showed significant associations between openness and trust in both familiar individuals and strangers. This suggests that openness may facilitate a more optimistic view of human nature, enhancing the willingness to rely on others regardless of prior interactions. Whether the trustee is a close family member, a neighbour, a known individual or an unknown individual, higher openness may lead to greater confidence in their intentions and reliability. Therefore, we hypothesise the following:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Openness is positively associated with interpersonal trust in all categories of trustees.

Conscientiousness

Conscientious people are logical, well-informed and typically view themselves as highly competent (Freitag & Bauer 2016; Gallego & Oberski 2012; McCrae & Costa 2003). Their strong features are planning, deliberation and ambition. Conscientious individuals often prioritise structure, reliability and a systematic approach. In contrast, individuals with low conscientiousness tend to behave more immaturely, carelessly and unpredictably (Freitag & Bauer 2016; McCrae & Costa 2003). Further, conscientiousness has been associated with multiple political attitudes. For instance, there is some support that higher conscientiousness is associated with more interest in politics and higher adherence to social norms (Gallego & Oberski 2012; Mondak & Halperin 2008). This adherence often translates into a preference for order and stability within societal systems. Conscientious people care about rule-following and conventionality. There has also been an association between conscientiousness and conservatism or dogmatic beliefs (Mondak & Halperin 2008). This relationship may reflect a preference for tradition and resistance to change which aligns with the structured and disciplined nature of conscientious individuals.

Since the literature connected conscientiousness with preferring the status quo, acting more according to the social norms, and even dogmatic belief, it could be assumed that conscientiousness is related to higher trust in certain

institutions. This connection likely stems from conscientious individuals' intrinsic appreciation for structure, order and stability. If institutions represent consistency, reliability and enforcement of rules, conscientious individuals should tend to trust them more. This trust is linked to the appreciation for the effectiveness of organised systems and a recognition of the importance of upholding social norms. Hence the second hypothesis is that conscientiousness is positively associated with institutional trust, but specifically, it is trust in the armed forces, police and courts because these represent stability, order and authority. Further, conscientious individuals probably tend to trust civil service as it represents the stable professional side of the public sector as opposed to institutions like parliament, government or political parties, which are more politicised and unstable.

> **Hypothesis 2:** Conscientiousness is positively associated with trust in the armed forces, police, courts and civil service.

Agreeableness

Agreeableness is linked to communal and pro-social orientation (Gallego & Oberski 2012). Agreeable people are more cooperative, conflict avoidant and sympathetic (Mondak & Halperin 2008). They engage more in volunteering and community building activities. This tendency reflects their innate desire to contribute to the well-being of others and foster a sense of belonging within their communities. They prefer harmonious relationships and are interested in community issues (Gerber et al. 2011). They can often serve as mediators or peacemakers in group dynamics, striving to maintain positive interpersonal connections. In terms of political attitudes, agreeableness has been related to higher civic participation or voter turnout but conditional on non-conflictual situations (Gallego & Oberski 2012; Mondak & Halperin 2008; Mondak et al. 2010). For instance, agreeable people might be more likely to join peaceful demonstrations but not boycotts or heated political debates. This aversion to confrontation stems from their strong preference for harmony. They are more inclined to support or engage in politics through consensus-building measures and dialogue rather than opposition.

Based on the literature review, we expect the trait of agreeableness to shape interpersonal trust, primarily increasing trust toward familiar trustees within communities. Agreeable people have a pro-social and empathetic nature but since they are focused on community building, it is likely that the bonds they foster are mainly within their immediate social networks. Further, since agreeableness fosters a preference for harmonious and non-confrontational interactions, individuals high in this trait are likely to trust institutions that reflect these values. By the same token, we anticipate an inverse relationship, meaning

there should be a negative association with institutions commonly linked to political conflict, such as parliament, government and political parties. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Agreeableness is negatively associated with trust in parliament, government and political parties.

Hypothesis 3b: Agreeableness is positively associated with close categories of trustees – that is, family and neighbourhood.

Extraversion

Extraversion refers to the degree to which people need social interaction (Gerber et al. 2011). People who are more extroverted derive more pleasure from social interactions. They are active, better networkers and outgoing (McCrae & Costa 2003; Mondak & Halperin 2008). On the other hand, introverts tend to be shyer and more reserved, preferring solitude or small groups. Extroverts are energised by the company of others and tend to seek out social settings that facilitate stimulating and dynamic interactions. As a result, extraversion is strongly related to group-based political activities, such as attending town hall meetings, where these traits are effectively engaged (McCrae & Costa 2003; Mondak & Halperin 2008; Gallego & Oberski 2012). Extraversion is also associated with certain forms of civic participation, such as campaigning, volunteering or community organising (Mondak & Halperin 2008). Extraverts tend to prefer political actions that involve teamwork and interpersonal communication. Such activities align with their preference for action-oriented, high-energy involvement and the opportunity to influence collective outcomes. Their preference to choose highly social situations often translates into an ability to build coalitions and mobilise support for shared goals.

Additionally, extraversion has been linked to a greater interest in politics and voting (Gallego & Oberski 2012; Gerber et al. 2011; Mondak & Halperin 2008). This association likely stems from extroverts' tendency to feel more connected to collective decision-making processes. Higher interest in voting could, in turn, foster greater trust in the elections. Furthermore, since extraverts are often involved in group-based political activities, they could trust labour unions more as these organisations align with their preference for collective action, collaboration and advocating for shared interests within a social framework. Therefore, Hypothesis 4a is that extroversion is positively associated with trust in elections and labour unions. Further, extraverts are more likely to have extensive social networks due to their outgoing and engaging nature. It is likely that their networks would include diverse individuals, exposing extroverts to varied perspectives which could foster inclusivity. Hence, Hypothesis 4b is that extro-

version is positively associated with interpersonal trust towards all categories of trustees, whether it is family, neighbours, known or unknown individuals.

> **Hypothesis 4a:** Extroversion is positively associated with trust in elections and labour unions.

> **Hypothesis 4b:** Extroversion is positively associated with interpersonal trust towards all categories of trustees.

Neuroticism

People with high neuroticism scores are likely to be more anxious and nervous (Mondak et al. 2010). Due to their tendency to experience negative emotions more frequently, such as fear, sadness and anger, their overall emotional stability is often compromised (McCrae & Costa 2003). This heightened emotional sensitivity often leads to overthinking and a tendency to dwell on potential risks or adverse outcomes, even in situations where such concerns may not be warranted. This emotional reactivity makes them more susceptible to stress in challenging situations. They often feel particularly vulnerable to perceived threats from unfamiliar individuals or groups outside their immediate social circles, heightening their sensitivity to any signs of discord or disruption within societal harmony (Gallego & Oberski 2012; Ackermann K. & Ackermann M. 2015).

When it comes to evaluating the trustworthiness of others, their predisposition toward anxiety leads them to foresee negative outcomes more frequently. This expectation of adverse scenarios fosters a general wariness in social interactions and drives a cautious and sceptical approach toward engaging with others. Neurotics often hesitate before forming close bonds. They frequently anticipate deceit or betrayal from others, which significantly diminishes their trust (Freitag & Bauer 2016). Hence, we expect neuroticism to be related to distrust in all categories of trustees but more so in the unknown groups as there are more unpredictable.

> **Hypothesis 5:** Neuroticism is negatively associated with interpersonal trust in all categories of trustees but more so for strangers.

Data and methodology

The data used in this paper focus on Slovakia and are derived from the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7, collected in 2022 (Haerpfer et al. 2022). The WVS employs computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), conducted face-to-face. The representative sample consists of 1,200 respondents from the non-institutionalised population of Slovakia, aged 18 years and older, and covering the entire country.

All WVS data, except the Big Five questionnaire, are publicly available. The Big Five questions were collected using a standardised 20-item Big Five questionnaire added to the WVS. These data are owned and curated by the DEKK Institute, which conducted the data collection. In preparation, negatively keyed items from the Big Five questionnaire were reversed for easier interpretation. Similarly, all scales from the WVS were reversed to gain positive scoring. Institutional trust items are measured on a 1–4 Likert scale, using the following question: 'I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence, or none at all?' Interpersonal trust is measured using the question: 'I'd like to ask you how much you trust people from various groups. Could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much or not at all?'

Building on prior literature review linking personality traits with political and social attitudes, this part of the paper empirically investigates the relationship between personality and trust through a series of linear regressions. Institutional trust variables include the armed forces, labour unions, police, courts, government, political parties, parliament, state and public administration, and elections. They were chosen for their representation of political or public sector institutions. Institutions such as media, banks or international organisations were excluded as they relate to non-state or geopolitical phenomena. By excluding these the study ensures conceptual clarity as the trust in chosen institutions is rooted in domestic political and administrative systems. For interpersonal trust, the dependent variables include trust in family, neighbourhood, people one knows and strangers. The control variables were age, income, education, gender and language, which was included to account for Slovakia's minority groups, such as Hungarians and the Roma.

Results

In this section, we present the results of the study, which models the relationship between trust and personality traits. We detail the outcomes of the regression analyses, both with and without control variables, to evaluate the hypotheses developed in the theoretical section.

Institutional Trust

For the institutional trust this paper argued for three hypotheses: conscientiousness is positively associated with trust in the armed forces, police, courts and civil service (Hypothesis 2); agreeableness is negatively associated with trust in parliament, government and political parties (Hypothesis 3a); and extroversion is positively associated with trust in elections and labour unions (Hypothesis 4a).

In Figure 1, we see that the linear regression results support Hypothesis 2 – that is, conscientiousness is positively associated with trust in the armed forces (β=0.15, SE=0.05, p<.01), police (β=0.15, SE=0.04, p<.001), courts (β=0.11, SE=0.05, p=.02) and civil service (β=0.09, SE=0.05, p=.04). It appears that conscientious individuals prefer institutions traditionally perceived as bearers of stability and order, and the professional side of the public sector – civil service. As we can see in Figure 2, after adding the control variables, conscientiousness remained positively associated with trust in the armed forces (β=0.13, SE=0.05, p<.01), police (β=0.14, SE=0.04, p<.001), courts (β=0.09, SE=0.05, p=.05) and civil service (β=0.08, SE=0.04, p=.06) though with slightly lower effects. Further, trust in the civil service also became less significant. In line with the theoretical expectations, Figure 3 shows that more politicised and fluctuating bodies, such as the parliament and government, do not show a significant association with conscientiousness. However, we see a positive association between conscientiousness and trust in labour unions (β=0.17, SE=0.06, p<.01) and elections (β=0.12, SE=0.05, p=.02). Figure 4 shows that the relationship remained significant after controls were added (labour unions β=0.14, SE=0.07, p=.04 and elections β=0.10, SE=0.05, p=.05).

