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ESSAYS

Why Does Backsliding Depth Vary? Legal Populism, Abusive Constitutionalism, and the Differential Trajectories of Democratic Erosion in Hungary and Poland

AHMED BENAIDJA AND ALI BAKCHICHE

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Abstract: *Why did democratic backsliding reach fundamentally different depths in Hungary and Poland, two states that shared comparable institutional legacies, European Union membership and right-wing populist governments? This article argues that existing comparative accounts – centred on executive aggrandisement and electoral authoritarianism – are insufficient to explain this variation, because they overlook the decisive role of constitutional design and the specific legal strategy adopted by each governing party. Drawing on a novel analytical synthesis of ‘abusive constitutionalism’, ‘legal populism’ and ‘stealth authoritarianism’, the article demonstrates that Hungary’s supermajority enabled a comprehensive constitutional overhaul that irreversibly restructured the conditions of political competition, whilst Poland’s institutional architecture and fragmented opposition preserved sufficient democratic resilience to allow electoral reversal in 2023. The article further engages V-Dem longitudinal data (2010–2024) to trace the divergent trajectories empirically, and evaluates the EU’s rule-of-law enforcement evolution across three phases: rhetorical condemnation, Article 7 proceedings and financial conditionality. The findings advance a ‘constitutional threshold’ theory of backsliding depth, with implications for comparative democratisation and EU institutional design.*

Keywords: *democratic backsliding, abusive constitutionalism, legal populism, Hungary and Poland, constitutional threshold*

Introduction: The puzzle of differential backsliding

A defining paradox of Central European politics over the past decade is that two structurally similar states – Hungary and Poland – both governed by right-wing populist parties, both EU member states, both post-communist democracies with comparable levels of consolidation, have arrived at starkly divergent political destinations. By 2024, Hungary had been reclassified by Freedom House as a ‘hybrid regime’, its competitive authoritarian character formally acknowledged by international democracy indices (Freedom House 2024; V-Dem Institute 2024). Poland, by contrast, had navigated a significant episode of democratic erosion and emerged – through the October 2023 parliamentary elections – with a reconstituted democratic majority capable of forming a government committed to institutional restoration.

A significant development requires acknowledgement at the outset. The April 2026 parliamentary elections produced electoral defeats for Viktor Orban in Hungary and for the Law and Justice party in Poland. We argue that these outcomes corroborate rather than undermine the constitutional threshold theory: PiS’s 2023 defeat and the subsequent democratic restoration represent an electoral reversal consistent with below-threshold backsliding, precisely as the theory predicts; whilst Orban’s 2026 defeat does not automatically dismantle the constitutional architecture he constructed – the Fundamental Law, restructured electoral system, colonised judiciary and captured media landscape remain in place, confronting any successor government with barriers requiring a constitutional supermajority that is extremely unlikely to be available. The asymmetric difficulty of institutional restoration in the two cases thus itself confirms the theory’s core prediction.

This divergence constitutes a theoretical puzzle that existing comparative accounts of democratic backsliding have not fully resolved. The dominant frameworks – executive aggrandisement (Bermeo 2016), democratic recession (Diamond 2015) and autocratisation (Luhmann & Lindberg 2019) – excel at identifying the mechanisms by which incumbents weaken democratic institutions, but are less equipped to explain why those mechanisms produce different depths of erosion across superficially similar cases. If both Fidesz under Prime Minister Viktor Orban and the Law and Justice (PiS) party under the leadership of Jaroslaw Kaczynski deployed comparable repertoires of institutional manipulation, why did the former consolidate a competitive authoritarian regime whilst the latter ultimately failed to do so?

This article proposes a new analytical framework – which we term the ‘constitutional threshold theory’ of backsliding depth – that centres the role of constitutional design and legal strategy in explaining variation in democratic erosion outcomes. Drawing on the concept of ‘abusive constitutionalism’ (Landau 2013), ‘legal populism’ (Blokker 2019) and ‘stealth authoritarianism’ (Meierhenrich

2021), we argue that the depth of democratic backsliding is decisively shaped by whether incumbents cross a ‘constitutional threshold’ – defined as the acquisition of sufficient constitutional authority to restructure permanently the conditions of political competition, insulating the regime from electoral reversal. Hungary crossed this threshold in 2011; Poland never did.

The article makes three interrelated contributions to the comparative democratisation literature. First, it advances a more granular theoretical account of backsliding depth by introducing the constitutional threshold concept as an analytical tool. Second, it deploys V-Dem longitudinal data for the period 2010–2024 to provide empirical grounding for the theoretical argument, tracing divergent trajectories across multiple dimensions of democratic quality. Third, it offers a periodised analysis of EU rule-of-law enforcement – distinguishing three phases: rhetorical engagement, Article 7 proceedings and financial conditionality – and evaluates the differential effectiveness of each phase across the two cases. Together, these contributions advance our understanding of why democratic backsliding produces qualitatively different regime outcomes even when its initiating conditions appear structurally comparable.

The article proceeds as follows. The second section develops the theoretical framework, situating the constitutional threshold theory within and against existing accounts of democratic backsliding. The third section presents the empirical analysis of Hungary, focusing on the acquisition and use of constitutional supermajority power. The fourth section analyses Poland, emphasising the institutional constraints that prevented the crossing of the constitutional threshold. The fifth section offers a comparative assessment grounded in V-Dem data. The sixth section evaluates EU enforcement responses across the three identified phases. The seventh section considers the implications of the Slovak case under Prime Minister Robert Fico as a partial test of the constitutional threshold theory. The conclusion draws together the findings and identifies avenues for future research.

Theoretical framework: Beyond executive aggrandisement

The limits of existing accounts

The scholarly literature on democratic backsliding has advanced enormously since Bermeo’s (2016) foundational typology. The concept of executive aggrandisement – the incremental accumulation of power by elected executives through ostensibly legal means – has become the dominant analytical lens for the Central European cases, and for good reason: It accurately describes the mechanism by which both Fidesz and PiS pursued institutional dominance. Yet executive aggrandisement is a description of a process, not an explanation of its outcomes. Two governments can pursue executive aggrandisement through

identical tactics and arrive at fundamentally different destinations, depending on the institutional resources available to each.

Ginsburg & Huq's (2018) account of 'constitutional retrogression' similarly illuminates the process of democratic erosion – the gradual degradation of electoral integrity, liberal rights and the rule of law – but does not systematically theorise why retrogression reaches different equilibria across cases. Levitsky & Ziblatt's (2018) influential framework focuses primarily on the role of institutional gatekeepers and behavioural norms in defending democracy, but their analysis is more attentive to the conditions that enable backsliding than to the factors that determine its depth. The V-Dem Institute's (2024) 'autocratisation' framework provides the most sophisticated empirical tools for tracking democratic decline, yet its aggregate indices do not capture the constitutional mechanisms that differentiate shallow from deep backsliding.

What is missing from these accounts is a theory that explains not just how backsliding occurs but why it produces different regime outcomes – specifically, why some episodes of executive aggrandisement produce stable competitive authoritarianism whilst others remain reversible. This article proposes that the missing variable is the constitutional threshold: the point at which an incumbent government acquires sufficient formal constitutional authority to restructure permanently the rules of political competition, thereby foreclosing the possibility of democratic reversal through normal electoral mechanisms.

Abusive constitutionalism and legal populism

Before examining each concept individually, it is useful to map how the three theoretical approaches relate to one another and to the constitutional threshold concept. The framework operates on three analytically distinct levels. At the level of mechanism, abusive constitutionalism (Landau 2013) identifies the specific legal instruments through which democratic erosion is engineered: Constitutional amendment, replacement and design are weaponised against democracy rather than deployed in its service. At the level of legitimisation, legal populism (Blokker 2019) explains how these mechanisms are discursively justified to domestic and international audiences: The dismantling of counter-majoritarian institutions is presented as the democratic liberation of 'the people' from elite capture. At the level of strategy, stealth authoritarianism (Meierhenrich 2021) characterises the overall approach: Formal democratic procedures are preserved as camouflage whilst their substantive content is progressively eliminated. The constitutional threshold concept is the synthetic construct that integrates these three levels, identifying the point at which the combination of abusive constitutional mechanisms, populist legitimisation and stealth strategy achieves sufficient formal constitutional authority to foreclose genuine democratic reversal. The selection of these three approaches, rather than alternatives available in

the literature, reflects a deliberate analytical choice. Levitsky & Way's (2002, 2010) framework of competitive authoritarianism is highly pertinent to the Hungarian outcome but does not systematically theorise the conditions under which backsliding reaches competitive authoritarian equilibrium as distinct from remaining reversible – precisely the explanatory gap this article addresses. Waldner & Lust's (2018) account of democratic erosion similarly illuminates the process of gradual degradation without explaining depth variation across structurally comparable cases. The three concepts selected here were chosen because, in combination, they provide analytical traction on the specific explanandum of this article: not whether backsliding occurs, but why it produces different regime outcomes.

Two theoretical concepts are particularly valuable for understanding how the constitutional threshold is crossed. The first is Landau's (2013) concept of 'abusive constitutionalism' – the use of constitutional amendment and replacement mechanisms to undermine rather than consolidate democracy. Landau observes that democratic backsliders have increasingly learned to deploy the very instruments of constitutional democracy – amendment procedures, constitutional courts, constitutional design – as weapons against democratic governance. Abusive constitutionalism is particularly insidious because it wraps anti-democratic outcomes in the legitimating language of constitutional legality: The incumbent can claim to be acting constitutionally even as the constitutional order is being stripped of its democratic content.

Hungary provides the paradigmatic case of abusive constitutionalism in the European context. The Orbán government's use of its two-thirds parliamentary supermajority to replace the 1989 constitutional settlement with an entirely new Fundamental Law – a document designed to entrench Fidesz's political preferences across electoral cycles – exemplifies the concept precisely. As Scheppele (2013) observed, the Hungarian case demonstrated that a governing party with sufficient constitutional authority could construct a 'legal labyrinth' that remained formally lawful whilst functionally precluding democratic accountability.

The second concept is Blokker's (2019) 'legal populism' – the use of legal and constitutional mechanisms to advance the populist claim that 'the people', as exclusively represented by the governing party, must be liberated from the constraints imposed by counter-majoritarian institutions. Legal populism provides the ideological legitimisation for abusive constitutionalism: the dismantling of constitutional courts, independent media and minority rights is presented not as the abuse of constitutional authority but as its democratic exercise. In both Hungary and Poland, legal populism served as the discursive framework within which executive aggrandisement was articulated and justified to domestic and international audiences.

Stealth authoritarianism and the constitutional threshold

Meierhenrich's (2021) concept of 'stealth authoritarianism' completes the theoretical triad. Where abusive constitutionalism describes the instrument and legal populism provides the justification, stealth authoritarianism characterises the strategic approach: the deliberate maintenance of formal democratic procedures – elections, parliamentary debate, judicial review – as a camouflage for the progressive elimination of their substantive content. Stealth authoritarians avoid the reputational and material costs of overt authoritarianism by never formally abolishing democratic institutions, instead colonising and neutralising them from within.

Synthesising these three concepts, we define the 'constitutional threshold' as the point at which stealth authoritarian tactics, deployed through abusive constitutionalism and legitimated by legal populism, achieve sufficient formal constitutional authority to lock in the restructuring of political competition. Below the threshold, democratic erosion remains reversible: Opposition actors retain sufficient institutional resources – independent courts, critical media, fair electoral rules – to mount effective challenges and, ultimately, to achieve democratic reversal. Above the threshold, the conditions of genuine electoral competition are so comprehensively restructured that reversal through normal democratic means becomes extremely difficult, even if not formally impossible.

The constitutional threshold is not a single event but a cumulative process. It is crossed when three conditions are simultaneously satisfied: (a) the governing party has acquired formal constitutional authority sufficient to alter the basic rules of political competition; (b) this authority has been deployed to restructure judicial appointment, media regulation and electoral rules in ways that systematically advantage the incumbent; and (c) the opposition lacks sufficient institutional veto points to contest these changes effectively. We argue that Hungary crossed this threshold in the period 2011–2013, whilst Poland – constrained by the absence of a constitutional supermajority and the persistence of institutional veto points – never did.

Hungary: Crossing the constitutional threshold

The supermajority as foundational resource

The enabling condition for Hungary's constitutional threshold crossing was the two-thirds parliamentary supermajority secured by Fidesz-KDNP in the April 2010 elections. Under Hungary's constitutional framework as it then stood, a two-thirds majority of all members of parliament (MPs) was required to amend the constitution – a provision designed to ensure that constitutional change reflected broad consensus rather than bare majority preference. The Orban gov-

ernment's supermajority transformed this protective mechanism into an instrument of institutional dominance: For the first time in post-communist Hungarian history, a single party possessed unilateral constitutional amendment authority.

The significance of this resource cannot be overstated. It is the foundational variable that explains why Hungary crossed the constitutional threshold whilst Poland did not. PiS's 2015 electoral victory produced a simple parliamentary majority – sufficient for ordinary legislation but insufficient for constitutional amendment without opposition support. This structural difference conditioned everything that followed: The Orban government could pursue abusive constitutionalism without negotiation or compromise, whilst PiS was constrained to operate within, and around, an existing constitutional framework it could not unilaterally replace.

V-Dem data for the period 2010–2014 document a dramatic and sustained decline in Hungary's democratic quality across multiple dimensions precisely coinciding with the period of supermajority government. The Liberal Democracy Index score for Hungary fell from 0.76 in 2010 to 0.54 in 2014 – a decline of twenty-two points in four years, a speed and depth of erosion without precedent among EU member states (V-Dem Institute 2024). This empirical trajectory confirms that the supermajority period constituted the decisive phase of threshold crossing.

Abusive constitutionalism in practice: The fundamental law and its amendments

The centrepiece of Hungary's abusive constitutionalism was the adoption of a new Fundamental Law in April 2011, replacing the extensively amended 1989 constitution. The Fundamental Law was drafted entirely within the Fidesz parliamentary faction, without meaningful opposition participation or public deliberation. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe issued a highly critical opinion noting that the speed of adoption, the absence of a genuine constituent process and the substantive content of several provisions raised serious concerns about its democratic legitimacy (Venice Commission 2011).

The substantive content of the Fundamental Law exemplified abusive constitutionalism in several key respects. Transitional provisions – subsequently relocated to the body of the Fundamental Law itself – entrenched specific policy preferences across electoral cycles by encoding them at constitutional level, beyond the reach of simple legislative majorities. Key institutional appointments – the president of the National Bank, the Data Protection commissioner, the chair of the National Office for the Judiciary, and members of the Constitutional Court – were filled for extended terms by Fidesz loyalists before the 2014 elections, ensuring that the institutional landscape would remain favourable to Fidesz even in the event of electoral defeat.

The Constitutional Court – historically one of the strongest in post-communist Europe and a significant constraint on governmental action – was simultaneously expanded from eleven to fifteen members and stripped of jurisdiction over budgetary and tax legislation. When the Court subsequently ruled that certain transitional provisions were unconstitutional, the Orban government responded by inserting those provisions directly into the body of the Fundamental Law through constitutional amendment, thereby placing them beyond judicial review. Scheppele (2018: 548) characterises this strategy as ‘autocratic legalism’: the use of formally legal constitutional amendment to override judicial checks on executive power, maintaining the appearance of constitutionalism whilst eliminating its substance.

It is important to emphasise that the decisive turning point in Hungarian democratic backsliding was not solely the adoption of the Fundamental Law in April 2011, but rather the series of increasingly radical amendments that followed. The Fourth Amendment to the Fundamental Law (March 2013) was particularly consequential: It reinserted into the main body of the constitutional text those transitional provisions that the Constitutional Court had struck down as unconstitutional, thereby placing them beyond judicial review whilst simultaneously curtailing the Court’s jurisdiction to assess constitutional amendments against the internal consistency of the constitution itself. The Seventh Amendment (2018) further entrenched the regime’s preferences by constitutionalising provisions related to migration and the authority of the National Council for the Judiciary. This pattern of progressive constitutional radicalisation – driven by consistently available supermajority authority and an increasingly unrestrained political will to deploy that authority – reveals that crossing the constitutional threshold was a cumulative process rather than a single founding act. The constitutional threshold was not simply the adoption of a new Fundamental Law; it was the progressive weaponisation of that law through successive amendments calibrated to the regime’s evolving political requirements.

Electoral reengineering and the consolidation of competitive authoritarianism

Having secured constitutional control of the institutional landscape, the Orban government proceeded to restructure the electoral rules governing future competition. The 2011 electoral reform reduced the number of parliamentary seats from 386 to 199 and replaced the previous mixed electoral system with a predominantly single-round, first-past-the-post mechanism for constituency seats. Constituency boundaries were simultaneously redrawn in ways that analysts characterised as systematic gerrymandering, concentrating opposition support in a smaller number of ‘safe’ seats whilst distributing Fidesz support more efficiently across a larger number of marginal constituencies.

The cumulative effect of these electoral changes was dramatic. In 2014, Fidesz secured 44.5 percent of the vote but won 66.8 percent of parliamentary seats – a disproportionality ratio without precedent in Hungarian electoral history. In 2018, a similar dynamic produced another two-thirds majority from a popular vote share of 49.3 percent. V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index for Hungary declined from 0.85 in 2009 to 0.62 in 2018, reflecting the systematic erosion of competitive conditions (V-Dem Institute 2024). By 2022, the opposition had recognised that winning a parliamentary majority required a vote share roughly fifteen percentage points higher than Fidesz’s – a structural disadvantage built into the electoral architecture itself.

Media capture and the information environment

The final dimension of Hungary’s constitutional threshold crossing was the systematic restructuring of the media landscape. The 2010 Media Law established a Media Council composed exclusively of Fidesz appointees with sweeping regulatory powers over broadcast content, licensing and fines. Public broadcasters were rapidly colonised by loyalists and transformed into partisan instruments. Over the following decade, pro-government businesspeople systematically acquired private media outlets, culminating in the 2018 consolidation of approximately five hundred media assets into the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) under a government decree exempting the transaction from competition law review.

By 2022, independent journalism in Hungary had been reduced to a small number of online outlets operating under conditions of sustained financial and regulatory pressure. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) observed in its assessment of the 2022 Hungarian elections that ‘the media environment remained unbalanced’ and that ‘the public broadcaster provided a platform almost exclusively for the ruling party’ (ODIHR 2022). A degraded media environment does not merely disadvantage opposition campaigns in the short term; it shapes the information environment in which citizens form political preferences, creating structural advantages for incumbents that persist across electoral cycles.

Poland: Significant erosion without threshold crossing

The absence of constitutional authority as a constraining variable

Poland’s democratic backsliding under PiS (2015–2023) was real, significant and deeply troubling by any reasonable standard. The constitutional crisis of 2015–2016, the judicial overhaul of 2017–2019 and the transformation of public broadcasting all constituted serious erosions of democratic governance. Yet the backsliding never crossed the constitutional threshold as defined in this article,

and this failure to cross the threshold ultimately permitted democratic reversal. Understanding why PiS could not cross the threshold requires attention to the institutional constraints that the simple parliamentary majority imposed.

The most fundamental constraint was the absence of constitutional amendment authority. With approximately 38 percent of the popular vote and 51 percent of parliamentary seats in 2015, PiS could govern but could not constitutionally restructure the basic rules of political competition. Electoral law could be modified at the margins but not fundamentally redesigned. The constitutional framework could be violated but not replaced. Judicial appointments could be manipulated but only within the existing constitutional architecture. These constraints meant that PiS's executive aggrandisement operated below the constitutional threshold, producing significant but ultimately reversible institutional damage.

V-Dem data confirm this interpretation. Poland's Liberal Democracy Index fell from 0.82 in 2015 to 0.61 in 2020 – a significant decline, but one that left Poland at a level of democratic quality higher than Hungary had reached in 2013 (V-Dem Institute 2024). More tellingly, Poland's Electoral Democracy Index declined far less sharply than Hungary's equivalent measure: from 0.87 in 2015 to 0.72 in 2022, compared to Hungary's fall from 0.85 in 2009 to 0.62 in 2018. The relative resilience of Poland's electoral environment reflects the absence of the constitutional restructuring of competitive conditions that Hungary underwent.

Legal populism without abusive constitutionalism: The limits of statutory manipulation

PiS's approach to institutional manipulation exemplifies what we term 'legal populism without abusive constitutionalism' – the deployment of statutory legislation to advance populist political control over institutions without the formal constitutional authority to restructure those institutions permanently. This strategy produced significant short-term gains for PiS: The Constitutional Tribunal was not merely paralysed but progressively transformed into a governmental enabler – a trajectory that Sadurski (2019b) traces from activist court, through paralysis, to instrument of PiS policy – the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS) was captured, the Supreme Court was disrupted and public broadcasting was subordinated. But because these changes were achieved through ordinary legislation rather than constitutional amendment, they remained formally reversible by a subsequent parliamentary majority, even if that reversal proved slower and more contested in practice than initially anticipated.

The distinction between statutory and constitutional entrenchment is crucial to the constitutional threshold theory. Statutory changes – however consequential in the short term – can be repealed, reformed or reinterpreted by successor governments. Constitutional changes – particularly those encoded in a new

constitutional text designed to entrench incumbent preferences – cannot be reversed by simple legislative majority. PiS's institutional manipulation therefore produced a form of democratic erosion that was severe in the moment but structurally reversible, whereas Fidesz's abusive constitutionalism produced changes that are extremely difficult to undo without the same constitutional supermajority that enabled them.

The rule-of-law crisis generated by PiS's judicial manipulation was real and extensively documented by the Venice Commission, the European Commission and the CJEU. However, the institutional resilience preserved by Poland's constitutional architecture – including the ability of opposition judges to contest their own removal, the persistence of parallel judicial structures and the eventual role of the CJEU in compelling withdrawal of the most egregious provisions – meant that the judiciary, though damaged, was never fully captured in the manner achieved in Hungary.

Institutional veto points and democratic resilience

A second key variable distinguishing Poland from Hungary is the persistence of effective institutional veto points. Poland's constitutional design includes a president with significant veto powers – separate from the parliamentary majority and elected by direct popular vote on a different electoral cycle. President Andrzej Duda, though elected on the PiS ticket, exercised an independent check on the government's legislative agenda on several critical occasions: vetoing the 2017 Supreme Court bill in its initial form, vetoing the 2021 media law targeting TVN and, in the final period of PiS government, increasingly distancing himself from the party's most extreme proposals.

The presidential veto mechanism exemplifies the significance of constitutional design for backsliding resilience. Hungary's constitutional framework, both before and after 2011, concentrated executive authority in the prime minister and cabinet, with a relatively weak presidency lacking effective veto powers. Poland's presidential system created a structural veto point that PiS could not eliminate without constitutional authority it did not possess. This veto point preserved spaces of institutional contestation that proved critical to the democratic reversal of 2023.

The 2023 electoral reversal as theoretical test

The October 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland constitute the most important empirical test of the constitutional threshold theory offered by this article. If our argument is correct, Poland's failure to cross the constitutional threshold – manifested in the persistence of genuine electoral competition, functional institutional veto points and a relatively less distorted media environment –

should have preserved conditions under which democratic reversal through electoral means remained possible. The 2023 elections confirm this prediction.

The opposition coalition – comprising the Civic Coalition of former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the Third Way alliance and the Left – secured a combined vote share of approximately 54 percent and a parliamentary majority sufficient to form a government. Crucially, the election was conducted under conditions that, whilst not fully fair – given the systematic bias of public broadcasting, the deployment of public resources in support of the incumbent and the attempts by the PiS government to influence the composition of the State Electoral Commission (PKW) through politically aligned appointments, as documented by OSCE/ODIHR (2023) – preserved sufficient openness to enable an opposition victory. The fact that PiS's manipulation of the media environment and electoral administration, however significant, was insufficient to prevent an opposition parliamentary majority illustrates precisely what the constitutional threshold theory predicts: Below-threshold backsliding produces institutional damage without foreclosing democratic reversal.

The subsequent formation of a Tusk-led government, and its programme of institutional restoration, further validates the theoretical framework. However, the limits of that restoration must also be acknowledged. The Constitutional Tribunal had been not merely paralysed but actively weaponised by PiS as a governmental enabler (Sadurski 2019a). In recognition of this reality, the lower chamber of parliament (Sejm) passed a resolution on 6 March 2024 (M.P. 2024 poz. 198) declining to recognise the Tribunal as a legitimate judicial body, and the Council of Ministers followed on 18 December 2024 (M.P. 2024 poz. 1068) with a decision not to promulgate or implement its rulings. The so-called neo-judges appointed by the PiS-controlled National Council of the Judiciary continued to adjudicate in both the Supreme Court and ordinary courts. Popular dissatisfaction with this institutional impasse contributed to the replacement of Minister of Justice Adam Bodnar in 2025. Notwithstanding these significant obstacles, the Tusk government's attempts at institutional restoration demonstrate that below-threshold erosion leaves sufficient institutional resources for democratic recovery to be structurally possible. The difficulty of full restoration reflects the characteristics of sub-threshold institutional damage rather than the irreversibility that characterises above-threshold competitive authoritarianism in Hungary.

Comparative empirical assessment: V-Dem trajectories

Tracking divergence across democratic dimensions

The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) dataset provides the most comprehensive available instrument for tracking democratic quality across multiple dimensions over time, and its longitudinal data for Hungary and Poland offer strong empiri-

cal support for the constitutional threshold theory advanced in this article. We focus on three key indices: the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) and the Rule of Law Index (RLI), each of which captures a distinct dimension of democratic quality relevant to our theoretical argument.

On the Liberal Democracy Index, Hungary's score fell from 0.76 in 2010 to 0.44 in 2022 – a decline of 32 points over twelve years, placing Hungary among the ten fastest-declining democracies globally during this period (V-Dem Institute 2024). Poland's LDI fell from 0.82 in 2015 to 0.58 in 2022 – a decline of 24 points over seven years, less severe in absolute terms and concentrated in a shorter period. Crucially, Poland's 2023 LDI score showed the beginnings of stabilisation and incipient recovery, whilst Hungary's continued on its downward trajectory. This divergence is precisely what the constitutional threshold theory predicts: below-threshold erosion is reversible; above-threshold erosion is self-reinforcing.

On the Electoral Democracy Index, the divergence is even sharper. Hungary's EDI fell from 0.85 in 2009 to 0.52 in 2022 – a decline of 33 points, reflecting the cumulative effect of electoral engineering, media capture and the restructuring of campaign finance rules. Poland's EDI fell from 0.87 in 2015 to 0.72 in 2022, then recovered to 0.79 in 2023 – a trajectory consistent with significant but reversible erosion. The threshold between Hungary's 0.52 and Poland's 0.72–0.79 is not merely quantitative; it reflects the qualitative difference between a competitive authoritarian regime and a damaged but recoverable democracy.

On the Rule of Law Index, Hungary declined from 0.71 in 2010 to 0.38 in 2022, whilst Poland fell from 0.75 in 2015 to 0.49 in 2022 before showing partial recovery. The depth of Hungary's rule-of-law decline – more than 30 points over twelve years – reflects the comprehensive judicial capture achieved through abusive constitutionalism. Poland's less severe decline reflects the constraints imposed by the constitutional framework on PiS's judicial manipulation strategy.

The constitutional threshold in empirical terms

Translating the constitutional threshold into empirical terms, we propose that a Liberal Democracy Index score below 0.5 may serve as an exploratory indicator of threshold-proximate conditions – a level at which the cumulative erosion of democratic institutions appears to have reached a point that fundamentally compromises the conditions of genuine electoral competition. Hungary crossed this level in approximately 2018–2019, coinciding with the consolidation of media capture through KESMA and the conclusion of the judicial reorganisation programme. Poland, at its nadir, reached 0.58 – above this indicative level, consistent with our characterisation of Polish backsliding as significant but sub-threshold. It must be emphasised, however, that this empirical op-

erationisation is strictly illustrative and exploratory in character. The rigorous empirical validation of the constitutional threshold as a cross-nationally generalisable concept would require a large-N quantitative comparative study encompassing a substantial sample of countries over a considerable period of time – a study that lies beyond the scope of the present article but that represents an important agenda for future research. The two-case analysis presented here provides theoretical plausibility and illustrative empirical support; it does not constitute definitive quantitative proof of the proposed threshold value or its generalisability.

It is important to note that empirical thresholds of this kind are always approximations and should be treated with appropriate methodological caution. The V-Dem indices are composite measures that aggregate diverse indicators, and their specific numerical values are subject to measurement uncertainty. The constitutional threshold as theorised in this article is a structural concept – defined by the formal constitutional authority acquired by the incumbent and the persistence of effective veto points – that empirical indices can track but not fully capture. Nevertheless, the convergence between the theoretical prediction and the empirical trajectories documented by V-Dem provides significant evidence for the constitutional threshold theory.

EU rule-of-law enforcement: A three-phase analysis

Phase One: Rhetorical engagement (2011–2017)

The first phase of the EU's response to democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland was characterised by rhetorical engagement – formal statements of concern, diplomatic pressure and the commissioning of expert opinions – without deployment of formal enforcement mechanisms. The European Commission issued a series of critical assessments of Hungary's Fundamental Law and its implementing legislation, and the Venice Commission produced multiple opinions documenting compatibility concerns. Yet no formal enforcement action was initiated, and Hungary's accession to the new Fundamental Law in January 2012 proceeded without institutional challenge.

This phase of rhetorical engagement reflected the EU's institutional assumption – prevalent among policymakers throughout the pre-2015 period – that member state governments would ultimately respond to normative pressure from peer institutions and would self-correct when confronted with credible evidence that their conduct was incompatible with European values. The Hungarian case demonstrated conclusively that this assumption was unfounded when applied to governments with sufficient domestic political dominance to absorb reputational costs without electoral consequences.

