WHAT CAN LIBERALS AND DEMOCRATS FIGHT WITH?

Finding a Winning Narrative in the High-stakes 2024 European Elections
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INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of the Hungarian Europe Society, the main cleavage in Europe today is to be found between the populist/illiberal/anti-European/anti-American and liberal/democratic/pro-European/Atlanticist political forces and, at the same time, their supportive electoral camps. In different variations, we have experienced almost everywhere on the continent the emergence of populist/nativist right-wing politicians, often political entrepreneurs, sometimes visionaries, or both, and their organisations as well as the narratives/worldviews they represent. Right-wing illiberal concepts have become more and more salient, influential and, in the Hungarian case, dominant in public discourse and, finally, decisive at the ballots.

That is why I cannot overstate the significance of the election year 2024; the European parliamentary, the US presidential and even the Hungarian local elections when citizens face an unprecedented dividing line and tense competition between supporters of liberal democracy, and frankly, its enemies. Certainly, in many cases there is still an opportunity for internal choices on the democratic supply side between left, liberal, green and centre-right political offers. However, the tendency of increasingly antagonistic political polarisation between “us” and “them” has been present not only in Europe and the United States, but globally – for a decade or so.

Talking about the historic elections during 2024, I will elaborate three – very simplistic – future scenarios.

1. Things might go wrong (or even worse)

In Europe the radical right can gain significant positions at European and also national levels. These forces follow a shared playbook/cookbook that is threatening the achievements of liberal democracy as well as the progress reached in building the architecture of a united Europe, both as a multi-level governance structure and the Europeanisation of political and public spheres. We might witness the decline of liberal political regimes and societies based on tolerance and shared European values even in well-established democracies of the traditional West. The European Union might lose influence as a geopolitical smart power because of its internal tensions and disagreements between inward-looking member states and under the attacks of the alliance of illiberal challengers.
In Hungary, at the moment, Orbán cannot rule the political agenda in consequence of recent huge scandals that even shocked his camp: the resignation of the President of the Republic and a noisy defection from the inner Fidesz circles have shaken the surface of his power. Still, a potential backlash from his government after the European elections – especially in case Orbán’s dominance in the domestic political arena seems to become weaker – cannot be excluded. How far the strongman is ready to go in order to regain his role as a permanent provocateur who always wants to control the political moments – that is the question. One of his loyalists, Tamás Lánčzi, who leads the new Office for Sovereignty Protection that is tasked to investigate alleged foreign influence, claimed that the penal definition of high treason should be reviewed. Namely, he believes that opposition figures who agree with the European Commission decision to freeze some of Hungary’s EU funds act against their own nation. Can it happen that Hungarian MEP-s who want to defend the financial interests of the European Union against a corrupt member state government with their vote in the European Parliament will be charged at home in front of a court? Such a dangerous claim would open a new chapter in the conflict series between Orbán’s regime and the European institutions. Again, how such a drastic step would influence the Hungarian leader’s isolated position within the European Council and his party’s loneliness in the European Parliament might also depend on the outcome of the European elections in general. In case the number of his like-minded political friends significantly increases in power positions, Orbán might enjoy the advantages of a protective shield in the reshuffled European assembly once again.

In a worst-case scenario, imperialist Russia will gain territories on the battlefield followed by a cease-fire or even a peace agreement forced upon Ukraine as the consequence of a general fatigue within the international democratic community. This outcome would have a devastating impact on the credibility of liberal democracy and the rule-based global order. Not only Russia, but even China can strengthen its influence in world politics, especially in those regions, where scepticism and anger have grown against the Western civilization and its values.

Moreover, if Donald Trump successfully comes back as the President of the United States of America in the fall of 2024, an unpredictable international disorder emerges and the transatlantic alliance might become almost irrelevant. It is not evident, whether an illiberal turn can be introduced on American soil undermining the more than two-hundred-year-old constitutional system.

### 2. Things will remain the same

In a modest middle-of-the-road scenario, European affairs will be still managed by the democratic-liberal political elites, which remain united when speaking and acting in one voice in the most important global issues like the deterrence of Putin’s Russia, the struggle for energy independence, green transition, dealing with climate emergency and keeping European and
universal values alive in the international arena and at home. Still, the populist alternative will threaten the status quo very loudly at European, regional and national levels. Central Europe will face a critical period where ethno-nationalism and “Brussels-bashing” echoed by “sovereignist” anti-Europeans might go hand in hand.

This will be especially true in Hungary, where the illiberal regime under strongman Orbán remains intact, although the peak period of Orbán’s rule is over and the otherwise fragmented opposition holds some crucial positions like the post of the Budapest mayor. Ongoing tensions between the government and the European institutions will not evaporate and most transfers from the European funds will not arrive to Hungary because the government does not respect the rule of law and upholds its corrupt economic system. Orbán will continue to be isolated at European level. Domestically, it might happen that the Office for Sovereignty Protection just becomes a toothless tiger, but central smear campaigns against out-groups, NGO-s and the European leaders keep the society in permanent hysteric atmosphere combined with extreme internal polarisation.

A potential neither war, nor peace situation – a frozen conflict – in Ukraine, as well as terror attacks by religious/ethno-centrist fundamentalists in the Middle East combined with the desperate efforts of Western diplomacy to find solutions to traditional military confrontations might characterise the international arena. Geopolitical competition between big powers will dominate the second half of the twenties of the 21st century, whilst partnership and dialogue will not disappear in some crucial areas for the safety of human race.

If Democrats win the presidential race in the United States this year, but alt-right Republicanism have strongholds in the country, cultural wars remain the only game not only in the American capitol, but in the Western hemisphere. Namely, as ideas travel through continents, imported and copied by political entrepreneurs as well as activist groups, the attractiveness of identity politics cannot be simply replaced by rational discussion about policy options.

3. Things become better

In the current international state of affairs, optimism sounds naïve. Still, we can all imagine a best-case scenario and historic evidence supports a positive vision: liberal democracies have been able to renew themselves and to adopt successfully to rapidly changing, often unpleasant conditions.

Starting with Europe: Zeitenwende, as the Germans are saying, is not yet complete. Significant reforms are needed: not only the biggest EU member states, but also Poland and the Czech Republic in our Central European region play an important role to urge necessary steps to make the European Union a geopolitically strong actor in security matters. The institutional realignment
of the European Union, making its decision-making methods more effective and democratic, as well as the widening its common policy fields might be accelerated right after the election period for both the European Parliament and the European Commission. Some populist politicians, just like the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has done, might continue to mitigate their Eurosceptic and extremist rhetoric and become ready to co-operate with the mainstream pro-European forces. Such a positive development would marginalise die-hard illiberal parties on the European stage.

Even in Hungary, analysts realise that nothing is given for ever. The current turbulence in the domestic political life might end in regime-change one day. How to implement unavoidable fundamental changes to re-introduce liberal democratic norms in public life is a task more complicated than in Poland where the defeat of the populist right was perhaps the best international news in 2023. Another inspiring moment that is worth to mention was the latest outcome of the Turkish municipality elections. Definitely, the Hungarian liberal-democratic political elites and the independent civil society need to elaborate seductive vision and rhetoric as an alternative to the illiberal regime: unmasking Orbán and Orbánism is not enough for electoral victory, particularly in a free, but not fair system.

Globally speaking, we wish that Russia loses the war in Ukraine at least in the middle or longer run, whilst the transatlantic relations will be reaffirmed with a stronger European leg. The international populist project inspired by Orbán might fall apart and can also be pushed back because the supporters of liberal democracy have learnt their lessons worldwide.

Certainly, we do not know the future. So many unexpected changes and turns, even U-turns have happened since the end of the Cold War – the collapse of communism was actually also a (positive) surprise. Just to mention some negative events and names: 9/11, Brexit, Trump, Erdogan, Putin, and Orbán’s ideological transformation. Covid-19 remains a warning sign that we do not fully control our fate. Still, multiple crises, including hostile attacks against liberal democracy in Hungary and elsewhere, might mobilise liberal and democratic forces, parties, civil society groups which believe in their shared values and are ready to act together accordingly.

In this publication, speakers of the conference organised by the Hungarian Europe Society under the same title in Budapest on 5-6 April 2024 have elaborated their concepts and views on the current and future state of our joint affairs. The themes of the volume include a broad range of topics like the attitudes of the Hungarian public to gender roles in an era when illiberal, intolerant government propaganda dominates the public sphere as well as the economic dimension of a semi-authoritarian regime which is – in fact – deeply integrated into the European single market. These topics are analysed by our Hungarian partners and friends from the 21 Research Centre and the Republikon Institute. Further important issues, which have been shortly mentioned in the introduction, are dealt with by our authors more expressively. They are supple-
mented with problems like the shift from traditional electoral politics to the politics of protest and the challenges of populist communication techniques in public discourse. From a normative conception of liberal democracy, moral disagreements and political differences should be handled through dialogic communication based on ethical standards – but what if populist political groups are interested in polarising the electorate?²

All in all, the essays and studies in this volume are supposed to lead us to answer the frustrating and, in the same time, inspiring question of our epoch: What can liberals and democrats fight with when heading European, US, national and local elections in 2024 and beyond?

² The Hungarian Europe Society participates in an EU-funded Horizon Europe project entitled DIACOMET (Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability; grant agreement ID: 101094816), which investigates the opportunities of a dialogue-based communication ethics in societies. See: https://diacomet.eu/. 
Chapter 1

LIBERAL VERSUS ANTI-LIBERAL VALUES IN HUNGARY AND THE ORBÁN-GOVERNMENT’S SOVEREIGNIST POLICY
THE GREAT ILLIBERAL DELUSION
AND ITS FAILURE: THE RISE AND FALL
OF THE HUNGARIAN ILLIBERAL FOREIGN POLICY

Every summer, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán attends a political jamboree organised by Fidesz at the campsite of a Transsylvanien (Romania) resort town Tusnádfürdő (Baile Tusnad). As a usual highlight of this political summer camp, always his keynote speech is giving his actual world interpretation. This was also the case on that Saturday morning, July 26, 2014, when the prime minister gave a genuine name to his system and announced the construction of the illiberal state. The audience braving the hot sun had no idea that this was not an ordinary Orbán’s speech, but the iconic naming ceremony of the Orbán regime

In the speech, he explained that the West is declining, it has no real chance against the Eastern countries, and the future clearly belongs to them. He also named the so-called star countries: Russia, China, Turkey and India. According to him, the liberal democracy is outdated and obsolete and unable to meet the challenges of the future, the West is nihilistic and has turned away from traditional values. In the new world, only strong states managed by strong leaders, which are based on the values of God, Fatherland, and Family, will stand their ground. The triple slogan is certainly familiar from the slogan of Mussolini’s fascist state, although Orbán may have taken it from an earlier Hungarian conservative agrarian party (Smallholders Party). He proudly declared that we are no longer building a liberal democracy, but an illiberal state.

The term illiberalism does not come from Orbán. It was originally first used by an American political scientist Fareed Zakaria in 1997, distinguishing modern constitutional, also known as liberal, democracies from democracies based on free elections but lacking the system of checks and balances

In this speech, Orbán already designated the main foreign partners and at the same time announced a corresponding new foreign policy strategy. This new strategy was called the Eastern Opening.

3 Senior fellow, János Kodolányi University; former Member of the European Parliament, Budapest.
4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVw1LqDarng
He chose new actors for the new play. He dismissed János Martonyi, the highly renowned and acclaimed foreign minister with a solid professional background, but with a firm pro-European and Atlanticist engagement, and replaced him with his loyal follower, Péter Szijjártó, who had no experience in foreign policy, and was the party’s former spokesman. He changed the name of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, sent away or fired a significant number of old staff, and the ministry was flooded with inexperienced, mainly young, party loyalists.