Figure 1: Institutional trust in public sector
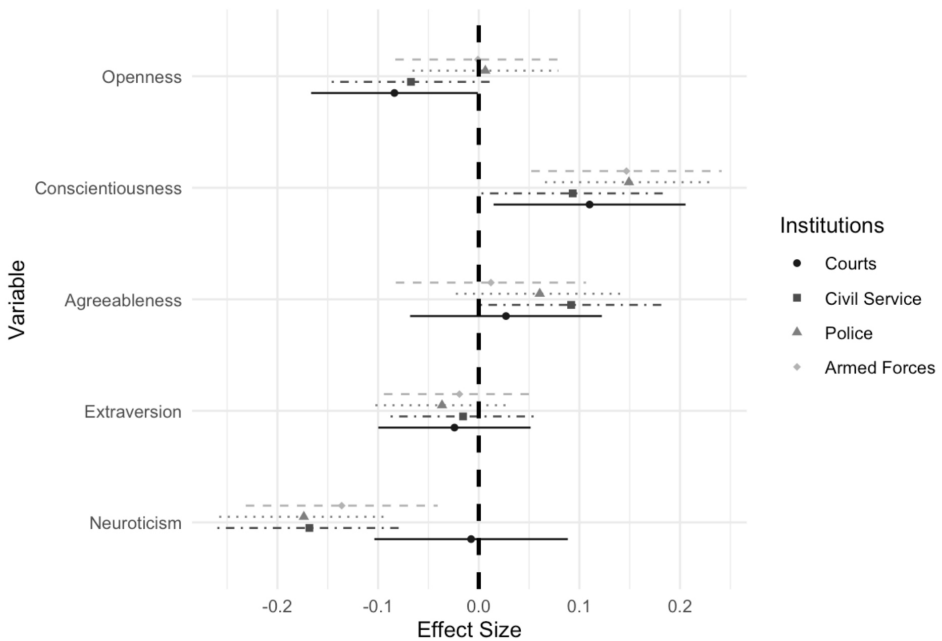
Source: Authors, based on data from WVS Database.
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals without control variables.
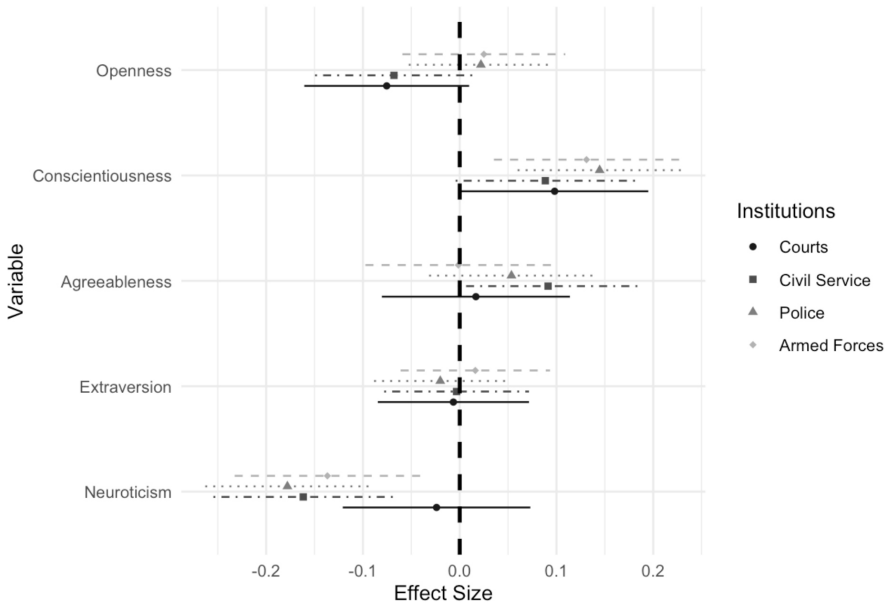
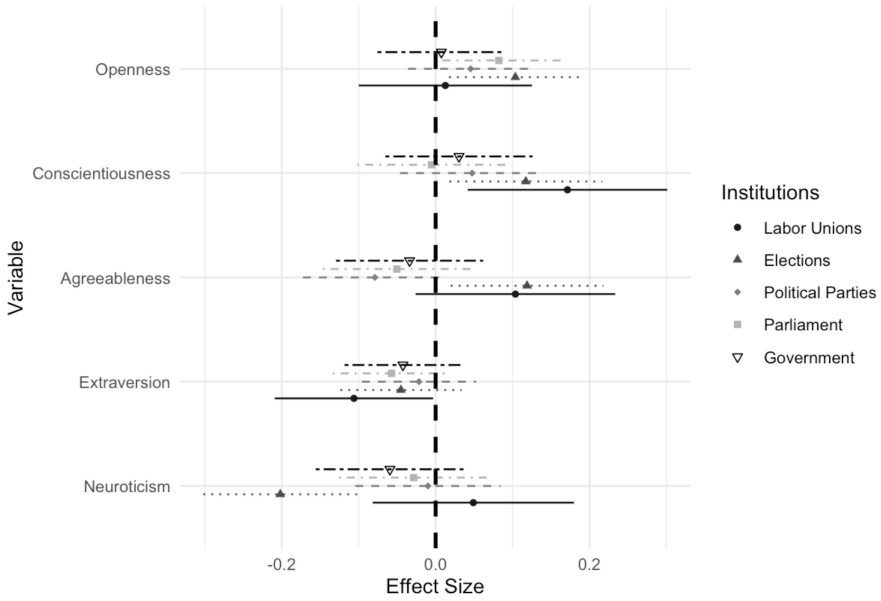**Figure 2: Institutional trust in public sector**

Source: Authors, based on data from WVS Database.
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals without control variables.

As we can see in Figures 3 and 4, no support was found for Hypothesis 3a; none of the theorised institutions – parliament, government and political parties – showed the expected negative relationship with agreeableness. Although there was a consistent negative association with all three institutions, these relationships were not statistically significant. However, there was a significant positive association between agreeableness and trust in elections ($\beta = 0.12$, SE = 0.05, p = .02) and trust in the civil service ($\beta = 0.09$, SE = 0.05, p = .05), although part of this association was reduced when control variables were added. The Hypothesis 4a was not supported. Figure 3 shows that extraversion was negatively associated with trust in labour unions ($\beta = -0.11$, SE = 0.05, p = .04). However, in Figure 4 we see that the significance dropped below the standard 95% confidence interval when control variables were added. There was no significant association between the extraversion and trust in elections, yet the directionality was contrary to expectations.

As for further associations, openness was negatively associated with trust in the courts ($\beta = -0.08$, SE = 0.04, p = .05), but this association also diminished when controlling for other variables. Openness was also positively associated with trust in elections ($\beta = 0.10$, SE = 0.04, p = .02), and this relationship increased in significance when control variables were added ($\beta = 0.14$, SE = 0.05, p < .01), suggesting potential omitted variable bias in the initial model. Further-

Figure 3: Institutional trust in political institutions

Source: Authors, based on data from WVS Database.
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals without control variables.

Figure 4: Institutional trust in political institutions
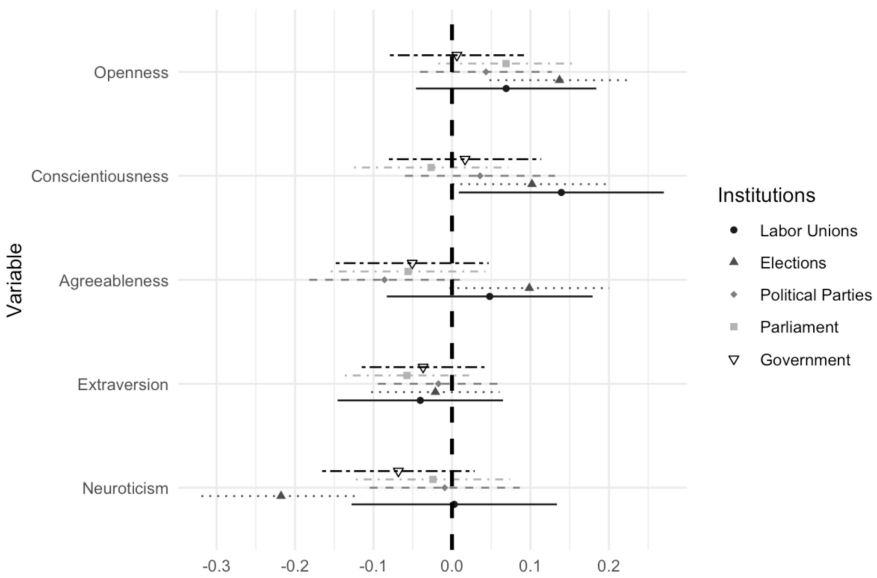
Source: Authors, based on data from WVS Database.
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals without control variables.

more, from the figures we can see that neuroticism was negatively associated with several institutions: trust in the armed forces (β=-0.14, SE=0.05, p<.01), trust in the civil service (β=-0.17, SE=0.05, p<.001), trust in elections (β=-0.20, SE=0.05, p<.001) and trust in the police (β=-0.17, SE=0.04, p<.001). Interestingly, one of the controls, the Romani language, showed a significant negative association to trust in civil service (β=-0.64, SE=0.29, p=.03). The Romani language also has a negative association with trust in the police (β=-0.56, SE=0.26, p=.03). Furthermore, Hungarian has also shown significant negative association with trust in the armed forces (β=-0.39, SE=0.11, p<.001).
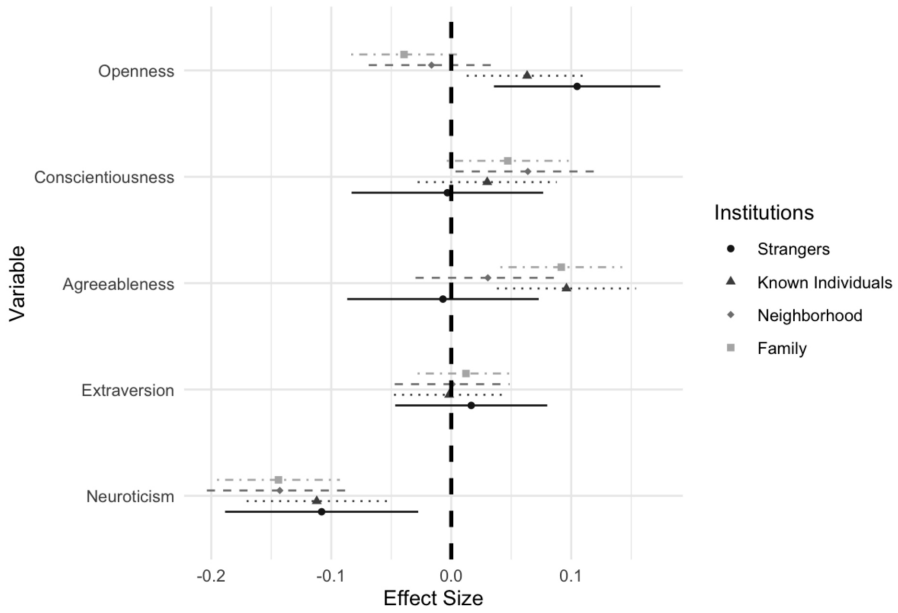
Interpersonal Trust

For interpersonal trust, this paper hypothesised that openness would be positively associated with interpersonal trust across all categories of trustees (Hypothesis 1). Additionally, it was hypothesised that agreeableness would be positively associated with closer categories of trustees, specifically family and neighbourhood (Hypothesis 3b). Extroversion was expected to be positively associated with interpersonal trust across all categories of trustees (Hypothesis 4). Lastly, it was hypothesised that neuroticism would be negatively associated with interpersonal trust across all categories of trustees, with a stronger effect for strangers (Hypothesis 5).

In Figure 5, we see that Hypothesis 1 was only partly supported. Openness showed significant positive associations only with trust in people known personally (β=0.06, SE=0.03, p=.01) and trust in strangers (β=0.10, SE=0.04, p<.01). Figure 6 shows that the relationship remained significant for both variables even after adding control variables. As we can see on both figures, there were no significant associations to trust in family and neighbourhood.