Two additional contextual factors significantly shaped Phase One dynamics and deserve explicit treatment. First, Fidesz's membership of the European People's Party (EPP) provided effective political insulation against formal EU action throughout this period. EPP leaders were unwilling to exert meaningful pressure on a party coalition that remained a significant source of votes and parliamentary seats in the European Parliament, and Fidesz's formal suspension from the EPP group – not achieved until March 2021, and ultimately resulting in Fidesz's departure – came far too late to constrain the most consequential phase of democratic backsliding. Second, the Hungarian-Polish axis of mutual support constituted a structural obstacle to EU enforcement. The collaborative dimension of Central European backsliding – encompassing the cordial early relationship between Orban and Donald Tusk (prior to PiS's rise), the deepening Fidesz-PiS alliance and the systematic deployment of mutual veto threats in the Council of the EU – has been documented in detail by Holesch & Kyriazi (2022). This cross-national solidarity effectively immunised both governments against Article 7 proceedings, since each could be relied upon to veto any Council determination against the other, rendering the mechanism structurally inoperative (Holesch & Kyriazi 2022).

The initiation of Article 7 proceedings against Poland in December 2017 – the first time in EU history that this mechanism had been activated – marked the symbolic end of Phase One. But the activation of Article 7 simultaneously exposed the fundamental structural weakness of the EU's enforcement architecture: The four-fifths majority requirement for Council action, combined with Orban's explicit commitment to veto any Article 7 determination against Poland, ensured that the proceedings would stall at the early stages. The Article 7 proceedings against Hungary, initiated in September 2018, faced the same structural obstacle in reverse (Sedelmeier 2017).

Phase Two: Article 7 and CJEU activism (2017–2020)

The second phase of EU enforcement was characterised by the paralysis of the Article 7 mechanism and the compensatory activism of the CJEU. In a series of significant judgments, the Court ruled against Hungary and Poland on specific judicial reform measures – including the forced early retirement of judges in both countries, the independence of the KRS in Poland, and the provisions of the Hungarian Higher Education Law directed at the Central European University. These judgments were significant in establishing that specific legislative measures violated EU law, but they were limited in their broader impact on democratic trajectories.

The CJEU's effectiveness was constrained by two structural factors. First, its jurisdiction is limited to questions of EU law – it cannot directly rule on the democratic character of member state governments, only on the compatibility of specific measures with specific EU legal obligations. This limitation meant that

the Court could compel the withdrawal of particular provisions whilst leaving the broader institutional architecture of democratic erosion untouched. Second, even where the Court's judgments were formally complied with, compliance was often achieved through minimal legislative adjustments that satisfied the letter but not the spirit of the ruling – the 'formal compliance' strategy that characterises stealth authoritarianism.

Phase Three: Financial conditionality (2020–2024)

The third and most consequential phase of EU enforcement was the introduction of financial conditionality – the formal linkage of access to EU structural funds to compliance with rule-of-law standards. The Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, adopted in December 2020 after protracted negotiations (during which Hungary and Poland successfully negotiated a delayed implementation timeline), provided the Commission with a new instrument whose effectiveness rested on material rather than normative incentives.

The mechanism was first deployed against Hungary in September 2022, when the Commission proposed suspending approximately EUR 7.5 billion of cohesion funds pending the implementation of a package of anti-corruption and judicial reforms. Hungary responded by enacting a series of formal legislative changes – establishing a new anti-corruption authority, modifying the judicial appointment procedures – that the Commission ultimately accepted as meeting minimum conditionality requirements, releasing a portion of the suspended funds. Critics, including Scheppele et al. (2022), argued that this outcome demonstrated the conditionality mechanism's susceptibility to 'Potemkin reforms' – formal legislative changes designed to satisfy conditionality criteria without producing substantive institutional change.

The differential application of financial conditionality across Hungary and Poland illustrates the constitutional threshold theory in an important respect. For Hungary – which had crossed the constitutional threshold – financial conditionality operated at the margin of an already-consolidated competitive authoritarian regime. The Orban government had sufficient domestic political dominance and alternative revenue streams (including bilateral funding arrangements with China and deepened commercial relationships with Russia prior to 2022) to absorb conditionality pressure without fundamental institutional change. For Poland – which had not crossed the threshold – the democratic reversal of 2023 rendered conditionality largely moot as an enforcement instrument; the new government was itself committed to rule-of-law restoration and actively engaged with Commission mechanisms to recover suspended funds.

The controversy surrounding Poland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (KPO) merits particular attention as a case study in the politics of conditionality. The European Commission's effective blocking of approximately EUR 35.4 bil-

lion in grants and loans – pending the implementation of judicial independence reforms – played a significant and contested role in the 2023 Polish parliamentary election campaign. The PiS government framed the Commission’s position as external coercion and an affront to Polish sovereignty, deploying it as a mobilising grievance for its electoral base. This framing proved double-edged: A substantial portion of the electorate voted for the opposition coalition partly out of a desire for improved EU relations and access to the blocked funds. The incoming Tusk government negotiated the conditions for disbursement and successfully secured the release of initial tranches in early 2024 (DW 2024), illustrating how financial conditionality, whilst insufficient to compel reform from a recalcitrant incumbent, can function as a significant electoral incentive for democratic reversal once a below-threshold backslider approaches competitive elections.

The Slovak case: A partial test of the constitutional threshold theory

A partial test of the constitutional threshold theory is provided by the trajectory of Slovakia under the government of Prime Minister Robert Fico, which returned to power in October 2023 with a programme that critics have compared to the Hungarian and Polish models of democratic backsliding. The Slovak case is theoretically interesting because it shares several structural similarities with Poland at the beginning of PiS’s tenure: a right-wing populist government operating without a constitutional supermajority, pursuing executive aggrandisement through statutory means and generating significant domestic and international concern about democratic quality.

Fico’s return to power in 2023 was accompanied by immediate moves to restructure public broadcasting, place the Prosecutor General’s office under greater political control and withdraw Slovakia’s support for Ukrainian aid – the latter move serving as a geopolitical signal of alignment with the ‘Eastern Opening’ strategy pursued by Hungary. However, as of the period covered by this analysis, Slovakia had not acquired the constitutional amendment authority that would enable threshold crossing, and its institutional landscape retained significant veto points – including a Constitutional Court that remained functionally independent and a president, Zuzana Caputova, whose independent electoral mandate provided a significant institutional counterweight.

President Caputova’s decision not to seek re-election in 2024, and the subsequent election of a Fico-aligned candidate, Peter Pellegrini, to the presidency, altered this institutional balance and raised the possibility of a more comprehensive executive aggrandisement strategy. Whether Slovakia will follow the Polish path of significant-but-reversible erosion or the Hungarian path of threshold crossing will depend critically on whether Fico’s coalition acquires constitutional amendment authority – a development that remains uncertain

as of the time of writing. The Slovak case thus serves as a prospective test of the constitutional threshold theory, one whose resolution will provide additional evidence for or against the framework's predictive validity.

Conclusion: Towards a constitutional threshold theory of backsliding depth

This article has advanced a new theoretical framework – the constitutional threshold theory of backsliding depth – to explain why democratic erosion reaches fundamentally different outcomes across structurally similar cases. Synthesising the concepts of abusive constitutionalism (Landau 2013), legal populism (Blokker 2019) and stealth authoritarianism (Meierhenrich 2021) with the empirical record documented by V-Dem longitudinal data, the article has argued that the decisive variable distinguishing Hungary's competitive authoritarianism from Poland's significant-but-reversible democratic erosion is the acquisition of constitutional amendment authority sufficient to restructure permanently the conditions of political competition.

Hungary crossed the constitutional threshold in the period 2011–2013 through the deployment of its two-thirds parliamentary supermajority to enact a new Fundamental Law, colonise the Constitutional Court, restructure the electoral system and capture the media landscape. Each of these changes was embedded at a level of formal entrenchment – constitutional or quasi-constitutional – that made reversal extremely difficult without the same constitutional majority that enabled it. Poland's PiS government, constrained by the absence of constitutional amendment authority and the persistence of institutional veto points including the presidential veto, pursued statutory manipulation that was significant but structurally reversible – a characterisation confirmed by the democratic reversal achieved through the 2023 elections.

Three broader implications of this argument merit emphasis. First, the constitutional threshold theory directs attention to constitutional design as a critical variable in democratic resilience. Scholars and policymakers concerned with backsliding prevention should attend carefully to the distribution of constitutional amendment authority, the design of veto mechanisms and the insulation of key institutional appointments from partisan capture. Constitutional frameworks that concentrate amendment authority in simple parliamentary majorities, or that permit incumbent governments to fill institutional positions for extended terms, are structurally more vulnerable to abusive constitutionalism than those that distribute veto power across multiple institutions.

Second, the analysis of EU enforcement across three phases suggests that material conditionality – specifically, the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation – represents a more effective instrument than either rhetorical engagement or Article 7 proceedings, but that its effectiveness is modulated by the depth of

backsliding in the target state. For sub-threshold backsliders, conditionality can provide incentives for reform that reinforce domestic democratic pressures; for above-threshold competitive authoritarians, conditionality may be insufficient to overcome the structural advantages that threshold crossing has conferred on the incumbent.

Third, the constitutional threshold theory carries sobering implications for the reversibility of democratic backsliding in Hungary. The Orbán government's deployment of abusive constitutionalism has produced an institutional architecture that is extremely difficult to reverse through normal electoral means: Even an opposition majority must overcome gerrymandered constituencies, a captured media environment, a colonised judiciary and a constitutional framework designed to insulate incumbents from accountability. The April 2026 elections, which produced an electoral defeat for Fidesz-KDNP, constitute an important test of this proposition. If the incoming government lacks a constitutional supermajority – as current projections suggest – it will face structural barriers to institutional restoration qualitatively different from those confronting the Tusk government in Poland. The depth of the institutional challenge confronting post-2026 Hungarian democracy is thus itself a confirmation of the constitutional threshold theory's core prediction: Above-threshold backsliding produces institutional damage that electoral change alone cannot undo.

Finally, the Slovak case demonstrates the prospective value of the constitutional threshold theory as an analytical tool for anticipating the trajectories of emerging backsliding episodes. By focusing attention on the acquisition of constitutional amendment authority and the persistence of effective veto points, the theory provides a framework for assessing whether a given episode of executive aggrandisement is likely to remain sub-threshold and reversible, or whether it threatens to cross into the territory of durable competitive authoritarianism. This predictive dimension is perhaps the most practically significant contribution of the theoretical framework, as it enables early identification of the institutional changes that most urgently require defensive attention from democratic actors within and beyond the affected states. The April 2026 electoral outcomes in Hungary and Poland – and the divergent post-electoral trajectories that are now unfolding – provide a natural experiment for further testing the theory's predictions about asymmetric reversibility, and constitute an urgent and fertile agenda for future empirical research.

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Democratic Erosion in Central Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Autocratic Mechanisms in the Visegrád Group Countries

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Abstract: *Central Europe, long considered a model of successful post-communist democratic consolidation, has undergone a dramatic transformation in the early twenty-first century. This study analyses democratic backsliding in the Visegrád Group countries in the period 2023–2026, identifying four key mechanisms of autocratisation: media capture, the securitisation of political repression, the dismantling of institutional checks and economic state capture. The theoretical framework synthesises three complementary concepts: Scheppele’s autocratic legalism, explaining how democracy is dismantled through formally legal procedures; Innes’s theory of state capture, illuminating actor motivations; and Bermeo’s executive aggrandisement, describing its temporal dynamics. Košař and Šipulová’s typology of court-packing (expanding, emptying and swapping) supplies the operational tools. The study reveals marked variation: Hungary is a consolidated autocracy, Slovakia accelerated towards repression after the 2024 assassination attempt, Poland shows the difficulty of democratic restoration after the 2025 presidential election, while the Czech Republic exhibits signs of blocked hybridisation. The findings demonstrate that European integration alone cannot prevent backsliding once domestic safeguards are weakened, and that the principal weakness of the EU response lies not in a lack of instruments but in the political reluctance to deploy them. The study contributes a new hybrid model, ‘Digital Sovereign Corporatism’.*

Keywords: *democratic backsliding, Visegrád Group, autocratic legalism, state capture, media capture, securitisation, institutional dismantling, court-packing*

Introduction

When the Visegrád Group countries acceded to the European Union in 2004, their entry was accompanied by optimistic expectations. European integration and the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* were expected to create irreversible institutional barriers against any return to authoritarianism. This teleological narrative, the assumption that democratic consolidation is a one-way process, has proven to be mistaken.

Recent years have brought watershed events across the entire region. In June 2025, the candidate backed by the Law and Justice party won the Polish presidential election, thereby blocking the process of democratic restoration initiated in 2023. In Slovakia, the dismantling of the rule of law has continued following the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico in May 2024, which the government instrumentalised to push through repressive legislation. In the Czech Republic, the October 2025 elections produced a governing coalition that includes the ANO movement of the oligarch and former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, signalling a potential shift towards autocratisation.

The period 2023–2026 is selected as the analytical frame precisely because it concentrates a cluster of region-defining ruptures within a single electoral cycle. The starting point of 2023 is not arbitrary: it marks the return of Robert Fico to power in Slovakia (October 2023), the inauguration of the reconstruction government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Poland (December 2023) following eight years of Law and Justice rule, and the activation of the EU budgetary-conditionality dispute over Hungary that culminated in the partial unfreezing of funds in December 2023. These three developments (an accelerating autocracy, an attempted democratic restoration and a test of the EU's enforcement resolve) unfolded almost simultaneously, making 2023 a natural baseline against which the subsequent trajectory of the region can be measured. The frame closes in spring 2026, with April 2026 as the empirical cut-off for the events analysed below.

This study seeks answers to two interrelated research questions: through what specific mechanisms does democratic erosion proceed in the Visegrád Group countries, and what structural and contingent factors explain the region's susceptibility to autocratisation?

Theoretical framework and conceptual tools

Before turning to the analytical apparatus, it is necessary to clarify the central terms, which are frequently used interchangeably in the literature but are not synonymous. Following Bermeo (2016), *democratic backsliding* is understood here as the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy. *Democratic erosion* denotes the gradual, incremental

sub-type of backsliding that proceeds through a series of discrete, individually legal measures rather than through an abrupt rupture such as a coup; it is the dominant mode in the contemporary EU context and the primary object of this study. *Autocratisation* (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019) is the broader directional concept describing any substantial movement away from democracy along the regime spectrum, encompassing both the erosion of established democracies and the further hardening of already hybrid or authoritarian regimes. In what follows, ‘backsliding’ and ‘erosion’ describe the process in the four states under examination, while ‘autocratisation’ is reserved for the overarching regional trajectory.

The theoretical foundation is built upon a synthesis of three mutually complementary conceptual frameworks. To understand contemporary developments in the Visegrád Group, it is essential to abandon the outdated notion of authoritarian coups. Contemporary democratic erosion proceeds quietly, procedurally, through formally legal steps.

The concept of autocratic legalism was originally formulated by Javier Corrales (2015) on the basis of his analysis of Venezuela, in which he identified three mechanisms: the use of law to expand executive powers, the abuse of law through selective interpretations, and the non-use of law. Kim Lane Scheppele (2013, 2018) extended this framework to the EU context. Her contribution lies in the metaphor of the *Frankenstate*, a state formation combining elements of democracy and authoritarianism that together function undemocratically, and in the concept of *systemic violation*, whereby individual legal norms may technically comply with EU law, yet their cumulative effect produces a system that violates the fundamental values of the EU.

State capture was comprehensively developed by Abby Innes (2014) in the Central European context. Unlike traditional corruption, it involves the systemic restructuring of institutions for the benefit of a narrow group of actors, while the new rules remain formally legal. Innes distinguished between partisan state capture (ideologically motivated elites seeking a political monopoly) and corporate capture (domination by business elites). Recent developments, however, reveal a significant convergence of these two models.

Executive aggrandisement describes the gradual concentration of power in the hands of the executive through legal changes. Nancy Bermeo (2016) demonstrated that this is an incremental process in which each individual step may appear legitimate, yet their cumulative effect leads to the fundamental disintegration of democratic institutions. The key feature is gradualism, which complicates timely identification and response. David Waldner and Ellen Lust (2018) emphasise that erosion often proceeds below the threshold of visibility, with institutions formally existing yet their autonomy being gradually hollowed out.

The comparative legal analysis of David Košar and Katarína Šipulová (2023) provides the operational typology of court-packing: *expanding*, *emptying* and *swapping*.

The *expanding* strategy denotes increasing the number of judges and filling new positions with loyal candidates; it is effective because it allows the claim that existing judges are not being removed but that the institution is merely being enlarged. The *emptying* strategy denotes restricting the legal competences of the court, for example by excluding certain categories of legislation from review; it leaves courts formally independent but effectively paralyses them. The *swapping* strategy denotes the replacement of sitting judges through lowering the retirement age or through disciplinary proceedings.

None of the presented concepts is without problems. Autocratic legalism has been criticised for paying insufficient attention to actors outside the executive. The concept of state capture faces criticism for its static character, and since 2014 a significant hybridisation of these models has occurred. Executive aggrandisement neglects the fact that erosion can also proceed through the legislature. Despite these limitations, the concepts provide a valuable analytical apparatus when used complementarily: autocratic legalism explains the mechanism, state capture illuminates the motivation and executive aggrandisement describes the temporal dynamics.

One further limitation, however, requires emphasis, because it bears directly on the EU context examined throughout this article. Theories that stress the formally legal character of autocratisation risk obscuring an equally important dimension: in practice, formally lawful measures have repeatedly been accompanied by manifestly illegal and unconstitutional conduct. The assumption that democratic backsliding occurs *only* through legal means is, in the European setting, only partly accurate. Both the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) have found that core elements of the Polish judicial ‘reforms’ did not merely strain legality but breached it outright: in *Reczkowicz v. Poland* (2021) and in the pilot judgment *Wałęsa v. Poland* (2023), the Strasbourg Court held that bodies staffed through the politicised National Council of the Judiciary did not constitute a ‘tribunal established by law’, while in *Xero Flor w Polsce v. Poland* (2021) it reached the same conclusion regarding the reconstituted Constitutional Tribunal. The analytical framework adopted here therefore treats autocratic legalism and manifest illegality not as alternatives but as layered and frequently co-occurring techniques: formally constitutional measures pave the way towards a *de facto* one-party-dominant state, while overtly unlawful acts accompany them where the legal route proves too slow or too constraining.

Historical context: The Visegrád Group 2010–2025

The Visegrád Group countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, shared a similar starting position after 1989. All underwent a relatively peaceful transformation, built democratic institutions and joined NATO (1999–

2004) and the EU (2004). By 2010, all four exhibited solid democratic indicators (Freedom House 2025; V-Dem Institute 2025, 2026).

Why did precisely the Visegrád Group countries succumb to autocratisation? The answer requires an analysis of the structural factors that make the region specifically susceptible. The first is the comparative weakness of civil society, with low levels of participation, distrust in institutions and a low organisational density of the non-profit sector. This is a legacy of the communist suppression of autonomous association documented by Howard (2003) and revisited in the regional context by Greskovits (2015), who links it directly to the fragility of post-accession democratic commitment. The second is the specific form of post-communist capitalism, in which rapid privatisation created a high dependence on foreign capital alongside close ties between economic and political elites (Innes 2014). The third is a historically conditioned distrust of liberal institutions: the repeated traumas of the twentieth century created a cultural predisposition to perceive liberal institutions as foreign imports. The fourth is the high volatility of party systems, which facilitates the rise of populists capable of mobilising voters against traditional parties. The successive annual rule-of-law reports of the European Commission (European Commission 2025, 2026) document how these structural predispositions translated, country by country, into concrete institutional vulnerabilities.

Structural factors create susceptibility but do not explain the temporal sequence. To understand the temporal dynamics, it is essential to analyse the role of external shocks: the 2008–2009 financial crisis discredited governing elites in Hungary, the 2015 migration crisis provided a pretext for constructing an existential threat, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 weakened civic mobilisation and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had ambivalent effects.

The pivotal moment was the Hungarian parliamentary election of April 2010, when Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán (prime minister of Hungary since 2010), won a constitutional majority (Kornai 2015), 68 percent of the seats with 53 percent of the vote. The first wave of reforms (2010–2011) included the adoption of a new constitution, the Fundamental Law, the reduction of the Constitutional Court's powers and a media law. The second wave (2012–2014) consolidated control over the economy.¹

Poland followed the Hungarian model with a time lag. In October 2015, the Law and Justice party (PiS), led by its chairman Jarosław Kaczyński, won an

1 The analysis presented in this article reflects the situation up to early April 2026. The parliamentary elections of 12 April 2026 produced a fundamental rupture in the Hungarian trajectory: Fidesz, after sixteen years of uninterrupted government, was defeated by the centre-right TISZA party (*Tisztelet és Szabadság*), led by Péter Magyar, which secured a constitutional supermajority. The institutional residue of the Fidesz era, analysed throughout this article, now constitutes the principal obstacle to any rapid restoration of the rule of law, providing a second empirical test of the concept of institutional hysteresis discussed in Section 6. A full analysis of the post-Fidesz transition lies beyond the temporal scope of the present study.

absolute majority in the Sejm. Lacking a constitutional majority, it opted for a strategy of sub-constitutional changes, attacking the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court and establishing the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court, together with a new disciplinary regime for judges that exposed them to sanction for the content of their rulings (Sadurski 2019).

The Slovak trajectory was more volatile. Over the period 2012–2018, the social-democratic Smer-SD governed, combining populist rhetoric with clientelism but without a targeted effort to restructure institutions. The murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in February 2018 (OCCRP 2018) triggered mass mobilisation and led to the fall of Fico's government. Subsequent anti-corruption governments (2020–2023) launched investigations into corruption networks.

The Czech Republic represented a model of corporate state capture without systematic autocratic restructuring (Hanley & Vachudova 2018). The entry of oligarch Andrej Babiš into politics (founding the ANO movement in 2011) embodied a personification of conflict of interest (Kopeček 2016), yet no fundamental assault on institutional checks occurred.

The period 2023–2026 brought a significant acceleration. In Slovakia, Robert Fico's regime, following his return to power (October 2023) and the assassination attempt (May 2024), shifted towards a hard form of illiberal democracy (Mesežnikov 2025). The Czech Republic likewise shifted towards illiberal tendencies after the October 2025 elections (Český statistický úřad 2025), which brought a victory for the ANO movement; it formed a coalition government with the SPD movement and Motoristé sobě on an explicitly sovereigntist programme, signalling the onset of 'soft autocratisation'.

Four mechanisms of autocratisation

Although the four mechanisms examined below (media capture, the securitisation of public space, the dismantling of institutional checks and economic state capture) are analytically distinct, they operate as an interlocking system. Each is presented in turn, with attention to the variation across the four countries.

Media capture

Media capture represents a systemic process in which media outlets are pushed out of independence through a combination of economic, legal and political instruments. Formal freedom of speech is preserved, yet the media's actual capacity to fulfil their watchdog function is deliberately undermined (Reporters Without Borders 2024).

Péter Bajomi-Lázár (2013) formulated the concept of 'party colonisation of the media', which encompasses three dimensions. The economic dimension

includes direct media ownership by politically allied oligarchs, selective state advertising directed exclusively to loyal media, and regulation of the advertising market. The legal dimension includes media laws with vague terminology, politically controlled regulatory bodies and defamation laws creating the threat of financially draining lawsuits. The personnel dimension concerns the rules for appointing the leadership of public service media, the protection of journalists and access to information.

Hungary represents the most fully developed such case in 2026, having transitioned from a phase of 'ownership consolidation' to one of 'systemic intimidation'. The first phase (2010–2011) established a repressive framework through the Media Council. The second phase (2012–2017) employed 'financial starvation', with the bulk of state advertising redirected to pro-government media. The third phase (2018) brought centralisation through the KESMA foundation, encompassing nearly 500 titles. Since 2024 a fourth phase is observable: the regime has shifted resources to the Megafon project, a network of state-subsidised 'influencers' on social media. Simultaneously, the Sovereignty Protection Office (Venice Commission 2024) investigates independent media for suspected receipt of foreign grants, labelling them a national-security threat.

In Slovakia, the transformation of the public broadcaster RTVS into the new institution Slovak Television and Radio (STVR), legislated in June 2024, took effect on 1 July 2024. This legislative step enabled the government to circumvent the functional terms of the original management and to initiate personnel purges. The private sector also underwent dramatic change, particularly TV Markíza, which succumbed to combined pressure, resulting in the departure of key figures and the effective suppression of critical journalism. The governing coalition continues to maintain a boycott of selected critical media outlets (SME, Denník N, Aktuality).

The Polish case in 2026 illustrates the complexity of 'democratic reconstruction'. During its tenure, PiS transformed public service media into an instrument of party propaganda. The attempt at rectification, initiated by Donald Tusk's government in December 2023, encountered deep institutional entrenchment. Because President Andrzej Duda vetoed legislative changes, the government resorted to an emergency mechanism: placing public service media into liquidation.

The Czech Republic has so far been distinguished by the absence of complete governmental capture of public service media; Czech Television and Czech Radio have maintained their editorial independence. Their financial stability was strengthened by the major media amendment of 2025, which increased licence fees. The private sector is highly concentrated: PPF controls TV Nova, and Czech Media Invest (Křetínský) dominates print and radio. A crucial change was the sale of the MAFRA publishing house (MF DNES) by Andrej Babiš to the Kaprain group, announced in 2023 and completed in early 2024. The iconic daily *Lidové*

noviny ceased its print edition in August 2024. This represents a deeper phenomenon than reports of mere economic optimisation suggest. The demise of the oldest Czech printed daily is a symptom of the collapse of traditional media gatekeeping in the region. Traditional media and publishing models inherently required structured editorial processes ensuring at least rudimentary standards of journalistic balance; their gradual degradation and eventual demise open the public arena to an entirely new type of digitally native political entity. The clearest Czech example is the Motoristé sobě movement and its absorption into the executive following the October 2025 elections. The centre of gravity of such entities' communication is no longer a coherent ideological programme but predominantly algorithmic microtargeting, deliberate affective polarisation and the targeted fragmentation of public discourse in an unregulated online environment. This algorithmic entropy erodes traditional media plurality and impedes the formation of coherent civic opposition, facilitating the executive's pursuit of controversial agendas.

With the full entry into force of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) (European Parliament 2024) in August 2025, the European Union acquired a formally enforceable instrument for the protection of media independence. The law covers three pillars: the transparent appointment of public service media leadership and stable financing; the protection of journalists against spyware and vexatious lawsuits; and ownership transparency. The real power of EMFA, however, confronts the limits of implementation: the European Commission's sanctioning mechanisms are slow, and autocratic tendencies seek ways to circumvent the letter of the law (European Commission 2025).

Whereas traditional media capture in the first decade focused on ownership structures and personnel purges in newsrooms, the phenomenon observable in the Visegrád Group after 2024 represents a qualitatively new level of control: digital authoritarianism. Governing elites in Hungary and Slovakia have adapted their strategies to the era of fragmented attention, in which it is unnecessary to censor information: it suffices to flood the information space and control the distribution algorithms. The analysis reveals three pillars of this strategy that had become established in the region by 2026.

First, the *privatisation of cybersecurity*: under the pretext of defence against hybrid threats, governments outsourced key security tools to entities linked to governing parties. An example is the Slovak amendment to the Cybersecurity Act (2025), which enabled the National Security Authority (NBÚ) to block 'harmful content' without a court order on the basis of vague criteria of 'protecting democratic foundations'. This mechanism, originally designed against disinformation, was subsequently used to block the websites of investigative journalists during critical pre-election periods under the pretext of 'spreading alarmist reports'.

Second, *algorithmic clientelism and information overload*: governing parties in Hungary and Poland (before 2023) invested massively in the data market. Through networks of allied digital agencies (for example the Hungarian Megafon network or the Slovak network of allied ‘alternative media’), microtargeting occurs that not only mobilises their own voters but effectively demobilises the opposition by inducing apathy and informational chaos. This is not classical single-message propaganda but a strategy of information flooding, which makes it far harder for ordinary citizens to orient themselves in the public space.

Third, *spyware as an instrument of domestic political struggle*: as demonstrated by the use of Pegasus software in Hungary and Poland, and by newer Predator variants in the region after 2024, digital surveillance has shifted from the fight against terrorism to the fight against the ‘internal enemy’. The legalisation of these practices through new intelligence-service laws has severely curtailed the right to privacy for journalists and opposition leaders, creating a powerful chilling effect as sources fear communicating with journalists.

Securitisation of public space as a means of suppressing the opposition

Securitisation is a process in which governing elites construct existential threats and subsequently legitimise extraordinary measures serving primarily to weaken democratic opposition, independent media and civil society.

Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (1998), within the framework of the Copenhagen School, defined securitisation as a process in which an actor declares that a certain phenomenon constitutes an existential threat and implements extraordinary measures. The process comprises three components: the construction of an existential threat, its discursive elaboration through speeches and campaigns, and the adoption of extraordinary measures. Securitisation is not an objective response to threats but a political act: a choice to present an issue as a security matter rather than an ordinary political one. In the context of democratic erosion, it is a determining mechanism because it enables the legitimisation of repression as the ‘defence of democracy’.

The Hungarian securitisation strategy in 2026 has settled into a comprehensive system of permanent mobilisation against a ‘three-headed threat’: migration, gender ideology and foreign influence. The third, the fight against foreign influence, has become the primary instrument for dismantling civil society. The Sovereignty Protection Office (established in December 2023) operates largely outside judicial oversight. It issues ‘sovereignty reports’ that de facto destroy the reputations of investigated entities, and it exploits powers to breach banking secrecy and monitor communications without a court order, publishing any foreign funding as evidence of ‘betrayal of national interests’. The result is

a chilling effect whereby donors and advertisers withdraw their support from independent entities out of fear of stigmatisation.