With the opening to the East, the foreign policy consensus of more than two decades came to an end. Right after his election victory in 2010, Viktor Orbán began to radically transform the system. In the same year, he adopted the new media law, which greatly limited the freedom of media and established the Media Council as a supervisory body, in which only Fidesz representatives took a seat. In 2011, it adopted a new constitution called the Basic Law, which already contained a collection of values that he later called illiberal values. In the same year, a new election law was also adopted by the ruling party, which clearly favored Fidesz. With all of this, he quickly provoked strong criticism from the Western world, mainly the EU. In 2012, Orbán already called his struggle and row with the EU as a freedom fight, comparing the EU to the Soviet Union and Brussels to Moscow. The supporters of Fidesz organized the first Peace March, its slogan was: We will not be a colony! Understand, we will not be a colony of the EU. In 2013, the EP adopted the first very critical report, the so-called Tavares report on the rule of law situation in Hungary. As a result of all this, the Hungarian government’s relationship with its Western partners, primarily the EU and the United States, began to deteriorate rapidly.

At the same time, in 2012, Viktor Orbán talked more and more about the opening to the East as an important new foreign policy and trade doctrine. The term of Eastern Opening seemed to be rather a political and communication product and not a real foreign policy strategy.

Foreign Minister János Martonyi did not like the term Eastern Opening and did not use it, instead he always spoke of Global Opening. Behind the aspiration of Global Opening was the intention that the Hungarian foreign policy would go beyond the usual Europe-centric limitations and diversify its activities geographically. It did not designate any privileged point of the compass as opposed to the Eastern Opening, and there was no sort of ideological implication behind it. The Global Opening was not intended to replace, but to complement the previous clear Western orientation of Hungarian foreign policy6.

Since the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the primary representative of foreign policy, until 2014 the strategy of the Eastern Opening was not dominant one, rather it only functioned as a communication element. However, in 2014, there was a change at the head of the ministry and this changed everything. From then on, the Eastern Opening became a central element of the state ideology, parallel to the openly declared and realised program of building an illiberal state.

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The new strategy not only modified, but simply terminated the consensus that had continuously defined Hungary’s foreign policy orientation since 1990. József Antall, the first freely elected prime minister and Géza Jeszenszky, his foreign minister laid down three main directions of the Hungarian foreign policy: the Euro-Atlantic integration (i.e., Western engagement), good neighbourly relations, and responsibility for Hungarians living abroad. There have always been different emphases in the interpretation and practical approach of these three directions, but until 2010 no one doubted the correctness of the system of objectives as a whole.

The real change came after 2014: the true reorientation in the foreign policy can be felt since then. The clear attachment to the West has been replaced by some kind of obscure “bridge role” between East and West and the so-called “peacock dance”.

The change in foreign policy orientation took place with incredible speed. From then on, relations with the most important partners, Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Chinese leadership and Turkish President Racip Erdogan really gained momentum. The close relationship with the new partners was not only based on the personal sympathy and ideological proximity of the leaders to each other, but Orbán’s consideration to build strong positions vis-à-vis the Western partners also played an important role in it. He wanted to demonstrate that he has other alternatives, that he has other strong non-Western partners. He has stated several times, for example in 2018 at an economic forum in Berlin, that if he does not receive financial support from the EU, he will ask for and receive it from China. Of course, this was never a realistic option, which has now been clearly proven in the dire situation of the Hungarian economy, but it could be used as a tactical tool in negotiations and he was not reluctant to use it. He used the Eastern Partnership to pressure and blackmail the West and build a strong negotiating position.

The strategy of opening up to the East was fuelled by economic wishful thinking. They believed that this would be the great inflection point and break-through of the Hungarian economy. In 2014, Orbán announced that by the end of the present parliamentary cycle (i.e. 2018), one third of Hungary’s foreign trade would be proceeded with the Eastern Opening countries. Of course, nothing spectacular has come of this, the share of the countries of the Eastern Opening in Hungarian foreign trade has changed almost nothing since 2010 and does not even reach 15%. The most important foreign trade partner, with a roughly 75% share, is continuously the EU.

Orbán made a spectacular break with Hungarian foreign policy, which was previously called value-based. He even mocked it publicly. It happened in 2014, when PM Orbán, in a strategic keynote speech at the meeting of Hungarian ambassadors, stated that “ideologically centered foreign policy guidelines were invented for half-witted countries by smart countries.”

He claimed to pursue a pragmatist, interest-based, realist foreign policy. However, Hungarian foreign policy is far cry from that. He can rather be labelled as an unprincipled opportunist one.

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7 Ibidem, pp.44-45.  
8 https://444.hu/2018/01/10/orban-ha-az-eu-nem-ad-penzt-majd-kerunk-kinatol  
9 István Szent-Iványi, Quo vadis Hungaria? Budapest, Republikon Institute, 2020, pp.34-35
In certain features, it reminded me of President Trump’s foreign policy, which he called transactional. He was looking for short-term and immediately realised advantages, in Latin do ut des, he wanted to ask the price for everything immediately. However, the Hungarian foreign policy was often disappointed by its Eastern partners.

It built relationships with new friends, Eastern despots and oppressive systems with great effort, while forgetting the rule of thumb in foreign policy that it is only worthwhile to make new friendship if this does not alienate old, good friends. The spectacular reorientation of Hungarian foreign policy towards the East caused suspicion among many old friends and led to the estrangement and alienation of relations.

Hungarian foreign policy, although it constantly criticised and even bashed the EU, considered its membership as a commodity for sale in its relations with third countries. It promised his Eastern partners that would represent their interests within the EU. Of course, they gladly accepted this, but it is not visible that they would have reciprocated it with anything. In recent years, the government has used the veto tool more and more often, and it is no coincidence that the international press called Hungary a veto super power. In the last six years, the majority of vetoes (around 60%) occurred in the EU are linked to the Hungarian government\textsuperscript{10}. The special feature of these vetoes is that they are usually served the interest of a third country. Most of the time, the interests of the Eastern partners are in the background of the Hungarian vetoes: China, Russia, Turkey, but even Israel was beneficiary of them.

Even more often, the Hungarian government lives with the threatening to veto or blackmail. Together with the Poles, they threatened to veto the adoption of the MFF and RRF, but blackmailed them with a veto in connection with the adoption of the Global Minimum Tax, or in connection with the ratification of Finland and Sweden’s NATO membership.

It is no coincidence that more and more countries have joined the initiative to abolish or reduce the scope of unanimous voting procedures, at least to introduce QMV (Qualified Majority Voting) in foreign policy matters. This is largely a reaction to the Hungarian government’s destructive veto policy.

Although Orbán rejected a foreign policy driven by values, some kind of values-based approach still appears in his certain steps. When he obstructed the extension of the EU Cotonou agreement for a long time because the term gender was included in the text, it could only be explained by ideology, because there was no real interest behind it. He is looking for extremist allies in Europe on an ideological basis, whom he occasionally even supports (e.g. Marie Le Pen’s party with an 8-million-euro loan in the French presidential election), which does not benefit him in any way, and is even particularly harmful for him. So, when Orbán rejects value-based foreign policy, he actually rejects the foreign policy representing the EU’s core values, and often makes foreign policy decisions based on his own illiberal values.

\textsuperscript{10} https://www.valaszonline.hu/2023/03/01/magyar-unios-diplomacia-kulpolitika-veto-szijjarto/
In particular, it disregards the representation of human rights and the values of democracy, and maintains a spectacular relationship with leaders who maintain oppressive regimes. He never brings up the issues of human rights or rule of law in his meetings, and although he presents himself as a defender of Christian values, the issue of persecuted Christians is never discussed during his cordial meetings with the Chinese president or Central Asian dictators. He regularly refers to the fact that he follows the principle of trust and mutual respect in diplomacy, which for him means that he does not bring up any human rights or rule of law issues. In fact, he rejects it and sees it as a sign of Western arrogance when Western leaders bring up these problems. He has also publicly stated several times that he does not believe in universal values.

In connection with the accession of Serbia and other Western Balkan countries to the EU, he repeatedly explained that it should only be judged on the basis of economic and stability interests and that it is incorrect to hold any rule of law and democracy criteria to account. In doing so, he practically neglects the Copenhagen criteria of the admission procedure.

Orbán’s illiberal foreign policy is a denial of the values that the EU wishes to represent in foreign policy matters. With its mere existence, it compromises and discredits the EU’s foreign policy aspirations and shows that the EU’s values are just lip service that must not be followed. As much as this foreign policy special way caused a lot of annoyance and difficulty for the cohesion and unity of the EU, until the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, it entailed tolerable costs for both the EU and the Orbán government.

However, Russian aggression is a turning point in this as well. Disrupting unity and occasionally clearly representing the interests of the enemy has become a serious security risk for the member states.

The EU reacted quickly and decisively to the Russian threat and used two major tools. On the one hand, he introduced ever-increasing sanctions (we are now at 13 sanctions packages), on the other hand provides financial support to Ukraine, partly to cover its budget deficit and partly to buy weapons and ammunition. The EU does this not out of mere solidarity, but out of a well-understood self-interest, since if Russia succeeds in its aggression plan and occupies Ukraine, it will destroy or at least radically weakens the European security architecture and become a direct and imminent security threat to Europe. This would particularly adversely affect the security of Hungary as a potential frontline country. Apparently, the Hungarian government does not want to take notice of this. In this dangerous security policy situation, it is vital that the member states support this common EU stance uniformly and decisively.

Here, too, the Hungarian government is following a spectacularly separate path. It calls itself pro-peace, while it labels all other member states as pro-war. It refuses to send weapons to Ukraine, and even does not allow weapons shipments to pass through the territory of Hungary, it constantly makes the acceptance of sanctions difficult and slows down and tries to watering down. He often acts as a defender of obvious Russian interests, e.g. regarding the removal of
Patriarch Kirill from the sanctions list. FM Péter Szijjártó has visited Russia seven times since the beginning of the war, once to Belarus, and a Russian minister has also been cordially received in Hungary. Anyway, FM Szijjártó has a close relationship with the Russian Foreign Minister and met him six times since the outbreak of the war. Previously, he regularly called Lavrov his good friend, from whom he received the highest Russian state award called Druzhba a few weeks before the Russian aggression against Ukraine. PM Viktor Orbán also received the highest award of the Russian Orthodox Church last year. Hungary has not yet expelled a single Russian spy, although it is widely believed that Budapest is a true Russian spy paradise. Russia’s largest embassy in Europe is located here. The International Investment Bank, which was widely considered the Russian spy bank, operated undisturbed in Budapest for more than a year after the beginning of the war and finally closed down only a year ago due to the American pressure and sanctions.

While after the Russian aggression, Finland terminated the Russian construction contract for a nuclear power plant, Hungary reconfirmed the similar contract with Rosatom and decided to speed up the construction. Due to historical reasons, Hungary is significantly dependent on Russian energy, but it was not alone in this respect. However, it is striking that most countries have significantly reduced this dependency in the past two years, while Hungary has done little to reduce this dependency. It is no coincidence that the shadow of Kremlin friendship has been cast over the country.

Since the outbreak of this war, the government has paid a heavy price for this friendship and continued favours. It practically lost all its former allies within the EU, disrupted the Visegrad Cooperation, the Hungarian-American relationship continued to deteriorate and the Hungarian-Ukrainian relationship became especially tense. The Hungarian government has become increasingly marginalized and isolated among its allies, who no longer consider it a reliable ally.

The government is particularly hurt and hit by the paralysis and insignificance of the Visegrad Cooperation. Previously, this was the flagship project and pride of Hungarian foreign policy. Something similar has happened to the Hungarian-Polish relationship which was previously particularly close, which has a significant historical past, but until the Russian aggression the ideological similarity between the two governments also strengthened the cooperation. However, the immoral Hungarian stance on Russian aggression caused a very serious alienation in bilateral relations as well. Now, when the Hungarian government’s dispute with the EU has intensified and as a result it has not been able to get financial subsidies for almost two years, it would greatly need friends and allies.