Hypothesis 3b was also only somewhat supported. It was expected that both family and neighbourhood would have significant positive associations with agreeableness, as they represent close communities. However, in Figure 6 we see that only trust in family showed a significant relationship (β=0.09, SE=0.03, p<.01 after controls), and trust in known individuals was also positively associated (β=0.10, SE=0.03, p<.01 after controls). Hypothesis 4 was not supported, as none of the variables showed a significant relationship with extraversion.

Finally, Hypothesis 5 was supported, as illustrated in Figure 5 and 6. Neuroticism negatively associated with all categories of trustees. These relationships remained significant after adding control variables. There was a stronger negative association with trust in family (β=-0.14, SE=0.03, p<.001 after controls), neighbourhood (β=-0.15, SE=0.03, p<.001 after controls) and known individuals (β=-0.11, SE=0.03, p<.001 after controls) compared to people met for the first time (β=-0.12, SE=0.04, p<.01 after controls).

Figure 5: Interpersonal trust

Source: Authors, based on data from WVS Database.
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals without control variables.
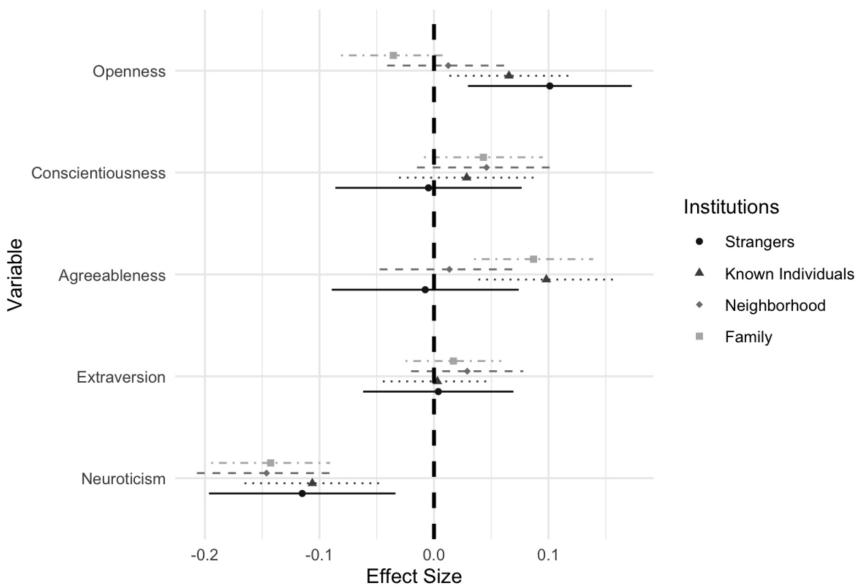
Figure 6: Interpersonal trust

Source: Authors, based on data from WVS Database.
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals without control variables.

Discussion

Institutional Trust

In the results section, we observed an unexpected positive association between conscientiousness and trust in labour unions and elections. On the one hand, these institutions are usually associated with change. The elections produce a change of the government and labour unions lobby for change in workers' rights legislation. This would contrast with our theoretical expectations that conscientious people prefer stability. On the other hand, these institutions are also associated with a type of stability. Elections are a critical pillar of the democratic system, and labour unions help maintain political balance by addressing the concerns of workers' rights. Both are foundational elements of democratic state's structure and democratic governance. It could be stipulated that conscientious individuals trust these institutions because they are connected to the stability of the democratic system.

Furthermore, we saw that there was a significant positive association between agreeableness and trust in the civil service. Possible explanations for this relationship may lie in the non-conflictual and impartial nature of the institution. Unlike, for example, political parties, which are by definition partisan and often support conflict of opinions, the civil service operates with a focus on professionalism, neutrality and public interest, which may appeal to individuals with high levels of agreeableness. Moreover, we observed significant positive association between agreeableness and trust in elections. This aligns with existing literature, which highlights a link between agreeableness and increased voter turnout (Gallego & Oberski 2012; Mondak & Halperin 2008; Mondak et al. 2010). Agreeable individuals are more cooperative and community oriented and elections often serve as a platform for representing diverse community interests. Hence, the higher tendency of agreeable individuals to trust elections could be connected to the perceived positives of collective decision-making.

We found no support for Hypothesis 4a: neither trust in elections nor trust in labour unions showed the anticipated positive relationship with extraversion. Instead, the direction of the relationship was negative for both institutions. We hypothesised a positive association, expecting extraverts' preference for collective action and collaboration to align with greater trust. However, this unexpected finding challenges the assumption that extraversion, which previous research has linked to higher political interest and voting behaviour (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Gerber et al., 2011; Mondak & Halperin, 2008), directly translates to institutional trust. This finding highlights the nuanced ways in which personality traits interact with trust, especially when contrasted with the trait of agreeableness. Both extraversion and agreeableness have been connected to greater interest in voting. Yet, while extraverts may actively engage

in politics and prefer collective actions, such engagement does not necessarily foster trust in elections or labour institutions.

The results also showed that openness was positively associated with trust in elections, and that the relationship increased in significance when control variables were added which suggests potentially omitted variable bias in the initial model. It is possible that some control variables are related to both openness and trust in elections. However, in general, the positive relationship between openness and trust in elections may be attributed to the value open people place on the acceptance of diverse viewpoints and inclusivity (Gallego & Oberski 2012; Cullen, Wright & Alessandri 2002; Duriez & Soenens 2006; Flynn 2005). Elections provide an opportunity for collective decision-making where a wide range of ideas are represented. This is particularly relevant in the Slovak multi-party system, which brings diverse representation of voices and policy proposals. It is likely that this is the reason for the increased trust in the electoral process among those with an open-minded disposition.

Furthermore, neuroticism was negatively associated with trust in the armed forces and police. As we have already noted, individuals with high neuroticism scores often experience increased anxiety and emotional instability. Some evidence also suggests that neurotic individuals may be more sensitive to authority (Greene & Robertson 2017; Wall et al. 2019). These institutions may be perceived as imposing control or potential harm, which could explain the decreased trust in them. However, we need more evidence on the relationship between neuroticism and authority because while some studies, such as Greene and Robertson (2017), suggest that neurotic individuals are more likely to view authority figures and institutions with suspicion due to their heightened emotional sensitivity and focus on potential threats, others, like Wall et al. (2019), indicate that neuroticism can also lead to compliance or reliance on authority in situations where it provides a sense of security or stability.

Moreover, there was a negative association between neuroticism and trust in civil service and elections. It could be argued that this relationship is linked to the scepticism of neurotic individuals and their expectation of deception (Freitag & Bauer 2016). They do not believe in fair election competition nor the objectivism and professionalism of civil service. They rather expect deceit and nepotism. Furthermore, prior research has associated neuroticism with higher levels of dishonesty (Giluk & Postlethwaite 2015; Stănescu & Iogra 2013; Weber 2017), which could theoretically lead neurotics to expect the same from others. It reinforces their belief that institutions are flawed and that societal systems are rigged. However, this explanation would mean that they distrust all institutions not just a selected few and therefore we would need more evidence to understand why neuroticism specifically impacts trust in certain institutions.

We also noted that the Romani language showed a significant negative association to trust in civil service and trust in the police. Negative experiences and

discrimination faced by the Roma minority in Slovakia (Belák 2016; Vašečka 2002) may contribute to their lower trust in public institutions. Such experiences likely eroded their confidence in public institutions over time and created a widespread perception of institutional alienation and exclusion within the community. This aligns with broader research, which links societal experiences of marginalisation, structural inequality and perceived institutional bias to diminished levels of trust among minority groups (Koch 2019; Murphy 2013; Tyrberg 2024; Vackle et al. 2020). Similar reasoning could be applied to Hungarians and distrust towards the armed forces although we would need more research to understand why specifically the armed forces and not police and civil service as in the case of the Roma minority.

Interpersonal Trust

In the results section, we observed no significant associations between openness and trust in family and neighbourhood. This outcome contrasts with our initial expectation that openness would be positively associated with trust across all categories of trustees. However, it aligns with previous research, which has highlighted a stronger relationship between openness and trust in strangers compared to known trustees (Freitag & Bauer 2016). Moreover, the literature suggests that open individuals are more likely to embrace diverse perspectives, engage with people from different cultural backgrounds and exhibit lower levels of discrimination (Cullen, Wright & Alessandri 2002; Duriez & Soenens 2006; Flynn 2005). These tendencies could contribute to their greater trust in strangers, as such interactions require openness to new experiences and reduce bias. It seems that trust in unfamiliar individuals is more likely to be influenced by dispositional traits like openness, while trust in familiar contexts, such as family and neighbourhood, may rely on other factors. There is probably a different dynamic to close relationships, where other elements such as shared experiences, mutual obligations or interpersonal bonds may take precedence over personality trait of openness.

Additionally, agreeableness was related to trust in family and known individuals, but not in neighbours, suggesting that Slovaks may not view neighbourhoods as close communities. This finding warrants further investigation by controlling for urban-rural status. If both contexts confirm this pattern, it would be an important insight. Furthermore, the results also show that there is no significant relationship between interpersonal trust and extraversion. Previous literature has indicated that extraversion is linked to wider social networks and higher participation in group-based activities (McCrae & Costa 2003; Mondak & Halperin 2008; Gallego & Oberski 2012). However, this study refines those findings by demonstrating that such tendencies do not necessarily translate into trust

Personality Traits, Trust in Institutions …   Veronika Cigáneková and Martin Lukáč

in others, whether known individuals or strangers. This nuance challenges the assumption that social connectivity inherently fosters trust. It seems that interpersonal trust may depend more on factors such as the nature of social interactions, specific social environment or the quality and depth of interpersonal interactions.

Finally, we saw that neuroticism related negatively to interpersonal trust whatever to category of trustee. As the literature suggests, neurotics' perceptions of trustworthiness are biased by expectations of negative outcomes, such as deceit or betrayal (Freitag & Bauer 2016). Interestingly, there was a stronger negative association with known or familiar categories of trustees such as family and neighbourhood. This finding suggests that neurotics may perceive familiar relationships through a lens of heightened sensitivity to perceived risks or past experiences. Still, it is notable that pre-existing relationships influence the level of trust that neurotics attribute to individuals. This contrasts with prior literature, which suggested stronger scepticism toward unfamiliar individuals (Gallego & Oberski 2012; Ackermann & Ackermann 2015).

Limitations

Several limitations need to be considered. First, the explanatory power of the regression models was limited, which was indicated by low R-squared values across all models (ranging from 0.003 to 0.079). While this outcome was expected – given that this paper did not anticipate that personality traits would fully explain variations in trust – it still suggests that the models captured only a small portion of the variance. Moreover, the associations observed in the results may, in part, reflect omitted variable bias, as in some cases the inclusion of control variables altered the significance of certain predictors, for instance with openness and trust in elections. This indicates that other unmeasured factors, possibly related to both personality and trust, might influence the results. Future research should explore these omitted variables to refine the models further.

Moreover, we would need further research to understand the realtionship between neuroticism and distrust in certain institutions. In the discussion section we offered some possible explanations but more reasearch would be needed as the literature posed mixed findings, e.g. the relationship between neuroticism and authority are shown to lead to both suspicion and compliance. Further, the findings suggested that there was a stronger negative association between neuroticism and known categories of trustees in contrast to strangers. Further research could delve deeper into the question of why pre-existing relationships influence the level of trust for neurotics. Additionally, there was an interesting contrasting finding for openness. While openness had a significant positive association to strangers it did not have a significant association with trust in family and neighbourhood. Further research could explore whether there are

different dynamics to close relationships. Relatedly, we found that just social connectivity does not inherently foster trust since there is no significant relationship between interpersonal trust and extraversion. Future research could further explore the factors such as the nature of social interactions, specific social environment or the quality and depth of interpersonal interactions and their relationship to interpersonal trust. Similarly, a mere interest in politics or greater voter turnout is not necessarily linked to higher trust as shown by the contrasting results for extroversion and agreeableness.