The Office's activity has not gone unchallenged at the European level. The European Commission opened infringement proceedings against the Sovereignty Protection Act, referring the matter to the Court of Justice (Case C-829/24, *Commission v. Hungary*), and in her Opinion of 12 February 2026 Advocate General Kokott concluded that Hungary had infringed EU law by adopting the Act, in particular the freedom to provide services, data-protection guarantees and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, holding that Article 4(2) TEU cannot shield such a measure from EU scrutiny. The Opinion, while not binding on the Court, signals the likely direction of the forthcoming judgment and exemplifies the recurring lag between the identification of a violation at the EU level and any effective remedy on the ground.

The Slovak securitisation strategy underwent a transformation from a rhetorical figure into a form of institutionalised repression following the assassination attempt on Robert Fico (May 2024). The government instrumentalised the act to push through a package of laws known as *Lex Atentát* (Amnesty International 2024), which by 2026 has become a far-reaching constraint on civil society. The threat construction rested on a narrative of the 'collective guilt' of the opposition and the media. The enforcement practice in 2026 manifests primarily in three executive dimensions. First, there are drastic spatial restrictions on the constitutionally guaranteed right of assembly, in the form of a blanket perimeter prohibition of protests within a fifty-metre radius of key state and judicial institutions, including the residences of protected persons. Second, there is an unprecedented statutory privileging of the senior executive, embodied in the unconditional granting of a lifelong annuity and permanent state protection for the prime minister and other constitutional officials. Third, there is a deliberately arbitrary redefinition of extremism in the amended Criminal Code, which provides the security forces with a disproportionately broad scope for the pre-emptive monitoring of online communication metadata and enables the extended detention of government opponents without direct judicial oversight.

Two crucial events from late 2025 must be highlighted. The constitutional amendment of September 2025 (the national-identity clause): on 26 September 2025 the Slovak parliament adopted Constitutional Law No. 255/2025, the controversial twenty-third amendment to the Constitution, introducing an explicit provision on national identity into the constitutional order. The amendment, centred on Article 7, empowers Slovak authorities, including the courts, to assess whether and to what extent EU law applies in Slovakia, asserting national sovereignty over matters of 'national identity' and purporting to allow domestic law to take primacy over international law, including EU law and the European Convention on Human Rights, in those areas. Sharply criticised by the Venice Commission for its vagueness and procedural deficiencies, the amendment

functions in practice as a constitutional safeguard against the delegation of competences to European Union bodies in culturally and ethically sensitive areas. It applies autocratic legalism directly, instrumentalising the principle of national constitutional identity into a tool for inoculating domestic law against the primacy of EU law. The European Commission responded by opening infringement proceedings, issuing a letter of formal notice on 21 November 2025 on the ground that the amendment, by empowering national authorities to disapply EU law and CJEU rulings, is incompatible with the principle of primacy and with Article 4(3) TEU.

The Criminal Code amendment of December 2025 (restriction of freedom of expression and the Beneš Decrees): a further drastic step followed on 11 December 2025, when the governing coalition, in an accelerated legislative procedure and by a vote of 76 to 60 amid physical altercations and obstruction in parliament, pushed through an amendment to the Criminal Code in the section concerning extremism and incitement to war. The new provision criminalises anyone who publicly denies or questions the ‘settlement of affairs’ established after the Second World War, a clear reference to the so-called Beneš Decrees, on the basis of which collective guilt was applied, together with mass deportations and the expropriation of the property of the Hungarian and German minorities. Questioning these decrees, which remain the legal basis for uncompensated ethnic expropriations, is now a criminal offence in Slovakia carrying a maximum sentence of six months’ imprisonment.

The Polish securitisation strategy of 2015–2023, focused on constructing an internal enemy (‘gender ideology’, German influence), left deep traces. The original PiS rhetoric, which dehumanised the LGBTQ+ community, culminated in the era of so-called ‘LGBT-free zones’. These resolutions were largely revoked by 2025 under strong economic pressure from the EU. With the advent of the new government there was a shift from securitisation towards normalisation; in late 2025 and early 2026 the governing coalition advanced a registered-partnership bill, still under parliamentary debate, intended as a symbolic break with the era of state-sanctioned discrimination, though it had not yet been enacted. The security discourse has not disappeared, however; it has merely shifted to external hybrid threats on the border with Belarus and Russia.

The Czech Republic, long considered a country of low-intensity securitisation, entered a phase of selective and instrumental securitisation following the assumption of power by the ANO, SPD and Motoristé government (October 2025). The previous cabinet had focused on combating hybrid threats from Russia; the new government abandoned this direction. Security rhetoric has changed: the governing coalition employs the narrative of a ‘threat to national existence’ in the context of migration and European integration. Unlike in Hungary, however, the effort to anchor repression in legislation encounters strong institutional

resistance. The Senate and President Petr Pavel function as effective brakes, confirming the Czech Republic's status as a 'blocked hybrid regime'.

A recurring thread across these national cases is the abusive use of emergency and quasi-emergency powers. The instrumentalisation of exceptional legal regimes, originally designed for genuine crises, has become a favoured technique for compressing the time available for deliberation and judicial scrutiny. Hungary's open-ended 'state of danger', repeatedly extended and used as the basis for rule by decree under the 2020 Authorisation Act and its successors, is the most developed example; Poland's 2021 state of emergency on the Belarusian border restricted media access to the affected zone; and the Slovak Lex Atentát package, although not formally an emergency statute, replicated the same logic by invoking an acute security shock to justify the accelerated adoption of permanent repressive measures. In each case the temporal exception becomes, in Bermeo's terms, a means of bypassing the slow incrementalism that backsliding would otherwise require.

Dismantling institutional checks

The third mechanism is the systematic erosion of institutional checks and balances: constitutional courts, independent judiciaries, ombudspersons, anti-corruption bodies and other oversight institutions. In liberal democracies these represent safeguards against the abuse of power by the executive or a parliamentary majority, and their weakening or capture enables governing elites to act without effective oversight. Historical authoritarian regimes proceeded openly and brutally, dissolving courts by force and annulling constitutions by decree. Contemporary autocratisation within the European Union, by contrast, is characterised by sophistication, proceeding through formally legal procedures (Pech & Scheppele 2017): Hungary increased the number of constitutional-court justices through an act adopted by a constitutional majority, Poland lowered the retirement age of judges through legislation, Slovakia abolished the Special Prosecutor's Office by a vote of parliament. Each individual step has formal democratic legitimacy: the problem lies in their cumulative effect, and, as Section 2 noted, in the manifestly unlawful conduct that has repeatedly accompanied it.

Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq (2018) documented that autocrats proceed in a specific sequence: they first attack constitutional courts (capable of overturning autocratic steps), then prosecutorial offices and police (capable of investigating corruption), and finally ombudspersons and oversight bodies (capable of criticism). This sequencing has an internal logic: constitutional courts can annul the laws dismantling other institutions and must therefore be neutralised first; prosecutorial offices threaten the personal wealth and security of autocrats and must be captured second. There is nothing accidental about this

order; it reflects a strategic rationality apparent in each of the four examined countries. Dismantling usually begins not with the media, where it would be easily visible, but with the legal system, where it can proceed under the guise of technical-legal reform.

Expanding (Košař & Šipulová 2023) was most consistently employed by Orbán in 2010, when he enlarged the Hungarian Constitutional Court from eleven to fifteen justices, and subsequently by Kaczyński through the creation of the Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court. *Emptying*, restricting a court's powers, for example by excluding budgetary laws from review, leaves courts formally independent but effectively paralyses them. *Swapping*, replacing judges by lowering the retirement age or through disciplinary proceedings, enabled Hungary to force out roughly ten percent of its judges by lowering the retirement age from seventy to sixty-two. No country employs a single strategy alone; they are always layered combinations.

Hungary represents the most systematic case of dismantling institutional checks in the European Union. The process unfolded in four coordinated phases. The first (2010–2012) neutralised the Constitutional Court: legislation expanded the number of justices from eleven to fifteen; the new positions were filled with loyal nominees; the court's powers were curtailed by excluding the review of budgetary laws; and justices' terms were extended from nine to twelve years, ensuring a long-term preponderance of Fidesz nominees. The Venice Commission found that the combination of these steps constituted a systemic weakening of constitutional review (Venice Commission 2011). The second phase (2012–2014) targeted the ordinary judiciary: the retirement age was lowered from seventy to sixty-two, enabling the forced replacement of roughly ten percent of judges. Although the CJEU ruled the measure discriminatory (CJEU 2012), the dismissed judges were not rehabilitated. The third phase, from 2015, was one of consolidation: Prosecutor General Péter Polt (in office since 2010) functions as a 'gatekeeper' who prevents any case threatening government leaders from reaching court. The fourth phase (2024–2026) brought a qualitative shift, relocating the centre of repression to the Sovereignty Protection Office, which possesses intelligence-service powers and can investigate anyone without judicial authorisation. The V-Dem Institute's index of judicial constraints on the executive (v2x_jucon) for Hungary fell from 0.89 in 2010 to 0.47 in 2025 (V-Dem Institute 2026), by some margin the steepest decline recorded among EU member states over the period.

A crucial component of the Hungarian strategy was legitimisation by reference to Western democratic models: the expansion of the Constitutional Court was justified by comparison with Germany, and the restriction of budgetary-law review was presented as an echo of the British tradition of parliamentary sovereignty. Kim Lane Scheppele designated this approach the *Frankenstate* tactic (2013): the assembly of elements of constitutional law taken from functioning

democracies, unproblematic in themselves, which autocrats extract from their institutional environment and recombine in a manner that eliminates the balancing of power. The German Constitutional Court is independent because Germany also has independent prosecutorial offices, pluralist media and coalition governments; the Hungarian ‘German model’, stripped of these complementary components, becomes an instrument of autocracy.

The Polish case differs fundamentally from the Hungarian one. Law and Justice never obtained a constitutional majority, so changes had to be carried out through sub-constitutional steps, which increased their legal vulnerability and enabled resistance from the judicial community. The first step was an assault on the Constitutional Tribunal (Sadurski 2019): in December 2015 the newly elected Sejm refused to swear in three judges lawfully elected by the previous parliament and instead elected its own nominees to the same posts. This did not create a symmetrical situation of ‘two groups with equally legitimate claims’, as is sometimes loosely described. The legal position is settled: in *Xero Flor w Polsce v. Poland* (2021) the European Court of Human Rights held that the participation of these irregularly elected ‘doubled judges’ meant that the Constitutional Tribunal was not a ‘tribunal established by law’ within the meaning of Article 6 ECHR, and in its judgment of 18 December 2025 (Case C-448/23, *Commission v. Poland*) the CJEU Grand Chamber confirmed that, on account of serious irregularities in the appointment of three of its judges and of its president, the Constitutional Tribunal cannot be regarded as an independent and impartial court for the purposes of EU law. The three judges lawfully elected in 2015 were never sworn in; the three persons installed in their place were appointed in breach of the Constitution.

Subsequent steps targeted the ordinary courts. The Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court was granted powers to prosecute judges for the content of their decisions. The National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), the body responsible for judicial appointments, was politicised by having its judicial members elected by parliament rather than by judges. The CJEU repeatedly ruled that the Polish reforms violated EU law (CJEU 2021, 2023), and Poland faced daily fines of one million euros.

Donald Tusk’s new government (December 2023) had a mandate to restore the rule of law, but implementation was complicated by President Duda’s stance, and the situation was fundamentally aggravated by the victory of Karol Nawrocki in the presidential election. Nawrocki, the PiS-backed candidate, prevailed in the decisive second round on 1 June 2025 with 50.89 percent of the vote (10,606,877 voters) over the liberal mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski (Civic Coalition), who received 49.11 percent (10,237,286 voters) (National Electoral Commission 2025). The margin was a mere 370,000 votes, on a record second-round turnout of 71.63 percent, the highest in a Polish presidential election. On 1 July 2025 the Supreme Court confirmed the validity of Nawrocki’s victory.

Crucially, that confirmation was issued by the Extraordinary Review and Public Affairs Chamber, a body created during the PiS tenure and staffed by persons irregularly appointed on the recommendation of the politicised KRS. The government of Donald Tusk and Minister of Justice Adam Bodnar challenged the legitimacy of this arrangement, pointing to the irregular appointment of its members and demanding that the validity of the election be determined by a lawfully composed chamber, a demand the ‘neo-judges’ rejected. The cabinet thus faced an unprecedented paradox: a body which both the CJEU and the European Court of Human Rights had held *not to be a tribunal established by law*, not merely a body whose independence had been ‘questioned’, but one found to fall short of the very definition of a lawful court (see Cases C-791/19 and C-204/21; Reczkowicz v. Poland 2021), nevertheless acted as the arbiter certifying the election of the head of state. In Case C-204/21 the CJEU held that Poland had failed to respect judicial independence and that the disciplinary regime for judges introduced by PiS was incompatible with EU law. This vividly illustrates the phenomenon of institutional hysteresis, whereby judicial bodies captured by a former autocratic regime remain functional after its electoral defeat and continue to shape the political process, a living manifestation of Scheppele’s Frankenstate.

After his inauguration, President Nawrocki continued to block judicial reforms through the presidential veto. Poland thus became an example of a situation in which the democratic reversal of autocratisation collides with the institutional structures left behind by the previous regime; democratic elections alone may not suffice to restore the rule of law where the autocrat has succeeded in filling key institutional positions. Part of the judicial community nonetheless built resilient structures: the Supreme Court and a number of ordinary courts refused to recognise the validity of appointments made on the recommendation of the unlawfully composed ‘neo-KRS’, in line with the European Court of Human Rights’ pilot judgment in *Wałęsa v. Poland* (2023), which characterised the defective appointment process as a systemic violation requiring structural remedy rather than a mere irregularity. The Polish Judges’ Association *Iustitia* played a crucial role, coordinating resistance and providing legal support to judges facing disciplinary proceedings (*Iustitia* 2023). The *v2x_jucon* index for Poland stands at 0.51 (V-Dem Institute 2026), reflecting an unstable situation of institutional paralysis. Read alongside the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index (World Justice Project 2025), which records Poland’s constraints-on-government and fundamental-rights scores only beginning to recover from their 2023 low, the Polish trajectory underscores how much slower restoration is than capture.

In Slovakia, the process in 2024–2026 focused on securing institutional impunity, with a targeted focus on the prosecutorial service and its capacity to prosecute corruption. Following the murder of Ján Kuciak in February 2018,

the prosecutorial service and police had launched extensive investigations uncovering vast networks connecting organised crime with politicians. These investigations became the target after Smer's return to power in October 2023. The crucial step was the abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office in March 2024, precisely when it was conducting the greatest number of investigations into persons close to Smer. In parallel, the National Criminal Agency (NAKA) was effectively dissolved at the end of August 2024, its elite units divided and its investigative teams dispersed. The amendment to the Criminal Code then reduced penalties for corruption, shortened limitation periods and abolished certain offences, enabling the discontinuation of dozens of pending cases. The Slovak Bar Association issued critical opinions on the incompatibility of these amendments with rule-of-law standards (Slovenská advokátska komora 2024).

The assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico (15 May 2024) was a far-reaching turning point: the government used it to adopt repressive legislation restricting freedom of assembly, expanding the definition of extremism and strengthening the powers of the security forces. The Constitutional Court of Slovakia has so far maintained greater independence than its Polish or Hungarian counterparts, but as the terms of its justices expire (2026–2027) the gradual election of loyal justices is anticipated. The v2x_jucon index for Slovakia declined to 0.62 (V-Dem Institute 2026), indicating accelerating erosion.

The Czech Republic has so far maintained the most functional institutional checks of the four countries; this is corroborated by the WJP Rule of Law Index (World Justice Project 2025), which continues to place the Czech Republic well above its regional peers on judicial independence and constraints on government power. The Constitutional Court has repeatedly ruled against governmental proposals (annulling parts of pandemic legislation, ruling on electoral reform and protecting minority rights), and the Senate functions as a safeguard against the most radical interventions, owing to its staggered electoral cycle (one-third elected every two years) and majoritarian electoral system. Although the new governing coalition commands a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, it encounters firm institutional barriers. The decisive factor of resilience is the distribution of forces between President Petr Pavel and the Senate, where the governing parties do not hold a majority, creating an effective block against constitutional change. After President Pavel exercised his informal constitutional brake and declined to appoint Filip Turek (Motoristé) to a ministerial post, the coalition did not pursue a confrontational course against the head of state; rather than forcing the issue, it left the ministry temporarily in the hands of the Motoristé leader before nominating the more pragmatic deputy Igor Červený, who likewise opposes core elements of EU climate policy. This step illustrates institutional corrosion: formal respect for constitutional procedure obscures the material continuity of the governmental objective. Pressure has shifted towards the public prosecution, where the coalition has prepared an

amendment enabling the easier dismissal of the Supreme Public Prosecutor. The *v2x_jucon* index has held at 0.87 (V-Dem Institute 2026), a markedly more stable trajectory in the regional context.

The comparative analysis reveals a predictable order of dismantling. The first target is always the constitutional courts, in Hungary (2010–2012) and Poland (2015–2016), capable of annulling the laws that dismantle other institutions. The second is the prosecutorial offices and police, in Slovakia (2023–2024, abolition of the Special Prosecutor’s Office) and Hungary (control through Péter Polt), which directly threaten autocrats’ assets. The third is ombudspersons and oversight bodies. Control of public service media runs throughout. The sequence reflects strategic rationality: first neutralise the institutions capable of revocation, then those capable of investigation, finally those capable of criticism.

Beyond the sequence, the analysis reveals clear mutual learning among autocrats. The Polish model of capturing the Constitutional Tribunal drew on the Hungarian tactic of expanding the court; Slovak post-assassination legislation references Hungarian precedents of securitisation. A significant factor was the long-standing tolerance of the European Union: The European People’s Party kept Fidesz in its ranks even after the Hungarian authoritarian trajectory was evident; suspension came only in 2019, and Fidesz departed in March 2021. This tolerance signalled that a degree of autocratisation would be accepted (Kelemen 2020).

The disintegration of institutions did not always meet passive acceptance, and the analysis identifies four factors of resistance. The first is the professional identity and solidarity of the judicial community, strong in Poland, weaker in Hungary. The second is international support, as CJEU and ECtHR decisions provided resisting judges with legal backing. The third is an active civil society capable of organising protest. The fourth is institutional architecture: bicameral systems with different electoral cycles (the Czech Republic, Poland) provide additional safeguards relative to unicameral systems (Hungary). A crucial role is played by the broader legal community, non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Transparency International documented violations, and their reports served as a basis for decisions by the European Commission and the CJEU (International Commission of Jurists 2025).

Economic state capture

The fourth mechanism is economic state capture: the systematic redirection of public resources, subsidies, public contracts and regulatory advantages to politically allied actors, creating a system of mutual dependency.

Economic state capture differs from ordinary corruption: it is a systemic practice embedded in the functioning of institutions; it produces a stable net-

work of mutual dependencies between political power and economic elites; and it provides the governing party with an enormous financial advantage funded from public resources, thereby distorting electoral competition.

Hungary presents the most developed model in 2026, though one that has had to evolve. The original model, based on ‘siphoning’ EU subsidies, encountered the limits of the EU’s rule-of-law mechanisms; the resulting shortfall in European funding is being offset by massive Chinese investment in the battery industry and by state loans. The central figure remains Lőrinc Mészáros, whose empire has moved from construction to the monopolisation of services and retail. The government deliberately employs so-called ‘extraordinary taxes’ (Transparency International Hungary 2024) and regulatory harassment to drive out foreign capital, so that the vacated market space can be cheaply occupied by loyal oligarchs. This architecture is not secured by the Sovereignty Protection Office, whose remit lies in the domain of civil society and public discourse rather than economic regulation; rather, it rests on a network of captured regulatory and oversight bodies (among them the competition authority, the media regulator, the public-procurement authority and the State Audit Office) whose selective enforcement entrenches the position of allied firms. This is the institutional core of what Bálint Magyar (2016) termed the ‘post-communist mafia state’: a system in which the relationship between the government and oligarchs has shifted from clientelism to one of mutual guarantee, with oligarchs becoming the holders of strategic infrastructure.

Slovak economic capture has a different structure in 2026. Whereas Fidesz built a new oligarchy from scratch, Slovak structures rest on the continuity of business-political clans rooted in the Mečiar era. Robert Fico’s return to power (2023) and the subsequent legislative blitz (2024) resolved this ‘problem’ systematically: the abolition of the Special Prosecutor’s Office and the drastic reduction of criminal penalties functioned as a *de facto* amnesty for allied oligarchs. The specificity of 2026 is a transformation in the character of capture: no longer a ‘mafia state’ in the traditional sense but a state of legalised impunity, in which control over the intelligence service and the police enables the pre-emptive elimination of investigations.

The Czech Republic represents a specific model of corporate state capture that rests less on systematic corruption than on a massive conflict of interest. The central figure is Andrej Babiš and his holding company Agrofert (Kopeček 2016). Although the holding divested its media division in 2024, it continues to dominate agriculture, food processing and the chemical industry, with annual revenues exceeding CZK 200 billion. With Babiš’s return to the prime minister’s office in autumn 2025, the conflict of interest returned in full force; Agrofert remains one of the largest recipients of agricultural subsidies and public contracts. The fundamental difference from the Hungarian model lies in the role of the judiciary. The Czech judiciary has maintained its independence

but has encountered the limits of the political cycle: with Babiš's re-election as a deputy, his immunity was reinstated and his criminal prosecution had to be suspended, leaving the country in a state of 'deferred justice'. In 2025, the new government, through Minister of Industry and Trade Karel Havlíček, presented an 'economic strategy' whose central pillar is the full state takeover of the energy group ČEZ. The plan envisages a compulsory buyout of minority shareholders, which would make the state, and by extension the current executive, the sole owner of the country's largest energy corporation, at an estimated cost of up to CZK 250 billion. Presented as a means of gaining manoeuvring room for energy investment, it conceals a substantial risk of extreme centralisation of economic power. The combination of vast state influence in energy with a private agrochemical monopoly creates an unprecedented structure of corporate state capture that completes the mosaic of Czech 'soft autocratisation'.

A crucial aspect of economic state capture in 2023–2026 is the transformation of the sources from which autocratic regimes finance their clientelistic networks. During this period the European Union activated its rule-of-law conditionality and budgetary mechanisms, but with markedly uneven effect. In the Hungarian case the amounts at stake were considerable: in December 2022 the Council suspended approximately EUR 6.3 billion in cohesion funding under the general conditionality regulation, while far larger sums, some EUR 22 billion in cohesion funds under the horizontal enabling conditions and a further EUR 10.4 billion under the Recovery and Resilience Facility, remained frozen on rule-of-law and judicial-independence grounds. The Commission's decision of December 2023 to allow Hungary to request reimbursement of around EUR 10.2 billion, on the contested basis that it had satisfied judicial-independence 'super-milestones', became itself the subject of litigation: in *Parliament v. Commission* (Case C-225/24) the European Parliament sought the annulment of that decision, and in her Opinion of 12 February 2026 Advocate General Ćapeta proposed that the Court annul it, on the grounds that the Commission may not disburse withheld funds until the required reforms are genuinely in force and applied. Slovakia, by contrast, has had no significant volume of EU funds actually suspended under these mechanisms to date: although the Commission opened infringement proceedings over the 2025 constitutional amendment and the European Parliament urged it in April 2026 to trigger the conditionality mechanism, no freeze has in fact been imposed, a disparity that points less to the design of the instruments than to the political discretion governing their use. As Western funding became conditional, the regimes in Budapest and Bratislava responded by replacing the shortfall with investment and opaque loans from China and Russia – for example in battery gigafactories. This marks a new phase in the development of the state-capture phenomenon described by Innes: whereas Western capital required at least formal respect for rule-of-law principles, Eastern 'geopolitical rent' imposes no such conditions, demanding instead

a strong, centralised executive that guarantees investment stability regardless of environmental or labour standards. Autocratic elites thereby acquire a new form of external legitimacy for the further consolidation of power.

By 2026, then, a ‘dual economy’ has emerged across the Visegrád Group (with the exception of Poland): a sector connected to Western markets (automotive, services), under pressure from regulation and taxation, and a privileged sector connected to Eastern capital and state contracts, which serves as the regime’s economic base and a source of campaign finance.

A new hybrid model: Digital Sovereign Corporatism

The four mechanisms analysed above do not merely coexist; in their most advanced form they fuse into a distinctive hybrid configuration that this study terms *Digital Sovereign Corporatism*. Because the claim to have identified a distinct model carries a substantial analytical burden, the concept is set out here with its constitutive criteria made explicit, rather than asserted in passing.

Digital Sovereign Corporatism is proposed as an ideal-type defined by the conjunction of four necessary features, no one of which is by itself novel but whose combination is. First is a *sovereignist legitimating discourse* that frames the control of the information space as the defence of national sovereignty against external (typically EU, NGO, or ‘globalist’) interference, the discursive register of the Hungarian Sovereignty Protection Office and the Slovak national-identity clause. Second is *corporatist intermediation*, whereby the state does not censor directly but channels resources, advertising and regulatory advantage through a network of nominally private but politically dependent intermediaries (oligarch-owned outlets, the Megafon influencer network, allied ‘alternative media’). Third is *algorithmic distribution control*, whereby influence is exercised not over the legality of speech but over its reach: microtargeting, information flooding and the cultivation of platform-native movements such as Motoristé sobě. Fourth is *the economic starvation of legacy gatekeepers*, whereby traditional editorial institutions are allowed to wither commercially rather than being suppressed, vacating the public arena for the algorithmic ecosystem.

These criteria distinguish the model from its closest neighbours. It is narrower than ‘media capture’ in the classical sense (Bajomi-Lázár 2013), which centres on ownership and personnel and need not involve algorithmic distribution; it differs from accounts of ‘censorship through noise’ or post-truth authoritarianism, which describe an informational effect without specifying the corporatist institutional architecture that produces it; and it is distinct from surveillance-capitalist analyses, in which the controlling agent is the platform rather than the sovereignist state. The Czech case best illustrates the model’s genesis: the demise of the printed *Lidové noviny* in August 2024 is not an isolated market episode but the commercial starvation of a legacy gatekeeper, and the rise of

Motoristé sobě, a movement generated less by a political programme than by the algorithmic induction of anger against symbols such as the Green Deal and ‘Prague elites’, exemplifies the platform-native entity that fills the vacated space. The model thus describes an evolution from censorship (state capture 1.0) to algorithmic entropy and information pollution (state capture 2.0), in which governments can plausibly claim not to restrict freedom of speech while controlling the capacity of information to influence opinion. Hungary remains the paradigmatic case, in which all four features are simultaneously present and mutually reinforcing.

The EU enforcement deficit: A problem of will, not tools

The comparative evidence assembled here points to a conclusion about the European Union’s response that diverges from the common reformist reflex. The persistence of autocratisation within the EU is often read as evidence that the Union’s instruments are inadequate: that Article 7 TEU, paralysed by its unanimity requirement, and the budgetary conditionality mechanism need to be redesigned, for instance by shifting to qualified-majority voting. These tools can certainly be refined, but recent scholarship, including the work on which the present study draws, suggests that this diagnosis is largely misplaced. As Closa (2016), Kelemen (2024), and Pech and Scheppele (2017) have argued, the existing toolbox (infringement actions under Articles 258 and 260 TFEU, interim measures and penalty payments, the conditionality regulation and the recovery-and-resilience framework) is, on paper, more than sufficient to address the violations documented above.

The binding constraint is political rather than legal. The decisive failures of the period were failures of will: the Commission’s reluctance to pursue infringement actions promptly and to their conclusion; the Council’s unwillingness to advance the Article 7 procedure against Hungary beyond its hearings; and, most strikingly, the release of some EUR 10.2 billion to Hungary in December 2023 at a moment of acute negotiating leverage over Ukraine, a decision driven by geopolitical expediency rather than by any genuine satisfaction of the rule-of-law conditions, and now contested before the Court. The asymmetry between the substantial sums frozen and released in the Hungarian case and the absence of any comparable suspension in the Slovak case, despite a comparable deterioration, reinforces the point: the instruments are applied selectively, according to partisan, geopolitical and intra-institutional calculations of expediency.

The practical implication is correspondingly reoriented. The priority is not the lengthy renegotiation of treaty provisions, which would itself require the political consensus whose absence is the root problem, but the prompt, sustained and depoliticised use of the instruments that already exist: the systematic deployment of interim measures, the swift escalation of infringement actions,

the rigorous and evidence-based application of conditionality irrespective of the offending government's geopolitical usefulness, and the implementation of the systemic-violation approach (Pech & Scheppele 2017) so that the cumulative effect of measures, rather than each provision in isolation, becomes the object of enforcement. Where reform energy is available, it is best directed at insulating these decisions from the political discretion that has hitherto blunted them, and at the direct financing of the legal community and watchdog organisations in the affected states.

Conclusion

Democratic erosion in the Visegrád Group in 2026 reveals itself as a deep but non-linear systemic trend. The analysis has identified four interconnected mechanisms (media capture, institutionalised securitisation, the dismantling of institutional checks, and predatory economic capture) whose intensity varies across countries but whose structural essence is shared. The region's susceptibility flows from a combination of weak civil society, a traumatic historical memory that casts liberalism as a foreign import, and a specific clientelistic capitalism.