Everyone expected Orbán to make a correction in this depressing and dire situation. The partners and allies would have forgiven the previous mistakes and treasons, since the internal unity and cohesion of the EU has been greatly appreciated in the current tense international situation. That’s not what happened. Based on the known circumstances, to give a rational explanation for the Hungarian government’s stance is difficult or even impossible while this self-destructive
behaviour of the Hungarian government violates its own sane and essential interests. It is no coincidence that analysts suspect hidden and secret drivers behind it. There have been many explanations, but there is no clear evidence for any of them, they are rather logical assumptions. There are those who suspect the business interests of oligarchs close to the government are behind the matter, there are those who think that the Russian leadership is blackmailing the Hungarian partners, others suspect some kind of secret political deal behind the matter.

According to media reports, Orbán told the Polish leadership before the elections last April that the reason for the immoral Hungarian stance on Russian aggression is tactical and that they will change this after the elections and accept the common position of the EU. However, this did not happen, and the Hungarian government even more defiantly faced the position of its allies after the elections.

PM Orbán proudly mentions that in Europe only he and perhaps Pope Francis are pro-peace, everyone else is pro-war. He insists that the military and financial support to Ukraine must be stopped and then there will be peace soon, because without it Ukraine will be unable to continue the war and will ask for peace. Although the government condemns the Russian aggression, Orbán never mentioned Putin’s name and never called on him to respect Ukraine’s internationally recognized borders and withdraw his troops from the occupied Ukrainian territories. He blames Ukraine and the Western allies for the war, does not call Ukraine a sovereign state, says that Ukraine cannot win, and Russia cannot be defeated.

Orbán himself senses that he is hopelessly alone and isolated. This does not lead him to change his mind either, because he hopes that, as a result of the renewed migration debate, European public opinion will change in a favourable direction. He puts his hope in the upcoming elections: he hopes that the illiberal, populist and far-right parties close to him will gain ground in Slovakia (already happened) and in Austria, the EP elections and, above all, in the United States, and then he will be able to break out of this isolation.

It is not disputed that the chances of the right-wing parties in these elections are better than before, but this is no guarantee for him. He also had high hopes for the victory of Giorgia Meloni, but it is obvious that Meloni is not looking for strong cooperation with him, but with the European mainstream. The same can happen to the winning parties of other elections.

Viktor Orbán celebrated himself and his foreign policy for a long time and was able to successfully convince his voters that he is a highly respected and appreciated strong leader abroad who is able to effectively represent the country’s interests. Today, however, more and more people see that the results of this foreign policy are deplorable. Hungary’s international prestige and perception have never been so bad since the regime change, the government has become a pariah in Europe, and this perception is increasingly affecting its citizens as well. Orbán is completely isolated in the international arena and is unable to promote the country’s most basic interests. The balance of the illiberal foreign policy is negative, the country has reached a dead
end. What is most worrying is that, despite the increasingly depressing situation, there is not even a faint sign of corrective skills and will to do so. This should also be an important lesson for those international partners who previously flirted with the Hungarian illiberal state or its foreign policy.
ECONOMIC CRISSES AS OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

The economic shocks of the first half of the 2020s have put an enormous pressure on national governments and international organisations alike. Yet, the aim of this study is to point out that crises can be regarded as windows of opportunity for the strengthening of liberal democracies, too. Through the case of Hungary, we will demonstrate how a right-wing populist government, which has taken a country way down the path of democratic backsliding, has found itself in a dire economic situation, which has led to the raising of doubts about the myth of its ability to provide existential security and prosperity to the country. Crises give decision-makers the opportunity to plan, develop, and implement policies that not only make economies more resilient to future shocks, but also build on and fortify liberal democratic values and the rule of law – as the two are fundamentally intertwined.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the world we live in has fundamentally changed since the late 2010s from several aspects. In 2022, Collins Dictionary chose “permacrisis” Word of the Year\textsuperscript{12} for a reason: an expression that – according to its definition – means “an extended period of instability and insecurity, esp. one resulting from a series of catastrophic events”\textsuperscript{13}. The Coronavirus pandemic, the energy price shocks, Russia’s unjustifiable war of aggression against Ukraine, Hamas’ brutal attack against Israel, and the war in Gaza, which has brought unspeakable suffering upon many civilians are the primary, but not the only examples of the unquestionably catastrophic events that have hallmarked the first half of the 2020s. Although the effects of these disastrous developments could be perceived differently, and to different extents depending on the perceiver’s geographical location, nationality, socio-economic status, and so on, there is hardly any individual, business, organisation, or government that remained unaffected.

For governments and public officials, one of the greatest challenges over this period of crises has been to maintain citizens’ sense of security. This hasn’t been a merely altruistic exercise, of course: abandoning (or just not providing sufficient support to) large groups of voters during an extended period of uncertainties and hardships is not particularly lucrative, politically speaking. The mishandling of the Coronavirus pandemic, for instance, either from an economic

\textsuperscript{11} Senior analyst, Republikon Institute, Budapest.
\textsuperscript{12} Collins Word of the Year announcement (2022)
\textsuperscript{13} Collins Online Dictionary
or from a health protection aspect, or even from a communications perspective, directly caused or largely contributed to the fall of several governments and political leaders around the globe, including Florin Cîțu’s government in Romania\textsuperscript{14}; Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga\textsuperscript{15}; or Tunisian Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi\textsuperscript{16}. It is important to note, though, that at the political level a mistake is only a mistake if there is a competing political power that is able to take advantage of it. In almost all cases, particularly in times of crisis, when existential risks arise, exactly because of the need for the above-mentioned sense of security, people will choose the political option they consider providing more stability, more predictability, more security. In other terms: a government can allow itself to make mistakes if there is no political alternative the voters can believe to be able to govern better.

In Hungary, the right-wing populist illiberal government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been in power since 2010, and Orbán’s party, Fidesz-KDNP\textsuperscript{17} has won a 2/3 supermajority in the Hungarian National Assembly in four consecutive parliamentary elections (2010, 2014, 2018, 2022). Many of the methods by which Fidesz-KDNP has been able to stay in power are more than questionable, which had partly led to Hungary becoming the only EU member state falling into the category of ‘partly free’ instead of ‘free’ in Freedom House’s Freedom in the World index in 2020\textsuperscript{18} – and the country’s score has only worsened since then. Undoubtedly, capturing the state, state bodies and institutions, strictly controlling the political narratives of supposedly independent or public service media outlets, or putting the legislative power of the parliament in the service of holding onto power have largely contributed to Fidesz-KDNP’s electoral success. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake not to consider the role legitimate factors played in Fidesz-KDNP’s ability to maintain a high level of support over the years; and one of those factors is prosperity.

Fidesz-KDNP took over governance from socialist party MSZP and liberal SZDSZ in 2010, at the beginning of the global recovery from the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009. The following years brought along the steady growth of economies worldwide, and the Hungarian economy was no exception. Aside from a little setback in 2012, the Hungarian GDP had grown continuously until the COVID-19 pandemic came along (Figure 1), and Hungarian people experienced an increase of their living standards.

\textsuperscript{14} Politico (2021)
\textsuperscript{15} BBC (2021a)
\textsuperscript{16} BBC (2021b)
\textsuperscript{17} Hungary’s governing parties are Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP); although the parties are officially separate political entities, in fact, the two have been in a symbiosis since the mid-2000s. KDNP is a de facto part of Fidesz.
\textsuperscript{18} Freedom House (2020)
Performance legitimacy has long been central to Fidesz-KDNP’s political narrative, and logically, it had an effect on Hungarian voters, too. As we elaborated above, the promises of stability and existential security are very effective when it comes to attracting political support and mobilising voters, particularly if there doesn’t seem to be a competing political alternative. The elaboration of why the Hungarian opposition wasn’t able to present a proper alternative to Fidesz-KDNP’s governance over so many years would go way beyond the scope of this study, but it can be stated without a doubt that in addition to the fragmented state of the opposition bloc, it didn’t help that one of the last memories Hungarian voters have of a non-Fidesz-KDNP government is the 2008-2009 crisis, in which several Hungarian families suffered greatly partly as a result of the flaws of previous economic policies. Fidesz-KDNP could argue for years (regardless of the argument’s validity) that if the opposition were in power, the Hungarian economy would be in ruins, but thanks to PM Orbán and his government, Hungary can enjoy the benefits of economic prosperity. And then came the COVID-19 crisis of 2020, then the Russian invasion of Ukraine, then the energy price shocks, which have fundamentally changed the economic playing field in which the Fidesz-KDNP government should prove itself – and economic data suggest that it is failing.

Over the last couple of years, we have witnessed the Hungarian economy to be in an ever-growing trouble. Even though it had been one of Fidesz-KDNP’s most important political products since its introduction in 2014, a ‘sacred cow’ of the governing parties, in 2022, the government...
had to limit the scope of its fixed household energy price policy\textsuperscript{21} (the so-called “rezsicsök-kentés”) because it had become unsustainable. Time after time, the government has had to put major investments on hold due to a lack of funds; most recently, in April 2024, Minister of Finance Mihály Varga announced the postponement of HUF650 billion (€1.7 billion) worth of state investments after the Hungarian state budget reached its annual deficit target within the first three months of the year\textsuperscript{22}. Statistics of the most recent periods also show that the Hungarian economy’s situation hasn’t only worsened, but it has been performing worse than the vast majority of other EU economies (Figure 2). The comparison is important both from an economic and from a political point of view: the Orbán government has long been attempting to blame external factors for all the economy’s problems, such as the war in Ukraine, or the European Union’s economic sanctions against Russia, but as soon as economic data from other EU member states of the region is compared to the Hungarian numbers it becomes clear that in some key indicators the Hungarian economy performed worse than similar economies under similar circumstances, which implies that there must be an intrinsic flaw in the Hungarian policies.

\textbf{Figure 2}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Annual GDP growth rate in EU Member States in 2023}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source: Statista}\textsuperscript{23}

Two major indicators of Hungarian economic troubles that have directly and severely affected the population recently have been the weakening of the Hungarian forint, and the extreme levels of inflation. The forint’s exchange rate against the euro stood at 308.59 on 2 January 2018; on 2 January 2024, it was at 382.1, and it even reached 430.65 at its weakest in October 2022 (Figure 3).

\textsuperscript{21} Official Gazette (2022)
\textsuperscript{22} Government Info (2024)
\textsuperscript{23} Statista (2023) ‘Annual real gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate in European countries in 2023’
The rate of annual inflation has been extremely high in Hungary over the last two years, and although the government communicated that it was a consequence of “Brussels’ botched decisions” in its sanctions policies towards Russia, and labelled it as “sanctions inflation”, there still has no official explanation been given for why Hungary had by far the highest inflation within the EU (Figure 4), with food price inflation being above 40% for months.

Hungary had by far the highest inflation within the EU (Figure 4), with food price inflation being above 40% for months.

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24 ECB, Euro to Hungarian Forint exchange rate history, 2 January 2018 – 2 January 2024
25 Orbán (2022)
26 Eurostat ‘Annual average inflation rates, 2014-2023’
It is fair to say that the economic hardships Hungary has had to face over the first half of the 2020s have seriously undercut the Fidesz-KDNP government’s performance legitimacy narrative. Under ideal global, or at least European circumstances, it would be possible to experience prosperity even with inefficient or inadequate national-level economic policies in place, too, as it likely used to be the case before 2020 in Hungary. In that case, the public perception of the economic situation could still be positive, which would mean that from a political aspect there weren’t any pressure on the government to improve its policies. However, as a result of the series of crises that, as we discussed above, affected virtually all the economies worldwide, Hungary – and, of course, all the other countries with underlying structural economic policy issues – lost the global safety net which could have cushioned the fall. According to opinion polls making ends meet has become the biggest problem for Hungarians, which opens up a major attack surface area on the government.