The study's scope was also constrained by its exclusive focus on a Slovak sample, which may limit generalisability to other cultural or demographic contexts. This is particularly relevant given that institutional trust is often shaped by historical, political and cultural factors, which vary widely across countries. Certain institutions may be percieved differently depending on the context. As such, the results should be interpreted with caution when applied to other populations. Additionally, the analysis was cross-sectional, examining data at a single point in time, which may overlook the dynamic nature of trust and personality. Longitudinal studies are needed to capture how personality traits and trust interact over time, especially considering the potential for bidirectional influences or changes in trust levels due to societal events.

Lastly, potential omitted variables, such as significant personal experiences or traumas that could influence both personality and trust, were not accounted for. For example, the study did not include direct measures of discrimination or systemic inequality, which may be particularly relevant for understanding the lower trust to certain institutions observed among the Roma minority. Broader structural factors, such as socio-economic status and education level, were primarily treated as control variables, leaving their broader potential impact underexamined. A deeper investigation into these factors could provide further insights into the relationship between trust and perceptions of institutions.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between personality traits and trust within the Slovak population. The findings show that certain traits – namely, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism – are associated with higher levels of trust in specific institutions. In the category of interpersonal trust, significant positive relationships were found for openness, agreeableness and also neuroticism. While the phenomenon of trust cannot be fully explained by personality alone, this paper demonstrates that personality plays a role.

Specifically, openness was linked to trust toward strangers and known individuals. The relationship was stronger for strangers which could be connected to a reduced bias of open individuals and their broader acceptance of diversity. However, it did not significantly influence trust within immediate communities

like family and neighbourhood, suggesting potential overlaps in the survey category of 'known individuals' or differing trust dynamics for these two categories. Moreover, conscientiousness emerged as a significant predictor of trust in stability-oriented institutions such as the armed forces, police, courts and civil service. This shows a preference of conscientious individuals for structured and reliable systems. We have also observed a positive association between conscientiousness and trust in elections and labour unions, reflecting a broader inclination towards organised systems and democratic processes. Further, we expected, based on the literature review, that agreeableness would negatively affect trust in conflict-oriented political institutions. While the observed relationships were in the anticipated direction, they were not statistically significant. Instead, agreeableness was positively associated with trust in elections and the civil service, likely due to their non-confrontational nature. Additionally, agreeableness was related to trust in family and known individuals, but not in neighbours, suggesting that Slovaks may not view neighbourhoods as close communities. Extraversion, contrary to prior research, did not show significant associations with trust, implying that in the Slovak context, social engagement does not necessarily translate to trust in others. Finally, neuroticism was consistently associated with lower interpersonal trust, particularly towards familiar individuals, contrasting with previous literature. We offered the explanation that neurotic individuals are less trusting of others due to their bias of negative expectations, yet it remains open why this relationship is stronger towards known individuals. Neuroticism was also negatively associated with trust in elections, police, the armed forces and civil service, but we would need further research to understand the reason for the effect on these specific institutions.

Still, the study emphasises the importance of considering personality traits in efforts to build and sustain trust within societies. It shows that behaviour alone may not restore trust across all population segments, as personality factors also influence trust dynamics. The analysis of diverse trustee categories provided a more nuanced understanding of these complexities. This deeper insight into the interplay between personality and trust can inform effective policymaking and community-building initiatives, which could ultimately enhance social cohesion and institutional legitimacy.

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The Effect of Collective Narcissism, Populism and Trust of Older Adults on Conspiracy Mentality: Evidence from Poland

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Abstract: *The article examines the impact of collective narcissism, trust and populism on conspiracy mentality among citizens aged 65 and older in Poland. Understanding their behaviours and attitudes is crucial for at least two reasons. First, demographic shifts are leading to a growing proportion of seniors in European societies. Second, as life expectancy increases, older adults remain socially and politically active for longer. This article presents findings from two waves of a longitudinal study (N = 379). Our model confirms that collective narcissism and populism drive generic conspiracist beliefs, while interpersonal and institutional trust have no significant effect.*

Keywords: *collective narcissism, trust, populism, conspiracy mentality, older adults*

Introduction

Research on conspiracy mentality has witnessed a remarkable rise in popularity over the recent years. It is increasingly recognized that belief in conspiracy theories is part of human psychology (Brotherton 2015). Scholars investigate factors that make an individual susceptible to conspiracies, noting that conspiracy explanations tend to emerge particularly after large-scale distressing events, such as terrorist attacks, economic crises or epidemics (van Prooijen & Douglas 2017). However, it is not only external circumstances that create space for conspiracy theories to spread. Studies firmly rooted in the literature also emphasize specific individual traits (e.g. cognitive, motivational, psychopathological) that increase susceptibility to conspiracy messages.

The presented article contributes to the discussion on the determinants of conspiracy mentality by focusing on a specific social group – the oldest citizens. The interest in this group stems, on the one hand, from forecasts regarding aging societies (United Nations 2019). These demographic changes bring about significant economic, social, psychological and even political transformations that governments and entire societies will need to address. On the other hand, the oldest citizens are interesting due to the increasing conservatism of views that come with age, which appears to be a natural consequence of the aging process. Many studies support that the characteristics and status achieved with age reinforce views and attitudes grounded in conservative values. Psychological age-related changes include a growing preference for order, greater uncertainty avoidance and an enhanced capacity to remember emotionally laden stimuli (Dennis et al. 2008; Jost et al. 2007; St. Jacques, Dolcos & Cabeza 2010). These features seem to correspond with traits that make an individual more open to conspiracy theories.

Nevertheless, the meta-analyses confirm a robust negative association between age and conspiracy endorsement (Goreis & Voracek 2019; Bordeleau & Stockemer 2024). One possible explanation is that the life experience of older citizens makes them more resilient to conspiratorial narratives. Enders et al. (2024) also argue that younger individuals, having less political influence and fewer financial resources than older people, may be more inclined to embrace conspiracy theories that blame 'sinister forces' for social inequality. It therefore becomes interesting to know what factors increase the susceptibility of older people to generic conspiracy ideation.

In our study, we propose a new perspective for examining the conspiracy mentality, understood as a general predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories. Unlike most prior research, we focus on the oldest citizens, whose societal importance is increasing due to extended active lifestyles and demographic shifts leading to population aging. Drawing on earlier findings, we assume that collective narcissism is a dominant driver of conspiracy mentality (e.g. Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek & Ciesielski 2022), while various forms of trust – particularly institutional trust – are likely to mitigate this effect. Additionally, our model incorporates populism, which we expect to be positively associated with belief in conspiracy theories (Cargnino 2021; Eberl, Huber & Greussing 2022; Pilch et al. 2023).

Collective narcissism and its consequences

Social identity, rooted in belonging to and identifying with a group, is an integral part of our existence. It posits emotional involvement with one's own group and a tendency to favour its members over outgroups (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Social identity can take two forms: secure attachment, which is resistant to threats and

fosters positive relationships with other groups, and a narcissistic form, which may lead to a range of consequences that are harmful to intergroup relations.

In recent years, collective narcissism (also called group narcissism) has become the subject of numerous studies. Findings consistently demonstrate that it entails an exaggerated belief in the uniqueness and greatness of an ingroup combined with a conviction that others fail to recognise its value sufficiently (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). This attitude is characterized by both superiority and entitlement. Superiority refers to the belief that one's group is not only unique but also better than others, making self-evaluation dependent on constant comparison with outgroups. Entitlement reflects the demand for confirmation of the superiority of one's group over another, which stems from compensating unsatisfied needs (Bertin et al. 2022). Collective narcissism can be observed among national, ethnic, religious, political and ideological groups (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka & Bilewicz 2013). In our research, we focus specifically on national narcissism – the belief in the greatness of one's own nation with the expectation of external recognition.

Collective narcissism reliably predicts hypersensitivity to criticism of the ingroup and a tendency to interpret ambiguous statements or situations as a threat to the idealised image of one's group, with a simultaneous desire for revenge (Cichocka 2016). Cross-national studies support this finding. For example, in Turkey, collective narcissism was linked to schadenfreude over the economic crisis in Europe, stemming from feelings of humiliation due to the prolonged wait for accession to the European Union (Golec de Zavala et al. 2016).

Importantly, group narcissism anticipates prejudice better than other forms of ingroup identification. Research has demonstrated this effect in relation to attitudes toward Ukrainians, Mexicans, Jews, Arabs, refugees and the LGBT+ community (Golec de Zavala 2024: 105–127). Cross-cultural analyses further show that collective narcissism correlates with hostility toward others, whereas positive identification without a narcissistic component is associated with greater tolerance. Studies conducted in Poland confirm this distinction: individuals with strong, positive national identify perceive less social distance toward minorities, whereas those with a high level of national narcissism report greater distance (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka & Iskra-Golec 2013).

National narcissism is also a significant predictor of support for populist parties and politicians (Cisłak et al. 2020; Federico & Golec de Zavala 2018; Lantos & Forgas 2021). Populism operates through a mechanism similar to that of collective narcissism, constructing a dichotomous division into antagonistic groups: the 'evil', corrupt and amoral elites versus the 'decent' people (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). Furthermore, national narcissism is linked to a negative attitude toward democracy. Research following the 2020 U.S. presidential election found that national narcissists were more likely to believe that Donald Trump should remain in power despite losing the democratic election. They

also expressed support for the storming of the Capitol and portrayed those involved in the attack as individuals standing against injustice (Keenan & Golec de Zavala 2021).

The effect of collective narcissism, populism and trust on conspiracy mentality

Research consistently shows that collective narcissism strongly predicts both generic conspiratorial thinking and belief in specific conspiracy theories, whether directed at out-groups or particular events (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek & Ciesielski 2022). Collective narcissism is linked to beliefs in various conspiracy theories, including those about immigrants in France (Bertin et al. 2022), an alleged anti-Polish conspiracy of western countries (Cichocka et al. 2016), a Jewish conspiracy (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka 2012; Kofta, Soral & Bilewicz 2020) and a conspiracy about EU activities (Bertin et al. 2024). It also predicted support for and the spread of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Sternisko et. al 2023). In Poland, national narcissism (collective narcissism regarding one's own nation) fostered belief in conspiracy theories attributing responsibility for high-profile events, such as the Smolensk disaster, to foreign actors (Cichocka et al. 2016; Soral et al. 2018).

National narcissism has been shown to predict not only endorsement of specific conspiracy theories bust also a more general conspiracy mindset (Federico & Golec de Zavala 2018). In this sense, it reflects a broader tendency to interpret social reality thought a Manichean lens that divides the world into 'us' versus a sinister 'them', even within one's own nation. This strong link between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs may thus help explain the success of political movements that employ conspiratorial rhetoric, portraying themselves as defenders of the 'real people' against malevolent national elites and frequently accusing political opponents of plotting conspiracy (Bergmann 2018).