Three findings stand out. First, autocratisation exhibits a pronounced institutional hysteresis: court-packing leaves behind judicial bodies that continue to block democratic reform long after the autocratic regime has lost power, as the Polish experience after June 2025 demonstrates, so that the speed of disintegration far exceeds the slowness of restoration. Second, contingent crises can collapse the gradualism that Bermeo's theory of executive aggrandisement presupposes; the Slovak Lex Atentát package, adopted in an accelerated procedure after May 2024, shows how a shock can substitute for slow, inconspicuous salami-slicing. Third, the fusion of sovereigntist discourse, corporatist intermediation, algorithmic distribution control and the starvation of legacy media produces the hybrid model set out above as Digital Sovereign Corporatism, of which Hungary is the fullest realisation. The common denominator is that autocratic legalism is not merely a tool of attack but also a durable defence: institutional mines, shock-era legislative precedents and algorithmic infrastructure remain functional even after electoral defeat.

The Central European experience of 2026 therefore serves as a cautionary lesson for the wider Union. The decisive variable is not the adequacy of the EU's instruments but the political will to use them promptly and consistently. Once oligarchic capital becomes intertwined with national populism and algorithmic infrastructure, the dismantling of democracy becomes highly efficient and exceedingly difficult to reverse; a European response governed by expediency rather than principle leaves the residue of capture firmly in place.

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How Opposition Strategies Interact under Electoral Autocracy: Evidence from Hungary's TISZA Party

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Abstract: *Theories on political opposition and democratic backsliding have identified factors associated with opposition success under authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. Yet, they have paid limited attention to how these factors interact over time. This article applies insights from this literature – focusing on party policy positioning, opposition mobilisation capacity and democratic innovation – to the Hungarian case following the failed opposition coalition in the 2022 parliamentary election and the subsequent rise of the TISZA Party from 2024 to 2025. The article asks how the party can establish itself as a leading challenger to Fidesz amid democratic backsliding. Drawing on process-tracing analysis, it demonstrates that the interaction and sequencing of opposition strategies constituted a key mechanism behind TISZA's relative success in generating popular support in the context of electoral and informational autocracy. By specifying the timing and sequencing of opposition strategies, the findings show that factors of democratic resistance should be treated not as isolated variables but as interdependent processes whose order and timing shape opposition outcomes.*

Keywords: *oppositions, electoral autocracies, democratic resistance, Hungary, TISZA party*

Introduction

Theories concerning political opposition and democratic backsliding have pinpointed the conditions under which opposition parties can prevail against authoritarian regimes. Existing studies have identified numerous factors associated with opposition success, including moderate party positioning, high

opposition mobilisation capacity and democratic innovation under constrained political environments. Much of this literature, however, has treated these factors as discrete or static variables, often analysing their independent effects rather than their interactions over time.

By examining the case of the TISZA Party (Tisztelet és Szabadság Párt) in Hungary, this article argues that opposition success amid democratic backsliding cannot be fully understood without attention being paid to the interaction and sequencing of key opposition strategies, including policy positioning, mobilisation and democratic innovation. Rather than treating these factors as isolated, the article treats them as interdependent processes whose order and timing shape opposition outcomes, i.e. the emergence of a viable leading challenger to the ruling party under electoral autocracy. TISZA is a newly (re-) launched opposition party that rapidly gained popular support after Péter Magyar assumed its leadership in 2024 (Baranyai & Gyulai 2025). Although the outcome of the 2026 parliamentary election remains uncertain as of the time of writing this paper, TISZA at times surpasses Fidesz in opinion polls. While a single-case study inevitably limits generalisability, the Hungarian case allows for close examination of how alternative sequencing of opposition strategies can generate political momentum following the failure of broad pre-electoral coalitions.

This paper begins by reviewing the literature on political opposition in the context of democratic backsliding, identifying the conditions under which opposition can prevail against authoritarian regimes and highlighting the key factors associated with opposition success. It then examines Hungary following the 2022 parliamentary election, in which a rare unified pre-electoral opposition coalition was defeated (Mikola & Santos 2025), with particular attention to developments from 2024 to 2025, when Péter Magyar emerged as a new, single leading political challenger to Fidesz.

Political oppositions amid democratic backsliding

A growing body of scholarship has explored under what conditions political opposition can prevail against authoritarian regimes, highlighting factors that contribute to opposition victory such as pre-electoral coalitions and party defections, as well as opposition strategies and methods.

First, with regard to pre-electoral coalitions, Wahman (2013) found that opposition parties are more likely to form them when there is a realistic opportunity to defeat non-democratic regimes. Selçuk and Hekimci (2020) also demonstrate in the case of Turkey that opposition parties from across the political spectrum forged electoral alliances to ‘incentivise the opposition parties to coordinate in the name of fighting for democracy’ (ibid.: 1496).

However, uniting against incumbents does not necessarily lead to opposition victory. As Bunce and Wolchik (2010) emphasise, opposition parties need to enhance their mobilisation capacities through the ‘deployment of a set of innovative, well-planned, detailed, and sometimes dangerous strategies’ (p. 73) to defeat autocratic regimes. Under conditions of democratic backsliding, opposition parties require significantly greater levels of ‘mobilisation, unity, skill, and heroism’ than those operating in democratic contexts (Diamond 2002: 24). Equally important is strong political oppositions to authoritarian regimes, which may arise not only from established opposition parties, but also from within ruling elites through intra-regime splits (Tomini, Gibril & Bochev 2022). Theories on party defection have specified the conditions under which such intra-party divisions occur. For example, based on cases from Zimbabwe and Turkey, Gandhi and Reuter (2013) argue that poor economic performance increases the likelihood of intra-party splits. More recent studies support this argument while identifying additional facilitating conditions, such as weakened control over mass media and declining party cohesion (Rio 2022).

Scholars have also examined the strategies and methods for opposition parties amid democratic backsliding, particularly the effectiveness of moderate opposition and democratic innovation. In terms of moderate opposition, Korkmaz (2024) argues that opposition can take either a rigid (radical and exclusive) or a flexible (moderate and inclusive) stance against electoral autocracies, and the latter is vital for oppositions to win against them. Gamboa (2022) similarly contends that opposition actors pursuing moderate policies are more likely to succeed in challenging incumbents than those positioned at the ideological extremes in electoral autocracies. Beyond ideological positioning, Stiers (2023) also found that voters are primarily concerned with opposition parties’ ability to fight the incumbent government rather than simply negatively and unconstructively blaming them. As Ong (2021) points out, emphasising ‘positive policy and material gains’ (ibid.: 2) can increase the likelihood that opposition parties defeat incumbents in electoral autocracies.

With respect to democratic innovation, Warren (2025) contends that, in representative democracies, newly emerging technologies and platforms, such as online forums and open-government initiatives, can play a supplementary role alongside existing institutions in deepening democracies. Unfortunately, some of these innovations are not readily applicable in authoritarian contexts and may instead be employed to suppress the public, as discussed in the digital-authoritarianism literature (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz & Wright 2020). Yet, digital technologies can also serve as tools of democratic contestation. As the experience of the Arab Uprisings demonstrates, online platforms – whose capacities have expanded significantly over recent decades – can be mobilised to challenge authoritarian rule and support the fight against autocratic leaders (Monshipouri 2014).

Case selection and methods

The remainder of this paper applies the aforementioned theories – moderate policy positioning, opposition mobilisation, party defection and democratic innovation – to the case of Hungary following the 2022 general elections. Particular focus is given to the rise of a new opposition party – namely the TISZA Party, led by Péter Magyar.

While Hungary was once regarded as a model of democratisation among post-communist nations, it took a sudden, sharp turn toward de-democratisation once Fidesz secured more than two-thirds of the seats in the 2010 national election and beyond. Through gerrymandering, Fidesz has weakened the voting power of urban and opposition-leaning constituencies (Scheppele 2022). Media pluralism has likewise deteriorated sharply: Rather than radically eliminating independent media outlets, the government has gradually suppressed critical coverage and distorted public perception through systematic media capture (Polyák, Urbán & Szávai 2022). Put differently, over the past decade, Hungary has experienced a gradual shift toward electoral autocracy and what has been termed an ‘informational autocracy’ (Krekó 2022).

Additionally, Hungary also saw the defeat of the pre-electoral opposition coalition against Fidesz in the 2022 national election amid democratic backsliding. However, despite the collapse of the united opposition coalition after the election, Hungary witnessed the rapid emergence of the TISZA Party as a new, single leading opposition. As Tomini, Gibril and Bochev (2022) note, political opposition may arise not only from established opposition parties but also from within ruling elites through intra-regime splits. This was also the case with Péter Magyar, a former Fidesz member who held several public positions during the Orbán administration but remained outside the party’s core decision-making circles. He positioned himself as an outsider and a political newcomer as an opposition party leader. TISZA employs strategies and methods that challenge and refine existing theoretical expectations, while Fidesz and other established opposition parties have been reconsidering their electoral strategies in response to its rise.

Methodologically, this paper employs theory-based process tracing, an approach widely used in recent political science research (Lupu 2016; Beach & Pedersen 2018; Morgan 2024), to unpack the causal mechanisms that produce the observed outcomes (Rohlfing 2012; Ricks & Liu 2018). The following sections review the relevant timelines and identify the causal mechanisms linking the emergence of Magyar as an opposition leader to his party’s successful challenge to Fidesz under electoral autocracy.

From defeat of the united opposition to the rise of new opposition¹

'We won a victory so big that you can see it from the moon, and you can certainly see it from Brussels' (Euronews 2022). Speaking to supporters and party members gathered in Budapest, Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, declared so on the night of 3 April 2022, after it became clear that his right-wing party Fidesz had once again secured a victory in the Hungarian parliamentary elections.

Prior to the election, some surveys suggested a tightening race, with the opposition coalition appearing to close the gap. Unlike in previous Hungarian elections, fragmented opposition parties chose to unite against Fidesz, driven by concerns over democratic backsliding and by an effort to increase their likelihood of electoral victory, as suggested by theories of pre-electoral coalitions (Mikola & Santos 2025). However, the opposition's efforts to secure the majority were hampered not only by Hungary's highly disproportionate electoral system and the lack of media pluralism, but also by the opposition's unstable, passive and uncoordinated united front against the ruling party (Mikola & Santos 2025). As theories of opposition mobilisation indicate, simply uniting the opposition was not sufficient enough to overcome the ruling party under the conditions of democratic backsliding. Furthermore, the defeat of the united opposition in Hungary posed serious fragmentation and disillusionment among opposition politicians and voters. One survey showed that opposition voters are becoming increasingly fragmented and pessimistic, as they express more dislike for each other's political leaders than for those of the ruling party, and 80% believe that Fidesz can no longer be removed through democratic means (Policy Solutions 2022).

Despite its landslide 2022 electoral victory, Fidesz also faced mounting challenges. Hungary has experienced a serious economic downturn, high inflation and rising housing costs since 2022. Compared with other EU member states, the war in Ukraine has posed particularly severe macroeconomic challenges for Hungary; for example, the country has recorded one of the highest inflation rates in the European Union (European Commission 2023).

Amid these circumstances, a major political scandal for Fidesz unfolded, followed by the emergence of a new opposition figure, Péter Magyar. In early February 2024, independent Hungarian media outlet 444.hu reported a sensational piece of news. It was based on a January report by HVG which stated that the 2023 amnesty list included the deputy director of a children's home who had been convicted of abusing more than ten boys between 2004 and 2016. The deputy director was secretly pardoned on 27 April 2023, ahead of the Pope's visit to Hungary (Urfi 2024).

1 The earlier version of part of the empirical sections appeared in Japanese commentaries published in *Foresight*: 'Will the 'Magyar Phenomenon' Win Conservatism with Conservatism?' (June 6, 2024) and 'Conservative New Party Redraws Hungary's Political Map' (March 27, 2025). The material has since been substantially revised and restructured for the present article.

Following this report, criticism surged against Katalin Novák, president of Hungary, who had decided on the pardon, and then-Justice Minister Judit Varga, who had approved it. Novák initially condemned the child sexual abuse but tried to deflect criticism by saying that the media coverage was a ‘political campaign’ by the opposition in a press conference on 6 February. However, this only resulted in further opposition and calls for her resignation. On 10 February 2024, just over a week after the scandal was widely reported, Novák announced her resignation, admitting that the decision to grant amnesty had been wrong. Varga announced her resignation from parliament on the same day.

In response to this situation, Magyar appeared on the political scene through the YouTube channel ‘Partizán’ on 12 February. In an interview, he expressed his indignation as a member of the conservative camp over the series of events surrounding the decision to grant clemency and its handling (Partizán 2024). In March, he organised the largest anti-government rally in recent years in Budapest – mobilising a crowd of around 30,000 people – and he announced that he would soon be launching a political party. He took over the TISZA Party in April 2024 as vice president and subsequently became its president.

Magyar is Varga’s ex-husband and his great-uncle is former President of Hungary Ferenc Mádl. After taking part in the anti-government demonstrations led by Fidesz in 2006, which was then in opposition, he worked as a diplomat at the Hungarian Mission to the European Union in the second Orbán government and as a coordinator with the EU in the prime minister’s office. After that, he held several positions until former Justice Minister Varga announced her retirement from politics. In recent years, he has served as a director of the Hungarian Development Bank (MFB) and the Student Loan Centre (Diákhitel Központ).

However, unlike Péter Szijjártó, who rose through the party’s youth organisation Fidelitas – one of the three main channels for recruiting young people in Hungary, alongside scholarship programmes for students and ideologically aligned educational institutions (Metz & Várnagy 2021) – Péter Magyar did not come from any of these paths, nor was he a central figure. According to Dezső (2024), he was ‘not given a political role [and was given] “only” a position in state-owned companies’. In this sense, he is what I would call an insider-outsider figure who understands the inner workings of the government but maintains a certain distance from it.

That characteristic not only appealed to Hungarian voters as a new challenger to Fidesz but also made it difficult for Fidesz to react to him.

Challenges for Fidesz and existing oppositions

The Orbán administration initially sought to counter Magyar’s rise through a targeted media strategy. To discredit him, the government channelled more than HUF 200 million into Facebook advertisements in the month following the

scandal through Megafon, a pro-government social media influencer platform established in 2020 (Papp 2024; Bene & Juhász 2025). Government-backed messaging extended to street posters for the European Parliament elections in June 2024. In the negative campaign against President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, who had been taking a confrontational stance, Orbán named Magyar one of her ‘humble servants’ (Bálint 2024).

Yet the Orbán administration’s attacks on Magyar have largely lacked persuasiveness. Even if Magyar is criticised as being ‘left-wing’ in the same way as other opposition parties, the effect is weak due to the nature of moderate opposition: He considers himself to be centre-right to conservative. Since the European migration crisis, Orbán has consistently relied on polarising ‘us vs. them’ narratives through anti-LGBTQ sentiment, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Agoston 2023; Sata 2023; Gizińska & Sadlecki 2025). However, similar criticism of Magyar potentially carries the risk of self-inflicted damage, as it draws attention to Fidesz’s past decisions to appoint him to political positions. Thus, while Fidesz has pursued a series of campaigns labelling both Magyar and the TISZA Party as ‘left-wing’, TISZA has been comparatively able to avoid such criticism, unlike other opposition parties, except for criticism focused on Magyar’s personal affairs. These factors enabled the TISZA Party to gain seats following Fidesz in the EU elections in June 2024 by attracting not only from pro-European voters who opposed Fidesz in the last national election but also some former Fidesz supporters who have become disappointed with the party in recent years (Kovarek 2025).

In addition to Magyar’s positioning of his party as moderate, his decision not to recruit former Fidesz politicians or to form pre- or post-electoral coalitions with existing opposition parties has further reinforced this perception. Even before the European election, Magyar emphasised that he is ‘interested in neither discredited opposition politicians nor figures from the National Cooperation System’ (Ábrahám 2024). Following the European elections and after holding talks with party leaders in the Budapest municipal councils, TISZA decided not to cooperate with any other political parties.

As TISZA’s support grew, traditional opposition parties and movements faced an existential crisis. Their responses were inconsistent; however, many opposition parties ultimately decided not to contest the elections due to a desire to break electoral autocracy or limited organisational capacity. For example, Momentum initially expressed openness to exploring cooperation with TISZA. The then leader of Momentum Donát Anna stated in April 2024 that ‘we should focus on what our shared goals are with Péter Magyar, who has shaken up the opposition’ (ATV 2024). However, such cooperation did not materialise, and after the TISZA Party officially announced in 2025 that it would field candidates in the 2026 parliamentary elections, Momentum decided not to run. Similarly, the Hungarian Green Party (LMP) ultimately announced that it would not

contest the 2026 parliamentary elections in order to avoid undermining the prospects for regime change (Nádor 2026a). Although motivated by different considerations, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) also announced that it would not participate in the elections, citing a lack of candidates and volunteers (HVG 2026). The far-right party 2RK likewise decided not to run primarily due to financial reasons (Nádor 2026b).

A notable exception was the Democratic Coalition (DK), which remained sceptical of Magyar and his party. Following the elections and as early as November 2024, DK confirmed that the party would compete in all constituencies in the 2026 parliamentary elections. Several other parties, including the far-right Mi Hazánk and the joke party Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP), also announced they would field candidates in the elections. In all, traditional opposition parties were forced to choose between confronting both Fidesz and TISZA or refraining from listing candidates for the election, thus illustrating that a pre-electoral coalition akin to that formed in 2022 was no longer feasible. Some parties opted not to run to maximise the chances of a democratic opposition victory, others withdrew due to internal organisational constraints and a smaller number chose to compete regardless of these strategic considerations. For TISZA, this process served as a mechanism to reduce fragmentation among opposition parties and strengthen its position as the main challenger against Fidesz.

Offline organising and online engagement

Returning to the political situation in 2024, Magyar actively pursued outreach beyond Budapest to local cities and rural areas both before and after the European elections. This is despite Fidesz's consolidated support in rural constituencies and the longstanding difficulties faced by other opposition parties in extending their appeal beyond urban centres into these areas (Jakli & Stenberg 2021). For example, Magyar's TISZA Party launched its campaign by mobilising a large crowd for a rally in Budapest in May 2024. A large-scale demonstration followed in Debrecen, where approximately 10,000 people participated. As Figure 1 shows, he has been more active – even more than Fidesz – in visiting countryside towns. After the 2024 European Parliament elections, he continued similar nationwide tour campaigns, such as the 'voice of the nation' campaign in early 2025, and an 80-day national campaign tour from summer to autumn 2025 (Figure 2).

For the TISZA Party, local community building has also been a cornerstone of TISZA's rural strategy. From July 2024, Magyar initiated a loosely affiliated network of grassroots supporters under the name Tisza Islands (Tisza Szigetek). This network operates independently of the party's formal structure and evokes parallels with the Movements of Civic Circles (Polgári Körök) that Fidesz sup-

Figure 1: List of towns major parties visited during 2024 European Elections campaigns

TISZA Party



Democratic Coalition



Fidesz (Orbán Viktor and Deutsch Tamás)



Source: Author; data was coded manually from Magyar Peter's Facebook, DK's official website, and Telex's campaign analysis of Fidesz politicians (Bakró-Nagy & Cseke 2024)

Figure 2: List of towns major parties visited after 2024 European Elections (until December 2025)



Source: Author; data was coded manually from Magyar Peter's YouTube lives

porters were encouraged to form following the party's loss in the 2002 parliamentary elections (Enyedi 2005). Drawing on both his insider understanding of the factors that contributed to Fidesz's earlier success and his outsider perspective, Magyar selectively adapted elements of the ruling party's mobilisation strategies, reframing them within a democratic context.

Along with these offline organising efforts across Hungary, Magyar is also focusing on online engagement across major and lesser-known social networking services, as the theories of democratic innovation suggest. Similar to offline organising, he has continued to innovate, at times borrowing from Prime Minister Orbán's past playbook and at other times introducing strategies unused by the ruling party.

Before the 2024 European parliamentary elections, Magyar livestreamed the national tour campaigns on his Facebook and YouTube channels. Unlike Fidesz, the TISZA Party has primarily relied on organic reach rather than paid advertising. As Szentirmai (2024) reported, the party had 'conquered Facebook' during the spring European Parliament elections through its extensive use of unpaid engagement. After the European Parliament elections, he launched regular livestreams for subscribers on his YouTube channel, arguably as a response to Prime Minister Orbán's regular radio broadcasts, to 'discuss current events and future issues in a more informal way each week' (Spirk 2024) and to foster a sense of online community.

While Magyar's overall social media following still lags that of Prime Minister Orbán, Magyar initially had more followers than Orbán on YouTube and later on his Instagram channel as well. Beyond the dominant platforms, Magyar

has also temporarily adopted Discord, a two-way communication tool increasingly favoured by younger audiences, and Reddit, a US-based forum platform. Magyar's use of online platforms also differentiates his content by platform: While YouTube hosts speeches and work-related updates, TikTok and Instagram are used for more casual, light-hearted videos, such as cooking clips aimed at humanising his image (Márton 2025).

When viewed through the lens of audience engagement rather than sheer follower counts, Magyar's online influence appears even more pronounced. For example, although Prime Minister Orbán has approximately three times as many followers as Magyar on Facebook, the latter consistently garners higher levels of interaction, measured by post likes.

A comparison of average post likes underscores this disparity. For example, in January 2025, Orbán's posts received an average of 11,700 likes, while Magyar's averaged 26,300 likes. Orbán's most-liked post that month – a standard New Year's greeting – reached about 64,000 likes. Orbán followed this up with a video post positively highlighting the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite Hungary ranking among the five worst countries globally in per capita death rates. The latter's COVID-related video only drew 30,000 likes.

By contrast, Magyar achieved 45,000 likes for a satirical video targeting a Fidesz member of the European Parliament, while a more serious post titled 'I Have a Dream' outlining his political vision for Hungary received approximately 81,000 likes (see Table 1). These figures illustrate how Magyar has sustained reader engagement by blending humorous content with substantive political messaging.

Table 1: Comparison of the number of Facebook likes for Magyar and Orban (Jan 2025)

	Orbán	Magyar
Average	11,700 likes	26,300 likes
Max.	64,000 likes	81,000 likes
Min.	3,500 likes	10,000 likes

Source: Author's calculation

Assuming agenda-setting power

At the same time, Magyar has increasingly assumed agenda-setting power from Fidesz and shaped the political agenda by either continuously generating controversy or strategically responding to the ruling party's initiatives.

Following the European Parliament elections, Magyar again conducted his nationwide tour in autumn 2024, focusing on the deteriorating conditions of the hospital system. The summer of 2024 was the hottest since 1906, and the extreme heat caused serious issues, including the breakdown of hospital air

conditioning systems and the postponement of medical procedures. Public criticism has grown over the government's failure to invest in essential infrastructure, despite its generous benefit schemes aimed at addressing issues such as the declining birth rate. The poor state of public healthcare is widely acknowledged; public hospitals often lack basic supplies such as toilet paper, and facility maintenance remains a persistent concern for the government. Acknowledging these issues in August 2024, Magyar visited St. János Hospital in Budapest, demanded the resignation of the minister of the interior and the secretary of state, and called for an extraordinary cabinet meeting with Prime Minister Orbán while he was on summer holiday (Vida 2024). During a nationwide tour in the autumn and winter of 2024, Magyar shifted his focus slightly but continued to spotlight public facilities by criticising the poor conditions in children's homes, thereby sustaining public attention on the issue.

In response to this, the government tried to prevent Magyar from visiting the facilities. On 3 December, when he tried to visit a children's home in the small southern city of Pécs, the government authorities – which had initially granted permission – refused him entry at the last minute. Meanwhile, Fidesz's head of public relations, Tamás Menzel, was waiting for him in front of the facility. Menzel refused to shake hands with Magyar and hurled insults at him, calling him 'short' and a 'liar', and the two men got into an argument (Barnóczki 2024). This was reported in the media and spread quickly on social networking sites causing a stir across the country and prompting many memes. It even led to an increase in donations to the TISZA Party and its number of followers on social networking sites (Bakró-Nagy 2024).

Another illustration of Magyar's agenda-setting role is his opposition to the so-called 'Mini Dubai project' – a government plan to sell land near Budapest's Nyugati Railway Station to an Arab real estate development company and to invest more than HUF 50.9 billion in high-rise buildings. In response to rising housing costs in Budapest and other Hungarian cities, Magyar instead argued for more liveable urban planning centred on the construction of affordable rental housing (Hamvay 2025). The Orbán administration was ultimately unable to ignore this opposition and cancelled the sale to the foreign developer, later allowing the city of Budapest to assume responsibility for the project.

The interaction between moderate party positioning and a sustained series of initiatives enabled TISZA to maintain mobilisation capacity while preventing Fidesz from occupying or co-opting its political agenda. This contrasts both with the 2022 parliamentary election, in which opposition parties failed to exercise agenda control against a ruling party that deployed state resources to dominate policy debates (Vidra & Messing 2025), and with the mid-2010s, when Fidesz 'put Jobbik under pressure to distinguish its stance from the government's rhetoric' by selectively co-opting Jobbik's core policy issues (Borbáth & Gessler 2023: 89).

Moderate policies and position blurring

Since the TISZA Party's relaunch under Péter Magyar, it has announced policy changes on important issues such as domestic affairs and relations with the EU. However, it has adopted a more moderate and selective approach to other policies, such as foreign policy.

On the one hand, Magyar has clearly stated that Hungary needs to build closer ties with the EU through anti-corruption measures, the independence of public media and the restoration of the rule of law. He has strongly criticised the stance of the Orbán administration, saying, 'Hungary today is a family-run limited company' (HVG 2024). The TISZA Party pledged ahead of the 2024 European Parliament election to 'get back the trillions of dollars of EU funds that are owed to our country from Brussels' (Tisza Párt 2024). In terms of more everyday concerns, TISZA further announced a ten-point 'Szent István' programme in August 2025. Reflecting criticism of Fidesz's limited focus on improving public infrastructure, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, the programme promised the construction of modern, large-scale hospitals. It also emphasised commitments to community building, education and the strengthening of municipal autonomy, among other policy priorities.

On the other hand, some of TISZA's policy positions do not represent a radical departure from those of Fidesz but rather a more moderate variation. For example, commenting on nuclear policy in an interview with Reuters, Magyar stated that suspending the Paks nuclear project was not realistic, although he emphasised that he would 'negotiate pragmatically' for reducing 'disadvantageous parts' (Komuves & Than 2025). Simultaneously, in the aforementioned 10-point programme, TISZA pledged to eliminate Hungary's energy dependence on Russia by 2035, and expressed support for sanctions against Russia. Regarding the war in Ukraine, both parties oppose Ukraine joining NATO and providing military assistance. At the same time, however, TISZA has expressed its intention to support Ukraine joining the EU, based on the results of the party's informal 'voice of the nation' referendum on Ukraine's EU membership in March 2025. Similarly, both parties oppose Ukraine joining NATO and providing military assistance.

Even with regard to TISZA's stance on the European Union, while the party has endorsed the introduction of the euro and emphasised the need to resume access to EU funds suspended due to rule-of-law violations in Hungary, it has expressed opposition to EU-level regulation of labour and social rights (Table 2).² Benedek and Sebestyén (2025) characterise it as neither pro-European nor Eurosceptic, but rather as 'Euroambivalent Euroscepticism', which 'strategically avoids the Eurosceptic label and deprioritises EU-related issues' (p. 195).

At times and as part of TISZA's strategy of moderate party positioning, Magyar has also refrained from engaging in government-induced contentious issues

Table 2: Policy differences between Fidesz (incumbent) and TISZA (opposition)²

Category	Theme	Fidesz	TISZA
The War in Ukraine	Ukraine's accession to the EU	Disagree	Unclear
The War in Ukraine	Sanction against Russia	Disagree	Agree
The War in Ukraine	Ukraine's accession to NATO	Disagree	Disagree
The War in Ukraine	Military support for Ukraine	Disagree	Disagree
EU	Introduction of Euro	Disagree	Agree
EU	EU's suspension of fund to Hungary due to rule of law issues	Disagree	Agree
Economy	Strengthening regulation at the EU level regarding EV factories	Disagree	Agree
Economy	Nuclear energy as a sustainable energy	Agree	Agree
Local	Restoration of autonomy for local governments	Disagree	Agree
Human Rights	EU-level regulation of labour and social rights	Disagree	Disagree
Human Rights	Rights of LGBTQ	Disagree	Unclear
Social	Family allowance	Agree	Agree
Social	Improvement of the environment at medical institutions and child protection facilities	Agree (but largely neglected)	Agree

Source: K-Monitor 2024; Komuves & Than 2025; Botos 2024; Vida 2024; Tisza Párt 2025

and joining other oppositions' broader mobilisation against Fidesz. A notable example concerns TISZA's stance on Fidesz's anti-LGBTQ policies. Magyar initially avoided adopting a specific position on the government's constitutional ban on Pride events, despite widespread condemnation from other EU member states in early 2025 (De Groot 2025). Not only did Magyar state that the anti-LGBTQ stance of the Orbán administration is 'not the most important issue at the moment' (Pataki 2024), but also emphasised that discussing such controversial issues would primarily benefit the government, as focusing on them could divert public attention away from everyday socio-economic concerns (Telex 2024). A similar pattern can be observed in TISZA's approach to Ukraine's accession to the EU. While the party has expressed its intention to support Ukraine's EU membership, based on the results of the party's informal 'voice of the nation' referendum on Ukraine's EU membership in March 2025, Magyar had previously argued that the Western Balkan countries should be prioritised in the enlargement process (Botos 2024).

² Please note that Table 2 is based on data up to 2025, the main scope of the analysis, and was compiled before TISZA's detailed programme, 'Működő és emberséges Magyarország alapjai', was published in February 2026.