**Figure 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The costs of living are too high</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of healthcare services is low</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages are low</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption rate is very high</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The social differences between the rich and the poor are too big</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of democracy is deteriorating in the country</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees are vulnerable to their employers</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment isn’t protected enough, not enough done against climate change</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled workforce migrates abroad</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is becoming more difficult in small municipalities</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a danger of more migrants moving to the country in the future</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensions are low</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of education is low</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing prices are too high</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian influence in Hungary is big</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is too much homosexual propaganda</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Policy Solutions, 2023*
Representative surveys\textsuperscript{27} carried out by Policy Solutions\textsuperscript{28} and Republikon Institute\textsuperscript{29} in 2023 demonstrate the effects of the economic hardships on the public opinion. The Fidesz-KDNP government’s performance legitimacy narrative is crumbling not because of academic debates about the validity or efficiency of its economic policies, but because Hungarians experience major economic challenges in their everyday lives they hadn’t experienced before for more than a decade.

The question is whether Hungary’s dire economic situation and its perception by the public were sufficient conditions for the Fidesz-KDNP government to fail, and the answer to that question is no. First, Fidesz-KDNP is particularly good at pointing fingers: as we discussed above, blaming “Brussels’ sanctions” against Russia for the inflation, or accusing the European Union of arbitrarily withholding funds from Hungary because the Orbán government doesn’t want to let the “LGBTQ lobby”\textsuperscript{30} into schools are regular methods of shifting responsibility. This approach has one flaw, though: even if some voters (particularly those of the governing parties) believe that Fidesz-KDNP’s narratives are true, they only demonstrate – within their own logic – that the government is actually incapable of protecting Hungary’s interests against Brussels and against the “LGBTQ lobby”. Second, Fidesz-KDNP has created an existential threat even bigger than

\footnotesize{Source: Republikon Institute, 2023}
the economic one from which the government can protect its citizens. Since its outbreak in February 2022, the war in Ukraine quickly became the most important topic of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, of which Fidesz-KDNP claims that both the domestic opposition and the EU attempts to drag Hungary into. In other words, according to the governing parties’ narrative, it’s only Viktor Orbán’s government that can prevent Hungary from going to war with Russia – an existential threat even bigger than inflation, or the weakening of the national currency. And third, as a result of the situation of the Hungarian opposition detailed above, there is a lack of political alternative.

This doesn’t mean, however, that the actual economic problems Hungary has been facing do not pose a real threat to the right-wing populist government. Moreover, the situation can be regarded as a window of opportunity, not necessarily for a change of government in Hungary, but at least for the promotion and advocacy of alternative economic policies either at a domestic or at a European level. While there is a fair amount of ambivalence in referring to crises as windows of opportunity, it is hopefully forgivable if we think of the circumstances created by them as opportunities to put policies and mechanisms in place that contribute to the preservation of liberal democracies.

The economic developments of the recent years have demonstrated that there is a need for the state during times of crisis. Even liberal thinkers have come to the conclusion that state intervention might be reasonable, moreover: desirable as long as its aim is to protect the functioning of the free market, and to ensure its operation in the long term. “[The 2020-2021 pandemic, and the energy crisis of 2022] underscored that in times of profound crisis, passive economic stewardship can be detrimental, but also that sizeable government interventions can worsen situations. Smart rather than big government is of the essence. The pandemic, in highlighting vulnerabilities, also provided a chance to reimagine economic policies for a more resilient future.”31

In our study we have focused on the case of Hungary: the economic troubles the country has been facing over the recent years; the public perception of those hardships; and the political challenges a worsening economic situation can pose to the Fidesz-KDNP government, whose power is largely based on performance legitimacy. Yet, conclusions can be drawn not only for Hungary, but for the entire European Union, and for political actors and thinkers worldwide attempting to protect and preserve the economies, values, and freedoms of liberal democracies in times of crises and beyond. The shocks of the first half of the 2020s have shaken economies globally, and have highlighted and brought to the surface the flaws of weak economic policies. In Hungary’s case, this manifested, among others, in the weakening of the national currency, in the underperformance of the national economy in a regional and international comparison, and, probably most glaringly, in extreme levels of inflation. A window of opportunity has opened up for the advocacy of policies and mechanisms that contribute to the preservation of liberal democracies by preventing the misuse of state funds, the overextension of the state within the free

31 Sustala (2023)
market, or the attempts of political profiteering from crises. An example of such mechanisms is the Rule of law conditionality regulation (RoLCR), introduced in 2021, which is “an additional layer of protection in cases when breaches of the rule of law principles affect or risk affecting the EU financial interests”32.

While it cannot be known for sure, of course, whether the RoLCR would have been introduced if it hadn’t been for the COVID-19 crisis, the economic shock that hit the European Union and its member states arguably contributed to its coming to existence. The adoption of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and of the Next Generation EU recovery package took place in the summer of 2020, at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic, and partly as a result of the extra pressure put on the member states’ governments and on the EU’s institutions by the crisis, by November that year, following intensive trilogue meetings of the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament, a conclusive legislative draft of the RoLCR was published33. The circumstances made it more important than ever to protect the EU budget, and that helped greatly the adoption of a regulation that did so by strengthening the rule of law within the community.

Economic difficulties also contributed – and keep contributing – to the effectiveness of the RoLCR. The need for funds arriving from the European Union to Hungary has increased in direct proportion to the accumulation of the country’s economic problems, and amidst such circumstances the suspension of €6.3 billion of budgetary commitments in cohesion policy programmes under the RoLCR34, in addition to the linking of the payment of further funds to Hungary to meeting certain rule of law milestones35 proved effective in persuading the Fidesz-KDNP government to take steps into the direction of meeting EU requirements. It can legitimately be argued that the introduction and the application of the RoLCR came too late for Hungary, as the state has already long been captured by the ruling right-wing populist government36, and democratic backsliding cannot be stopped or reversed by such measures anymore. Nevertheless, it has also been proven that the RoLCR can have a positive effect on the protection of EU budget and of rule of law, and its application can contribute to the safeguarding of liberal democratic values.

Times of economic crisis create opportunities for decision makers to review the existing policy frameworks, and to plan, adopt, and apply policies that support their communities (from municipal governments to international organisations), and make them more resilient to future shocks. The inclusion of principles, ideas, and approaches in those policies that are key to protecting liberal democratic values is not only possible, but essential, as they also guarantee the efficiency of such policies by reducing the possibility that either the extra funds made available for crisis management, or the extra political power a state of emergency might endow a government or certain political leaders with are misused for the benefit of a particular political or business in-

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32 European Commission
33 Kirst (2021)
34 European Council (2022)
35 European Commission (2023)
36 Black Book II – Corruption and State Capture in Hungary (2021)
terest group. Prioritising local knowledge and expertise over centralised solutions (in line with the European Union’s principle of subsidiarity), or urging governments to take more targeted measures, when necessary, instead of distorting the free market by excessive state interventions, for example, are import not only from an economic point of view, but they are essential instruments of protecting liberal democracies.

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ATTITUDES OF HUNGARIAN SOCIETY TOWARDS GENDER ROLES – AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

1. Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that gender differences today are multifaceted and influenced by a combination of biological, social, cultural, and environmental factors. The overall societal view of male-female roles does not necessarily reflect the fundamentally more modern gender perceptions of individuals, so a nation may still be more dominated by traditional, conventional values. This can represent a potential tension in the relationship between the individual and society, be it women’s career plans, family planning, displaying a ‘double ambition’ (Pongrácz - S Molnár, 2011). Attitudes towards gender roles are a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that relates to at least two different dimensions: the imbalance of power between women and men, and the sphere in which these roles are manifested (privately or public) (Constantin - Voicu, 2015). A highly visible example of the balance of power between men and women in the public sphere is politics. Women are globally underrepresented at all levels of politics. The aim of our research is to empirically explore certain attitudes towards gender roles and stereotypes, emphasizing questions regarding women’s political potentiation.

2. Methodology

Our research is based on the Eurobarometer 2017 survey, which was carried out in 28 European countries, and a significant proportion of the questions deal with gender issues. Salaries, unpaid work within the family, social perceptions, gender skills and strengths, are all included. Using various demographic indicators, we examine the attitudes of Hungarian society towards certain female stereotypes, the perception of women at the political level and the need for gender equality in the field. The results in Hungary will then be compared with European averages and with the averages of the other V4 countries. Our variable selection criteria were to focus...
gender differences as much as possible on political participation. These variables were compared with important demographic characteristics such as gender, age group, size of municipality, employment, and political preference on a scale from left to right. Statistical analysis was performed in SPSS.

3. Analysis

3.1 Analysis of gender equality attitudes within Hungary along demographic groups

Of the gender stereotypes that were questioned, seven relevant ones are highlighted in our research according to our topic. One is that women are more likely to make decisions based on emotion than men. Based on the results from Hungary, 87% of respondents tend to agree or strongly agree with this statement (Figure 1). We also see no striking differences of opinion across different demographic groups. Young people under 29, entrepreneurs, left-leaning individuals, and those living in large cities are the most likely to strongly disagree with the statement, but they also constitute only 5% of their own group.

Figure 1. Women are more likely than men to make decisions based on their emotions

*Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungarian results, n=1105*
The other question we have examined is that the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family. Overall, there are fewer people who agree with the statement, with 77% agreeing with it. Older age groups, and therefore pensioners and those who consider themselves right-wing, were more likely to believe that a woman’s primary role is to look after the family and the home. These groups also generally hold more conservative values.

**Figure 2.** The most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family

The other five questions are mainly based on politically relevant stereotypes. Starting with the statement that women are less interested than men in positions of responsibility in politics. Overall, far fewer people fully agree with the statement than with the previous ones. Women, centrists, people living in large cities, and entrepreneurs are the most likely to think that it is not true that women are less interested in political positions of responsibility. Among them, the ratio is approximately 50-50.
Figure 3. Women are less interested than men in positions of responsibility in politics.

It is certainly worth reflecting on the reasons for the low participation of women in politics. The next question to be analyzed concerns women’s unpaid work at home which potentially eclipses their ambitions, and freedom. The highest percentages of those who fully agree with the statement are women, older people over 65 and, correspondingly, retired citizens. There may be generational reasons for this higher ratio, as gender equality may have changed in the last 40 years, so a woman having children today may have more freedom, especially as it is becoming more acceptable for fathers to stay at home with the children. But regardless of this, Hungarian society as a whole agrees that women still have less freedom today.
Figure 4. Women have less freedom because of their family and responsibilities

When the question arises whether women do not have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility in politics, 58% of the people reject this stereotype (Figure 5). Only 3 groups reached over 15% of respondents who completely agree that women are less qualified than men: those who identify themselves as right-wing, men and the unemployed.

, Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungarian results, n=1105
Figure 5. Women do not have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility in politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Tend to agree</th>
<th>Tend to disagree</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>30-39</td>
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<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungarian results, n=1105

Fewer of the male-centered stereotypes were asked, of which the most relevant for our topic are whether men are more ambitious than women, and whether the political landscape is dominated by men who lack confidence in women. The results of the former (Figure 6) indicate that 58% of people think men are actually more ambitious. Those who disagree most are mainly women, 30-39 years old, self-employed, left-wing and people living in rural areas.
The question of whether political life is dominated by men who don’t have confidence in women presents a much more balanced picture. A majority (66%) agree with this statement, and we do not see differences of opinion of more than a few percent across different social groups. The response option of ‘tend to agree’ was the most popular, with only under 10% of those who would completely disagree with the statement.