Trust is another key factor in shaping susceptibility to conspiracy theories. It constitutes the foundation of a well-functioning social system and a driver of economic growth (e.g. Putnam 2000; Rothstein & Stolle 2008). Its absence fosters dissatisfaction with democracy and reinforces the perception that political elites fail to represent citizens' interests (Zmerli et al. 2007). Indeed, distrust not only contributes to democratic backsliding but also strengthens the belief in conspiracy theories. Hollander (2018), for example, found that partisan identification combined with low interpersonal trust was associated with belief in four widely circulated conspiracies in the United States. Other studies also confirm that individuals with a lower level of trust in other people are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories (e.g. Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013; Green & Douglas 2018; Leman & Cinnirella 2013). Thus, social trust can serve

as a safeguard against disinformation (Gundersen et al. 2024), effectively limiting the spread of unverified information and conspiracy theories.

Research also supports the link between low institutional trust and endorsement of conspiracy theories, including those about COVID-19 (Šrol, Čavojová & Ballová Mikušková 2022), political events and global warming (van der Linden et al. 2021). Furthermore, distrust in the institution fuels generic conspiracy ideation in both young and stable democracies (Stoyanov & Douglas 2022).

Populism also plays an important role in shaping belief in conspiracies. Conspiracy theories function in a similar way to populist narratives. They are becoming attractive to some citizens because they offer simple, though unrealistic, explanations for complex social phenomena and perceived threats. Research conducted in EU countries confirms a strong association between populist attitudes and a general conspiracy mindset (van Prooijen 2022). Other studies further demonstrate that populist attitudes shape the belief in specific conspiracy theories, such as those concerning the COVID-19 pandemic (Guan & Yang 2020; Stecula & Pickup 2021).

Methods

The research was conducted using the CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing) method within a longitudinal design on a randomly selected sample of older adults. A nationwide sample of people aged at least 65 was drawn from the PESEL register[1] (N=2082). We sent two letters by post inviting them to participate in the study. The first letter outlined the study's objectives, research procedure and all relevant ethics information. It also included the project manager's telephone number and e-mail address, encouraging recipients to get in touch in case of categorical refusal or to clarify any questions related to the study. Following this initial contact, 587 people declined to participate. The second letter was subsequently sent to those who had not opted out. It introduced the interviewer by name, surname and photo, along with a telephone number to facilitate contact. After this stage, 189 further individuals refused to participate. The interviewers then approached the remaining individuals directly at the addresses provided, making up to three attempts to secure consent for an interview. The first wave of the study took place between 15 November and 30 December 2022, while the second occurred immediately after the 2023 parliamentary elections, between 22 October and 30 November 2023.

The final sample of respondents who participated in both waves of the study consisted of 379 individuals (success rate = 18.2%), including 234 women (61.7%). The average age of the respondents was 72.55 (SD = 6.22). The sample

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1   PESEL is the national identification number used in Poland.

was relatively diverse in terms of education: primary and lower – 10.6%, vocational – 21.9%, secondary – 36.2%, higher – 31.4%. The study participants reported regular engagement in religious practices, such as attending Mass (including via radio, television or the Internet). Specifically, 41.1% attended once a week, while 15.4% participated more than once a week. The subjective financial status, determined on a five-point scale (1 = 'I live very modestly'; 5 = 'I live very well'), was assessed at an average level (M = 3.25; SD = 0.88). Regarding electoral preferences, the sample was largely dominated by supporters of the Civic Coalition (138 people, 36.4%) and Law and Justice (107 people, 28.2%).

We included the following variables in our study:

(1) Trust measured in three dimensions:
- *Interpersonal trust* assessed using three statements (*Most people are good and kind*; *Most people are honest*; *Most people are trustworthy*) with answers on a seven-point scale (1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*). These items are often used in the measurement of trust, defined as the expectation that people are generally good and trustworthy (Rotter 1980).
- *Institutional trust* – a 9-item index including trust in following institutions: politicians in the parliament, local politicians, the police, the courts, the army, the healthcare, the Catholic church, EU institutions and NATO.
- *Attitude toward democracy* measured using three statements (*Life in Poland today is better than when I entered adulthood*; *Democracy has problems, but it is a better system of government than any other*; *I am generally satisfied with the functioning of Polish state*) with answers on a five-point scale (1 = *definitely not*, 5 = *definitely yes*).
(2) *National narcissism* measured by the 5-item Collective Narcissism Scale (*The Polish nation deserves special treatment*; *Not many people seem to fully understand the importance of the Polish nation*; *It really makes me angry when others criticize the Polish nation*; *If the Polish nation had a major say in the world, the world would be a much better place*; *I will never be satisfied until the Polish nation gets the recognition it deserves*) with answers on a six-point scale (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009).
(3) *Populism* assessed using a 4-item index based on populist attitudes scale (Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014) with answers on a five-point scale: *The politicians need to follow the will of the people*; *The people, not politicians, should make the most important decisions*; *I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by a professional politician*; *The political differences between elites and the people are greater than the differences among citizens*.
(4) *Conspiracy mentality* measured using a 3-item index based on the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (*A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest*; *Groups of scientists manipulate,*

fabricate or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public; *The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics*) with answers on a five-point scale (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013) in the Polish version (Siwiak, Szpitalak & Polczyk 2019).

Additionally, to explore the potential impact of political preferences on the general conspiracy mindset, we compared the values of the examined variables among supporters of Poland's two major political parties – the Civic Coalition and Law and Justice.

Results

The study participants exhibited a high level of interpersonal trust and a strong commitment to democracy, while their trust in institutions remained relatively low. Furthermore, they scored above average in national narcissism and populism. To identify potential relationships between the variables, we start with computing Pearson correlation coefficients. Conspiracy mentality was positively correlated with national narcissism and populism. Additionally, national narcissism was positively associated with populism and, interestingly, with institutional trust, while showing a negative correlation with attitudes toward democracy.

Table 1: Means, SDs and correlations between variables using in the study

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Interpersonal trust	4.57	1.37	—					
2. Institutional trust	3.19	.62	.143**	—				
3. Attitude towards democracy	4.50	.46	-.003	.005	—			
4. National collective narcissism	3.89	1.28	-.052	.228***	-.240***	—		
5. Populism	4.00	.71	.037	-.043	-.012	.318***	—	
6. Conspiracy mentality	3.89	.86	.033	.018	.043	.242***	.190***	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$
Source: Authors

To diagnose the factors affecting conspiracy mentality, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. The overall model was significant [$R^2_{adj.} = .073$, $F(5, 372) = 6.896$, $p < .001$]. We found that the significant predictors of belief in conspiracy theories included national collective narcissism, populism and attitude towards democracy. As we assumed, national narcissism best explains conspiracy mentality ($\beta = .242$, $p < .001$). Moreover, populism also determined generic belief in conspiracy theories ($\beta = .112$, $p = .036$). Interestingly, in our study, attitude toward democracy was positively associated with conspiracy mentality ($\beta = .102$, $p = .048$). This means that individuals who rated democracy better were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. Neither interpersonal trust nor institutional trust reached statistical significance in the model.

Table 2: Factors predicting conspiracy mentality among older adults in Poland (multiple linear regression)

Variable	B	95% CI	β	t	p
(Constant)	1.898	[.802, 2.993]		3.406	< .001
Interpersonal trust	.030	[-.032, .092]	.047	.940	.348
Institutional trust	-.052	[-.194, .090]	-.038	-.724	.469
Attitude toward democracy	.190	[.002, .378]	.102	1.986	.048
National narcissism	.162	[.088, .237]	.242	4.288	< .001
Populism	.134	[.009, .260]	.112	2.103	.036

Source: Authors

Afterward, we decided to investigate the potential moderating effect of national collective narcissism and populism on the relation between interpersonal and institutional trust and conspiracy mentality. National narcissism implies not getting enough recognition from the world and some kind of exclusion from the groups of interest (at least in the Polish political context). Populism, on the other hand, assumes distance between elites and ordinary people. In conspiracy mentality, we usually have both of those beliefs. Thus, we thought that the relation between trust and conspiracy mentality could emerge under conditions of high collective narcissism and high populism. We performed a series of moderation analyses based on hierarchical regression analysis with an interaction variable. The independent variables were mean-centred by subtracting the arithmetic mean from the variable's value. The results of the analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Moderation analysis

Variable	B	95% CI	β	t	p
Interpersonal trust	.009	[-.054, .072]	.015	.286	.775
Populism	.246	[.125, .368]	.205	3.980	< .001
Interpersonal trust * Populism	.069	[-.016, .153]	.083	1.598	.111
Institutional trust	.034	[-.104, .171]	.025	.483	.629
Populism	.230	[.110, .350]	.191	3.774	< .001
Institutional trust * Populism	.039	[-.165, .243]	.019	.372	.710
Interpersonal trust	.026	[-.036, .088]	.042	.834	.405
National narcissism	.165	[.099, .231]	.245	4.892	< .001
Interpersonal trust * National narcissism	.023	[-.026, .072]	.046	.915	.361
Institutional trust	-.060	[-.200, .079]	-.044	-.850	.396
National narcissism	.162	[.094, .231]	.242	4.692	< .001
Institutional trust * National narcissism	-.085	[-.188, .017]	-.083	-1.638	.102

Source: Authors

We found that neither national collective narcissism nor populism had a moderating effect on the examined relationship. Including the moderator in the regression models increased the explained variance by no more than 0.7%. The moderation effects were nonsignificant ($p > .05$).

To explain a weak relationship between trust and conspiracy mentality, we also compared the mean values of the study variables across the electorates of the two main Polish parties – Law and Justice (PiS) and the Civic Coalition (KO). Interestingly, we found no significant difference in conspiracy mentality among the oldest citizens. This observation contradicts the other studies that suggest the Law and Justice voters are more likely to believe in the Smolensk conspiracy (Marmola & Olszanecka-Marmola 2024) and '89 Round Table conspiracy (Kofta & Soral 2019). Therefore, we can assume that while they endorse the specific conspiracy theories directed against their group, they do not differ in generic conspiracist ideation. Among the Law and Justice voters, the belief in specific conspiracy theories may be additionally reinforced by a higher level of national narcissism than in other groups.

We identified intriguing patterns regarding trust. While PiS and KO voters exhibited similar levels of interpersonal trust, they showed significant differences in the institutional trust. Interestingly, KO voters had a more favourable attitudes toward democracy, whereas PiS voters placed greater trust in institutions. This suggests that the former relied more on systemic mechanisms, while the latter's trust stemmed from a positive view of the PiS government, which shaped Polish politics from 2015 to 2023.

Table 4: Partisan differences in trust, collective narcissism, populism and conspiracy mentality

Variable	Voters of Law and Justice (N = 107)		Voters of Civic Coalition (N = 138)		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Interpersonal trust	4.48	1.46	4.53	1.24	-.279	n.s.	-.037
Institutional trust	3.37	.53	3.16	.59	2.896	.004	.373
Attitude towards democracy	4.31	.42	4.71	.36	-7.760	< .001	-1.018
National narcissism	4.77	.89	3.30	1.26	10.648	< .001	1.317
Populism	4.12	.68	3.96	.71	1.800	n.s.	.232
Conspiracy mentality	3.95	.84	3.89	.89	.542	n.s.	.070

Source: Authors

Discussion

In our study, we sought to address a gap in the research by identifying the factors that shape the conspiracy mindset among citizens aged 65 and older. Recent studies indicate that the oldest Poles are less likely to endorse conspiracy theories compared to younger age groups (Czech & Ścigaj 2023), which makes this phenomenon particularly intriguing. In a rapidly changing world, one might expect older individuals to feel more disoriented and, therefore, more inclined to rely on stereotypes and simplifying cognitive strategies, such as conspiracy narratives. Gligorić et al. (2021) argue that conspiracy theories often function as a compensatory control mechanism in response to complex and ambiguous situations that generate uncertainty. At the same time, older adults are less likely to use the Internet and social media, which play a critical role in disseminating misinformation and reinforcing conspiracy beliefs (Stano 2020).