These TISZA approaches from 2024 to 2025 reflect not only its positioning as a moderate party but also a blurring of strategic position. As Nasr (2023) suggests, when voters hold relatively positive images of a party, they are more likely to tolerate policy ambiguity rather than penalise it. TISZA appears to have leveraged its popularity to pursue a strategy that would attract as wide a range of voters as possible. This approach from TISZA enabled the party, as suggested by McCoy and Somer (2021) and further developed by Benedek in relation to TISZA (2026), to avoid intensifying polarisation (i.e. depolarisation) or transform polarisation (i.e. repolarisation) by focusing instead on widely shared underlying grievances, such as everyday socio-economic concerns.

Conclusion

This study has examined processes and interactions, as illustrated in Figure 3, linking the rise of TISZA to the party's relative success as the main challenger to Fidesz. Following the electoral defeat of a united pre-electoral coalition under conditions of electoral autocracy, TISZA has at times even led Fidesz in independent opinion polls. Not all of the individual factors – i.e. moderate party positioning, mobilisation through imitation and innovation, and avoidance of polarisation – are unique to TISZA. As discussed in the existing literature, neither the moderation strategy pursued by the formerly far-right Jobbik in the mid-2010s (Polyakova & Shekhovtsov 2016; Borbáth & Gessler 2023), nor the selective adoption of Fidesz's policies – such as family policies by Peter Marki-Zay, the leader of the joint opposition list in 2022 – has posed sustained challenges to Fidesz. It is the interaction and sequencing of each factor that enabled and sustained the TISZA Party's relative success.

Figure 3: Processes and interactions of the rise of TISZA to the party's relative success



Source: Author

The emergence of Magyar as another conservative opposition politician, following Jobbik yet without roots in the far-right, began with his party defection from Fidesz. Magyar, who held several public positions as a bureaucrat in the Orbán

administration but was never a central figure within it, emerged as another, single opposition figure amid political scandals and an economic downturn. The subsequent stage consisted of moderate party positioning. Magyar's cultivation of an 'insider-outsider' profile not only enabled him to present TISZA as a moderate party, but also allowed him to draw on insider know-how while simultaneously emphasising his position as an outsider. The rejection of a pre-electoral coalition and the exclusion of former establishment politicians from joining TISZA further reinforced this positioning.

The above phase was followed by TISZA's hybrid of online and offline mobilisation campaigning. At times, these efforts borrowed from Fidesz's campaign playbook, while at other moments they introduced innovative techniques. This interplay between online and offline mobilisation interacted effectively with TISZA's agenda-setting capacity, which further enhanced the party's mobilisation ability as an opposition. As TISZA's popularity increased and election day approached, Magyar and the party faced the question of whether and what kinds of policy commitments to offer voters. While articulating positions on certain issues that aligned closely with Fidesz, except for TISZA's key policy promises, the party avoided polarisation by focusing on widely shared underlying grievances, such as everyday socio-economic concerns, as McCoy and Somer (2021) suggested, and by maintaining strategic ambiguity on more sensitive policy areas, consistent with TISZA's strategy of moderate party positioning.

The interaction of these components across successive stages constituted a key mechanism underlying TISZA's relative success under conditions of electoral and informational autocracy. Even in a systematically disadvantaged position relative to the ruling party, the combined dynamics of moderate party positioning, mobilisation through both imitation and innovation, and the strategic avoidance of polarisation translated into sustained momentum for TISZA as the main challenger.

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Mainstream Labels, Radical Practice: A Theory of Disguised Parties

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Abstract: *Disguised parties are electorally competitive organisations that preserve a mainstream label while durably advancing radical-right projects through programmatic shifts, institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture. We theorise disguise as a strategic equilibrium that widens electoral appeal and reduces reputational and regulatory costs by separating audiences and sequencing illiberal change through low-visibility instruments. The concept differs from mainstreaming, rebranding and episodic hardening by requiring a sustained divergence between public self-placement and governing practice and by combining multiple channels over time. We develop a portable identification checklist and a threefold typology and apply them in a within-case, theory-guided process tracing of Fidesz (1989–2025). The case shows how mainstream signalling can shield radical-right governance: It legitimises legalistic institutional redesign, facilitates information-environment capture and raises the costs of alternation and rollback. From this logic we derive testable expectations about enabling conditions, especially radical-right competition, permissive oversight in media and judicial arenas, and party-finance loopholes, and about downstream effects on opposition coordination and policy feedback. The argument reframes democratic-backsliding debates by highlighting mainstream enablers as a distinct regulatory problem and by motivating ex ante, structural safeguards.*

Keywords: *disguised parties, democratic backsliding, party competition, mainstreaming, Fidesz*

Introduction

Across contemporary democracies, erosion increasingly proceeds through incremental, formally legal change rather than overt ruptures. Elected executives can reconfigure the rules of competition, oversight and information without cancelling elections, precisely because reputational and regulatory constraints reward strategies that appear moderate and lawful. This raises a conceptual puzzle only partly captured by existing terms: How can a party preserve a mainstream label while durably enacting radical-right governance in practice? We advance the concept of disguised parties to capture this configuration.

Disguised parties are electoral organisations that (i) maintain a mainstream public identity and formal self-placement, through branding, party-family signalling, coalition positioning and outward-facing commitments, while (ii) sustaining a durable divergence between label and practice via a multi-dimensional bundle of change. In practice, this bundle typically combines programmatic hardening (radical-right frames and policy priorities), institutional engineering (legalistic redesign of constraints and competitive rules) and ecosystemic capture (the restructuring of media, civic intermediaries and resource flows that shape public scrutiny). Disguise is therefore not cosmetic rebranding or episodic rhetorical escalation. It is a strategic equilibrium in which parties separate audiences and sequence change: They minimise stigma and scrutiny among moderates, watchdogs and external principals while maximising mobilisation, agenda control and organisational security among radical-right constituencies.

The article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies what existing literatures explain and what they miss. Scholarship (Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016; Brown, Mondon & Winter 2023; Moffitt 2022; Mudde 2024) on mainstreaming demonstrates how established parties adjust positions, emphases or rhetoric in response to niche or radical challengers. Yet much of this work remains centred on electoral competition and issue uptake. Disguised parties instead entail institutional and organisational adaptation that consolidates a substantive shift over time, including the redesign of electoral rules, regulators, judicial architecture and public-resource allocation, while maintaining mainstream cover. Second, cartel-party theory illuminates state-party entanglement, collusion and resource dependence (Katz & Mair 1995; 2009; Koole 1996; Pelizzo 2007), but disguise foregrounds a different logic: asymmetric signalling under constraint. Parties can present moderation to swing voters and regulators even as they entrench radical-right practice through policy, institutions and partisan ecosystems. Third, we translate the concept into a portable measurement framework: a checklist and typology that can be applied beyond a single setting and that generates testable expectations about when disguise emerges, how it is sustained and what it does to democratic competition.

Theoretically, disguise links reputational costs to institutional opportunity structures. When radical-right competitors pressure incumbents, adopting radical frames can reduce defections and consolidate a base, but overt radicalisation risks sanctions from moderates, independent oversight bodies and supranational principals. Disguise offers a way to resolve this trade-off. Mainstream labelling dampens reputational and regulatory penalties, while legalistic institutional change and ecosystemic interventions raise rivals' costs and reduce the effectiveness of accountability. In this framework, democratic erosion is not only a function of polarisation or voter demand; it also reflects strategic choices about *how* to move, through which instruments, in which sequence and under which constraints.

Empirically, we develop an operational checklist for identifying disguised parties and apply it in a within-case, theory-guided process tracing of Fidesz across a long horizon (1989–2025, with focused attention to governing sequences after 2010). Hungary illustrates the stakes because a party that long signalled mainstream respectability simultaneously built an integrated toolkit of institutional redesign and information-environment control. The design allows us to trace how mainstream signalling interacts with specific instruments, electoral-law change, regulatory capture, judicial reconfiguration and selective resource allocation to produce durable advantages while maintaining the outward forms of legality and competition. The extended time frame also allows assessment under shifting external constraints, including EU rule-of-law conditionality, and anchors a comparative agenda: Which combinations of competitive pressure, permissive media-judicial environments and party-finance rules make disguise feasible and with what downstream consequences for opposition coordination and policy feedback? These questions speak to core debates on party change, competitive authoritarianism and democratic resilience. The phenomenon theorised here is not specific to Hungary, nor is it confined to Central and Eastern Europe. Rather, Hungary serves as a paradigmatic case of full-spectrum disguise, selected because it makes unusually visible the interaction of mainstream cover, institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture over time.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines disguise, states scope conditions and introduces a threefold typology (programmatic, institutional, ecosystemic), drawing clear boundaries vis-à-vis mainstreaming, rebranding and satellite arrangements. Section 3 theorises the mechanisms and expectations that render disguise a rational response to reputational, regulatory and competitive constraints. Section 4 sets out the research design, data and measurement strategy, including the operational checklist. Section 5 analyses Fidesz. Section 6 discusses implications for democratic competition and regulation and concludes.

Conceptualising disguised parties

We use the term ‘disguised parties’ to denote electoral organisations that preserve a mainstream public identity, in branding, formal self-placement and alliance behaviour, while durably enacting a multidimensional shift associated with radical-right governance across (a) policy programmes and frames, (b) institutional design and enforcement and (c) the surrounding media-civic ecosystem. Disguise captures a strategic divergence between presentation and practice: Parties continue to communicate moderation to pivotal voters, watchdogs and international audiences, yet routinise radical-right agendas in governance. Unlike episodic rhetorical hardening or short-lived policy pivots, disguise refers to a stable equilibrium in which mainstream signalling lowers reputational and regulatory costs even as radical practices expand mobilisation capacity and entrench incumbency advantages.

Scope conditions

The concept is designed for electoral regimes that preserve pluralism and some oversight, where labels and reputational constraints still carry informational value, for example under supranational conditionality, media scrutiny, judicial review and civil-society monitoring. It is not tailored to hegemonic single-party autocracies where labels convey little information, nor to purely pre-electoral tactical flirtations with hardline cues. To mark the required durability, we treat disguise as persisting for at least two national electoral cycles or four years (whichever is longer). To mark the required multidimensionality, we require observable movement on at least two of three pillars – programmatic, institutional or ecosystemic – for an organisation to qualify as disguised.

The concept is therefore intended to travel beyond Hungary and beyond Central and Eastern Europe. It captures a portable pattern observable in competitive electoral regimes where party labels retain informational value, reputational sanctions remain non-trivial and incumbents can exploit legal, regulatory and media-adjacent instruments without abolishing pluralism outright. Central and Eastern Europe offers particularly visible instances because post-transition institutional fluidity and uneven oversight often make the label-practice gap easier to observe, but the phenomenon itself is not region-bound. In this sense, Hungary should be read as a paradigmatic rather than an exclusive case.

Distinguishing disguise from adjacent concepts

Disguised parties are analytically distinct from several neighbouring concepts. Research on mainstreaming (Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016; Williams & Hunger 2022; Krause, Cohen & Abou-Chadi 2023; Minkenberg & Vegh 2023) demonstrates how established parties adjust positions or salience in re-

sponse to radical-right challengers. Yet mainstreaming typically remains within the competitive field of issue uptake. Disguise goes further by encompassing institutional and organisational consolidation – for example, the remaking of media regulators, the redesign of judicial architecture or the engineering of electoral rules – undertaken while publicly retaining a mainstream label. By the same token, rebranding/‘modernisation’ captures presentational updates or leadership refresh without the persistent label-practice gap central to disguise. Cartel-party theory explains state-embedded collusion and resource dependence (Wiesendahl 2024; Blyth & Katz 2005; Bolleyer 2009), but disguise foregrounds asymmetric audience signalling under constraint: Moderation cues are targeted outward to watchdogs and swing voters even as radical practice is institutionalised inward for core supporters. Finally, disguised parties are not reducible to satellites subordinated to a dominant principal; they act as principal political actors. Movement infrastructures and astroturfing (Kovic et al. 2018; Courpasson & Vallas 2016) can support disguise by providing mobilisation capacity, but in a disguised configuration the party coordinates and instrumentalises such networks rather than functioning merely as their organisational arm.

Three pillars of disguise

Substantively, disguise can be programmatic, institutional or ecosystemic, typically in combination. Programmatic disguise denotes the normalisation of radical-right frames, nativism, authoritarian law-and-order and anti-pluralist delegitimation under a mainstream pedigree. It is visible in manifesto content and sustained leader rhetoric across electoral cycles and can be measured via Manifesto Project (MARPOR) categories and CHES expert placements relative to the party family the organisation publicly claims. Institutional disguise proceeds through what Scheppele (2018) terms *autocratic legalism*: constitutional redesign, regulatory capture, electoral-law engineering, civil-society restrictions and selective enforcement, justified in the idiom of ‘normal governance’. Such moves should register as inflection points in V-Dem’s rule-of-law and liberal-component indices and can be traced in legal-text change and enforcement patterns. Ecosystemic disguise involves constructing a loyal media-civic infrastructure, ownership concentration, skewed state advertising and procurement and GONGO-style intermediaries, while publicly claiming pluralist credentials. It is trackable through Media Pluralism Monitor risk profiles, ownership mapping and public-spending data.

A party is classified as *disguised* when all three conditions are met:

(1) Mainstream label: The party claims to be or is credibly placed within a mainstream family (self-description, coalition/alignment signals and where relevant EP group affiliation), yet policy outputs and institutional actions align with radical-right governance over time.

(2) Minimum durability: Persistence for $\geq$ two national electoral cycles or $\geq$ four years.

(3) Multidimensionality ($\geq$ two of three pillars): Programmatic across two consecutive elections, net increases in relevant MARPOR blocks and/or a ≥ 0.3 s.d. movement in CHES placements relative to the claimed family mean, with translation of frames into enacted policy. Institutional: deployment of at least three instruments among electoral-law redesign, regulator capture, judicial appointments/reshaping, NGO-law change and selective enforcement, accompanied by declines or structural breaks in V-Dem rule-of-law/liberal components. Ecosystemic: increased media-ownership concentration (HHI $\uparrow$) and state-advertising or procurement shares to aligned outlets exceeding audience share by ≥ 20 percentage points (or an equivalent skew), alongside the emergence or empowerment of pro-government civic intermediaries.

These thresholds are intended as heuristics that enhance comparability; robustness to alternative cut-offs can be assessed in sensitivity checks (reported in the online appendix). Figure 1 visualises the temporal clustering of these indicators for Fidesz (2010–2025) as a heatmap, illustrating how multi-pillar disguise consolidates over time.

For empirical work, the checklist provides measurement leverage and comparability across cases and time. It also underpins causal expectations about when disguise emerges, especially under radical-right competitive pressure combined with permissive oversight environments and party-finance loopholes and how it endures through reduced reputational costs and raised reversal costs. In short, existing labels capture fragments of the syndrome; disguise identifies the package that makes illiberal transformation sustainable under a respectable banner.

Mechanisms and expectations

Disguise is sustained through three interlocking channels that jointly reduce reputational and regulatory sanctions while increasing incumbency advantages. The first channel is audience separation. By preserving a mainstream label, through party-family cues, coalition signals and outward-facing moderation, incumbents dampen stigma among pivotal voters, watchdogs and external principals, even as targeted domestic cues mobilise hardline constituencies. The second channel is institutional engineering under legalistic cover. Here, formally lawful rule changes convert contingent majorities into durable advantages by reshaping the conversion of votes into seats, reconfiguring oversight and raising the costs of reversal for successors. The third channel is ecosystemic capture. By reallocating resources and opportunities in the information field, via ownership concentration, selective subsidisation and aligned civic intermediaries, incumbents gate message reach and weaken counter-narratives without abolishing pluralism. Together, these channels

generate a stable equilibrium in which elections and formal pluralism persist, but effective contestability thins.

These mechanisms imply a sequenced logic. Competitive pressure can trigger programmatic hardening; mainstream signalling then reduces the penalties of illiberal change; institutional and ecosystemic instruments consolidate advantage; and their joint operation creates path dependence that constrains alternation and rollback. We therefore derive five expectations.

H1 (Competitive trigger): Where a salient radical-right challenger threatens an incumbent's core electorate, incumbents are more likely to initiate programmatic hardening and to begin assembling enabling institutional or ecosystemic instruments within two national electoral cycles.

Observable implications: (a) Sustained upward movement in relevant MARPOR categories and/or CHES placements relative to the claimed party-family mean; (b) early adoption, drafting or public justification of enabling rules (e.g. regulatory discretion, financing loopholes, procurement/advertising flexibility) that expand implementational latitude.

H2 (Audience separation and sanction dampening): Maintaining a mainstream label attenuates electoral, reputational and regulatory penalties for illiberal moves, especially under polarisation and out-group threat framing.

Observable implications: (a) Institution-altering reforms attract weaker punishment among moderates when mainstream cues remain salient; (b) systematic two-level messaging, external-facing moderation and legality claims combined with domestically hardening cues; (c) compared with overt hardline actors, the incumbent faces delayed or softened sanction responses for substantively similar moves.

H3 (Legalistic engineering and incumbency advantage): When disguise includes institutional engineering, rule changes increase incumbency advantages and raise reversal costs for successors.

Observable implications: (a) Simulated seat allocations under pre-versus post-reform rules show a more favourable votes-to-seats conversion for the incumbent; (b) activation or creation of veto points (constitutional thresholds, appointment locks, entrenched regulatory bodies) that increase the political and legal cost of rollback.

H4 (Ecosystemic capture and information gating): Selective state advertising/procurement and ownership consolidation shift survival odds and message reach toward aligned outlets while preserving formal legality and nominal pluralism.

Observable implications: (a) Persistent gaps between audience shares and state-advertising/procurement shares favouring aligned outlets; (b) worsening risk profiles in the Media Pluralism Monitor (or equivalent) for editorial independence and market plurality; (c) where data permit, detectable content shifts toward government frames following subsidy or ownership shocks.

H5 (Cumulative entrenchment and path dependence): The joint presence of institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture lowers the probability of alternation and reduces the magnitude and scope of rollback when alternation occurs.

Observable implications: (a) Reduced reversal rates in core domains despite changes in government personnel or coalition composition; (b) durable trend breaks in rule-of-law and liberal-component measures (e.g. V-Dem) that do not rebound fully after turnover, consistent with elevated reversal costs and constrained accountability.

Research design, data and measurement

The study employs theory-guided process tracing (Falletti 2014) to test whether the sequence and co-evolution of programmatic hardening, legalistic institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture matches the mechanism of disguise rather than short-lived rhetorical or policy spikes. The analysis is anchored in clearly dated decision points and policy bundles, most notably electoral-law redesign, regulatory reconfiguration, judicial and oversight changes and the reallocation of state resources in the media and civic sphere, so that timing, interaction and durability across channels can be assessed. Classification follows the portable checklist introduced earlier: A party qualifies as disguised when a sustained label-practice divergence is observed under minimum durability ($\geq$ two national electoral cycles or $\geq$ four years) and multidimensionality (movement on $\geq$ two of the three pillars). The empirical aim is not an exhaustive measurement of all possible indicators, but mechanism testing: whether programmatic shifts emerge and persist alongside institutional and ecosystemic instruments in a pattern consistent with H1–H5.

Causal leverage derives from timing, sequencing and scope-condition tests. For institutional and ecosystemic instruments to plausibly enable disguise, reforms in electoral rules, regulator design or subsidy/allocation mechanisms must precede or coincide with the relevant shifts in indicators (content, concentration, risk profiles) and the pattern should be sustained beyond a single cycle. We compare counterfactual seat allocations under pre-reform vs post-reform rules to evaluate changes in votes-to-seats conversion and to identify institutional features that raise rollback costs (e.g. entrenchment mechanisms, appointment locks or heightened thresholds). To reduce over-attribution, we incorporate falsification checks: Placebo outcomes in apolitical beasts (e.g. sports or culture) should not respond systematically to state-advertising shocks and non-aligned outlets should not experience improved survival probabilities following alignment-contingent subsidies. Message asymmetry is assessed by contrasting external-facing moderation cues with domestic hardening in topic and valence patterns, complemented by qualitative evidence of strategic signalling.

Table 1: Data families, indicators, sources and uses

Domain	Indicator (examples)	Primary Source(s)	Coverage	Use in Tests
Mainstream Label (Classification)	Self-description; coalition/alignment signals; EP group/party-family cues (where relevant); outward-facing moderation/legality claims	Party documents; coalition records; EP/group records; external communications	Event-dated; 1989–2025 (focus 2010–2025)	Checklist condition (label-practice divergence); H2: audience separation
Programmatic	MARPOR nativism/authority/law-and-order blocks; sustained leader-speech frames; CHES movements vs claimed party-family mean	MARPOR; speech corpora; CHES	Election years + annual; 2010–2025 (CHES waves through 2024)	H1: drift/trigger; H2: sanction dampening; breakpoint/trend tests
Audience Separation and Sanction Environment	External moderation cues vs domestic hardening (topic/valence); timing/intensity of watchdog, judicial or supranational responses	External vs domestic speeches/press; watchdog statements; court rulings; EU-facing responses (where applicable)	Event windows around contested reforms	H2: two-level messaging; delayed/softened sanctions (pattern tests)
Institutional Engineering	Legal-text changes (constitution/electoral/NGO law); regulator statutes; appointment/oversight redesign; veto-player inventory	Official gazettes; constitutional/electoral codes; appointment records	Event-dated; 2010–2025	H3/H5: sequencing; reversal-cost proxies; process-tracing tests
Rule-of Law / Liberal Components	Index levels; trend breaks; persistence after key reforms/turnover	V-Dem	Annual; 2010–2025	H3/H5: structural-break diagnostics; persistence/roll-back tests
Ecosystemic	Ownership concentration (HHI); state-advertising/procurement skew vs audience share; MPM risks; outlet survival probabilities	Ownership registries; audience metrics; state advertising/procurement data; MPM	Annual/bi-annual + event shocks; 2010–2025	H4/H5: allocation-skew tests; falsification; (appendix) DiD/survival models
Elections	Votes, seats, district boundaries, apportionment formulae (D'Hondt/Sainte-Lague)	Electoral commissions; district maps; legal rules	Election years; 2010–2025	H3: seat-vote counterfactuals; changes in votes-to-seats conversion
Falsification / Placebos	Apolitical beasts (sports/culture) content; placebo allocations (e.g., cultural funding)	Content corpora; budget lines; administrative datasets (where available)	Event windows; 2010–2025	Robustness: placebo tests to reduce over-attribution

Source: Author

Data, measurement and robustness

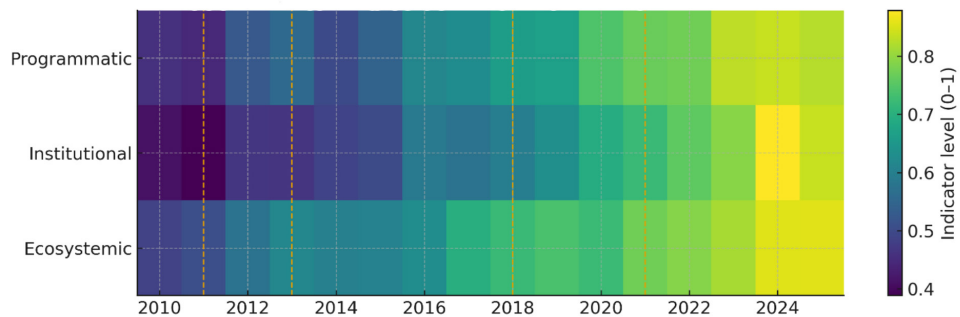
Triangulation combines four data families (summarised in Table 1): (1) textual and positional evidence (manifestos, leader speeches, CHES placements) to capture programmatic change and signalling; (2) institutional-legal series (constitutional amendments, electoral-law revisions, regulatory statutes, enforcement patterns) to capture institutional engineering and reversal costs; (3) information-ecosystem indicators (ownership mapping, HHI concentration, state-advertising allocation, Media Pluralism Monitor risk profiles) to capture ecosystemic capture; and (4) electoral returns and district-level reconstructions to generate pre/post rule counterfactuals of votes-to-seats conversion.

Indicators are normalised to a common (0–1) scale with transparent transformations. Heuristic thresholds (e.g. CHES movement ≥ 0.3 s.d. relative to the claimed party-family mean; state-advertising shares ≥ 20 percentage points above audience share) are treated as comparability aids and are stress-tested in the online supplement via alternative cut-offs and lags. Where gradual change is expected (e.g. frame normalisation), we use breakpoint diagnostics and flexible trend specifications (e.g. restricted cubic splines) to detect inflections without over-fitting. Robustness exercises include alternative operationalisations of programmatic change (different MARPOR aggregations; alternative CHES axes), alternative periodisations for institutional change ($\pm$ one election; $\pm$ two years) and alternative denominators for advertising skew (audience share, reach, time-weighted reach). Missingness is handled by pre-specified rules (listwise deletion for $<5\%$ gaps; multiple imputation otherwise, never across outcome families). All coding decisions are logged and uncertainty intervals accompany quantitative estimates.

Case analysis – Fidesz (1989–2025; focus 2010–2025): From liberal youth to a disguised party

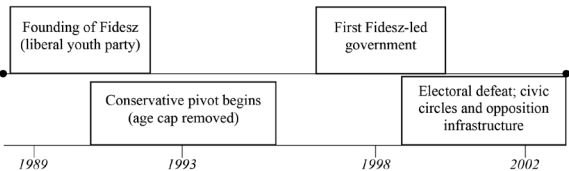
Fidesz provides an unusually clear test of disguised-party mechanisms because it combines (i) a long period of credible mainstream signalling and international embedding with (ii) a post-2010 governing sequence in which institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture are assembled under legalistic cover. The core claim advanced here is not that Hungarian politics became openly non-electoral, but that a durable equilibrium emerged in which electoral ritual and formal legality persist while effective contestability thins. To orient the within-case process tracing, Figure 1 summarises the clustering of key disguise indicators across the post-2010 period, while Figures 2A and 2B map the mechanism-relevant turning points through which mainstream cover was first assembled and then translated into multi-pillar disguise.

Figure 1: Disguise indicators over time – Heatmap of Fidesz (2010–2025)



Source: Author

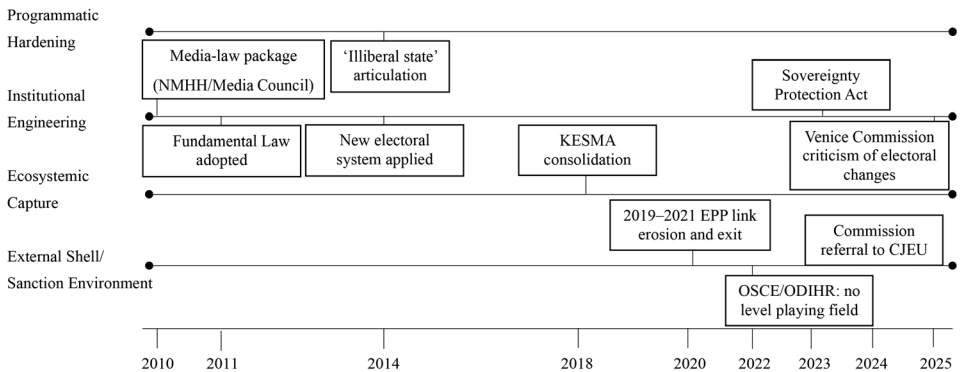
Figure 2A: From liberal origins to mainstream cover: Fidesz (1989–2002)



Source: Author

Note: The figure includes only those pre-2010 turning points that helped establish Fidesz’s mainstream credibility, governing legitimacy and movement capacity, i.e. the background conditions that later made a durable label-practice gap possible.

Figure 2B: From mainstream cover to multi-pillar disguise: Fidesz (2010–2025)



Source: Author

Note: Events are included only when they mark (i) the activation or deepening of one of the three pillars of disguise or (ii) a shift in the external sanction environment relevant to audience separation and the erosion of Fidesz’s international mainstream shell.

In the pre-2010 phase, Fidesz largely resembled a liberal movement-party with generational renewal (the 35-year age cap), market-liberal and civil-libertarian appeals and a clear pro-European profile (Lendvai 2019; Kiss 2002). Throughout the 1990s the organisation centralised and pivoted toward a civic-conservative identity (Batory 2016), broadening its electorate and elite alliances; by 1998 it led a centre-right government, reinforcing mainstream credentials in European party politics (Kiss 2002; Benoit 2002). After losing office in 2002, Fidesz invested in movement infrastructures, most notably the civic circles (*Polgári Körök*) (Greskovits 2017; Bozoki 2008) and cultivated business-media linkages that later proved decisive. This pre-history matters because it builds a dual capacity: outward respectability via European party-family embedding and inward mobilisation capacity via civilisational and sovereigntist frames. In the terms of this article, it supplies the foundations for a later label-practice gap to become durable rather than episodic. The decisive turn after 2010 transformed opportunity into durable advantage through a sequenced assembly of the disguise toolkit. Competitive pressure in the right-of-centre space provides the relevant trigger logic (H1): Where challengers threaten core constituencies, incumbents have incentives to harden programmatically while preparing enabling instruments that expand implementational latitude. In this setting, programmatic hardening is paired with the gradual activation of institutional and ecosystemic levers that are formally legal, technically framed and therefore comparatively low in immediate visibility. This interpretation is compatible with Agh's (2022) characterisation of the Orban regime as a 'perfect autocracy' culminating in a form of 'zombie democracy'. For the purposes of this article, Agh's formulation is useful not as a substitute for the disguised-party concept, but as a regime-level description of the political end-state toward which multi-pillar disguise can contribute. The present argument, by contrast, specifies the party-strategic mechanism through which such an outcome becomes electorally sustainable under mainstream cover.