In a representative, in-person survey conducted by TÁRKI in 2010, which looked at the barriers to women’s equality, 53.9% of respondents said that the overwhelming majority of politicians are men was the biggest problem, but 50% also said that too few women in decision-making positions was the major problem. Following these two problems in order of importance was the ‘double burden’ of women having to take on not only work but also home responsibilities, generally in higher proportions than men (Tátrai, 2010). These findings are consistent with our findings that the majority of society believes that women have less freedom because of domestic responsibilities and that the political sphere is overwhelmingly dominated by men.
After examining stereotypical attitudes, we looked at how people in the country perceive the situation of women and men in their country at the political level. In this section, we focused on gender equality, how people in their countries think equality has been achieved, including in leadership positions and politics. Linked to this is the question of how important they think it is to promote gender inequality in politics, and how different genders perform in political positions.

In the following, we compared whether gender equality is achieved in leadership and political positions in Hungary (Figure 8, 9). We get very similar, almost identical results for both questions, not only overall, but also when looking at different social groups. 47% of people think equality is achieved in leadership positions and 36% in politics. This is about in line with the real picture – maybe even a little low percentage – as research showing that the representation of women in politics has been notoriously low and static for a long time now, and that this is threatening democratic norms in Hungary. In relation to the low presence of women in politics, it should be noted that the descriptive representation of women in Hungary has stayed under 10% for eight parliamentary elections from 1990 until 2018. This makes Hungary the only...
Central and Eastern European democracy with such a low level of representation, while the average share of women parliamentarians in the other post-communist EU Member States has increased to 21.6% (Ilonszki - Vajda, 2019).

**Figure 8.** Do you think that gender equality has been achieved in Hungary in leadership positions in companies and organizations?

![Bar chart showing the percentage of people who think gender equality has been achieved in Hungary in leadership positions.](chart)

*Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungarian results, n=1105*
People’s views on the importance of gender equality in a democracy are almost in complete agreement, with 93% of respondents indicating that it is essential (Figure 10). However, on the issue of gender balance, only 63% said there should be more women in political decision-making positions in Hungary, according to 33% of respondents the current number of women is about right. Only minimal percentage of people believing that fewer women are needed in politics (<5%) (Figure 11).
Figure 10. Promoting gender equality is important to ensure a fair and democratic society

Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungarian results, n=1105
On the issue of cross-gender comparisons, on how a woman and a man can advocate the respondents interests as political representatives, women are considered marginally more competent (Figure 12, 13). Overall, respondents think that the representative of their gender is more likely to represent their interests. There are no such differences in the other demographic groups, all of which show that women are slightly better at representing people’s interests in political positions. This may be consistent with the findings of previous questions that women are more empathetic and caring. The respondent’s perception that it is socially right and expected not to marginalise women or make negative assumptions about them may be a factor in the distribution of the latter questions.
Figure 12. Do you think that a female political representative can represent your interest?

Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungarian results, n=1105

Figure 13. Do you think that a male political representative can represent your interest?

Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungarian results, n=1105
3.2. International comparison from a gender equality perspective

The international assessment of stereotypes (Table 1) revealed that in Hungary there is a much higher proportion of people who believe that women tend to make decisions based on their feelings and that women should take care of the family according to the majority. This proportion is also higher in the V4 countries than in the EU countries, but is still lower than in Hungary. On the issue of women's responsibility is the family, and the home, the EU countries are much more dismissive, with 47%, while the Hungarian and V4 countries are more than half that, at 21%.

While 60% in Hungary and 56% in the V4 countries think that women are less interested in political positions, in the EU the figure is only 41%, and the proportion of those who explicitly reject this statement is twice as high as in Hungary, at 23%. The proportion of those who say that women have less freedom because of family and other responsibilities is particularly high in Hungary, with the EU figure being 26% of those who strongly agree with the statement, compared to 46% in Hungary, but when looking at those who agree overall, the figure is 89% in Hungary compared to 73% in the EU, and higher than the EU average at 82% in the V4 countries.

Overall, in all the countries surveyed, there is a general agreement that women have a greater burden of family responsibilities at home. As we examined earlier, more than half of people in Hungary think this is correct, with 77% saying that women have a responsibility to look after the family and home. This is more divided in the EU as a whole, with half of people agreeing (51%). The majority of society, however, disagrees that women do not have the skills needed to pursue a political career, especially in the EU. In Hungary, 13% strongly agree that they do not have the necessary skills, but in the V4 and EU countries this figure is only half of that at 6%. However, more than half of respondents in Hungary, 58%, also tend to disagree that there is a problem with skills, but in the EU the figure is much higher at 81%, of which 51% strongly disagree, with the V4 countries’ results not significantly different from the EU average on this issue. Fewer stereotypes about men appeared in the questionnaire, one being that men are more ambitious, with 58% of Hungarians agreeing, compared to 42% in the EU and 48% in the V4 countries. Again, the proportion of those who completely disagree is almost twice as high in the EU (24%) as in Hungary (13%) or the V4 countries (16%). Many studies show that politics is mainly male-dominated (Tátrai, 2010), and this is the question where there is the greatest consistency between the countries studied, with no significant difference between the V4 and the EU, but in Hungary the proportion of those who think that politics is entirely male-dominated is twice as high (40%), the proportion of those who tend to agree is 45%, although this proportion is similar in the V4 and EU countries, so this is another issue that people across countries perceive as a present issue.
Table 1. International comparison of stereotyping issues examined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Totally agree</th>
<th>Tend to agree</th>
<th>Tend to disagree</th>
<th>Totally disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HU EU avg.</td>
<td>HU EU avg.</td>
<td>HU EU avg.</td>
<td>HU EU avg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are more likely to decide emotion based</td>
<td>46 29 30</td>
<td>41 45 53</td>
<td>9 16 13</td>
<td>2 8 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women should take care of home/family</td>
<td>37 22 30</td>
<td>40 31 48</td>
<td>15 24 18</td>
<td>6 23 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are less interested in political positions</td>
<td>20 10 14</td>
<td>40 31 42</td>
<td>28 36 34</td>
<td>12 23 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women have less freedom because of their family</td>
<td>46 26 31</td>
<td>43 47 51</td>
<td>10 19 15</td>
<td>2 8 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women do not have the necessary skills for politics</td>
<td>13 6 6</td>
<td>29 14 17</td>
<td>32 30 42</td>
<td>26 51 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men are more ambitious</td>
<td>23 15 19</td>
<td>35 28 29</td>
<td>29 34 36</td>
<td>13 24 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics is dominated by men who do not have sufficient confidence</td>
<td>40 23 22</td>
<td>45 43 47</td>
<td>13 25 25</td>
<td>2 9 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Equality in leadership and political positions do not differ as much as when stereotypes are examined (Table 2). Overall, gender equality is thought to be more likely to be achieved in leadership positions than in politics in Hungary, but not in the EU and V4 countries. In the EU, 50% think there is equality in leadership positions, the same in the V4 countries and only a few percentage points lower in Hungary (47%). According to the EU, 55% of EU countries have gender equality in politics, 47% in the V4 countries, but only 36% in Hungary, which has one of the lowest proportions of women in parliament and among government officials.

Table 2. Do you think gender equality has been achieved in your country in leadership positions, and in politics?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equality achieved in leadership positions</th>
<th>Yes, definitely</th>
<th>Yes, to some extent</th>
<th>No, not really</th>
<th>No, not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender EQ achieved in leadership positions</td>
<td>8 11 10</td>
<td>39 39 40</td>
<td>37 35 35</td>
<td>17 14 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In politics</td>
<td>7 14 10</td>
<td>29 41 37</td>
<td>38 32 36</td>
<td>25 13 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importance of gender equality in a democracy is a priority in all the areas examined. The EU has the highest proportion of people who fully agree on the importance of this, with 55%. However, overall 93% agrees in both Hungary and the EU, and 90% in V4 countries.
Table 3. Promoting gender equality is important to ensure a fair and democratic society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HU</th>
<th>EU avg.</th>
<th>V4 (excl. HU)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Totally agree</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to agree</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totally disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungary, all countries examined (EU), V4 countries excluding Hungary.*

The majority globally agrees that more women should be in politics, but the highest percentage is in Hungary, where the proportion of women is the lowest. The percentage of people who think there are enough women is the highest in the V4 countries (44%).

Table 4. In your opinion, which of the following statements regarding the number of women currently in political decision-making positions in your country applies best?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HU</th>
<th>EU avg.</th>
<th>V4 (excl. HU)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There should be more women</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The current number of women is about right</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be fewer women</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungary, all countries examined (EU), V4 countries excluding Hungary.*

On the question of whether male and female representatives adequately represent the interests of respondents, the results are the same for all three groups surveyed. In the EU 87% agree that a male political representative can represent their interest totally or somewhat, in Hungary it is the same ratio, in the V4 it is not much less, 86%. However, women are considered to be slightly more suitable to represent their interest. Although the proportion is the same in Hungary, the proportion of those who think their interests are fully represented by women is higher.

Table 5. Do you think that a female/male political representative can represent your interest?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>male</th>
<th>female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HU</td>
<td>EU avg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, totally</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, somewhat</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, not really</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, not at all</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Eurobarometer, 2017, Hungary, all countries examined (EU), V4 countries excluding Hungary.*
4. Conclusions

The main objective of our research was to explore certain attitudes related to gender roles and stereotypes in Hungary, with a strong focus on issues related to women’s political potency, and to compare them with all EU and V4 countries. In line with the relevant publications, we found that, in Hungary, a higher proportion of people think that more women are needed in politics, that women have less freedom because of their responsibilities at home, and that even if they wanted to, they would find it harder to enter politics, despite having the skills to do so. Possibly also because of the male-dominated nature of the profession, a point on which society is almost unanimously agreed. One example of this is that in 2022, 14% of members of parliament in Hungary were women, while the V4 countries average was 25 (excluding Hungary). The EU average is much higher than these rates, at 33%. The stereotypes we examined also showed us that compared to the EU and even the V4 countries, people in Hungary tend to have a conservative opinion of women’s responsibilities in the family and their political interest.

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Chapter 2

POLARISATION, PROTEST, POPULIST COMMUNICATION
EMBRACING THE DEMOCRATIC DANCE: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX TERRAIN OF MODERN DEMOCRACY

Democracy faces an urgent and pressing crisis. The global trend toward authoritarianism is on the rise, evidenced by the popularity of populist political leaders and by an increasing number of countries veering away from democratic principles. Populist parties have increasingly achieved positions of power, such as the PVV in the Netherlands, PiS in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary, and VOX in Spain. Political scientists see a new radical right and populist wave. Fears are growing that national trends will translate into a right-wing populist front within the European Union in 2024’s European Parliament elections. The 2022 World Values Survey of 77 countries showed that only 47 percent support the idea that democracy is important, versus 52 percent five years before. Support for “strong leaders” had risen from 38 percent in 2009 to 50 percent in 2021. Although democracy remains the main form of government in Europe, its performance is stagnant. Nearly half (43 percent) of democracies in Europe — a total of 17 countries — have suffered erosion in the last five years. These declines affect 46 percent of the high-performing democracies. Studies show democratic backsliding is more likely under populists.

This democratic decay coincides with an all-time low in trust, extending to so-called high-trust societies like the Netherlands where political trust and satisfaction with democracy are on the decline. Across the EU, trust in institutions such as the EU, national governments, the police and news media is eroding (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2018). Trust in government especially has fallen more than 10 percent between 2020 and 2022 (Eurofound, 2022).

Simultaneously, citizens increasingly disengage from electoral politics to express political views, values, and beliefs. While recent years have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of diverse forms of political protest, and activism, thriving extensively both in physical spaces and across various digital platforms. Protest movements have erupted across the globe. Take the Arab Spring in the MENA area, where a wave of protests attempted to take down authoritarian regimes. Or, a more recent example, the wave of protests in Germany, in resisting the rise of authoritarian tendencies of the AfD. In fact, a wave of more than 12,500 protests across 148 countries in 2022 over food, fuel, cost of living, climate, women’s rights, farmers, and...
democracy have erupted across the globe (Politico 2023\textsuperscript{47}). Notably, most European youth (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2017) consider participating in these forms of protest politics equal to, or more effective, than voting (Eurobarometer Youth Survey 2021).