Our findings largely align with existing research on conspiracy theories. We confirm that the conspiratorial thinking of the oldest voters is driven by the same factors as in the general population. Consistent with previous studies, collective narcissism emerged as the strongest predictor of a general conspiracy mindset, with this effect further amplified by populism. Although we hypoth-

esised that trust – both interpersonal and institutional – would moderate the tendency to engage in conspiracies, our results did not support this assumption. It is worth emphasising, however, that while most studies generally showed negative relationships between conspiracy beliefs and trust, in several cases these associations were statistically insignificant (e.g. Vitriol & Marsh 2018; Kim & Kim 2021).

Several explanations may account for the absence of a link between trust and conspiracy beliefs in our study. First, this may reflect the characteristics of our sample, which exhibited relatively high interpersonal trust. This is also consistent with the results of other studies indicating that older adults are more likely than younger individuals to perceive others as trustworthy (Poulin & Haase 2015), potentially due to accumulated social experiences, enhanced emotional regulation and cultural shifts over time. Second, as we point out, patterns of institutional trust among older Polish adults appear to be inconsistent. Notably, we observed no correlation between trust in democracy and trust in institutions, which may stem from some voters associating institutions not with their enduring functions but with the actions of the politicians currently in power. These factors may explain the weaker relationship between trust and conspiracy mentality observed in our study. Further research is needed to determine whether this lack of association reflects a stable characteristic of older populations or a result of situational factors.

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Democratic Innovations as a Tool to Restore Trust and Citizens' Participation: A Comparison Between Stakeholder Groups in Italy

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Abstract: *Recent changes in European countries have stimulated the search for multilevel policy interventions to restore citizens' trust and engagement, focusing specifically on democratic innovations. Our paper presents the results of a survey conducted in 2025 as part of the Horizon TRUEDEM project, focusing on the views of civil society organisations' leaders and activists on the Italian case. Despite positive experiences, such as local initiatives and referendums, the paper highlights the crisis of trust weighing on democratic participation in Italy, testified by rising abstention rates and disaffection with institutions. By analysing the opinions that emerged in focus groups, we identify significant differences between the various stakeholders and propose concrete actions to revitalise democratic practices, including the need for civic education and the creation of spaces for dialogue. The paper highlights the complexity of the interactions between democratic innovations and political trust in Italy and proposes an integration of perspectives from different levels of civil society to address the current crisis.*

Keywords: *Trust, Citizens' participation, Democratic innovations, Civil society organisations, Italy, Focus group*

Recent changes in political trust and democratic participation in European countries have inspired the search for multilevel institutional interventions to restore both trust and citizens' political involvement at national and local levels. In this context, the case of Italy is of particular relevance since this country has experienced a pronounced decline in both trust and political participation in

recent years, especially compared to other countries in the European Union (Norris 2022; Chiaramonte & Emanuele 2022; Addeo et al. 2025). This paper aims to present some results of a survey carried out between April and June 2025, explicitly devoted to the collection and analysis of the opinions and attitudes of different categories of stakeholders (namely, responsible persons from civil society organisations) and about a specific group of institutional interventions – that is, so-called 'democratic innovations' (Gonthier et al. 2024; see also Veraldi & Oddo 2024). The latter are 'processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence' (Elstub & Escobar 2019: 14, in Gonthier et al. 2024: 7). More specifically, we focus on petitions, popular initiatives bills, referendums, participatory budgets (PBs) and mini-publics, both at national and local levels, promoted through conventional (face-to-face) and digital channels, both by public authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs), such as trade unions, NGOs or grassroots local movements.

Following Gonthier et al. (2024), our approach does not aim to replace current representative democratic regimes with a combination of direct or deliberative democracy. Instead, we convene on the idea that 'deliberation, direct participation, and delegation to representatives can be creatively combined at different stages of the decision-making process' (McLaverty 2009; Parkinson 2006; Saward 2000) (Gonthier et al. 2024: 7). Moreover, according to the authors mentioned above, there is a relationship between democratic innovations and political trust, based mainly on the role of political efficacy as a proxy. Also, a number of intermediate factors are identified in the current literature on democratic innovation as necessary conditions for their functioning as trust enablers: for instance, transparency and fairness of the participatory process, its endurance and institutionalisation, and the degree of social and political polarisation (ibid.).

Based on this framework, we investigated the Italian case. The Italian political system already offers various interesting examples of democratic innovations. Citizens may propose referendums, petitions and popular initiative bills at a national level. Not only are these practices allowed locally, but there have been some interesting experiences of participatory budgeting and popular assemblies (Tisserand et al. 2025). At the same time, however, Italy is also a country that seems to have experienced – just like some Central European countries – a sharp decline in voter turnout (the clearest indicator of citizen participation in democratic life) as well as trust in institutions and political actors (Addeo et al. 2025). This seems to have generated a climate of mistrust and disaffection that to some extent has also affected democratic innovation mechanisms.

Here, our research questions are to assess (1) how different types of stakeholders perceive the issue of democratic innovation in Italy, and (2) which

avenues they identify in order to make these practices work and improve their effectiveness. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to briefly summarise the literature on experiences of democratic innovation in Italy. A short description of our research methodology will follow. Finally, we propose an analysis of the main results obtained, followed by some concluding observations aimed at the scientific and policy implications of our results.

Democratic innovations in Italy: A literature review from a social sciences perspective

As we have seen, the concept of 'democratic innovation' is well-established in international debates on social and political change (Moro 2009). However, there is no uniformity of definitions or a single approach to research on this topic. Furthermore, the concept of democratic innovation has struggled to gain ground in Italy, partly due to substantial resistance within the academic world to anything perceived as 'new' and, therefore, potentially dangerous to established scientific dynamics. There is still no explicit recognition of a disciplinary field that is hybrid in nature, bringing together political science, political sociology, media studies and public law (De Blasio & Sorice 2016).

In this regard, the most significant academic reflection on democratic innovations is perhaps the white paper published by the commission established in 2021 by the Ministry for Relations with Parliament on institutional innovations and technological tools helpful in increasing citizens' political participation (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2022). It contains practical recommendations for simplifying and digitising forms of political participation. In particular, it highlights that the National Referendum Platform, established in 2021, facilitates the collection of signatures for referendums and popular initiative bills, introducing digital methods for citizens to sign up. In addition, the paper recommends combining electoral and referendum procedures into a single election day in order to facilitate the achievement of the quorum necessary to ensure the legal validity of the procedure and its results. This suggestion could be of great importance, given that only one national referendum out of nine failed to reach the 50% voter turnout threshold between 1974 and 1995. In contrast, between 1997 and 2025, only one national referendum out of nine reached the threshold (Rainews 2022, Ansa 2025). What is more, since 2011, no national-level referendum question has reached the threshold required for its results to be valid. However, our focus is not only on national referendums but on the whole set of instruments of direct and deliberative democracy.

In this context, no single literature review comprehensively synthesises and analytically discusses all contemporary democratic innovations across mechanisms (petitions, initiatives, referendums, PBs, mini-publics, digital, NGO/grassroots) with a robust interdisciplinary analysis of citizen participation and in-

stitutional effectiveness for the Italian general population. However, high-quality empirical and comparative syntheses are available for participatory budgeting and Tuscany-centred deliberative democracy (Floridia 2012, 2013; Bortolotti & Corsi 2012), while other mechanisms remain significantly under-reviewed.

To name just a few of these studies, Alber and Valdesalici (2015) provide a comparative analysis of both institutional innovation and participatory democracy at the subnational level, focusing on 'institutionalised' pathways and their inclusionary/exclusionary results. Bassoli (2012) offers a comparative case study of PB outcomes on democracy, which focuses on inclusion, participation, opposition and transparency, and suggests that leadership and inclusive strategies mediate sustained participation and meaningful democratic impact. Allegretti, Bassoli and Colavolpe (2021) provide an in-depth empirical study of PB in five regions (Tuscany, Sicily, Emilia Romagna, Apulia, Lazio), linking legal frameworks, participatory culture and effective diffusion/implementation. The authors argue that formal legalisation is necessary but insufficient – monitoring, evaluation and community anchoring are crucial. Finally, Mattei, Santolamazza and Grandis (2022) conducted a deductive content analysis and a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis on the PB regulations of 100 Italian municipalities. Their findings suggest that the PB design cannot always guarantee citizens' involvement. 'Successful' municipalities engage citizens from the beginning and in the most relevant phases of the deliberative process. A simple legislative provision does not guarantee genuine involvement in participatory governance.

From a sociological perspective, the most important findings of these analyses concern the demographics of participation. PB and mini-publics usually attract older, male, highly-educated participants; open-call models compromise inclusion unless stratified sampling is applied (Bassoli 2012; Lewanski 2013). Apparently, the social profile of participants in recent national referendums on civil, social and labour rights is not different (Ipsos 2025). Another significant finding in the literature on democratic innovations in Italy refers to the role of civil society. Some studies see this as vital, both as a driver (mobilisation, advocacy, watchdogging) and as a gatekeeper (channelling participation, sometimes unintentionally reinforcing exclusions) of political participation (Bassoli 2012; Russo 2014). For instance, research on democratic innovation in Alto Adige/Südtirol (a northern Italian region with mainly German-speaking residents) has shown that:

In order for democratic innovations to truly bridge the democratic deficit, they need a genuine culture of participation, as well as resources and time. This culture of participation is characterized by the search for consensual solutions through participatory dialogue and debate between decision-makers and citizens, rather than through voting. (Alber 2023: 254)

As for the implementation rates, the adoption of the PB project, when the budget is ring-fenced, exceeds 50%. On the contrary, non-earmarked PB, or mini-public outputs, see lower rates and high inter-municipal variance (Bassoli 2012; Allegretti, Bassoli & Colavolpe 2021).

When considered in relation to international literature on democratic innovations (Gonthier et al. 2024), these results confirm some crucial points in the debate on non-representative forms of modern democracy. We refer in particular to political efficacy as a variable mediating between the institutional environment, citizens' trust in the political system and democratic participation. 'Political efficacy encompasses two dimensions: internal efficacy, which relates to individuals' self-perception of their ability to grasp and participate in political processes, and external efficacy, which pertains to their sense of influence over government actions' (Gonthier 2024: 12). Trust is reinforced when citizens perceive that their input may lead to change (external efficacy). When innovations are dismissed, ignored or blocked, trust erodes further. Moreover, empirical results from research conducted in Italy confirm that democratic innovations mainly involve groups of people who (for social or cultural reasons) have a subjective perception of political efficacy. They tend to involve more the 'critical' citizens (often highly skilled and with middle- or high-income), and less the 'disaffected' ones (less educated and with lower income) (Dalton & Welzel 2014; Hooghe, Marien & Oser 2017; Norris 2011; Walsh & Elkink 2021; Warren 2018; Webb 2013). Moreover, they offer some proof that 'distinct types of innovation, along with their unique designs, produce different outcomes among citizens' (Gonthier et al. 2024: 17).

However, we do not know how much these differences matter to organised actors in civil society. Apparently, it is assumed that they are all, more or less, equally interested in the development of mechanisms of direct democracy or deliberative democracy. However, we could also find the differences among citizens in movements, associations, nonprofit organisations and trade unions. Our research pathway has led us to investigate this very issue.