Institutional engineering provided the first pillar of consolidation (H3-H5). The Fundamental Law (2011) replaced the post-1989 constitution and was followed by amendments (Mazza 2013) and 'cardinal' laws that entrenched key policy and personnel rules (Bako 2022; Chronowski 2021). Revised parliamentary elections acts re-engineered districting, introduced single-round single-member district contests and recalibrated list-compensation rules, first applied in 2014 (Bozoki 2015; Biro-Nagy 2017). The central point for the disguise mechanism is not merely that rules changed, but that they changed under legalistic and technocratic justificatory frames while generating foreseeable cumulative partisan effects. In process-tracing terms, these reforms constitute dated decision points that plausibly increase reversal costs and alter the conversion of votes into seats, precisely the pathway implied by H3.

A parallel strand reworked the information environment through regulation, supplying the second pillar of advantage (H4). The 2010 media-law package (Act CIV on the Freedom of the Press; Act CLXXXV on Media Services and Mass Media) created the NMHH (Leszczynska 2025; Sherwood 2011) and a powerful Media Council with long terms, licensing control and sanctioning capacity (Griffen 2020). Whatever the balance of formal legality in the design, the mechanism relevant here is that regulatory architecture can generate low-visibility, high-leverage controls over entry, viability and incentives, shifting the information field without overt censorship. This is consistent with ecosystemic capture as ‘information gating’: The system remains formally pluralist, but the distribution of reach and resources changes in ways that systematically favour aligned actors. Market-mediated consolidation then supplied a structural channel through which ecosystemic capture became durable. By 2018, hundreds of outlets were pooled into the KESMA foundation, centralising pro-government media under a single umbrella (Gyori 2023; Stetka & Mihelj 2024). In the logic of disguise, the critical point is that control can be exercised indirectly: Selective subsidisation and resource allocation, including state advertising, can distort markets and content incentives, rewarding alignment and disciplining critical journalism while preserving the outward forms of legality. Under this configuration, the party does not need to police messages continuously; it reshapes the incentive structure such that favourable messages dominate and counter-narratives weaken. By the late 2010s, institutional engineering, regulatory leverage and market-mediated information power jointly sustained advantage while a mainstream-coded presentation and legal formalities were maintained.

Audience separation and sanction dampening (H2) help explain why this toolkit can operate without immediate, prohibitive penalties. The maintenance of mainstream cues, party-family signalling, legality claims and outward-facing moderation attenuates reputational costs among pivotal voters and external audiences, even as domestically targeted cues harden. The thinning of the ‘external shell’ between 2019 and 2021, as the party’s bridge with the EPP frayed (suspension and exit), does not invalidate the mechanism; rather, it illustrates an important implication: Once institutional and ecosystemic instruments have accumulated, domestic entrenchment can persist even as international reputation costs rise, because reversal costs and information gating reduce the electoral penalty for hardline practice.

The 2022 parliamentary elections illustrate this combination in operation. Assessments that elections were professionally administered but lacked a level playing field due to media imbalances (Polyak, 2019), blurred boundaries between state and party, and opaque campaign finance capture the central paradox (Auerbach & Kartner 2023; Ivan & Ilonszki 2006): Procedural features can remain intact while the competitive environment is structurally tilted. This is consistent with H2 (audience separation) and with H5 (cumulative entrench-

ment), in that alternation becomes harder and rollback more costly even when elections occur regularly. Cross-national diagnostics that register sustained deterioration in liberal-component measures (including constraints on the executive and media freedom) align with the expectation that multi-pillar disguise produces durable shifts rather than short-lived perturbations.

Adaptation under conditionality after 2023 further clarifies the logic of disguise as strategic sequencing. When external constraints tighten, incumbents can trade selective concessions in high-visibility arenas for continued movement in lower-visibility domains. The partial unfreezing of funds following findings that specific judicial-independence milestones had been addressed coexisted with subsequent moves framed in the idiom of sovereignty and security, including the creation of investigative capacity over alleged ‘foreign influence’. The point for the theory is not the legal label attached to these instruments, but the recurring pattern: Measures are presented as neutral governance responses while generating chilling effects on oversight, civil society and information flows, again consistent with the rule-by-law repertoire central to institutional and ecosystemic disguise.

The party-system context in 2024 highlights why competitive pressure can sustain rather than reverse disguise (H1). The European Parliament election results signalled a reshaped right-of-centre field, combining radical-right representation and a government-critical challenger (McDonnell & Werner 2019; McDonnell & Werner 2018). In a disguise framework, such pressure does not automatically induce moderation. Instead, it can be met by renewed issue hardening paired with targeted activation of administrative, legal and informational instruments that are less visible to casual monitoring. The mechanism predicts resilience under such conditions because mainstream presentation lowers reputational costs among pivotal voters (H2), while embedded institutional and ecosystemic advantages dampen the electoral penalties of hardline practice (H3-H5).

Taken together, the Hungarian case satisfies the portable checklist for disguise. Mainstream labelling was sustained for an extended period through party-family embedding and outward-facing moderation cues, even as governing practice increasingly aligned with radical-right projects (Brown, Mondon & Winter 2023; Feischmidt & Hervik 2015). Durability is satisfied across multiple electoral cycles after 2010. Multidimensionality is met on at least two pillars: institutional engineering (constitutional redesign, electoral-law engineering, oversight reconfiguration) and ecosystemic capture (regulatory leverage, ownership concentration and allocation mechanisms in the media field), with programmatic consolidation visible in manifestos and sustained rhetoric. Where these channels co-evolve, formal electoral ritual persists, but effective contestability thins, precisely the equilibrium implied by the theory of disguised parties.

Fidesz should therefore be treated not as the only possible instance of disguised-party dynamics, but as an unusually permissive one. Its parliamentary strength, constitutional latitude and control over institutional sequencing allowed the three pillars of disguise to develop in an unusually integrated form. Other cases need not replicate this depth to remain analytically relevant: Elsewhere, the same logic may appear in more constrained, partial or coalition-limited variants. The comparative question, then, is not whether other parties become ‘another Fidesz’, but rather combinations of authorisation, veto structure and ecosystemic leverage allow disguise to travel across settings.

Scope-condition probe: Slovenia’s SDS (2020–2022) as ‘partial disguise’ under coalition constraints

To demonstrate the portability of the disguised-party framework beyond Hungary’s super majoritarian setting, this section offers a scope-condition probe of Slovenia’s Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) under Janez Janša in 2020–2022. The aim is not to reproduce the within-case depth of the Fidesz analysis, but to test whether the core mechanisms, audience separation, selective legalistic engineering and ecosystemic capture appear in a different institutional environment characterised by proportional representation, coalition government and comparatively stronger alternation prospects. In such settings, the theory anticipates partial rather than comprehensive disguise: Programmatic hardening and ecosystem-building may be feasible, while deep constitutional entrenchment is constrained by coalition arithmetic and veto points. This ‘least-likely-for-maximal-entrenchment’ context is analytically valuable because it clarifies which components of disguise travel and which depend on concentrated power.

SDS is a useful probe because it retains an externally legible mainstream identity through its long-standing location on the centre-right and its European embedding (Hanley 2005; Vachudova 2008), even as the party’s domestic political style has been widely described as populist-nationalist and confrontational toward watchdog institutions (Mandelc 2025). Novak and Lajh (2023; 2024) characterise Janša as the long-time leader of SDS, emphasising both his political centrality and the party’s populist positioning closer to the extreme-right pole within Slovenian politics. This creates the precondition for audience separation (H2): A party can remain intelligible as a ‘normal’ conservative actor to segments of international and moderate audiences while deploying polarising narratives at home. In the disguised-party logic, such separation is not merely rhetorical; it functions as a sanction-dampening device that reduces the reputational and regulatory costs of illiberal manoeuvres, especially when public debate is saturated by threat frames and antagonistic moral binaries.

The COVID-19 period provides a critical window to examine how emergency governance can become an opportunity structure for democratic erosion when

incumbents feel electorally insecure. Pavlović's (2023) comparative study explicitly includes Slovenia and argues that incumbents uncertain of victory may use emergency contexts to expand executive capacity in ways that can outlast the immediate crisis. For the disguised-party framework, the key point is not that emergency politics automatically produces autocratisation, but that it can lower visibility and compress decision horizons, facilitating legalistic changes and administrative practices that are difficult to contest in real time. This matches the theory's expectation that consequential moves often migrate to technical, time-sensitive or low-salience domains where oversight is fragmented.

The strongest 'portable' signature in Slovenia concerns selective pressure on civil society and intermediary institutions, a pattern that tracks the institutional and ecosystemic pillars of disguise, albeit in a less entrenched form than Hungary. Novak and Lajh (2023; 2024) document that after the March 2020 government change, democratic backsliding became more apparent through liberal organised interests being publicly discredited, the obstruction of largely environmental organisations and attacks on the media; they also note a downgrade in civic space assessments during this period. Importantly, they frame these dynamics in terms consistent with 'selective closure': Rather than indiscriminate repression, pressure is often targeted at ideologically distant or government-critical actors, allowing incumbents to maintain democratic appearance while weakening specific counterweights. This is precisely the kind of pattern that a disguised-party configuration would produce under constraints: thin contestation without overt rupture, achieved through delegitimation campaigns, administrative obstruction and asymmetric access to decision-makers.

Ecosystemic mechanisms are even more directly visible. A core proposition of the disguised-party approach is that durable advantage can be generated not only through legal changes but also through restructuring the information field, ownership concentration, preferential resource flows and the construction of loyal media-civic infrastructures (H4). The Media Ownership Monitor's Slovenia profile (Valic, Roncevic & Tomsic 2023; Milosavljevic & Gerjevic 2022) describes a party-controlled or party-aligned media architecture around SDS, including a TV/online network (Nova24TV) and affiliated print/online outlets, noting the role of Hungarian-linked capital and cross-border investments connected to pro-government media networks (Delic 2020). While this evidence base is not identical to the Hungarian case's scale, it fits the theoretical claim that ecosystem-building can substitute for or complement hard institutional redesign where coalition constraints limit constitutional engineering. The relevant mechanism is information gating by structural means: Even without formal censorship, preferential financing and ownership concentration can shift survival odds and content incentives in favour of aligned outlets, thereby weakening the opposition's capacity to set agendas or mobilise credible counter-narratives.

A further dimension that reinforces the probe is the growing scholarly attention to ‘illiberal’ strategies implemented through policy domains that are symbolically potent but institutionally under-theorised in backsliding research, especially culture. Čufar and Hawlina (2025) analyse Slovenia’s 2020–2022 period through the lens of illiberal cultural policy, conceptualising ‘weaponisation’ as a strategy that reshapes cultural institutions and symbolic repertoires in ways that support broader illiberal agendas. For the disguised-party framework, this matters because cultural policy can operate as a low-visibility channel that (i) signals civilisational alignment to core constituencies, (ii) imposes reputational costs on liberal opponents and (iii) reinforces ecosystemic infrastructures by reallocating symbolic and material resources. The result is a complement to media-ecosystem strategies: Cultural fields can become additional arenas for entrenching a loyalist ‘civil society’ veneer while delegitimising pluralist intermediaries.

Taken together, the Slovenian probe supports a constrained but meaningful interpretation of SDS as a partial disguised-party configuration. Durability is present insofar as polarising, anti-watchdog political style and ecosystem-building are not episodic; yet the institutional pillar is structurally bounded by coalition dependence and a competitive environment in which alternation remains plausible. The most robust mapping is therefore to a typological variant in which programmatic hardening and ecosystemic capture are prominent, while institutional engineering appears more in the form of administrative pressure, attempted regulatory shifts and emergency-enabled executive aggrandisement than in wholesale constitutional redesign. In theoretical terms, the SDS case clarifies an important scope implication: Disguise does not require the Hungarian level of super majoritarian legal reconstruction to be analytically meaningful. Rather, in coalition settings the equilibrium can be sustained through audience separation + ecosystem-building + selective administrative/legal tactics, generating thinner contestation even when full lock-in is unattainable.

This probe also sharpens the article’s comparative agenda. If the disguised-party syndrome travels into coalition democracies as a partial form, then cross-case variation is likely to hinge on (i) the density of party-controlled media infrastructures, (ii) the availability of cross-border or domestic financing channels that can sustain aligned outlets and (iii) the degree to which emergency governance or administrative discretion can be leveraged without provoking decisive backlash. In other words, the Slovenian case suggests that the disguised-party framework should not be read as a ‘Hungary-only’ story of super majoritarian entrenchment, but as a broader account of how mainstream-labelled actors can normalise illiberal governance through modular combinations of programmatic, institutional and ecosystemic instruments, combinations that adapt to opportunity structures and veto constraints.

Implications for democratic competition and regulation

The Fidesz case clarifies why ex post rule-enforcement is routinely outpaced when incumbents operate as disguised parties: The formal shell of competition (regular elections, legality, institutional continuity) is preserved, while its effective contestability is thinned through low-visibility changes to rules, resource flows and the information environment. The regulatory challenge is therefore not primarily to arbitrate speech or to police isolated violations, but to raise the ex-ante cost of legalistic engineering and to reduce the returns to audience separation without constraining legitimate government communication or pluralist contestation. The practical lesson is structural: Safeguards must be designed to detect and deter the package of mechanisms (media-market steering, indirect public support and rule manipulation) that allows a mainstream label to normalise illiberal governance.

A first implication concerns the information environment. Research on media capture and state advertising shows that governments can weaken watchdog capacity (Johnson 2014) without overt censorship by steering ownership and revenues, especially public advertising, towards aligned outlets, thereby altering outlet survival probabilities and shifting content incentives. In smaller or advertising-dependent markets, public advertising can function as a selective subsidy with measurable editorial and competitive effects. A rights-preserving response is to regulate spending structures and disclosure, not content. Concretely, states should maintain a single, machine-readable registry of all public communication spending (including central government, sub-national authorities, agencies and SOEs), with contract-level disclosure (beneficiary, amount, timing, placement channel and a standardised audience rationale). Allocation rules should be benchmarked against transparent audience and price metrics, with rebuttable presumptions against persistent deviations. These measures align with the European Media Freedom Act's emphasis on transparency and safeguards around state advertising and media-market integrity.

A second implication concerns political finance. As party membership revenues and private civil sources shrink, parties rely more heavily on public resources and regulatory privileges; oversight must therefore treat party finance as an ecosystem encompassing procurement, state advertising, foundation funding and government information campaigns, not merely donations and formal subsidies. The operational move is data integration: Party-finance authorities should link beneficial-ownership registries, procurement data and public communication-spending registries to party accounts and campaign reporting to detect resource-alignment congruence (for example, spikes in publicly mediated revenue paired with shifts in editorial or campaign alignment). This is a structural analogue to cartel-party insights about how state-embedded

resource channels can entrench incumbents when allocation formulas and audits are not insulated from governing control.

A third implication concerns electoral-law safeguards and timing. Contemporary integrity risks often arise less from ballot fraud than from legalistic manipulation, districting changes, compensation-formula tweaks, threshold adjustments, regulator redesign and compressed legislative timetables, justified as technical corrections. Procedural guardrails should therefore be codified: minimum consultation windows; independent impact assessments for any reform plausibly affecting contestability and automatic correction mechanisms when malapportionment exceeds pre-defined limits. These recommendations are consistent with the Venice Commission's guidance stressing the stability of electoral law and cautioning against changing fundamental elements close to elections (Hauser 2020; Fasone & Piccirilli 2017; Gamper 2022). Stability is not cosmetic. In fragmented oppositions, small rule changes can materially alter coordination incentives and replacement feasibility; for that reason, simulation studies (pre/post counterfactuals) should be published before adoption and a rebuttable presumption against 'late-cycle' reforms should apply unless cross-party thresholds are met.

A fourth implication concerns platform governance. Platforms mediate visibility, targeting and agenda-setting; they can reinforce audience separation when incumbents combine public-money campaigns with algorithmic amplification and opaque targeting. The regulatory move is to shift from narrow takedown logics to systemic-risk transparency and research access. Under the Digital Services Act, vetted researchers may request data from very large online platforms and search engines for research into systemic risks (Article 40) and EU enforcement bodies have issued guidance to operationalise that access. Separately, the EU's regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising creates an additional 'traceability' layer for political ads and their targeting practices. For democratic competition, the actionable design principle is linkage: On-platform transparency (ad libraries, delivery metrics, targeting parameters) becomes substantially more informative when it can be matched to off-platform structures (ownership mapping, public communication-spending flows and procurement/finance data).

Finally, enforcement should be sequenced and joined up. Comparative experience suggests that judicial tools alone can be insufficient once domestic media structures and oversight bodies are compromised; credible conditionality and coordinated venue choice outperform isolated actions. Nationally, independent regulators need mandates and capacity to investigate both media-market structure and public communication spending, while audit institutions should run integrated checks across party-finance returns and procurement/advertising registries. During election years, pre-clearance mechanisms for consequential rule changes and quiet-period presumptions against adoption can reduce the

payoff to technocratic manipulation. Supranationally, legal action is most effective when coupled with measurable indicators that demonstrate systemic competition risks: (i) concentration indices and cross-market ownership mapping; (ii) public-money skew (the gap between state-advertising share and measured audience share); (iii) procedural stress (fast-track frequency, consultation-window length and malapportionment deviations); and (iv) platform-distribution diagnostics enabled by DSA research access.

Normative trade-offs remain. Transparency regimes can chill editorial autonomy; spending benchmarks can constrain legitimate public information; and algorithmic access raises privacy and trade-secret concerns. The remedy is narrow tailoring and rights-preserving procedure: publish-first transparency, due-process guarantees before sanctions and time-limited emergency exceptions subject to independent review. Properly designed, this agenda does not engineer electoral outcomes; it re-equalises the informational and administrative terrain so voters can evaluate political projects on their merits rather than through engineered scarcity and tilted rules, the terrain on which disguised parties thrive.

Conclusion

This article theorised disguised parties as electoral organisations that preserve a mainstream label while durably institutionalising radical-right practice through an instrumental combination of programmatic hardening, institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture. The conceptual contribution is to specify this composite mechanism, how legality claims and respectability cues operate as camouflage, while drawing sharper boundaries vis-à-vis mainstreaming, rebranding, cartelisation and satellite formations. Empirically, the article introduced a portable operationalisation and testable expectations (H1–H5) and then developed the argument through theory-guided process tracing of Fidesz (2010–2025). The Hungarian sequence shows how audience separation can dampen reputational sanctions, how legalistic redesign can raise seat-vote advantages and reversal costs and how selective subsidisation can reshape the information ecosystem without resort to formal bans.

Two payoffs follow. First, the framework replaces ad hoc labelling with decision rules: a necessary label-practice divergence, minimum durability ($\geq$ two national electoral cycles or $\geq$ four years) and multidimensionality (movement on $\geq$ two pillars), each tied to observable indicators (e.g. party-family distance in expert placements, manifesto trends, rule-of-law components, ownership concentration and state-advertising skew). These rules increase comparability across cases and time, reduce coder discretion and provide a basis for cumulative research. Second, the Fidesz analysis clarifies sequencing. Programmatic shifts become politically consequential when paired with institutional and ecosystemic instruments that alter the conversion of votes into governing author-

ity and restructure message reach and survival in the information field. Where these channels co-evolve, effective contestability can thin even as electoral ritual, procedural legality and the outward appearance of pluralism persist. The scope-diversity probe further underscores that the mechanism is modular: In more coalition-constrained settings, disguise may appear in partial or incipient form, which is analytically valuable for specifying boundary conditions rather than diluting the concept.

The argument also reframes regulatory debates. Safeguards that focus on single infractions, post hoc content disputes or isolated legal challenges are often poorly matched to disguised strategies. Structural, ex-ante instruments are more effective because they target the channels through which durable advantage is produced rather than the opinions that ride on them. The implications developed in the preceding section – rule-change stability, regulator insulation, transparency and neutrality in public communications spending, ownership disclosure and joined-up auditing across media, money and rules – are deliberately content-neutral and compatible with free expression. They specify measurable compliance (for example, disclosure standards; auditing seat-vote counterfactuals before reforms; benchmarked allocation rules for state advertising) and in doing so, raise the maintenance costs of disguised strategies.

Limitations remain. The proposed thresholds are heuristic and should be stress-tested across media systems and legal architectures; what counts as a substantively meaningful ‘pillar shift’ may vary with institutional baselines. The single critical-case design privileges causal clarity over breadth and external validity must ultimately be established through multi-country designs, near-miss comparisons and structured case selection. Data availability also remains uneven, especially outlet-level advertising microdata and beneficial-ownership registries, so the replication package prioritises transparent transformations, uncertainty reporting and sensitivity checks, but future work would benefit from statutory transparency and researcher-access portals.

A research agenda follows naturally. Comparative scope conditions should be specified more tightly: Disguise should be more likely where constitutional change can be framed as technocratic modernisation, media markets are small and advertising-dependent and oversight is proceduralist and slow to aggregate diffuse harms. Micro-foundations can be tested with experiments and panel designs that examine sanction dampening among moderates when mainstream cues remain salient. Measurement should be harmonised by pre-registering coding rules for party-family distance, legal-text timelines and ecosystemic indicators and by publishing uncertainty intervals rather than point classifications alone. Finally, counterfactual work can refine seat-vote simulations to quantify gains from legalistic engineering and to assess rollback feasibility under alternative coalitional and institutional constraints.

Recognising disguise prevents two recurring errors: mistaking proceduralism for democratic health and treating illiberal moves as isolated episodes. By identifying how illiberal projects can be advanced under respectable labels, through audience separation, legalistic entrenchment and information gating and by providing portable diagnostics, this article aims to help scholars accumulate comparable evidence and to help policymakers target the mechanics of advantage rather than the content of political contestation. The framework is designed to travel across cases that differ in institutional authorisation, coalition dependence and veto structure. Fidesz represents an unusually permissive and fully developed configuration, but the underlying logic of disguise may also appear in more partial or constrained forms where mainstream cover, selective institutional change and ecosystemic leverage can still be combined. Where rule stability, regulator independence and resource neutrality hold, disguised parties face higher maintenance costs; where they do not, structural tilt can persist behind a mainstream label. The practical task, then, is to re-equalise the field so voters can evaluate projects on their merits rather than through engineered scarcity of information and a tilted administrative terrain.

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European Youth Perceptions of EU Strengths and Challenges: Implications for Optimism About the Union's Future

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Abstract: *This study investigates the determinants of optimism about the future of the European Union (EU) among young adults by integrating perceptions of EU strengths and challenges with socio-demographic characteristics and cross-national variation. Drawing on data from the European Commission Flash Eurobarometer 556 conducted across EU member states, the analysis examines how European youth's evaluations of the EU's strengths and challenges shape optimism about the future of the EU. The findings indicate that optimism is primarily driven by positive assessments of tangible EU contributions, particularly regional investment, solidarity, climate action and democratic governance. In contrast, economic insecurity – especially concerns related to the cost of living – and migration-related challenges exert the strongest negative effects on optimism. Freedom of movement and developments in digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, do not exhibit statistically significant effects. Attitudinal factors outweigh socio-demographic characteristics, although higher educational attainment and urban residence are positively associated with optimism. Substantial cross-national differences persist even after controlling for individual-level covariates, highlighting the continued importance of the national context in shaping public attitudes toward the EU.*

Keywords: *EU youth, EU Optimism, EU Strengths, EU challenges*

Introduction

The process of European integration has repeatedly been tested by regional and global economic, political and institutional crises. Over the past decade alone, the European Union (EU) has faced a series of profound challenges, including

the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union (Brexit), the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These events have generated significant politico-economic pressures, such as inflation, economic insecurity and the electoral rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties across several member states. Against this backdrop, one might reasonably expect younger generations in Europe to hold pessimistic views regarding the EU's institutional future.

Contrary to this expectation, recent evidence suggests a markedly optimistic outlook among European youth. According to the 2025 Flash Eurobarometer survey conducted among individuals aged 16–30 across all 27 EU member states, 72.6% of respondents express optimism about the future of the EU (European Commission 2025). This finding is particularly consequential, as today's young people will become the primary political, economic and social stakeholders of the Union in the coming decades. Their expectations regarding the EU's future therefore carry existential significance for the sustainability and legitimacy of European integration.

Public attitudes toward the EU constitute a well-established and multifaceted field of research. However, despite the extensive literature on support for or opposition to European integration, systematic empirical analyses focusing specifically on youth optimism about the future of the EU remain remarkably scarce. Existing studies largely concentrate on contemporaneous attitudes toward the EU or on general levels of support and Euroscepticism, often treating younger generations as part of broader age-based comparisons rather than as a focal group.

This study seeks to address this gap. Its central research question is: What factors are most strongly associated with optimism about the future of the EU among young adults in Europe, based on their perceptions of the EU's strengths and challenges? To answer this question, the paper proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the canonical literature on public attitudes toward the EU, highlighting the limited attention paid to youth-specific future-oriented optimism. Second, it describes the data and methodological approach in detail to facilitate replication. Third, it presents the empirical findings, which are subsequently discussed in relation to existing scholarship. The paper concludes by outlining the academic and policy implications of the findings, as well as the study's limitations.

Literature review

To start with, a conceptual distinction needs to be made between support for the EU and future-oriented optimism. As is evident, one does not directly translate into the other. An individual who supports the EU project may not necessarily be optimistic about its future, while someone who does not support the EU in its current form may still hold positive expectations regarding its future transformation. Therefore, it cannot be directly inferred that future-oriented optimism reflects present levels of EU support.

Nevertheless, keeping this distinction in mind, optimism can still be expected to constitute an important basis for the formation of positive attitudes towards the EU. Accordingly, drawing on the literature on EU support to gain insights into the factors shaping optimism about the EU's future can be mutually enriching.

Research on public attitudes toward the EU gained substantial momentum following the Maastricht Treaty (Hobolt & de Vries 2016). The literature identifies a broad range of explanatory factors, often grouped under different but conceptually overlapping frameworks. Hooghe and Marks (2005), for example, classify determinants of EU attitudes into 'calculation', 'community' and 'cues', referring respectively to economic considerations, identity-based factors and mediating influences such as political parties and the media.

Economic utilitarianism represents one of the most prominent explanatory approaches. At both the individual and national levels, perceptions of economic benefits have been shown to shape support for European integration (Gabel & Palmer 1995; Gabel 1998). When individuals perceive favourable economic outcomes, they are more likely to endorse the EU. Beyond material considerations, political and institutional factors also play a crucial role. Anderson (1998) argues that individuals with limited knowledge of EU institutions rely on cues from trusted domestic actors, such as political parties, to form opinions about integration. Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) emphasises democratic performance, suggesting that EU membership may enhance democratic standards in member states, thereby increasing public support.

Cognitive and informational factors further condition EU attitudes. Inglehart's (1970) concept of cognitive mobilisation highlights the importance of political knowledge, while subsequent studies underline the role of education in shaping EU support (Hakhverdian et al. 2013). Identity-based explanations, by contrast, stress the constraining effect of national identity and cultural concerns on EU approval (McLaren 2002; Carey 2002). Additional research points to the relevance of anti-immigration attitudes (de Vreese & Boomgaarden 2005), occupational status (Hooghe et al. 2007), political party affiliation (Steenbergen et al. 2007), institutional trust extrapolation (Harteveld et al. 2013) and media coverage (Brosius et al. 2019).

However, these analyses are generally not youth-specific. Research focusing explicitly on young people remains limited, particularly with respect to optimism about the EU's future. Stockemer and Anlar (2024) invite academics and practitioners to consider how they might contribute to addressing the problem of youth underrepresentation in contemporary political systems. Political science research has still not devoted sufficient attention to youth attitudes, even two decades after Furlong and Cartmel (2007: 121) highlighted the issue, attributing it to the perception that youth do not constitute a political group capable of swaying elections compared to older cohorts. Nevertheless, there are

compelling reasons to treat youth as a distinct analytical category rather than subsuming them within the broader population, as they experience specific forms of inequality and marginalisation that warrant recognition (Bayat 2010).

Youth constitutes a crucial analytical focus because many individuals form their political orientations during early stages of life. The development of habits of political participation is well documented to begin early in the life cycle (Hooghe et al. 2004). In addition, young people exhibit different citizenship norms that shape their engagement with political structures (Dalton 2008). They often adopt non-conventional forms of political participation, relying more on latent modes of engagement than on party politics (Ekman & Amnå 2012). Moreover, young people tend not to rely on traditional modes of political participation (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). Taken together, these factors provide strong justification for treating youth as a distinct analytical category.

Some studies suggest that young people may exhibit higher baseline optimism about the future in general, even during periods of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Keating & Melis 2022), but these findings are not EU-specific. Earlier work by Convery et al. (1997) examined young people's attitudes toward the EU, emphasising the role of education, yet this study was descriptive, geographically limited and did not address future-oriented expectations. More recent research indicates that youth mobility increases approval of the EU (Mazzoni et al. 2018), while perceived economic benefits motivate young people to favour EU membership (Cores-Bilbao et al. 2020).

Other strands of literature, though not directly focused on EU attitudes, offer relevant insights. Baillergeau and Duyvendak (2022) argue that young people's future aspirations are shaped by socioeconomic conditions and access to information about alternative futures. Trunk et al. (2022) show that youth attitudes vary systematically depending on whether respondents come from newer democracies or long-established democratic systems. Abbas and McNeil-Willson (2025), while not studying EU attitudes directly, find that young people facing relative economic hardship are more susceptible to extremist ideologies – an observation that is indirectly informative given the predominantly anti-EU orientation of extremist movements.