It is argued that while citizens increasingly disengage from traditional party politics and voting as a way to express political views, values and beliefs, recent years have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of diverse forms of political protest, social and artistic movements, and activism, thriving extensively both in physical spaces and across various digital platforms.

With this potential shift from party politics to protest politics, interaction between governments and citizens and the arenas where this takes place might undergo substantive changes, potentially bypassing democratic checks and balances in place within formal representative institutions. Indeed, different governments react differently to these protests. Due to democratic backsliding, there is a fear that government responses become more authoritarian worldwide, affecting democracy further in a downward circle.

The convergence of these trends underscores a pressing and practical societal need for insights that help societies to understand changes in democratic engagement and their impact on democracy altogether, in relation to rising and established populism in democracies across the world (cf. Baggio et al., 2023). I maintain that as a reaction to the growing realisation that democratic engagement is changing and that, in order to avoid new democratic deficits – or de-democratization (cf. Castañeda & Jenks, 2023) – democratic societies must better understand the shift from electoral towards protest politics, and especially their impact on democracies worldwide.

However, halting democratic decay demands more than a comprehensive grasp of protest activities. Indeed, it takes two to tango. I hold that a deep analysis of the effects of a shift from electoral to protest politics on democracy should include the often-neglected aspect of reactions by political parties, in government and opposition. Do they ignore, repress, or absorb protests? A profound understanding of doing democracy – the performance of what I coin the democratic dance – requires a thorough analysis of the democratic interaction between citizens and governments. Therefore, I argue that there is a pressing academic need for a rigorous, comprehensive, comparative framework accounting for citizens’ varied attempts to influence politics, and how these attempts impact democracy. Understanding this ‘Democratic Dance’ requires a dual focus:

- Grasping the potential shifts in democratic engagement and their impact on democracy over time and across nations.
- An in-depth understanding of’ absorptive capacities of political actors in response to these dynamics.

1. A comprehensive understanding of democratic engagement

To understand if, and in case yes why, a shift from electoral to protest is taking place, we need to know what makes individuals choose one type of activity over the other. However, while the relationship between electoral and protest politics has been theorised at the macro-level (e.g. Hutter, 2010) it is rarely studied at the individual level. This is remarkable given that the theoretical and empirical expectations as to what drives both electoral and protest participation overlap significantly (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). Research that combines electoral and protest politics within one unified framework is urgently needed to understand changes in democratic engagement. There are only a handful of studies combining electoral and protest politics within a single framework, and they all come with limitations. To start with Barnes and Kaase’s (1979) classic study on democratic engagement; since then, the socio-political world has changed profoundly and so has democratic engagement, coined as the expansion of the repertoire of political participation (Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018). Moreover, these studies include only a small number of countries (Hutter, 2010; Teorell et al., 2007), or only Western democracies (Morales, 2009). A deep understanding of the evolution of democratic engagement requires, by definition, comparative research through time and across different democratic landscapes. These studies, finally, examine a limited set of independent and/or dependent variables (Norris, 2011; Teorell et al., 2007; Van der Meer & Van Ingen, 2009). Participation repertoires are extensive and vary significantly over time and across countries. Conventional large survey projects, constrained by the need for questionnaire continuity, often restrict participants to reporting on a limited set of behaviours. Consequently, we know that many different arrangements between electoral and protest politics exist, but a large share of oppositional activities remains under the research radar, and our knowledge of the conditions and mechanisms that make individuals end up in the one arrangement or the other, is limited.

One of the key transformations in political participation, in the past decades, worldwide, is that institutional forms of engagement, e.g. voting, have decreased while innovative, non-institutional modes of political engagement, like protest, have increased (Theocharis & de Moor, 2021). In essence, citizens’ participation repertoires have become more varied, with institutional political involvement, such as working for a political party, increasingly accompanied by activities operating beyond the realm of political institutions, such as engaging in protests or participating in product boycotts (e.g. Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Oser, 2022).

Political participation assumes a central role in normative conceptions of liberal democracies (Strömbäck, 2005). However, scholars hold varying perspectives on which forms of participation are instrumental in establishing a healthy democracy. Within a representative model
of democracy, such assessments primarily revolve around the institutional sphere of politics (Tormey, 2014), with citizen participation often exclusively tied to electoral turnout or party membership (Ercan & Gagnon, 2014).

But when only a limited set of institutional activities is considered indicative of an engaged citizenry, it is likely to result in biased evaluations of democratic society’s functionality (Theocharis & de Moor, 2021). Indeed, the well-being of a democracy is determined not only by what happens during elections, but also by what happens between them. Consequently, more and more scholars have drawn attention to political behaviours ‘after the ballot box’ (Portos, 2019). In contemporary democracies, citizens increasingly participate in activities that can be deemed political but are not necessarily state-associated or facilitated (Dalton 2008). Instead, these non-institutional modes of action actively challenge the established institutional order (Theocharis & van Deth 2018; van Deth 2014). Moreover, it is of utmost importance that we understand why citizens opt for what type of political activity, and thus the relationship between these engagements and trust in and the effectiveness of electoral processes and the perceptions about democratic legitimacy in general. We should analyse the evolution of diverse oppositional forms (protest, cultural opposition, non-compliance, activism) across physical and online platforms including the drivers and factors that play a role in fostering such forms of politics.

These above-mentioned shifts have been explicitly recognized in the work of Theocharis and van Deth (2018) as what they define as the expansion of the repertoire of political participation. I therefore follow Theocharis and van Deth (2018) and van Deth (2014) to define political participation as voluntary behaviours done by citizens that are either located in or targeted at the sphere of government, state, or politics; aimed at solving collective or community problems; used to express political aims or intentions; or are occurring in a political context. This definition explicitly recognizes the existence of different types of political participation.

Based on this reasoning, I suggest to conceive of democratic engagement as a set of activities, i.e. individual repertoires of participation, rather than electoral and protest activities separate. I propose individual repertoires of political participation – defined as how individuals combine these different types of participation – as a tool to map potential shifts from electoral to protest politics over time and across different democratic landscapes to identify what accounts for choosing the one democratic activity over the other.
2. A comprehensive understanding of absorptive capacities of political actors

A profound understanding of the democratic implications of a shift from electoral to protest politics requires not only a focus on citizens’ actions but also on the democratic interaction between citizens and political actors. Understanding this democratic dance, citizen’s actions and political actors’ reactions, is a necessity to not only understand shifts in forms of democratic engagement but also in identifying the democratic implications. This knowledge, I argue, is vital for shaping responsive governance, promoting inclusive democratic processes, rebuilding trust, and advancing democratic theory and practice.

From the outset, it has “virtually [been] a truism among sociologists that political action affects policy” (Burstein & Linton, 2002, p. 383), whereas “political scientists have tended to view social movements as ineffectual, stressing instead the role of elections and public opinion as the main popular mechanisms mediating policy shifts” (McAdam & Su, 2002, p. 697). Consequently, we already have rich literature about political parties’ responsiveness during crises (Karremans, 2021) as well as to citizens’ alternative forms of political activity (Alemanno & Nicolaidis, 2022). However, Giugni et al. note in their seminal book “How movements matter” how important, and difficult, it is to understand movements’ outcomes (Giugni et al., 1999). Hence, we know little about the conjunction between citizens’ protest and political parties’ responses and the democratic implications have not been systematically studied so far. Important though, with a shift from electoral politics to protest politics, the interaction between governments and citizens and the arenas where this takes place is undergoing substantive changes. Hence, key aspects of this knowledge gap include the potential effects on citizens’ democratic representation, policymaking, and the overall responsiveness and accountability of democratic governance.

How do political actors, in government and opposition, respond to the voiced claims? Do they facilitate the protests, ignore them or do they repress them, and in which ways? Social movement scholars working from a political opportunity structure perspective have analysed the national and local political context in terms of threats and opportunities to explain the presence and absence of collective action (Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; Meyer, 2003). A political opportunity structure (POS) has been defined as the circumstances surrounding a political landscape. However, Tarrow (1998) argues it is misleading, as most opportunities need to be perceived and are situational, not structural (see also Gamson & Meyer, 1996). Political opportunity structures are prone to change and can alter in days or last for decades, as observed during the Arab Spring. Two main dimensions of political opportunity have been stressed in the literature to facilitate and/or inhibit protests (McAdam et al., 1996): (1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalised political system, and (2) political actors’ capacity and propensity for repression.
These two political opportunity dimensions form the backbone of my conceptual reasoning to relate political actors’ actions to citizens’ collective actions. How do policies and practices of political actors – be it national or local, official or street level bureaucrats influence democratic erosion and impact citizen engagement in the political process? How resilient is civil society in the face of oppressive governance, including its capacity to mobilise, adapt, and advocate for democratic values? The more open a POS, the more political actors are expected to absorb the agenda of collective action. The closer the POS, the more political actors are expected to ignore the claims, and not act upon the agenda of collective action.

The second dimension, political actors’ capacity and propensity for repression, translates to facilitation or suppression of protests, “typically [seen as] a marker of repression”\textsuperscript{48}, is on the one hand enacted on by political actors themselves. For instance, by implementing measures or laws that facilitate or suppress protest, internet shutdown/censorship, or stigmatisation of protesters\textsuperscript{49}. On the other hand, this is assigned to law enforcement officials who have, as instrumentalised governance (Gilmore et al., 2019), a dual role here (Curtice & Behlendorf, 2021). As guardians of public safety providing law and order, they have the responsibility to facilitate protest, at the same time they are the primary instrument to implement (sometimes violently) repression to these protests (Davenport et al., 2019). Important, the policing style used in the streets, is not necessarily a one-to-one translation as instructed by authorities, it follows its own ‘policing politics’ (cf. Curtice & Behlendorf, 2021). This makes the role of policing actors and protest policing a crucial, additional, indicator of the extent to which political actors enact their capacity and propensity for facilitation/suppression of protest. Analyse policing politics and strategies as employed during protests and civic dissent and participation, in order to assess how police implement political parties’ positions towards protests.

### 3. A comprehensive understanding of democratic implications

In times of growing concerns about unequal democratic representation (Traber et al., 2022), the two contrasting trends create a significant worry. This is because the decline in electoral politics is particularly among lower-status groups, while we see increased non-electoral participation especially among higher-status groups (Oser, 2022). These concerning trends coincide with new evidence of worrying backsliding in democratic functioning (Maatsch & Miklin, 2021), and marginalised and discriminated groups facing more barriers to protest by restrictions on their right to protest and harsher repression\textsuperscript{50}. Thus, a higher exit from electoral politics combined with higher barriers to voice in protest politics creates a double challenge of non-representation for

\textsuperscript{48} Human Rights Committee, General comment 37 on the right of peaceful assembly (article 21), 17 September 2020, CCPR/C/GC/37, paras 1-2.
\textsuperscript{49} Amnesty International 2022
\textsuperscript{50} Amnesty International 2022
marginalised groups. Currently, our understanding of the participation/representation link is surprisingly limited. Consequently, it is essential to investigate (new) democratic deficits and scrutinise the democratic implications of shifting democratic engagement on representation patterns.

The vitality of a democracy hinges not solely on politically active citizens but, crucially, on the synergy between such active citizens and the presence of a responsive and accountable government. Indeed, it takes two to tango. **Responsiveness** entails the government’s ability to address citizens’ needs and concerns promptly. This relates to what I defined ‘absorptivity’, indicating to what extent political actors react and answer to the claims voiced in the non-electoral arena. For these participatory models to operate democratically, political actors must demonstrate responsiveness not only to electoral engagement but also to the diverse spectrum of non-electoral participatory channels. Democracy goes beyond law and governance, and must be cultivated and embodied continuously (Boutellier, 2021). The multifaceted nature of this challenge underscores the critical need for comprehensive and nuanced approaches to democratic governance.