Research methodology

Our survey focused on the stakeholders in democracy, i.e. leaders of civil society organisations (trade unions, business associations, organisations defending democracy, minority rights movements), at both national and local levels. The survey methodology identified was the World Café method, which is a structured conversational process designed to facilitate open and collaborative dialogue in a group of people (from 9 to 12 persons) (Slocum 2003). However, given our research interest in uncovering divergent perspectives and structural tensions across stakeholder groups, we opted for the Focus Group technique (Bloor et al.

2001; Kristiansen & Grønkjær 2018), which is better suited to exploring disagreement, scepticism and conflicting institutional experiences.

The literature cited above highlights the main differences between the World Café and Focus Group techniques. The former evolved in the context of peace research and conflict resolution and aims to achieve consensus among those involved. Conversely, the latter is now a classic social research and marketing technique aimed at highlighting both elements of convergence and potential conflict. However, despite their differences, the two techniques enable communication between different individuals. From this perspective, an element of interest for social research is that each of the debates we organised involved people belonging to specific categories of democratic politics stakeholders in the current context of crisis. This allows us to compare different sentiments and attitudes towards the current state and future prospects of democratic innovations in Italy.

More specifically, we organised three focus groups, each aimed at a particular target group among the Italian CSOs:

1) Representatives of tertiary student associations active in our university: We contacted about twelve people, four of whom participated in the face--to-face debate held in a lecture hall at the University of Salerno (lasting just over an hour);

2) Representatives of local civil society organisations in Salerno: We contacted about fifteen people, seven of whom participated in the face-to--face debate held at a marketing research agency in the city of Salerno (lasting over an hour and a half);

3) Representatives of national civil society associations: We contacted around eighteen people, of whom only three were able to participate in the debate we held via Google Meet (which lasted about an hour and a half).

We started organising the events in April 2025 and held the three focus groups in May and June of the same year. We have aggregated some information about the participants in each discussion group in the table below (see Table 1).

It is worth noting that our survey was carried out in a climate of disaffection towards the mechanisms of democracy (including direct and deliberative democracy). This general mood, already widespread among the Italian public (Cattolica News 2024), grew even more disaffected during the campaign for the national referendums on social and workers' rights on 8 and 9 June 2025 and the subsequent failure to achieve the quorum required by law for the validity of the consultation. The five questions were aimed at (1) restoring the possibility of reinstatement of workers in their jobs in all cases of unlawful dismissal; (2) removing the cap on compensation for unlawful dismissals in companies with fewer than 15 employees; (3) abolishing specific rules governing the possibility of establishing fixed-term contracts and the conditions for their extensions and

Table 1: Focus groups participants

Name[1]	FG no.	Gender	Age group	Organisation type	Organisational role	Territorial level
Claudia	1	W	under 35	Student	Leader	Local
Luigi	1	M	under 35	Student	President	Local
Marianna	1	W	under 35	Student	Leader	Local
Michela	1	W	under 35	Student	Activist	Local
Alberta	2	W	under 35	Environment	Activist	Local
Laura	2	W	over 55	Welfare	Leader	Local
Luisa	2	W	under 35	Environment	Activist	Local
Mario	2	M	35-54	Advocacy	Leader	Regional
Olindo	2	M	over 55	Welfare	President	Local
Paola	2	W	over 55	Welfare	Coordinator	Local
Ugo	2	M	over 55	Advocacy	President	Regional
Fabrizio	3	M	over 55	Welfare	Leader	National
Giovanni	3	M	35-54	Advocacy	Leader	National
Manuela	3	W	35-54	Advocacy	Leader	National

Source: Authors

renewals; (4) repealing the provision that excludes joint and several liabilities of the client, contractor and subcontractor for accidents at work arising from risks specific to the activities of contractors or subcontractors; (5) cutting from 10 to 5 years the period of legal residence in Italy required for non-EU foreigners of legal age to apply for Italian citizenship. The committee promoting the referendum included Italy's main trade union and various civil society associations. While the centre-left parties had called for people to vote, the governing parties had called for abstention. The result was therefore seen as a victory for the right-wing government and also as proof that discouragement prevails among a large part of the electorate (Fanpage 2025). Indeed, our research findings (see below, sections 3 and 4) confirm that this growing disillusionment and disaffection with democratic life is also widespread among representatives of civil society movements and organisations. It is also worth noting that the small number of participants in our research and the qualitative nature of the methodology used highlight the exploratory nature of our results.

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1   For reasons related to personal data protection, we have changed the names of the participants in the debates.

We analysed the content of each debate using two different routes: a classical content analysis based on interpretive procedures (Silverman 2010, 2015), and a comparative analysis based on AI tools (namely, Qwen and Chat GPT). The following is a reasoned summary of the results we have obtained, aimed at comparing the sentiments and attitudes of the above-mentioned stakeholder groups on the issue at stake.

Democratic innovations in Italy: A comparison between different categories of stakeholders

Actors involved in democratic innovations include activists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and networks that actively contribute to advancing democratic processes. These actors offer valuable practical experience, facilitate dialogue and promote collaboration between different social groups and categories, improving the quality of governance and citizen participation (Gonthier et al. 2024). The three debates we held with these actors confirmed this view with regard to Italy. Still, there were some significant differences depending on the type of actors asked about the situation, problems and prospects for citizen participation, which were unfiltered by the political class. We will, therefore, begin by examining the results with a summary of the points of convergence between the three groups of stakeholders before highlighting the differences.

As regards the current state of democratic innovation in Italy, some participants see positive elements. Among these, significant local experiences are often cited, such as those related to some local-level referendums, participatory budgeting and university petitions.

> However, the referendum is already an important incentive to participate in the vote. For me, a referendum in my municipality was important because it helped me understand our fellow citizens' views on a particular issue. Of course, it was consultative, but it is a tool for participation. So I think it is important. Then it depends on how it is applied (Michela, student association).

> We launched a petition for a lunch break, and now the lunch break in the (name of department) is regulated, thanks to that petition… So, in my opinion, with the right methods, that is, with the right implementation, I think it is a functional tool that can be (useful) (Marianna, student association).

Respondents highlight a still widespread civic engagement at the local level, especially in the areas of community and social welfare.

> The third sector also often manages to anticipate needs, rather than just filling gaps (Paola, local CSO).

However, other forms of democratic innovation can be seen… from energy to housing to food to mobility, albeit to a lesser extent. In short, creating places linked to people's daily lives… Very often there are interesting forms of collaboration between mayors and local associations, between mayors and businesses. The point is that they are often on a very limited scale, but they do exist (Fabrizio, national CSO).

Some tools (in particular digital platforms) are seen as effective if well managed and supported by a culture of participation.

One positive thing is that (mini-public policy) promotes digital technology, which is important, and currently digital technology… Also, the fact that it's not just a game, it's more than when we go to vote. In my opinion, we certainly express our thoughts there, but it's a very passive thing, i.e., we go there, there's no dialogue on the issues we face when we go to vote. In this case, there's the possibility of interacting, so I think it's a very positive thing (Marianna, student association).

At the same time, several participants in the discussions highlight the existence of important critical issues that can hinder, or even block, the development of democratic innovations. Perhaps the main one is a crisis of trust in representative democracy, which translates into high abstention rates even in direct consultations.

Non-participation is not determined by lack of interest, but by a lack of trust from the outset… The collective perception is that we are someone's puppets (Laura, local CSO).

In my opinion, the referendum showed us the state of (Italian) democracy. Even on an occasion when citizens had the opportunity to participate, abstention was extremely high (Manuela, national CSO).

According to some, the lack of effective political intermediation and functioning representation hinders the consolidation of innovative democratic practices. Many participation tools are perceived as formal or ineffective (e.g. blocked petitions, slow decision-making processes).

The tool (of the referendum) exists and has enormous potential, but the fact is that… *they* make it seem useless, that it doesn't matter, that it wouldn't change anything (Alberta, local CSO, italics added).

Do we remember the referendum on water? The referendum on water passed the threshold. But what happened to it? (Manuela, national CSO).[2]

As a result, these experiences often remain isolated and fail to have an impact on structural issues and citizens' quality of life. The implication is that isolated and ineffective democratic innovations can increase citizens' distrust of politics, therefore producing an effect contrary to that expected in the literature (Bauer & Fatke 2014). What is at stake here is the issue of political efficacy as a factor enabling political trust and democratic participation (Gonthier et al. 2024).

The (popular initiative) proposals are certainly fundamental and could have a significant impact, but the problem lies at the parliamentary level. They get bogged down and eventually end up... buried and remain there (Alberta, local CSO).

Finally, there is also some convergence on concrete proposals and lines of action to revitalise democratic innovation in Italy. Among these, the one that has received the widest support refers to the need to reactivate or expand civic and democratic education programmes (Alber 2023), with the development of educational projects on civic awareness and active participation.

Citizenship and the constitution are very important and are not studied in school (Michela, student association).

I would say that one of the tools is to get back to creating democratic culture, in schools, in public squares, in local areas (Manuela, national CSO).

A second important aspect concerns the improvement of digital platforms, making them more accessible to non-digital natives, but also expanding their use – for example, for collecting signatures for referendums and petitions at a local level. This could reduce the negative impact of the current socio-cultural context on participation processes (De Blasio & Selva 2019).

Easy-to-use platforms make people feel more comfortable participating (Luigi, student association).

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2   In 2011, the majority of Italian voters voted to repeal a law that allowed the privatisation of publicly owned companies that provided essential services, including water management. Despite this result, the various governing coalitions that have come to power since then have continued down the path of privatisation, largely nullifying the outcome of the referendum.

(We need to promote) the collection of signatures (for petitions and refer-endums) via SPID,[3] which may seem trivial but in reality is not, because... otherwise you need someone to collect citizens' signatures, and that is very complicated (Giovanni, national CSO).

A final line of action on which there is consensus is the creation of physical and digital spaces for networking associations, movements and individual citizens interested in issues related to democratic participation. The implication here is that these changes could ultimately produce a shift towards collaborative governance, a set of participatory arrangements enabling cooperation between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders (Elstub & Escobar 2019).

We need to rebuild these intermediary bodies... because today we don't have a group that can say 'I have listened, I know that these needs exist' (Paola, local CSO).

Chambers of Labour[4] could constitute an incredible territorial hub to activate this type of thing (Fabrizio, national CSO).

Differences in sentiment and attitudes regarding democratic innovations

The previous analysis highlighted the main points of convergence between the three different categories of Italian civil society representatives with regard to democratic innovations. However, in this work, our research is instead aimed at highlighting the differences between the various groups and proposing hypotheses that contribute to explaining them, as well as paths that contribute to integrating different perspectives into a unified vision capable of breathing new life into democratic participation in Italy.

A comparative sentiment analysis on Italian stakeholder groups

In this whole process, the first step has been a comparative sentiment analysis (Cambria et al. 2017; Maisto 2024), which has allowed us to highlight the differences in the general tone of the three conversations, in the attitude towards democratic innovations and in the level of optimism/pessimism in each group. Sentiment analysis is an increasingly popular social and political research technique, as scholars can use it to understand the political orientation of citizens.

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3   The Sistema Pubblico di Identità Digitale (Public System for Digital Identity, SPID) is a tool that guarantees all Italian citizens and businesses unique, secure and protected access to digital services provided by the public administration.