Taken together, the literature provides a rich understanding of the determinants of EU attitudes but offers limited insight into how young Europeans evaluate the future of the Union. This constitutes a significant gap in the literature.

Contribution of the present study

Existing research spans a wide range of analytical perspectives, including pro- and anti-EU orientations, individual- and country-level determinants, varying geographical scopes and diverse explanatory variables such as economic conditions, identity and sociodemographic characteristics. However, this literature

is overwhelmingly retrospective, focusing on current or past evaluations of the EU rather than future-oriented expectations.

Despite the policy relevance of younger generations' outlooks, there is a striking absence of systematic academic research explicitly examining youth optimism about the future of the EU. While large-scale datasets frequently include young respondents, they rarely centre youth as an analytical focus. Searches conducted in major academic databases such as Web of Science and Scopus reveal only a few studies dedicated specifically to this question. Existing reports produced by the European Commission and other governmental or non-governmental organisations remain largely descriptive and do not offer multivariate or comparative analytical frameworks.

This study addresses this gap by examining how young Europeans' perceptions of the EU's strengths and challenges are associated with optimism about its future. Using a large, harmonised, cross-national survey covering all EU member states, the analysis models evaluative dimensions while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and country-fixed effects. The empirical strategy aims to document robust patterns of association. Methodologically, the study employs binary logistic regression with country-fixed effects and post-stratification weights, allowing for systematic cross-national comparison while accounting for heterogeneity across member states. Substantively, the contribution lies in the integrated analysis of perceived strengths and challenges within a single framework, offering an account of how different evaluations align with optimism about the EU's future among young adults. In the literature, the effects of objective and subjective factors have been widely examined, yielding differing and often mixed results. The relationships between these factors and the dependent variables are typically designed to draw inferences from non-opinion-based and non-perceptual variables. However, within the current research design, I argue that it is more direct to identify influencing factors based on respondents' own evaluations of the EU. How they perceive the EU's strengths, what they believe these strengths imply and how they assess the challenges facing the EU constitute a more direct way to decipher the dynamics between optimism and pessimism regarding its future. By doing so, the study advances ongoing debates on public attitudes toward European integration and provides a foundation for future causal research on EU optimism and EU perceptions.

Data and method

The analysis is based on data from Flash Eurobarometer 556 (EU Commission, 2025). The working dataset contains 25,920 observations, covering respondents from 27 EU member states. Post-stratification weights ('WEIGHT RESULT FROM TARGET') are applied in all analyses. According to information provided

on the survey's official website, the dataset covers young people aged 16–30 across all 27 member states of the European Union. Data collection was conducted over a ten-day period, from 11 to 20 February 2025. Country samples are approximately evenly distributed, with around 1,000 respondents per country, and smaller samples for Cyprus ($n = 502$), Luxembourg ($n = 506$) and Malta ($n = 516$). Missing values are treated using user-defined missing value rules, and analyses are conducted using all cases with valid data for the variables involved.

Dependent variable

The original variable is derived from responses to the survey question, 'To what extent are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the EU?' Responses were coded into four ordered categories ranging from 1 ('very optimistic') to 4 ('very pessimistic'), with an additional 'don't know' category. Given that this scale does not represent a natural ordinal continuum, the variable was recoded to capture a net binary measure of attitude.

Among respondents with valid data ($n = 24,467$), 24.9% report being very optimistic and 51.8% rather optimistic about the future of the European Union, while 18.7% report being rather pessimistic and 4.6% very pessimistic. Following recoding, the EU optimism variable was operationalised as a binary indicator, with valid responses coded as 1 = optimistic and 0 = pessimistic. Overall, 5.6% of the total sample were treated as system missing. Of the full sample, 24,467 respondents (94.4%) provided valid responses. Among these respondents, 72.4% were classified as optimistic and 22.0% as not optimistic. Although dichotomising the variable reduces its granularity, it facilitates a clear and interpretable modelling approach using logistic regression. The response distribution demonstrates a distinct separation between optimistic and pessimistic categories, supporting the analytical distinction employed. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that this recoding entails a potential loss of information, and future research could consider alternative modelling strategies if more finely graded measures are available.

Independent variables

The model includes binary indicators capturing respondents' perceptions of the European Union's strengths (Q3) and current challenges facing the EU (Q6). Specifically, Q3 asks 'In your opinion, which of the following do you think are the main strengths of the EU?', while Q6 asks 'Which of the following do you think are the current main challenges the EU is facing?' Each item is operationalised as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent selected the respective option. The options for both questions are listed in table 1 regression model.

In addition, the model controls for a set of individual-level covariates. Employment status is measured by the question ‘Are you currently in work?’ and coded as 1 = full-time employment, 2 = part-time employment and 3 = not employed, with ‘don’t know’ responses treated as missing. Educational attainment is captured by the highest level of education or training completed, coded on a six-point scale ranging from lower than secondary education (1) to higher education (6); ‘don’t know’ responses are coded as missing. Gender is included as a binary indicator (0 = male, 1 = female). Type of community is measured on a three-category scale distinguishing rural areas (1), small towns (2) and large cities (3). Finally, country-fixed effects are included for all 27 EU member states, with Sweden serving as the reference category. In the preliminary exploratory analyses, age was tested in the model as a separate variable. However, the results indicated that it did not contribute meaningfully to the model, while increasing the risk of multicollinearity with other socio-demographic variables. For this reason, age was excluded from the final specification.

The sample is broadly balanced by gender, with 51.6% of respondents identifying as male and 48.4% as female among those with valid responses. With respect to place of residence, 24.9% of respondents reside in rural areas or villages, 41.5% live in small or medium-sized towns and 33.7% reside in large towns or cities. Among respondents with valid information on educational attainment ($n = 9,912$), 36.7% report having completed higher education. Employment status data indicate that 43.7% of respondents are in full-time employment, 21.4% are employed part-time and 34.9% are not currently working.

A binary logistic regression model was estimated with EU optimism as the dependent variable. All Q3 and Q6 items, sociodemographic control variables and country-fixed effects were entered simultaneously using the Enter method. Due to missing data on some covariates, the final model was estimated on 8,830 cases. The decrease from the original dataset to the final analytical sample is primarily attributable to the requirements of binary logistic regression analysis, which relies on complete-case observations. That is, respondents are excluded listwise if they have missing values on any of the variables included in the model. As a result, individuals who provided partial responses across survey items could not be retained in the regression analysis. In addition, ‘don’t know’ and other non-substantive responses were treated as missing values and therefore contributed to the reduction in sample size. However, the final sample remains relatively large ($N = 8,830$), supporting the robustness of the statistical analysis and allowing for a reasonable degree of generalisability.

Model fit was evaluated using the Omnibus Test of Model Coefficients, pseudo- R^2 statistics, the Hosmer–Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test and overall classification accuracy. All analyses apply the post-stratification weights provided with the dataset to ensure representativeness. Reported values are weighted accordingly. Multicollinearity among the predictors was assessed using Toler-

Table 1: Results for the Binary Logistic Regression Model^a

95% C.I

Independent Variables	b	SE	Exp(b)	(Wald)	Lower	Upper
Strengths of the EU						
The freedom of movement	0.115	0.059	1.121	(3.734)	0.998	1.260
The standard of living	0.663	0.065	1.940	(104.611)***	1.709	2.203
Capacity to create jobs	0.888	0.079	2.429	(126.000)***	2.080	2.836
Commitment to democracy	0.798	0.068	2.220	(139.599)***	1.945	2.534
Trade power and competitiveness	0.735	0.068	2.085	(117.227)***	1.825	2.381
EU investment in regions	1.003	0.074	2.726	(183.396)***	2.358	3.152
Innovation and research	0.606	0.078	1.833	(60.306)***	1.573	2.136
Solidarity between countries	0.840	0.063	2.317	(177.018)***	2.048	2.623
Position in the world	0.660	0.069	1.936	(91.449)***	1.691	2.216
Protecting the climate	0.944	0.072	2.570	(173.400)***	2.234	2.958
Challenges of the EU						
Inequalities	-0.437	0.067	0.646	(42.358)***	0.566	0.737
The cost of living	-0.712	0.062	0.491	(131.291)***	0.434	0.554
Conflicts and instability	-0.412	0.063	0.662	(42.425)***	0.585	0.750
Environmental issues	0.036	0.070	1.037	(0.269)	0.904	1.190
Irregular migration	-0.688	0.063	0.503	(117.515)***	0.444	0.569
Terrorism and organized crime	-0.416	0.064	0.660	(41.866)***	0.582	0.749
Digital technologies	0.028	0.087	1.028	(0.103)	0.868	1.218
Disinformation	-0.253	0.069	0.776	(13.552)***	0.679	0.888
Unfair competition	0.048	0.086	1.049	(0.311)	0.887	1.241
Declining competitiveness	-0.481	0.084	0.618	(32.779)***	0.524	0.729
Socio-demographics						
Employment	0.027	0.033	1.027	(0.665)	0.963	1.097
Highest level of education	0.121	0.020	1.129	(35.847)***	1.085	1.175
Gender	-0.200	0.054	0.819	(13.793)***	0.737	0.910
Type of community	0.169	0.036	1.184	(22.442)***	1.104	1.269
Country (ref.: Sweden)						
Belgium	0.319	0.186	1.376	(2.956)	0.956	1.979
Bulgaria	0.076	0.179	1.079	(0.179)	0.759	1.533
Czechia	-0.525	0.163	0.592	(10.382)**	0.430	0.814
Denmark	0.987	0.200	2.682	(24.246)***	1.811	3.973
Germany	-0.990	0.183	0.372	(29.156)***	0.260	0.532
Estonia	0.572	0.174	1.772	(10.755)**	1.259	2.495

Independent Variables	b	SE	Exp(b)	(Wald)	Lower	Upper
Ireland	1.452	0.235	4.270	(38.304)***	2.696	6.761
Greece	0.353	0.171	1.423	(4.233)*	1.017	1.992
Spain	-0.708	0.188	0.492	(14.182)***	0.341	0.712
France	-1.049	0.168	0.350	(39.160)***	0.252	0.487
Croatia	-0.208	0.169	0.812	(1.528)	0.583	1.130
Italy	-0.112	0.178	0.894	(0.399)	0.631	1.266
Cyprus	1.174	0.226	3.234	(26.972)***	2.076	5.035
Latvia	0.585	0.180	1.794	(10.535)**	1.261	2.554
Lithuania	0.602	0.179	1.827	(11.359)**	1.287	2.593
Luxembourg	0.634	0.252	1.885	(6.315)*	1.150	3.089
Hungary	0.572	0.182	1.772	(9.848)**	1.240	2.534
Malta	1.692	0.336	5.431	(25.394)***	2.812	10.490
Netherlands	0.217	0.169	1.242	(1.638)	0.891	1.732
Austria	0.292	0.180	1.339	(2.630)	0.941	1.905
Poland	-0.209	0.186	0.811	(1.260)	0.563	1.169
Portugal	0.672	0.180	1.959	(13.983)***	1.377	2.787
Romania	0.854	0.215	2.349	(15.753)***	1.541	3.582
Slovenia	-0.196	0.166	0.822	(1.400)	0.594	1.137
Slovakia	0.072	0.169	1.074	(0.179)	0.771	1.496
Finland	0.454	0.183	1.575	(6.165)*	1.100	2.254
Constant	-0.477	0.203	0.621	(5.538)*		

Model statistics:

N = 8,830

$\chi^2(50) = 1,942.206$, $p < .001$

Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.192$

Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.276$

Hosmer–Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 9.962$, $p = .268$

Classification accuracy = 77.2%

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^aDependent variable: Optimism about the Future of the EU (0 = pessimistic, 1 = optimistic)

Source: Author

ance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) statistics. All independent variables exhibited Tolerance values ranging from 0.770 to 0.989 and VIF values between 1.011 and 1.299, indicating low correlation among predictors. These results suggest that multicollinearity is not a concern, and the regression coefficients can be interpreted with confidence.

Results

A binary logistic regression was conducted to examine factors associated with optimism about the future of the European Union (0 = pessimistic, 1 = optimistic). The model included perceived strengths and challenges of the EU, sociodemographic characteristics and country-fixed effects (with Sweden as the reference category), based on a sample of 8,830 respondents.

The full model was statistically significant with Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients, $\chi^2(50) = 1,942.206$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors reliably distinguished between pessimistic and optimistic respondents. The model explained 19.2% (Cox & Snell R^2) to 27.6% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in EU optimism (-2 Log likelihood = 8942,574). The Hosmer–Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test was non-significant, $\chi^2(8) = 9.962$, $p = .268$, suggesting acceptable model fit. Overall classification accuracy was 77.2%, with particularly high accuracy for optimistic respondents (92.5%) and more limited performance for non-optimistic cases (39.1%), reflecting the skewed distribution of the dependent variable.

All predictors correspond directly to survey items and are theoretically motivated. The effective sample size is well above conventional thresholds for logistic regression given the number of predictors. Model diagnostics, including the Omnibus Test of Model Coefficients, pseudo- R^2 statistics and the Hosmer–Lemeshow test, indicate stable estimation and good overall fit. These results suggest that overfitting is unlikely. Estimates are reported transparently, and no selective interpretation of insignificant coefficients was performed, in line with best practices for survey-based regression analysis.

Perceptions of EU strengths are strongly and positively associated with optimism about the EU's future. Among these, EU investment in regions emerges as the most influential predictor (OR = 2.73, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents who perceive regional investment as a key EU strength have substantially higher odds of optimism. Similarly, large effects are observed for protecting the climate (OR = 2.57), capacity to create jobs (OR = 2.43), solidarity between countries (OR = 2.32) and commitment to democracy (OR = 2.22), all of which are statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Other perceived strengths – such as standard of living, trade power and competitiveness, position in the world, and innovation and research – also significantly increase the likelihood of optimism, though with comparatively smaller effect sizes. In contrast, freedom of movement does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Overall, these findings indicate that evaluations of the EU's economic performance, redistributive capacity and normative foundations exert the strongest positive influence on future-oriented optimism.

Perceived EU challenges are predominantly associated with lower levels of optimism. The strongest negative effect is observed for the cost of living (OR

= 0.49, $p < .001$), suggesting that economic strain substantially undermines positive expectations about the EU's future. Similarly, irregular migration (OR = 0.50), declining competitiveness (OR = 0.62), inequalities (OR = 0.65), and terrorism and organised crime (OR = 0.66) significantly reduce the odds of optimism.

By contrast, concerns related to environmental issues, digital technologies and unfair competition do not exhibit statistically significant associations with the outcome. Taken together, these results highlight the primacy of material and security-related concerns over more abstract or technological challenges in shaping EU-related pessimism.

Among socio-demographic variables, education has a positive and statistically significant effect (OR = 1.13, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of educational attainment are associated with greater optimism about the EU's future. Gender also exhibits a significant effect (OR = 0.82, $p < .001$), with females expressing systematically lower optimism. Additionally, respondents living in more urbanised communities are more likely to be optimistic (OR = 1.18, $p < .001$). Employment status, however, is not significantly related to optimism once other factors are controlled for.

Substantial cross-national variation is evident relative to Sweden (reference category). Respondents in Ireland, Malta, Cyprus and Denmark display markedly higher odds of optimism, while respondents in France, Germany, Spain and Czechia are significantly less optimistic. These country effects remain sizeable even after accounting for individual-level attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics.

Discussion

This study investigates the determinants of optimism regarding the future of the European Union (EU) by integrating perceived EU strengths, perceived challenges, socio-demographic characteristics and country-level variation. Overall, the findings are highly consistent with the broader literature on EU public opinion, which emphasises the centrality of utilitarian evaluations, perceived institutional performance and national contextual factors in shaping citizens' attitudes toward European integration.

Contrary to the argument advanced by Ward et al. (2025), who contend that EU regional policy exerts only a limited influence on public support for the EU, the present analysis identifies EU investment in regions as the most influential among perceived EU strengths. This finding is substantively meaningful, suggesting that young people across Europe value the governance logic underlying EU regional policy and perceive territorial investment as a tangible and credible contribution of the Union. In this respect, the results corroborate the recent findings of Debus and Schweizer (2025).

Perceptions of EU solidarity and climate protection emerge as strong, positive predictors of optimism. These findings suggest that the more the EU is perceived as caring for both people and the environment across its regions, the more likely young citizens are to express optimism about its future, echoing Ronald Inglehart's (1970) concept of cognitive mobilisation.

The effects of regional investments, together with EU policies aimed at job creation, underscore the primacy of utilitarian factors in shaping EU optimism, in line with Gabel and Palmer (1995) and Gabel (1998). The protection of democratic and representative standards also constitutes one of the EU's key benefits, consistent with the findings of Sánchez-Cuenca (2000).

In the literature, freedom of movement is generally associated with immigration, which is often framed in terms of concerns over national identity (de Vreese & Boomgaarden 2005). By contrast, and somewhat unexpectedly, freedom of movement does not exert a statistically significant effect on EU optimism in the present model. This may suggest that, for younger generations, freedom of movement is perceived as a secondary or taken-for-granted benefit of EU membership, whose value depends on the presence of more fundamental economic, social and normative achievements.

Perceived challenges largely mirror the pattern observed for perceived strengths. Economic concerns – particularly those related to the cost of living – constitute the most powerful predictors of pessimism about the EU's future. In line with previous studies, EU youth expect European institutions to ensure economic stability, price control and protection against inflation. This finding reinforces the enduring explanatory power of economic evaluations in shaping EU attitudes, as demonstrated by Gabel and Palmer (1995) and Gabel (1998). Moreover, perceptions of inequality significantly increase pessimism, underscoring the continued salience of solidarity-related concerns among younger cohorts. Security-related challenges – including terrorism, organised crime and irregular migration – also diminish optimism, reflecting expectations that the EU should function as a guarantor of peace, stability and internal security. These variables are consistent with the findings of McLaren (2002) and Carey (2002) regarding identity-based predictors of EU attitudes.

Interestingly, developments in digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, do not exhibit significant predictive power with respect to EU optimism. Despite widespread media coverage emphasising the potentially disruptive effects of AI on employment, young respondents do not appear to perceive digital transformation as a threat to the EU's future. This suggests that younger generations may hold a more adaptive or opportunity-oriented view of technological change.

Consistent with post-materialist theory (Inglehart 1970) and subsequent empirical research (Hakhverdian et al. 2013), education emerges as a significant

determinant of EU optimism. Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with a greater likelihood of expressing optimism about the future of the EU.

With regard to gender, female respondents display slightly higher levels of pessimism than their male counterparts. However, given the mixed and often inconsistent findings reported in the literature, this result should not be interpreted as reflecting a stable gender-based attitudinal difference. Rather, it may point to differentiated experiences or perceived opportunity structures that affect young women's outlooks more negatively in certain contexts.

Consistent with evidence from Hegewald and Schraff (2025), the analysis confirms that urban residents are significantly more optimistic about the EU's future than those living in sparsely populated or rural areas. This enduring urban-rural divide once again underscores the importance of spatial and socio-economic context in shaping attitudes toward European integration.

Diverging from Hooghe et al. (2007), employment status does not emerge as a significant predictor in the model. Although this finding may appear surprising given the exclusive focus on young respondents, it is plausible that unemployed youth anticipate future labour market integration, thereby attenuating the direct relationship between current employment status and EU optimism.

Substantial cross-national differences are also evident. Youth in smaller and peripheral member states – such as Ireland, Malta, Cyprus and Denmark – are significantly more optimistic about the EU's future, whereas respondents from France, Germany, Spain and Czechia exhibit comparatively lower levels of optimism. These differences may reflect variations in national political discourse, perceived distributive burdens or country-specific experiences with EU policies, including migration-related challenges identified in the model.

Taken together, optimism about the EU's future is driven primarily by positive evaluations of its economic, redistributive and normative capacities, while concerns related to economic insecurity and migration exert the strongest negative effects. Attitudinal factors outweigh socio-demographic characteristics, and considerable cross-national variation persists even after controlling for individual-level covariates.

Conclusion

Drawing on data from a large cross-national survey of young adults across the European Union, this study demonstrates systematic associations between optimism about the EU's future and individuals' perceptions of the Union's strengths and contemporary challenges. Optimism is more prevalent among respondents who identify multiple institutional, economic and normative strengths, and less prevalent among those who emphasise economic, social and global challenges.

These relationships remain robust after accounting for socio-demographic characteristics and country fixed effects, indicating that individual-level per-

ceptions play a central role in shaping future-oriented attitudes toward the EU across member states. At the same time, the persistence of substantial cross-national differences highlights the continued importance of national contexts in structuring public opinion.

Overall, the findings contribute to the literature on public attitudes toward European integration by demonstrating the coexistence of positive and negative evaluations within individuals' broader outlooks. They suggest that sustaining public optimism will depend largely on the EU's ability to deliver visible and effective outcomes in areas such as economic security, social cohesion and climate action.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and public attitudes may shift in response to evolving political and economic conditions. Furthermore, while country-fixed effects capture cross-national variation, they do not elucidate the specific national mechanisms underlying these differences.

Future research would benefit from the use of repeated cross-sectional data to examine how changes in perceived EU strengths and challenges shape optimism over time, as well as from the integration of macro-level indicators to better explain cross-national heterogeneity. Such approaches would deepen our understanding of the dynamics underlying public optimism about the European Union.

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Between Script, Synthesis and Canon: Czech Textbooks on the History of Political Thought in Political Science Education

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Abstract: *This article analyses Czech textbooks and synthetic texts on the history of political thought in political science education. Using qualitative content and genre analysis, it distinguishes five models in the Czech textbook landscape: the chronological-canonical model, political science-didactic course notes, ideological-theoretical synthesis, philosophical-historical compendium and expansive-cataloguing textbook. The central diagnostic case is the new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák, which significantly broadens the Czech canon by including non-European traditions, feminism, African political thought, biopolitics, environmentalism and artificial intelligence. The article argues, however, that the expansion of content does not automatically solve the didactic and disciplinary problem. In the modern and contemporary section, the new textbook at times produces a catalogue of authors and themes rather than an interpretative architecture of political problems. The article concludes that Czech political science has moved from a problem of scarcity to a problem of structure.*

Keywords: *history of political thought, political theory, textbook, political science, canon, Czech political science, political ideologies, cataloguing expansion*

Introduction

The history of political thought is a traditional component of political science education. Students of political science usually encounter authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx or Mill right at the start of their studies. Subsequent courses then frequently feature

Rawls, Arendt, Schmitt, Hayek, Foucault, authors of critical theory, feminist political theory, republicanism, communitarianism, or contemporary theories of democracy. At first glance, this seems an obvious part of the discipline: a political scientist should be familiar with the classical texts from which modern thinking on the state, power, sovereignty, legitimacy, representation, democracy, freedom, equality and justice has developed.

It is precisely this taken-for-granted nature, however, that is problematic. For it is not clear exactly what a political science student is supposed to learn when studying the history of political thought. Is it primarily about knowledge of canonical authors? An overview of the historical development of political ideas? An introduction to political philosophy? Preparation for the study of political ideologies? Or a way of showing students that the basic concepts of political science are not neutral technical terms, but historically shaped and normatively charged categories? This question is not merely didactic. It touches upon the very identity of political science as a discipline that moves between empirical research into politics, normative theory and the interpretation of historically variable political concepts.

In the international debate, the history of political thought can be understood in several ways. The contextual approach associated with the so-called Cambridge School emphasised that political texts cannot be read as timeless answers to ever-the-same questions, but as interventions in specific linguistic, intellectual and political contexts (Skinner 1969; Pocock 2009). Skinner's seminal text 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' was published in the journal *History and Theory* in 1969 and became one of the foundational methodological texts of modern history of ideas. Pocock's later collection, *Political Thought and History*, summarises a broader methodological tradition that understands political thought through political languages and historical contexts. Alongside this are approaches that link political thought to the analysis of political concepts, ideologies and their morphological structures; Freedén's concept of ideologies as specific configurations of political concepts is particularly important here (Freedén 1996).

The Czech context, however, deals with these issues in a specific way. After 1989, political science was rapidly institutionalised as an independent academic discipline, but its textbook base developed gradually, unevenly and often in close connection with specific departments, courses and pedagogical needs. Yet the history of political thought was never entirely absent from the Czech context. There were lecture notes, overview publications, philosophically oriented syntheses, textbooks on political ideologies, and general introductions to political science. Nevertheless, it can be said that Czech political science has long lacked a generally accepted, widely applicable and at the same time clearly political-science-grounded textbook on the history of political thought.

The publication of the new textbook *Dějiny politického myšlení. Stát a politika od starověku po současnost* (*History of Political Thought: State and Politics from Antiquity to the Present*) therefore presents a suitable opportunity for broader reflection. It is not merely a question of whether this publication fills a certain gap in the market. More significantly, its publication reopens the question of what type of text Czech political science actually needs in this field. It is not enough to have a comprehensive overview of authors from antiquity to the present day. Nor is it enough to have a deeply specialised history of ideas if it is not readily applicable in basic political science teaching. And it is not enough to have lecture notes that serve one course excellently but have no ambition to create a broader disciplinary synthesis.

The aim of this article is therefore not to write a review of a single new textbook. The new textbook is understood here as a diagnostic case: as a text that allows us to reopen the question of how the history of political thought is constructed, taught and canonised in Czech political science. The article focuses on Czech textbooks and synthetic texts that deal with the history of political thought, political theories and political ideologies, and which can be linked to political science education. It primarily addresses three questions. Firstly, what canon of authors and topics these texts create. Secondly, what genre do they represent? Thirdly, to what extent are they able to teach the history of political thought as part of political science, rather than merely as the history of philosophy or a collection of historical facts?

The main argument of the article is as follows: the Czech problem of the history of political thought in political science lies not merely in a lack of textbooks, but in the tension between several distinct interpretative models. Some texts function as political science lecture notes, others as extensive philosophical-historical syntheses, and still others as overviews of political theories or ideologies. The new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák does not resolve this problem merely by filling a gap in the literature, but by simultaneously bringing it into sharper focus. It attempts to overcome the lack of synthesis by expanding the canon, yet it is precisely the modern and contemporary section that demonstrates how the breadth of the thematic scope can lead to a cataloguing approach to interpretation. The problem of Czech political science is therefore not merely a question of whether we have a sufficiently comprehensive textbook, but whether we can create a text that combines the breadth of the canon, interpretative depth, didactic usability and a clear political science architecture.

Textbooks as a canon and a tool for disciplinary socialisation

Textbooks are often understood as a secondary academic genre. Compared to monographs, scholarly articles or critical editions of classical texts, they appear as derivative, simplifying and didactically subordinate texts. Such a concep-

tion is, however, inadequate. A textbook is not merely a means of transmitting ready-made knowledge. It is also a tool for selecting, organising and authorising knowledge. In other words, a textbook not only informs about a particular field, but also helps to shape it.

This is particularly true in the field of the history of political thought. Every textbook in this field necessarily makes choices. It decides whether to begin with ancient Greece, or whether to include ancient non-European traditions as well. It decides whether to regard the Middle Ages as an important period in the development of political thought, or as an intermediate stage between antiquity and modernity. It decides whether modern political thought will be told as a story of liberalism, democracy and the state, or also as a story of empire, colonialism, gender inequality, religious conflict or social issues. It also decides whether women, non-European authors, Czech thinkers or contemporary critical currents will make it into the canon.

This selection is not neutral. Textbooks shape the idea of who is a 'classic', which questions are fundamental and what kind of argumentation students should consider relevant. If Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau appear repeatedly in a textbook, but figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault or authors from the Central European tradition are absent, then students are not merely learning the history of political thought. They are also being taught a particular vision of the discipline. This image may be narrow, broad, Eurocentric, state-centric, liberal, republican, historical, philosophical or political-scientific.

The textbook therefore functions as a tool for disciplinary socialisation. It teaches students not only what they should know, but also how they should ask questions. In political science, this function is exceptionally important, as the relationship between political theory and empirical political science is not always self-evident. A student may learn that Hobbes is the author of the theory of the social contract and sovereignty. From a political science perspective, however, the more significant question is how Hobbes helps us think about security, the state, legitimate coercion, or fear as a political affect. Similarly, one can learn that Rousseau works with the concept of the general will. But what is also essential from a political science perspective is how this concept relates to representation, democracy, populism, participation, or the critique of inequality.

The difference between the history of authors and the history of political problems is fundamental here. The history of authors leads the student from one thinker to another. The history of political problems traces how questions of power, order, freedom, equality, legitimacy, citizenship, representation or conflict change over time. A good political science textbook on the history of political thought cannot, of course, ignore the authors. However, it should not merely retell their stories. Its task should be to show why these authors are important for political science.

In this regard, it is useful to distinguish several functions of a textbook on the history of political thought. The first is an orientational function: the student gains a basic overview of authors, works and periods. The second is a canonising function: the textbook determines which authors and texts are considered fundamental. The third is the interpretative function: the textbook shows how classical texts can be read and what issues can be analysed through them. The fourth is the disciplinary function: the textbook explains why the history of political thought is part of political science, and not merely the history of philosophy. It is precisely this last function that is often the weakest, and at the same time the most important for this article.

The Czech context: Between philosophy, political science and course notes

The Czech context is unique in that the history of political thought here did not develop within a single, clearly defined institutional framework. Various academic traditions have contributed to its interpretation: philosophy, political science, legal theory, history, sociology and, to some extent, civic education. This in itself is not a problem. Political thought is, by its very nature, an interdisciplinary field. The problem arises when it is unclear from which disciplinary perspective a textbook is written and what type of teaching it is intended to serve.