Third, democratic **accountability**, defined as to what extent governance is equated with answerability, culpability, liability, and the expectation of account-giving. It is argued that new forms of citizen involvement usually have administrative rather than political origins (Warren, 2011). Administrators are typically seeking citizen input rather than citizen empowerment in decision making. This feeling of ‘not being taken seriously’ is said to occur even more frequently when citizens decide to take a stand on an issue themselves (Verloo, 2020). Predominantly because, so Verloo, political actors seem less responsive when it is not the government inviting them, but when citizens themselves decide to protest as ‘unsolicited input’. In terms of democratic outcomes, it is important for citizens to know that they can ‘rule’ via the ballots, and the streets. The absence of democratic accountability can exacerbate disaffection, as citizens may find themselves participating in engagement efforts only to witness decisions being made elsewhere and for reasons unrelated to their input (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Under these circumstances, more participation can, paradoxically, decrease rather than increase democratic legitimacy.

### 4. In conclusion

The democratic landscape is facing a multifaceted crisis characterised by the rise of authoritarianism, declining trust in institutions, and a shift from electoral politics to protest politics. The surge of populist parties and the erosion of democratic principles across Europe and beyond highlight the urgency of addressing these challenges. Furthermore, the decline in electoral participation, coupled with increased activism and protest movements, underscores the evolving nature of democratic engagement.
To navigate this complex terrain, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses both individual repertoires of political participation and the absorptive capacities of political actors. By understanding the dynamics between citizens’ actions and political responses, we can better grasp the implications for democratic representation, governance, and accountability. Moreover, this nuanced understanding is essential for fostering responsive governance, rebuilding trust, and advancing democratic theory and practice.

In light of these pressing concerns, there is a critical need for rigorous research that transcends traditional boundaries and examines the evolving nature of democratic engagement across different contexts. By shedding light on the ‘Democratic Dance’ between citizens and political actors, we can pave the way for informed policies and practices that uphold democratic values and promote inclusive participation. Ultimately, safeguarding democracy requires a concerted effort to address the root causes of democratic decay and foster a vibrant, resilient democratic culture that empowers citizens and ensures their voices are heard.

5. References


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Chapter 3

FROM THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN STAGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ARENA: THE FUTURE OF A LIBERAL WORLD ORDER
ARE THE BAD GUYS WINNING?
THE CHALLENGE OF AUTOCRACY
AND THE GLOBAL SOLIDARITY
OF DEMOCRATS

In her famous article\textsuperscript{52} of December 2021, ‘on the eve’ of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Anne Applebaum stated that, while the 2nd half of the 20th century saw the victory of liberal democracy in several phases, culminating in 1989, the 21st century so far has been rather a success story for autocrats.

Let that sink in, then ask what makes autocrats so successful at the moment – and finally come to some counterstrategies for democrats.

1. The Global Backslide

As in all crises human, here, too, the road to recovery begins by recognising the depth of the problem. After the decay of communism in the 1980s, the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, democratic optimism, and actually a global breakthrough for electoral democracy, the market economy and open society followed. According to the US NGO Freedom House, however, since 2006, the trend has reversed and democratic backsliding\textsuperscript{53} has begun on a massive scale: In 2024, we are in the 18th year of democratic decline. The world has fewer and fewer free countries.

The most spectacular examples of countries which have become full-blown autocracies – while the expectation in the 2000s was exactly the opposite – are Russia and China. Those two are the leaders of a whole ‘New Axis of Evil’ with Iran and North Korea, followed by a whole bunch of lesser autocracies and hybrid systems such as Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Belarus, Myanmar, the Huthis in Yemen and Hamas and Hezbollah. The triangle of globally relevant actual and potential major conflicts at the moment is formed by Russia/Ukraine/NATO in Europe, Israel/Hamas/Hezbollah/Iran in the Middle East and – potentially – China/Taiwan/Japan/US in the Indo-Pacific. In all three theatres, the new axis of autocracies faces the Global West with a re-
visionist intention of undoing the progress that democracy has made in the first 15 years after the end of the Cold War.

We now recognise the hubris of 1989: Taking Central Europe for the rest of the world. Even Central Europe doesn’t look that fresh anymore. And, to be honest, even Western Europe and North America don’t look that fresh anymore, when looking at Trump and the recent successes of national populists across the EU. As the fashionable Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek once said: 9/11 was the end of the dream of global democracy, the 2008 financial crisis was the end of the dream of global capitalism.

But before we fall into complete despair, let’s rather look at the characteristics of the world’s new autocracies – in order to develop counterstrategies.

### 2. Autocracy Inc.

From Xi Jinping to Vladimir Putin, the world’s leading autocrats have learned from the mistakes of 20th century dictators, particularly Central and Eastern Europe’s communists in the 1980s. The ‘colour revolutions’ of the 2000s and the Arab Spring in 2011 and 2012 also figure prominently as warnings to autocrats. They have concluded that, first of all, ‘giving in’ to demands for democratisation opens the road to regime change. They understand that Western democracies are a threat to them not for what they do but for what they are: free countries – they give the citizens of autocracies the ‘wrong ideas’, quite literally. That is why in autocrats’ eyes, the West has to be undermined at a very fundamental level. They have learned to utilise technology for regime security. The have learned that narratives have to be built that go beyond Marxism-Leninism, even beyond ideology as such. And they have learned that mutual help in propping up otherwise moribund regimes is essential.

Modern autocracies have one overarching common interest: regime survival; staying in power. This is not only subordinate to ideology (even in countries where the regime does subscribe to a historically evolved idea such as Marxism-Leninism) but it is even subordinate to economic expediency – which has come as a surprise in recent years to many China-watchers, for example, who believed that lifting the country out of poverty and creating prosperity for the highest possible number were the foremost goals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Once the supreme goal – regime survival – is established, to fight anything that could endanger it, such as democrats and democratic forces at home as well as across the world, becomes the next goal in line. The third step, following from the second, is the global strategy of revising the liberal world order – because the free flow of goods, people and ideas in all directions, as well as the anti-imperial bias of the current international system make it much harder to fight democracy.

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54 [Slavoj Zizek Hardtalk 1/3 (youtube.com)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=)
than a neo-imperial world of zones of influence and one-sided dependencies in which, ultimately, might is right.

Modern autocracies help each other survive in fundamental ways (so that Anne Applebaum speaks of ‘Autocracy Inc.‘):

- most obviously in the economy – through trade among state-owned enterprises and financial assistance.

- The same is true on military matters, by selling weapons (latest example: North Korean ammunition and Iranian drones for Russia’s war against Ukraine) and often enough through direct military/intelligence/police intervention (as in the case Russia keeping Lukashenka in power in Belarus since 2020).

- Technology also plays a role, as we see in Chinese exports of facial recognition software to autocratic governments across the entire world.

- Utilising social media for information warfare and the transport of narratives has become a Russian specialty and ever since the pandemic of 2020, China has copied many pages from the Russian rulebook.

- Finally, the leading autocracies of the world are, together, time and again trying to mobilise wider groups of countries (mostly from the ‘Global South’) against the West under the banner of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. The Hamas massacre of 7 October 2023 as well as Iran’s hybrid war against Israel are good examples of this. While the Global South had begun to doubt its initial equidistance between Russia and Ukraine after some very smart lobbying by the Ukrainian government in the wake of February 2022, after October 7, 2023 and the Western support for Israel, Western hypocrisy seemed clear.

Moreover, autocrats (including those inside the West, like Viktor Orbán) have begun to mobilise some meta-narratives which are currently at work in the entire world:

- First of all, there is the self-defined victimhood at the hands of a liberalism that has turned illiberal itself: wokeness and cancel culture. In this way, it is not autocracy which is constantly crossing red lines but a liberalism running amok. Autocrats pretend to stand for traditional values from the position of the underdog, fighting a worldwide conspiracy of progressive elites.

- Second, autocrats like to reverse the past-future narrative of liberals. To us, Viktor Orbán looks like a figure from the 19th century. But to him, all of us liberals are something like hippies from the 1970s: a temporary aberration. Whereas the future, the 21st century, belongs to him. Similarly, Xi Jinping and Putin are convinced that the West is in terminal decline. But it is still deemed dangerous enough to require constant undermining.

- Third, autocracy is strongly rooted in what US historian Timothy Snyder55 calls the ‘poli-

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55 Cf. Timothy Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America, New York 2018
tics of eternity’. If liberals tend to conceive of world history in a teleological way as progress which happens no matter what humans actually do (the ‘politics of inevitability’), autocrats ultimately suggest that nothing ever really changes. Boys will be boys and superpowers will be superpowers, with their respective spheres of influence. It’s a cynical view but spreads easily in an atmosphere of general malaise. Democrats should, however, not neglect human agency and never assume that anything is inevitable.

But, finally: Autocracy Inc. has its limits:

• There is no such thing as nationalist internationalism: While autocrats and national populists may be able to agree on fighting global liberal elites and wokeness, autocracies and national populists in neighbouring countries with a painful history often regularly end up fighting each other. Precisely because there is no clearly defined ideology connecting autocrats and national populists across the world, Russia and China are not genuinely friends (despite the Xi-Putin bromance) and in the European Parliament, for example German and Polish or Hungarian and Romanian nationalists have a hard time even sitting in the same Group.

• Increasing oppression is a one-way street: Once a regime has gone as far as Putin’s, it is impossible to relax the pressure without risking collapse. But the pressure cannot be increased or even kept up forever either. At a certain point, such systems become highly volatile.

• The unsolved question of succession: This is the Achilles Heel moment of every autocracy – death, incapacitation or removal in a coup of the Great Leader. Precisely because autocracies completely lack established procedures for succession, this moment becomes so volatile and possibly regime-threatening. Democracies are more sustainable in the long run exactly because they have painstakingly regulated the peaceful change of government.

• Long term output legitimacy: Democracies are still better – in the long run – at guaranteeing a certain balance between freedom, security and prosperity. Autocracy lacks mechanisms of self-correction, as spectacularly obvious in the Chinese Communist Party’s at first seemingly successful, but in the end disastrous handling of the Covid pandemic 2020-2022.

3. Democrats of the World, Unite!

For all these reasons, there is no excuse for the democrats of the world to give up. But 21st century democrats need to become smarter and more determined. Here are three key areas in which creativity and resolve are essential:

• Civil society! Autocracies are structured top-down; free societies should in principle respond in a
bottom-up way. Political parties, free media, NGOs, foundations, think tanks and networks of individuals should form the backbone of democracy’s defence. In fighting disinformation, for example, governments should not take the lead (though they have roles to play including intelligence agencies) but civil society should do so. Ideally, governments should not hire staff, but finance projects. The friction losses incurred through the lack of a central command are well worth the much greater sustainability and resilience of civil society.

• Democratic alliances: in a world in which autocracies prop each other up in such existential ways, it would be suicidal for democracies to stay separate. President Biden’s Summit of Democracies is a good beginning but no silver bullet, of course. Broad military, economic and political cooperation as well as regular exchange of intelligence and best practice in fending off hostile influence and supporting democracy, should be the obvious strategy. That is why the ‘Europe First’ voices in the EU strategic autonomy debate and the still existing advocacy of Europe as a third pole in the superpower rivalry between the US and China are so mistaken. This does not mean democrats should aim for a Cold War 2.0 or a black-and-white division of the world. It is better to conceive of the Global West in concentric circles: the Euroatlantic area (NATO and EU) at the core, like-minded democracies around the world in the next group, and finally a changing system of ad hoc cooperation and temporary partnership with non-lethal autocracies (often in the Global South) which can be mobilised against the core nations of the ‘New Axis of Evil’.

• Narratives:

  » Cognition and communication: when faced with authoritarian advance, democrats will have to walk a fine line between complacency and defeatism. Both are detrimental to the task ahead. Recognising the problem democracy has today, maintaining agency and not falling into the inevitability trap, as well as maintaining overall optimism: this combination will be essential.