4   The Chambers of Labour are the local branches of Italy's main trade union.

In particular, it is now considered a valuable research technique for determining a topic's valence and polarity (neutral, positive or negative) under collective debate (Marrazzo 2014). In the context of our research, we proceeded with a content analysis of each conversation in order to identify:

1) Explicit emotional tones: keywords expressing positive, negative or neutral judgments;
2) Attitudes toward the topics discussed: optimism, scepticism, frustration, hope, critical detachment;
3) Trust in the Italian political system: expressed directly or inferred from the context. We then sought to interpret the contextual meaning of the text, considering mostly
    a) The purpose of the discussion;
    b) The social and institutional role of the speakers;
    c) The level of experience or awareness of the topics discussed.

Finally, we proceeded to identify recurring patterns for each of the groups considered. We summarise the results in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparative sentiment analysis

Group	General tone	Attitude toward democratic innovations	Trust in the system	Critical issues	Vision of the future
Student associations	Pragmatic and positive	Favourable, focused on simple and immediate tools	Moderate	Limited understanding of the broader institutional context	Optimistic, trust in education and participation
Local CSOs	Realistic and critical	Interested, but aware of operational and bureaucratic limitations	Low	Difficulty in transforming participation into real change	Moderate, progress is recognised but ineffectiveness is lamented
National CSOs	Analytical, detached, sometimes pessimistic	Reflective, critical of the systemic crisis of democracy	Very low	Crisis of representation, abstentionism, fragmentation	Cautious, sees ferment but calls for a profound rethinking

Source: Authors

The emotional tone of student association representatives toward democratic innovations is generally positive, with an emphasis on the opportunities offered by instruments of direct/deliberative/participatory democracy. Confidence in the ability of students (or, more generally, citizens) to influence political processes through instruments such as petitions and referendums is quite high. On the other hand, they show less awareness of structural weaknesses.

I think that (the assessment of democratic innovations) is positive, because they involve the community, whether it be the university community or the community in general (encouraging it) to take action (Claudia, student association).

However, the referendum is already an important incentive to participate in the vote. For me, a referendum in my municipality was important because it helped me understand our fellow citizens' views on a particular issue. Of course, it was consultative, but it is a tool for participation. So I think it is important. Then it depends on how it is applied (Michela, student association).

On the other hand, the emotional tone of the participants in the second workshop, who came from local civil society organisations, can be described primarily in terms of critical realism. The participants in this debate emphasised, above all, the difficulty of having a real impact on decision-making processes. There is also a certain weariness due to the lack of tangible results and a consequent distrust of democratic participation under the current institutional, political, social and cultural conditions.

The tool (of the referendum) exists and has enormous potential, but the fact is that... they make it seem useless that it doesn't matter, that it wouldn't change anything (Alberta, local CSO).

Finally, the emotional tone of the representatives of national civil society organisations is analytical, expressing a level of knowledge and experience relating to Italian society as a whole, which allows them to take a systematic approach to the issue of democratic innovations in the context of Italian politics. At the same time, they express considerable pessimism, as they tend to highlight the crisis of political representation and the current social and cultural fragmentation of Italian society. The widespread perception that the country is in a structural crisis that is not being adequately addressed by the political class makes the level of trust in the system very low.

Any question about democratic procedures cannot be separated from the question of the current state of democracy... So, it seems to me that we are experiencing the greatest crisis of democracy (Manuela, national CSO).

It seems to me that the state of health (of direct democracy tools) is not particularly flourishing (and this) is due to the great deafness of institutional politics and its very limited capacity to absorb any stimulus or proposal that comes from outside the organisational boundaries of the parties (Fabrizio, national CSO).

Comparative sentiment analysis reveals a gradual shift from youthful optimism to critical awareness at the local level, culminating in analytical detachment and pessimism at the national level. Young people see democratic innovations as a direct educational tool, but their vision is still limited to the micro level. Local CSOs are realistic since they recognise these tools' value but highlight their operational and bureaucratic limitations. Representatives of national-level civil society organisations offer a deeper analysis of the crisis of representative democracy but express reduced confidence in the political system as a whole. This diversity of attitudes suggests the need to build bridges between levels of participation, integrating the enthusiasm of young people, the experience of local communities and the systemic vision of the national level. This represents an important challenge to be taken up both by the parties most interested in citizen participation in the Italian democratic life and by civil society organisations themselves.

A comparative analysis of the stakeholders' attitudes towards enhancing democratic innovations

We can also find differences between stakeholder groups regarding the initiatives to relaunch and disseminate democratic innovation mechanisms to restore trust and increase citizen participation in Italian democratic life. Quite surprisingly, most 'technical' proposals come from student associations. The actions suggested by students to promote democratic innovation refer to the revival of civic education and the establishment of spaces for dialogue and civic discussion in schools. In addition, they also suggest improving access to digital platforms for participation, introducing interactive graphic guides to facilitate the use of democratic tools and even experimenting with artificial intelligence to support the discussion and management of some participatory initiatives, such as petitions.

> Perhaps we should establish (dialogue on topics of common interest) as a custom, perhaps starting in schools, and dedicate one hour per week from the youngest to the oldest classes to develop critical thinking (Claudia, student association).

> Simulating being a member of the European Parliament... encourages young people to remain active citizens (Luigi, student association).

> Creating platforms in the wake of Facebook... would make these people less afraid (of making mistakes) because they would recognise the interface (Luigi, student association).

The proposals put forward by local civil society representatives tend to be on a different level. Particular mention should be made of strengthening the role of intermediary bodies (trade unions, committees, associations). This should involve building integrated territorial networks between public, private and nonprofit entities, thus leading to improved accessibility and effectiveness of local decision-making processes. However, alongside and perhaps even before this, local civil society leaders are suggesting measures to reduce bureaucracy and speed up response times to citizens.

> We need to rebuild these intermediary bodies... because today we don't have a group that can say 'I have listened, I know that these needs exist' (Paola, local CSO).

> Citizens must organise themselves in order to participate, whether we like it or not, otherwise these are individual demands, and it is difficult to imagine shared visions (Laura, local CSO).

> A first step could be to hold public meetings throughout the territory, rather than centralised ones (Laura, local CSO).

> One method could be to trigger majority decision-making processes, because a decision has to be made sooner or later, but to integrate mediation phases into the decision-making procedure (Laura, local CSO).

Starting generally from an assessment of the Italian democratic system as a whole, participants in the workshop aimed at representatives of national civil society organisations focused primarily on the need to revive and spread democratic culture in society and institutions. Beyond this general objective, there is a need for reform of the system of democratic representation in both politics and civil society. Some representatives emphasise, in particular, the need to identify local bodies (such as the Chambers of Labor, see above, section 3.1) as hubs for participation. A final suggestion concerns the enhancement and institutionalisation of local experiences within a coherent national framework.

> It is necessary to root a political culture, a culture of democracy, in the system in which we operate (Manuela, national CSO).

> It is useful to bring together two broad areas of intervention, one consisting of democratising spaces for political decision-making, and another that includes all functions supporting spaces for organising democratic processes (Giovanni, national CSO).

The discourse of best practices is very powerful. We should imagine it ourselves, so that it becomes less tragic when we (left-wingers) lose the elections and have to play defence (Giovanni, national CSO).

We summarise the results of our comparative attitude analysis in Table 3, which shows the main differences between these stakeholder groups on this side. The table also highlights the substantial complementarity between the three positions, which could be usefully integrated into a single proposal for the development of democratic innovations in Italy.

Table 3: Comparative attitudes analysis

Topic	Student associations	Local CSOs	National CSOs
Main objective	Educate active citizens	Strengthen local participation	Rebuild Italian democracy
Level of action	Micro	Meso	Macro
Timeframe	Short term	Medium term	Long term
Main tools	Civic education, digitalisation	Territorial networks	Institutional reforms
Level of realism	High	High	Medium
Political vision	Emerging	Partial	Advanced

Source: Authors

An integrated model could include a strong focus on civic education, institutional support for active participation at the local level and national coordination in order to build a widespread culture of democratic participation. This integration would enable the growth of a new generation of active citizens, strengthen the capacity of local communities to influence decision-making processes and create a favourable environment for systemic action (at the national level) thanks to a solid foundation of democratic practice. This three-tier model proposed for Italy could also be helpful for other countries, such as the Central European ones, where a similar gap between local innovation and national stagnation in both trust and citizens' participation can be detected (Gonthier et al. 2024). The common challenge is to build bridges between the tiers, preventing democratic innovations from remaining isolated experiences. However, which political entity could take responsibility for this strategy and carry it forward?

Concluding remarks

Our research has highlighted similarities and differences between the opinions and attitudes of different stakeholder groups involved in citizens' participation with regard to democratic innovations in Italy. More specifically, we found a gradation in sentiment and attitudes that seems to be in line with the opinion of those, such as Norris (2022), who argue that in more developed countries with a more established and stable democratic tradition, a sceptical trust in institutions and political actors is emerging today. In fact, as the level of experience and knowledge available to political stakeholders increases, trust decreases, but gives way to a rational attitude oriented toward the construction and consolidation of political alternatives from below (Micciarelli 2018). However, this same attitude signals that this mobilisation strategy tends to present intermediary bodies as political actors in their own right, rather than to build relationships with political parties. Therefore, the relationship postulated by Norris' theory between politico-institutional trust and the trustworthiness of politicians seems questioned when applied to the context of representative democracy in Italy. Here, associative practices and social participation no longer feed political representation (Barbera 2023).

This is in line with the findings of Karlsson et al. (2021), who argue that democratic innovations implemented in periods of growing distrust – like what Italian society is experiencing today – may have counterproductive effects, especially if participants are dissatisfied with the process, such as in the French case (Blondiaux 2021). Therefore, there is a need to rethink the established relationship between mechanisms of representative democracy and those of direct/deliberative/participatory democracy in Italy. In addition, the risks of triggering a boomerang effect indicate that we cannot identify a unidirectional causality between institutional innovations, political trust and citizens' involvement. Whether trust acts as a precondition that enables governments to undertake reforms and innovations, or whether it is a result of institutional innovations that citizens perceive as effective, cannot be answered unequivocally. This dichotomy conceals a complex interdependence that operates on multiple levels and is shaped by many contextual factors. We certainly need more research on this subject.

Another aspect of our research findings deserves attention. The people involved in the three conversations belong to relatively high social strata in both economic and cultural terms. The university students, activists and representatives of civil society organisations who participated in our focus groups share a high level of education and (excluding students) employment in the middle or upper levels of social stratification. The interest they showed in the topic under discussion, therefore, tends to confirm the fact that, in today's Italy, democratic innovations mainly involve 'critical' citizens, not 'disaffected' ones

(see above, section 1). Theoretically, it is reasonable to assume that the cognitive mobilisation approach to citizens' involvement in democratic innovations is more effective than political disaffection in explaining when trust and political participation are lacking (Bowler et al. 2007; Schuck & de Vreese 2015). It remains to be seen whether this is sufficient to reactivate political participation among citizens or whether additional mobilisation is indispensable, which can only be ensured by political dissatisfaction among the less affluent, less skilled social classes.

Finally, our findings may offer a case for rethinking the relationship between representative and participatory democracy. Democratic innovations must be embedded in a broader project of institutional reform and democratic culture--building that bridges the gap between local vitality and national stagnation. The proposed three-tier model – integrating education, territorial networks and institutional reform – offers a roadmap for such a transformation. While Italy's case is specific, its lessons resonate across Southern and Central Europe, where similar tensions between democratic aspiration and institutional fatigue persist.

Acknowledgments

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