Philosophy-oriented texts can offer great interpretative depth, thorough engagement with primary sources and sensitivity to historical context. However, they may not be easily applicable in a basic political science course, the aim of which is to show students the relationship between political theories and the concepts of modern political science. Political science lecture notes, on the other hand, can be excellently tailored to a specific course, but their limited scope and connection to a single institution usually prevent them from becoming a more general synthesis of the discipline. Survey textbooks can offer a broad scope, but often at the cost of flattening arguments and reducing classic texts to a set of easily memorable theses.

This tension is well illustrated by Stulík's lecture notes *Dějiny evropských politických teorií* (*History of European Political Theories*). This is not a monumental synthesis of the history of political thought, but rather a textbook intended for a bachelor's degree in political science. It is precisely for this reason, however, that it is exceptionally important for analysis. In the introduction, the author explicitly articulates the problem facing political science students: it is not enough merely to know 'what is', but one must understand 'why', 'what it might mean' and 'what it is for' (Stulík 2016). The history of political theories is not presented here as an end in itself – a mere overview of the classics – but as a means to understanding political science as an interpretative discipline.

Stulík also explicitly states that his text is a teaching aid, not a comprehensive exam guide. He therefore does not aim to include as many authors as possible, but rather to provide a broader and more critical presentation of a limited selection. He links the selection of authors to the needs of the bachelor's programme in political science: Kant is important for theories of international relations and democratic peace, Plato and Aristotle for political systems, and Locke for the intellectual foundations of liberalism (Stulík 2016). Such transparency in the selection is valuable for the textbook genre, as it demonstrates that the canon is not self-evident, but rather constructed didactically and within the discipline.

Alongside this political science-didactic model stands the extensive philosophical-historical project *Dějiny politického myšlení* (*History of Political Thought*), published by OIKOYMENH. This represents a completely different type of text. Its strength lies in its scholarly depth, historical scope and careful reconstruction of intellectual contexts. Volume II/1 is devoted to political thought from its beginnings to the High Middle Ages, covering early Christianity, Augustine, Byzantine, Arab and Jewish political thought, the origins of Czech political thought, the conflict between secular and spiritual power, and Thomas Aquinas; it comprises 647 pages and was published in 2012. Volume II/2 covers the period from the crisis of the Middle Ages to the Reformation, including Dante, Ockham, Marsilius, Charles IV, Hus, the Hussite movement, Chelčický and the European Reformation; it has 519 pages.

The OIKOYMENH project thus fulfils a different function from a textbook for a bachelor's course. For political science teaching, it may be an indispensable specialist resource, but not necessarily a text that in itself structures a basic course in the history of political thought. The scope, expertise and historical depth here are not synonymous with textbook-like qualities. It is precisely the contrast between Stulík and OIKOYMENH that shows that the problem with Czech political science teaching does not lie in a simple lack of texts. There are both didactic texts and texts of great scholarly depth. The question is whether there exists a text that would convincingly combine both functions.

Another type is represented by political science syntheses associated, for example, with Lukáš Valeš. Valeš's *Dějiny politických teorií* (*History of Political Theories*), in the 2004 edition analysed here, aims to provide a clear overview of the history of political theories for political science students. Its ambition is not to achieve the same historical and philosophical depth as OIKOYMENH, but rather to create an accessible framework for navigating the main authors, periods and concepts. The structure of the content follows the classical European axis from ancient Greece and Rome through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, 17th-century political thought, the French Enlightenment, the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, to German classical philosophy (Valeš 2004). Here we see the typical tension inherent in an overview textbook: the broader the scope, the

greater the risk of oversimplification. On the other hand, it is precisely this type of text that best meets the practical needs of political science teaching.

A borderline case is the publication by Milan Lupták and Vladimír Prorok, *Politické ideologie a teorie. Od starověku po rok 1848 (Political Ideologies and Theories: From Antiquity to 1848)*. The book presents itself, in its own words, as an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of Eurocentrism in the interpretation of the history of political thought; alongside European traditions, it also includes the political views of ancient India, China, Israel, the Arab East, Byzantium, Kievan and Muscovite Rus, and Tsarist Russia. In doing so, it demonstrates that in the Czech context, the history of political thought often overlaps with the interpretation of political ideologies. This is understandable: liberalism, conservatism, socialism or nationalism cannot be properly explained without reference to historical authors and theories. At the same time, however, this model blurs the boundary between political theory, the history of political thought and ideological currents. For political science, such an interconnection may be useful; analytically, however, it is necessary to distinguish whether a textbook is tracing the history of arguments, the history of ideologies or the development of political concepts.

Corpus and method

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of the content and genre of selected Czech textbooks and synthetic texts that deal with the history of political thought, political theories or political ideologies and which can be linked to political science education. This is not a complete bibliography of all Czech publications in the field of political philosophy. The aim is to analyse texts that fulfil, or may fulfil, a textbook function in political science.

The main corpus includes texts representing five basic models. The first is the chronological-canonical political science textbook, represented by Valeš's *History of Political Theories* (Valeš 2004). The second are political science-didactic lecture notes, represented by Stulík's *History of European Political Theories* (Stulík 2016). The third are texts situated at the intersection of the history of political theories and political ideologies, particularly the publication by Lupták and Prorok (Lupták & Prorok 2011). The fourth type consists of extensive philosophical-historical syntheses, represented by the *History of Political Thought* project from the OIKOYMENH publishing house (Herold, Müller & Havlíček 2012a, 2012b; Kučera & Chotaš 2022a, 2022b). The fifth is the expansive-cataloguing model, the most striking example of which is the new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák (Valeš, Květina & Sekerák 2026). Additionally, the overview text *Dějiny politických filozofií (A History of Political Philosophies)* is also taken into account, which allows one to trace the older thematic structure of the exposition from antiquity to the 20th century (Syllaba 2005).

The analysis examines several dimensions. The first is the disciplinary framework: whether the text conceives the history of political thought as part of political science, philosophy, the history of ideas, legal studies or general social science education. The second is genre: whether it is a lecture notes, a textbook, a scholarly synthesis, a compendium or an overview of ideologies. The third dimension is the construction of the canon: which authors, periods and traditions are included, which are marginalised and which are absent. The fourth dimension is the political science nature of the interpretation: whether the text links historical authors with concepts of political science, such as the state, power, sovereignty, legitimacy, representation, democracy, citizenship or conflict. The fifth dimension is the didactic architecture: whether the text merely provides the student with information, or guides them towards interpretative and analytical work.

This approach does not evaluate textbooks according to a simple scale of quality. The aim is not to determine which publication is 'the best'. Individual texts fulfil different functions. A deeply specialised philosophical-historical synthesis cannot be assessed by the same criteria as a lecture note for a bachelor's course. Nevertheless, it is possible to ask what picture of the history of political thought these texts create and how they contribute to the shaping of political science education.

Five models of the Czech textbook landscape

Czech textbooks and synthetic texts on the history of political thought cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between the absence and presence of a textbook. The available corpus suggests instead a plurality of models that fulfil different functions. Some texts are primarily textbooks providing a basic introduction, others are lecture notes for a specific course, and others are specialist philosophical-historical syntheses or interpretations of political ideologies. The new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák adds a fifth type to these models: an expansive-cataloguing textbook that seeks to include as many authors, schools of thought and contemporary topics as possible. It is precisely this typology that demonstrates that the Czech textbook landscape is not empty, but rather heterogeneous in terms of genre.

The first model is the chronological-canonical political science textbook. It is well represented by Valeš's earlier textbook, *A History of Political Theories*. Its content is structured as a classic chronological timeline: political thought in ancient Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the 17th century, 17th- and 18th-century France, the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and in German classical philosophy (Valeš 2004). The exposition here follows the well-known European lineage from the Sophists, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle through Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Bodin, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu

and Rousseau to Tocqueville, Smith, Mill, Burke, Saint-Simon, Owen, Fourier, Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx. Importantly, the text also includes supplementary questions and suggestions for seminar papers, i.e. the didactic apparatus typical of a basic course textbook.

The strength of this model lies in its clarity. Students are provided with a map of the core European canon and learn to navigate the main periods and authors. Its weakness, however, lies precisely in its canonical narrowness. Non-European traditions, feminist political theory, most of 20th-century political thought and contemporary critical currents remain outside the main scope. This model therefore corresponds well to the older conception of an introductory course in political science, but less so to the current demand for a more pluralistic, global and problem-oriented interpretation.

The second model is the political science-didactic textbook. Its aim is not to create a definitive history of political thought or to cover the widest possible canon of authors, but to provide students with a basic orientation in political theories whilst showing them why these theories are important for political science thinking. This model is represented by Stulík's textbook *History of European Political Theories* (Stulík 2016). Its significance lies not in its scope, but in the explicit consideration of its didactic function. Stulík emphasises that political science students should not merely strive to master information, but to understand the relationship between political processes, norms, theories and interpretation.

Stulík's model is valuable precisely because of its selectivity. The author openly acknowledges that this is not a comprehensive exam guide, but a teaching aid. His aim is not to present as many authors as possible, but rather to examine a smaller number of authors in greater depth and from a critical perspective. The selection relates to the specific needs of a bachelor's degree programme in political science: Kant is important, amongst other things, for understanding theories of international relations and democratic peace; Plato and Aristotle for the research context of political systems; and Locke for understanding liberalism (Stulík 2016). This model thus demonstrates that didactic reduction need not be a weakness, provided it is transparent and justified in political science terms.

The third model is the ideological-theoretical synthesis. This type of text links the history of political theories with an interpretation of political ideologies. In the Czech context, it is represented in particular by Lupták and Prorok's publication *Political Ideologies and Theories: From Antiquity to 1848* (Lupták & Prorok 2011). Its content does not begin directly with ancient authors, but with a general section devoted to political ideology as an object of analysis: the concept of political ideology, the possibilities of true knowledge in politics, the emergence and development of political ideologies, and the relationship between ideology and modes of political thought. Only then does an exposition

of ancient and medieval political thought follow, including India, China, Israel, Greece, Rome, Christianity, Islam, Byzantium, Kievan and Muscovite Rus, and modern revolutions.

The advantage of the ideological-theoretical model is its proximity to political science, as modern political science cannot do without an explanation of liberalism, conservatism, socialism, nationalism, communism, fascism, anarchism or feminism. Here, the history of political thought is naturally intertwined with the history of modern political conflicts. A weakness is the risk that historical political thought will be read primarily as a precursor to modern ideologies. Authors may then become representatives of ideological currents rather than thinkers addressing more general questions of power, order, legitimacy, law, justice or citizenship.

The fourth model is the philosophical-historical compendium. In the Czech context, this is most notably represented by the project *History of Political Thought*, published by OIKOYMENH. Volume II/1 covers early Christianity, Tertullian, Augustine, the barbarian kingdoms, Byzantine political thought, the Byzantine mission to the Slavs, political thought in Muslim countries, Jewish political thought, the origins of political thought in the West, the origins of Czech political thought, the struggle between secular and spiritual power, and Thomas Aquinas (Herold, Müller & Havlíček 2012a). Volume II/2 continues with Dante, Ockham and Marsilius of Padua, the radical and secular currents of the 14th century, the state theology of Charles IV, the ideological roots of the Reformation in the Czech lands, Jan Hus, the Hussite movement, Petr Chelčický, Nicholas of Cusa and the European Reformation (Herold, Müller & Havlíček 2012b).

The later volumes III/1 and III/2 extend this model into the early modern period and the 19th century: Machiavelli, Erasmus, classical utopias, Jesenský, Comenius, Bodin, Suárez, Grotius, Hobbes, Harrington, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau in III/1; American political thought, Hume, Burke, Kant, Herder, Fichte, Hegel, utilitarianism, Tocqueville, utopian socialism, Marx, anarchism, Russian political thought, Nietzsche, Weber and 19th-century political thought in the Czech lands in III/2 (Kučera & Chotaš 2022a, 2022b). The strength of this model lies in its historical depth, academic rigour and the significant integration of Czech and Central European traditions. From the perspective of basic political science teaching, however, it is more of a reference resource than a textbook structured for a single undergraduate course.

The fifth model is the expansive-cataloguing textbook. It is most clearly represented by the new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák (Valeš, Květina & Sekerák 2026). Its scope is exceptionally broad: it begins with non-European political thought in antiquity – namely Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India – continues with the classical European canon, and in the third part turns to political thought of the 20th and 21st centuries. It is precisely this third part that is key to the article. Within a relatively limited scope, it covers classical and

social liberalism, libertarianism, conservative critiques of liberalism, communitarianism, neo-republicanism, Arendt, Christian political thought, left-wing thought of the first and second halves of the 20th century, African political thought, feminism, postmodern currents, globalisation, climate change and AI.

This model addresses a long-standing shortcoming in Czech literature in a new way: not through selection and didactic focus, but through expansion. Its undeniable advantage is its topicality and the effort to extend the canon beyond the boundaries of the traditional European line. Its weakness, however, is the cataloguing effect. The more authors and topics are to be included in a single textbook, the more the exposition skims the surface. Modern political thought can then turn into a list of items, in which major themes are covered in the space of one or a few pages. Students learn that a particular author or school of thought exists, but they may not understand its logical structure, historical context or political science relevance.

This typology suggests that Czech political science faces a dilemma between didactic reduction and encyclopaedic expansion. The first model risks incompleteness, the second superficiality. The most productive solution in political science terms therefore lies neither in a return to a narrow European canon nor in the endless expansion of the list of authors, but in a more thoughtful architecture of interpretation: in linking the canon of authors with the history of political problems.

The canon and its boundaries

Every textbook on the history of political thought creates a canon. It does so not only through the selection of authors, but also through the way it orders, connects and interprets them. The canon is not merely a list of names. It is an implicit argument about what is considered essential for understanding politics. In the field of the history of political thought, this problem is particularly acute, as the selection of authors generally reproduces a certain conception of the development of Western political rationality: from the ancient polis through Christian and medieval thought, Renaissance realism, social contract theory, the Enlightenment, liberalism, conservatism and socialism to modern democracy and its critics.

The classical canon has its obvious advantages. Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Mill and Tocqueville are indeed authors without whom modern political thought is difficult to understand. The problem arises, however, when this canon is presented as natural and self-evident, rather than as the result of a selection. The textbook then conveys not only knowledge of the history of political thought, but also the notion that this particular line of thought constitutes the history of political thought as such.

Stulík's text is useful in this respect precisely because of its openness. His canon is distinctly European and classical, but the author simultaneously acknowledges that the selection is necessarily selective, subjective and influenced by the needs of a specific bachelor's programme (Stulík 2016). This is methodologically honest. The textbook canon does not present itself here as an exhaustive map of the entirety of political thought, but as a didactically justified selection. Such an approach may be more beneficial to students than seemingly neutral encyclopaedic comprehensiveness, as it demonstrates that any account of the history of political thought must answer the questions of why these particular authors and why in this particular context.

The OIKOYMENH philosophical-historical model, by contrast, expands the canon through depth and historical specialisation. Of particular importance is that it integrates into the account of medieval and early modern political thought traditions that are often marginalised in simpler political science textbooks: Byzantine, Arab and Jewish political thought, the Czech Reformation, the Hussite movement and the thought of Chelčický (Herold, Müller & Havlíček 2012a, 2012 b). This model demonstrates that 'European' political thought is not a homogeneous Western lineage leading from Athens to liberalism. It is shaped by a plurality of religious, legal, institutional and cultural contexts.

It is precisely the Czech dimension that is particularly important here. In the standard political science canon, Czech authors often appear either as a national add-on or as a special digression. Hus, Chelčický, Comenius, Bolzano, Masaryk, Patočka and Havel are often difficult to integrate into the main line of European political thought. This creates a peculiar paradox: Czech political science teaches the history of political thought predominantly as the history of the Western canon, whilst it often leaves its own Czech and Central European tradition aside or relegates it to specialised courses. Yet it is precisely the Czech and Central European context that can be exceptionally productive for political science: it raises questions of nationhood, the Reformation, religious conflict, citizenship, democracy in a small state, dissent, the intellectual's responsibility, and the relationship between morality and politics.

The new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák, by virtue of its content structure, already seeks to significantly expand the canon towards non-European traditions and contemporary authors. It does not begin, as is customary, with Greece alone, but includes non-European political thought in antiquity, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India (Valeš, Květina & Sekerák 2026). In the third part, it then turns to political thought of the 20th and 21st centuries and includes, among others, Rawls, Dworkin, Shklar, Hayek, Nozick, Schmitt, Gentile, the Conservative Revolution, communitarianism, neo-republicanism, Arendt, Christian political thought, Lenin, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, African political thought, feminism, Foucault, Agamben, Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe, globalisation, climate change and artificial intelligence. This ambition

is important because it transcends the older European canonical framework. However, merely expanding the list of authors and topics does not in itself mean overcoming the problem of textbook-like rigidity. What is decisive is whether these topics are integrated into a well-thought-out interpretative framework, or whether they become mere entries in a catalogue.

Here, three ways of expanding the canon can be distinguished. The first is decorative inclusion, where non-European or marginalised traditions are included so that the textbook does not appear too narrowly Eurocentric, but their presence does not alter the main interpretative line. The second option is comparative inclusion, where different traditions are compared in terms of concepts of power, order, law, legitimacy, governance or sovereign authority. The third and most challenging option is conceptual inclusion, where the inclusion of non-European or hitherto marginalised traditions transforms the very question of what constitutes the history of political thought. It is precisely this distinction that is appropriate to apply in a detailed analysis of the new textbook.

A similar question concerns women and feminist political theory. Traditional textbooks on the history of political thought have long been markedly masculine. It is not merely a matter of whether Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Carole Pateman or Susan Moller Okin appear in them. What is more important is whether feminist political theory is included in the narrative merely as a separate chapter, or whether it alters the interpretation of fundamental concepts such as citizenship, the private and the public, freedom, equality, justice, representation and power. The canon is not changed simply by adding a few names to the traditional list. It changes when new authors and new questions transform the way the whole is read.

The canon of Czech textbooks on the history of political thought must therefore be analysed on four levels. The first is the authorial level: who is included and who is omitted. The second is the spatial level: whether political thought is presented as a Western European, European, global or Central European narrative. The third is the temporal level: where the narrative begins and where it ends. The fourth is the thematic level: whether the history of political thought is organised around authors or around political issues. It is precisely this last level that is crucial for political science.

The political science nature of the narrative: From authors to issues

The fundamental question of this article is: when is the history of political thought taught from a political science perspective? The answer cannot simply lie in the fact that the text was produced in a political science department or is intended for political science students. The political science nature of the interpretation is manifested primarily in whether the textbook is able to link

historical authors with analytical concepts of political science. In other words, it is not merely a question of whether the student knows what Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau wrote, but whether they understand how their arguments help to comprehend the state, power, sovereignty, legitimacy, democracy, representation, citizenship or conflict.

A political science textbook on the history of political thought should therefore not merely be a history of authors. Nor should it be merely a history of ideas in the narrow philosophical sense. Its specific function lies in translating historical texts into the problematic language of political science without thereby flattening them ahistorically. This task is difficult. On the one hand, the historical context must be respected, as emphasised by the contextual approach of the Cambridge School (Skinner 1969; Pocock 2009). On the other hand, political science teaching has a legitimate need to show students why older texts are relevant to contemporary issues in political science. Textbooks must therefore balance historical sensitivity with contemporary analytical utility.

Stulík's example illustrates one possible approach. From the outset, the author links the exposition of political theories to the question of how political science interprets political processes, states and norms. Theories here are not isolated philosophical systems, but tools for understanding political phenomena. Stulík therefore emphasises that a political scientist must work not only with political realities, but also with theories and value-based interpretations of these realities (Stulík 2016). This approach is strong from the perspective of political science because it does not merely tell the student to 'learn the authors', but shows them why theories are part of the political science method of explanation.

At the same time, the limitations of this model are also evident here. If the text is organised primarily around authors, the political science issues remain largely dependent on the interpretation of the teacher or student. In other words, the textbook may indicate the political science relevance of each author, but it does not necessarily systematically trace the history of political thought across themes. An alternative would be a textbook organised not primarily chronologically, but thematically: the history of sovereignty, the history of representation, the history of citizenship, the history of democracy, the history of freedom, the history of equality, the history of legitimacy, the history of political conflict. Such a model is didactically very appealing in political science, but at the same time runs the risk of historical texts being taken out of context and used merely to illustrate contemporary concepts.

A political science textbook therefore cannot, in all likelihood, completely abandon chronology or authors. It should, however, supplement chronology with a problem-based framework. For each major section, it should be clear which political science problem is being addressed. Antiquity should not be merely 'Plato and Aristotle', but also the emergence of the question of citizen-

ship, the polis, constitutions, participation, and the relationship between politics and ethics. The Middle Ages should not be merely 'Augustine and Aquinas', but also the question of the relationship between secular and spiritual power, the legitimacy of authority, natural law and the universal order. The early modern period should not be merely 'Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke', but also the problem of sovereignty, security, property, the contract and the modern state. The nineteenth century should not be merely 'liberalism, conservatism, socialism', but also the debate over democracy, the nation, civil society, capitalism and the social question.

This problematic architecture is also important for the present day. The history of political thought is not merely a museum of ideas. It is a reservoir of concepts through which we still understand politics today. Concepts such as sovereignty, representation, the people, the nation, citizenship, freedom, equality, security, justice or democracy are not self-evident. They have a history, conflicting meanings and normative baggage. The teaching of the history of political thought in political science should show students precisely this historical and conflictual nature of the basic concepts of political science.

From this perspective, the new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák is an important case study. The publisher's blurb presents it as a text that does not merely aim to be a catalogue of the classics, but is intended to facilitate an understanding of the present and even to 'peek behind the curtain of the future' (Valeš, Květina & Sekerák 2026). Such an ambition is significant in political science, but at the same time raises the question of how exactly it is realised. Does the textbook present the present through historical concepts? Or does the present serve rather as a rhetorical justification for why the classics should still be read? It is precisely this question that should be at the heart of a detailed analysis of the new textbook.

The new textbook must therefore be evaluated on a case-by-case basis according to its individual sections. Different criteria can be applied to the treatment of antiquity and the classical European canon, different ones to the section devoted to modern political ideologies, and entirely different ones to the section on political thought of the 20th and 21st centuries. It is precisely this last section that is the most ambitious, yet at the same time the most problematic: the attempt to include almost the entire contemporary canon means that the exposition occasionally turns into a catalogue of authors, schools of thought and themes.

The political science nature of the exposition can therefore be assessed according to several criteria. The first is conceptual coherence: the textbook should clearly demonstrate how the concepts of the state, power, sovereignty, legitimacy, citizenship, freedom, equality and democracy are formed by individual authors. The second criterion is analytical relevance: the exposition should help students understand why historical arguments are important for contemporary political science issues. The third criterion is historical sensitivity: a textbook

should not turn the classics into today's political scientists and rewrite their texts in the language of contemporary debates without regard for context. The fourth criterion is didactic clarity: students should understand not only what the author claimed, but also what problem they were addressing, against whom they were arguing and why their thinking remains relevant.

It is precisely at this point that the main argument of the article returns. Czech political science does not merely need another extensive overview of the history of political thought. It needs a textbook model that links the canonical authors with the problem-based structure of political science. Without this link, the history of political thought easily becomes either an encyclopaedia of the classics or a philosophical-historical specialisation detached from political science teaching. In both cases, their most important function is lost: teaching students that the basic concepts of political science have a history and that political thought is not an add-on to the discipline, but one of its fundamental ways of understanding politics.

Czech political science therefore faces not merely the question of whether it has a sufficiently comprehensive textbook on the history of political thought. It faces the question of how such a textbook should handle the canon, selection and depth. The most productive approach appears to be combining a chronological narrative with a problem-based framework: the history of political thought should not merely be a history of authors, but also a history of sovereignty, representation, citizenship, democracy, freedom, equality, security, the body, technology and political conflict. Only in this way can it become a genuine disciplinary part of political science education, rather than merely its historical or philosophical prelude.

The new textbook and the problem of cataloguing expansion

The new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák is the most significant case study within the analysed corpus. Not because it exhaustively addresses the problem of Czech approaches to teaching the history of political thought, but because it attempts to address several shortcomings at once: the absence of a current, comprehensive synthesis; the Eurocentrism of older textbooks; the weak presence of 20th- and 21st-century political thought; and the need to link the classical canon with contemporary political issues. Yet it is precisely this ambition that also reveals the limitations of the textbook genre.

The new textbook by Valeš, Květina and Sekerák represents an important milestone precisely because it seeks to overcome the limitations of older texts. It includes non-European ancient traditions, an extensive section on 20th- and 21st-century political thought, feminism, African political thought, postmodern currents, environmentalism and artificial intelligence. In doing so, it significantly expands the Czech textbook canon. At the same time, however, it demon-

strates that expanding the content is not the same as resolving the didactic and disciplinary functions of the textbook. The modern section at times resembles a catalogue of topics, in which major currents are given only minimal space.

The first part of the textbook signals a shift away from older chronological-canonical texts. The exposition does not begin solely with ancient Greece, but with non-European political thought in antiquity: the city and the state between reason and mystery, Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India (Valeš, Květina & Sekerák 2026). This step is important because it undermines the notion that the history of political thought begins only with the Greek polis. At the same time, however, it raises the question of whether non-European traditions truly transform the overall interpretative logic of the exposition, or whether they merely precede the main European line.

The problem is even more evident in the section devoted to the 20th and 21st centuries. Its title – From social liberalism to biopolitics and AI – itself suggests an enormous scope. In quick succession, the text covers social liberalism, Berlin, Rawls, Dworkin, Shklar, Hayek, Rothbard, Nozick, Schmitt, Gentile, Spengler, the Conservative Revolution, Dávila, neoconservatism, paleoconservatism, post-liberalism, de Benoist, John Gray, communitarianism, neo-republicanism, Arendt, Christian realism, Catholic social teaching, Maritain, Lenin, Bernstein, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Austro-Marxism, Lukács, Althusser, Poulantzas, Debord, analytical Marxism, Alinsky, the Frankfurt School, African political thought, feminism, Foucault, Agamben, Vattimo, Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe, Naomi Klein, environmentalism, Latour and artificial intelligence (Valeš, Květina & Sekerák 2026). This section, conceived in this way, is exceptionally topical, yet at the same time necessarily cataloguing in nature.

By ‘cataloguing expansion’, I mean a situation where the textbook responds to the legitimate demand for a broader, more contemporary and more inclusive canon by adding an ever-increasing number of authors, schools of thought and topics to the exposition, without creating a sufficiently robust interpretative framework for them. The problem, therefore, does not lie in the fact that the textbook includes Foucault, feminism, environmentalism or AI. On the contrary: it is precisely these topics that belong in contemporary political science teaching. The problem lies in the fact that when such broad schools of thought are presented in such a limited scope, the textbook resembles an encyclopaedic list. Students learn that a particular name or topic exists, but they may not acquire the ability to work with it from a political science perspective.

Conclusion

From this perspective, the main conclusion of the article can be formulated as follows: the Czech textbook landscape has shifted from a problem of scarcity to a problem of architecture. Previously, it was possible to say that a compre-

hensive, up-to-date textbook was lacking. Today, it is more accurate to say that mere comprehensiveness is not enough. The key question is no longer merely whether the textbook covers a sufficient number of traditions, authors and contemporary topics, but whether it can use them to create a politically meaningful interpretation of the history of political problems.

An analysis of Czech textbooks and synthetic texts devoted to the history of political thought shows that the Czech context cannot be characterised by a simple lack of literature. There are texts that are chronological-canonical, didactic-political science, ideological-theoretical, philosophical-historical and expansive-cataloguing. Each of these models responds to a different need: orientation within the classical canon, teaching a specific course, the interpretation of ideologies, the scholarly reconstruction of the history of ideas, or an effort to incorporate contemporary themes. The problem lies in the fact that these functions have not yet been combined into a clear model for a political science textbook on the history of political thought.

This criticism does not deny the significance of the new textbook. On the contrary, its contribution lies precisely in the fact that it highlights the problem within the field of textbooks. It shows that the old European canon is inadequate and that contemporary political science requires a broader thematic horizon. At the same time, however, it demonstrates that the solution cannot lie in the mere accumulation of content. A political science textbook on the history of political thought must select, structure and interpret. Its quality is not measured solely by how many authors it includes, but by whether it helps students understand why and how the history of political thought forms part of political science.

The new textbook thus demonstrates that Czech political science no longer needs merely more authors and more topics. Above all, it needs a more carefully considered structure of exposition. Modern political thought cannot be taught merely as an appendix to the classical canon, nor as a telephone directory of notable names. If it is to be truly useful in political science, it must be organised around issues that enable students to understand the relationship between older texts and contemporary political conflicts. Otherwise, the history of political thought becomes a catalogue that is extensive but didactically fragile.

From the perspective of political science pedagogy, it is therefore crucial to distinguish between topicality and interpretation. Topicality means that the textbook covers contemporary issues: the climate crisis, biopolitics, feminism, postcolonial or African political thought, technological power and AI. Interpretation, however, means that these topics are not merely appended to the end of the classical canon, but are linked to long-standing political science issues: sovereignty, power, representation, citizenship, freedom, equality, the body, security, legitimate authority and democracy. Without this problem-based structure, updating occurs without interpretation.

This problem differs from that of older textbooks. Valeš's earlier textbook was limited primarily by the classical European canon and essentially ended with German classical philosophy, Marx, and the political thought of the turn of the 19th century (Valeš 2004). Stulík's lecture notes were even more selective, but openly justified this reduction on didactic grounds (Stulík 2016). The new textbook, by contrast, highlights the opposite risk: not a canon that is too narrow, but one so broad that depth is lost. In other words, the shortcoming of the older texts lay in the absence of many authors and topics; the shortcoming of the new textbook lies in the fact that their mere presence does not in itself constitute a high-quality exposition.

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