  » Recognise own weaknesses: Frankly, not all populist and autocratic complaints about wokeness and cancel culture are wrong. While, of course, those tendencies are incomparably less lethal than oppression in dictatorships (so much for the accusation of ‘Stalinist campuses’ in the West), nevertheless, in some countries and some sectors, such as academia, illiberalism has become self-defeating. This should be openly acknowledged, and cancel culture countered.

  » Focus on corruption: Autocracies rely on corruption in a systemic way, no matter what they claim. By fighting corruption at home while focusing on the systemic corruption of autocracies in communication, democrats can go a long way in regaining political ground.

  » Focus on output legitimacy: Democracies need to constantly improve their ability to strike a more sustainable balance between freedom, security and prosperity, and they should communicate this better.
4. Conclusion

Two thoughts to finish with:

About 100 years ago, in the wake of the First World War, democratic capitalism was already in an existential crisis for two decades. Authoritarian and even totalitarian movements, especially fascism and communism, looked so much fresher and more vigorous than the tired democracies of the West which had won the war but were about to lose the peace. German self-styled philosopher Oswald Spengler became a guru across Central Europe with his notion that Western civilisation is outdated and the future belongs to the new ‘Caesars of the World’. He didn’t foresee that democracy and the market economy would live through a brilliant second half of the 20th century. There is a chance for Western democracy to regain the initiative in the 21st century as well!

Finally from Caracas to Minsk, from Tehran to Moscow, to Yangon, Hong Kong and even Beijing: just looking at the past 10 years, it was the best and the brightest of the young generations, hundreds of thousands of courageous people in autocracies across the entire world who risked their careers, their personal liberty and often enough their lives for a set of ideas that the autocrats of the world have united against, and declared moribund. But as long as we don’t see hundreds of thousands of bright young people demonstrating for one party rule in the streets of Warsaw, Paris, London or New York, democrats stand a fighting chance!
As we approach 2024 European elections, one topic dominates the discussion on their possible outcomes and that is the seemingly unstoppable rise of Eurosceptic populism across the EU. Since 2015, when nationalistic and ultraconservative Law and Justice (PiS) party won presidential and parliamentary elections, Poland had become a European laboratory of populism in power. Poland’s populist rulers set out to dismantle democratic checks and balances by capturing the key elements of the judiciary system and public media. In result, the quality of the country’s democracy has steadily declined as testified by a number of international comparative studies. The process of democratic backsliding further accelerated after PiS was re-elected for another four years in office in 2019. Despite domestic and international criticism, Law and Justice government maintained and even enlarged its popular appeal while the opposition appeared divided and lacking leadership.

The process of democratic backsliding did not go unchecked. The first protests against PiS infringements of the rule of law happened in December 2015 after the unconstitutional appointment of three new members of the Constitutional Tribunal. The protests led to emergence of new civil society organizations, such as Committee for the Defense of Democracy KOD, and new media initiatives, such as OKO.press. Together with older established NGOs and independent private media, such initiatives contributed to societal resilience against the virus of populism. Another crucial barrier to authoritarianism was the local government. In 2018 local elections, PiS failed to win a single mayoral race in the hundred largest towns and cities. While unable to reverse the direction of changes away from democracy and towards populist authoritarianism, social resistance effectively slowed the changes, while the EU institutions deliberated on how best to response to Warsaw increasing divergence from European values as defined in article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union.
The diagram below illustrates the fact that despite the undemocratic and anti-European drift of the country, Law and Justice benefited (as well as contributed to) unusually high public mood during the first years of its tenure 2017. This tendency was reversed after 2019 parliamentary elections.

**Graph 1.** Public mood in Poland 1990-2023: generally speaking, would you say that the country is going in the right or in the wrong direction? (green – the right direction, red – the wrong direction)

A closer examination indicates that the crucial point in the populists’ reversal of fortune was the ruling of the PiS-controlled Constitutional Tribunal, which further restricted the already extremely conservative right to abortion. The ruling was followed by days of massive protests, which met with an extremely aggressive reactions from the police. Although the government managed to extinguish the protests and regain control on the streets, both the public mood and the government’s ratings rapidly declined.
Graph 2 below shows precisely that the crisis of the PiS government legitimacy started at the end of October 2020, following the Tribunal ruling, the women’s protests and police repressions against peaceful protesters.

Later studies revealed that this lasting decline of public attitudes towards the PiS government had a number of reasons. Following the pandemic, inflation had been on the rise and the war in Ukraine has accelerated the steep rise of the costs of living. Morawiecki’s government tried to offset this by generous handouts to selected social groups, focusing on its constituencies, such
as the elderly or the rural dwellers. This has caused significant frustration among the younger cohorts, especially urban middle class who felt that this generosity fuels inflation and thus makes the costs-of-living crisis more acute. Combined with the crisis in the housing market, this was one of the significant reasons why some people who had earlier been politically passive adopted a more adversarial position vis-à-vis the PiS government. In spite of the stereotype of PiS pro-social policy, the state of public services (healthcare, education system, access to justice) has visibly deteriorated. Added to this were stagnating salaries in public sector (teachers, civil service, nurses etc.) The frustration was deepened by the official ‘propaganda of success’ pouring out of PiS-controlled media and the ruling party politicians’ speeches.

While during the first term of office, there were relatively few publicly known instances of political corruption, after the re-election in 2019, PiS politicians seem to have lost any inhibition when it came to exploiting the material advantages of their largely unchecked power. As their material situation deteriorated, more and more voters became more sensitive when they encountered the cases of gross political corruption and handouts of public money to private individuals or organizations. Such instances were reported by independent media on everyday basis and added to general frustration stemming from economic hardship.

As already mentioned, PiS democratic backsliding and growing restrictions on civic rights, especially related to reproductive rights, has been a cause of growing criticism and mobilization of the opponents of the populist rule. The so-called ‘Women Strike’, i.e. the protests against restrictive abortion laws, became a watershed moment in Poland’s recent political history. The government’s growing proclivity to using violence for political reasons added further reasons for citizens to worry that the country was quickly moving away from democracy and towards authoritarianism. Last but not least, the growing conflict with Brussels over rule of law and the resulting suspension of the monies from the EU Reconstruction Fund was testing the patience of one of the most pro-European societies in the EU.

The response of the democratic opposition

The growing public discontent with the direction in which Poland was moving under PiS government was a necessary condition of political change, but it was not sufficient for the loss of political power by the populists. In fact, in the first half of 2023, opinion polls indicated an upsurge in support for the far-right Konfederacja grouping, which focused on criticizing government’s economic policies. The far-right particularly benefitted from the economic frustration of young men, promising them both low taxation and less competition with migrant workers on the labour market. Therefore, a plausible scenario was that of a post-election coalition between PiS and Konfederacja, which would produce an even more authoritarian, xenophobic and anti-European government.
In order to win the elections, democrats needed to channel the existing discontent into a vote for the opposition and to mobilize those who doubted if real change was possible. The return of Donald Tusk, former Prime Minister and President of the European Council, from political retirement gave the key oppositional party, the Civic Platform, a credible leader who already (in 2007) removed PiS from the office. Although Tusk has been the key target of government propaganda and thus mistrusted by large sections of the society, his return gave new hope to the opposition, at that time dispersed and lacking motivation for concerted challenge to the populists in power. However, the existence of a strong ‘negative electorate’ of Tusk and his party remained a challenge for oppositional unity. In the end, despite pressure from the media and civil society, the opposition decided not to form a single electoral coalition, instead running as three separate groupings: the Civic Coalition (i.e., Civic Platform and some smaller like-minded parties) the New Left (bringing together a number of different left-wing entities) and the Third Way (a coalition of the agrarian Polish People Party and a relatively new and moderately conservative Poland 2050 movement). This allowed the voters who were opposed to the ruling PiS party yet mistrustful of Tusk and Civic Platform to cast an oppositional vote that would contribute to a future democratic coalition. All three groupings declared before the elections that they would be willing to create such coalition after the elections and, importantly, clearly rejected any possibility of entering a coalition agreement with PiS.

The situation was different regarding the elections to the Senate (the less powerful upper chamber). Here the elections were fought within the first-past-the-post electoral system and in order to win the opposition had to agree to have a single oppositional candidate in each constituency. The result was quite remarkable as the opposition won 66 out of 100 mandates in the Senate.

**Uneven playing field**

After eight years of progressive dismantling of democratic institutions, the opposition faced an uphill struggle to win democratic elections. Already in 2019, ODHiR observation mission conclude that the elections were ‘free but not fair’. In 2023 the playing field was even more heavily tilted towards the ruling party.
The key elements of this biased system are as follows:57

• The electoral administration largely under government’s political control;
• Unfair assignation of mandates to electoral districts;
• Public media turned into the ruling party mouthpiece, demonizing opposition as serving foreign and minority interests;
• Opposition politicians and activists were under illegal surveillance (Pegasus)
• Administrative resources used for political campaigning;
• State-controlled companies and other entities could spend freely on political advertising because of the referendum organized on the election day;
• Independent private media attacked with SLAPPs and deprived of government advertising, while some nominally independent media were secretly ‘bribed’ with government’s funds;
• Generous funding of GONGOs and defunding of genuine civil society organizations;
• Unequivocal support of the Catholic church.

The role of the public media, purged of independent journalists and generously funded from the state budget was the most conspicuous aspect of the ruling party advantage over the opposition. Another disturbing information that came to the public attention prior to 2023 elections was the fact that security services had been keeping key oppositionist activists under secret surveillance. In fact, the leader of the Civic Platform had his telephone was infected with Pegasus. The data illegally obtained and tampered by security services was passed on to loyal journalists who used it to discredit the opposition politicians. By 2023, the oppositional politicians were aware of such threats to the integrity of elections and pledged to repair the broken system after the change of the government.

Dominant election campaign narratives

The asymmetrical polarisation of the Polish political scene had been deliberately used by the ruling party to mobilise its voters and to divide and demobilise the potential supporters of the opposition. However, in the 2023 campaign, polarisation became a sword with two blades. While PiS politicians continued to use their by now familiar populist narratives that the oppositional parties (particularly the Civic Coalition) are traitors who would sell out Poland to

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Germany and Russia, the oppositional parties clearly stated that their key aim is to reverse the authoritarian and anti-Western drift by removing Jaroslaw Kaczyński and his party from power and to restore democracy. Pointing to the already damaged electoral system, Tusk and others repeatedly stated that the October elections would be the last chance for the citizens to change the government through the ballot box. If re-elected, they argued, PiS would continue on the path to authoritarian rule by closing down independent media and civil organisations. These warnings reflected real concerns within the society. The opposition held powerful rallies in Warsaw in the run-up to the elections to make sure that this key narrative is communicated to the public. In short, the opposition finally learned to use political polarisation to its advantage. As a result, these elections had the highest turnout in the history of Polish elections: it happened largely because of the two rival narratives that mobilised the supporters as well as the opponents of the populists in power.

**Photo 2.: March of Million Hearts**

**Responding to specific populist narratives**

After their victory in 2015, Law and Justice party consolidated their support by rolling out a program of generous social handout to key societal groups. During subsequent elections they scared the beneficiaries of this programmes, such as 500 Plus child subsidies, that the opposition would dismantle these programmes. In response, Tusk and other opposition leaders made clear statements that no benefit programme will be dismantled. Such declaration took the wind from
the key element of PiS campaigning strategy. Indeed, voters’ turnout data indicates that older citizens, who are the backbone of PiS constituency, were not mobilised on election day (relative to other social groups) in order to defend their benefits.

Overall, the opposition understood well the reasons of public discontent and tried to speak the same language as people on the street. They understood that, for example, the crisis of cost of living was at least as important for the voters as the crisis of democracy. Thus, the opposition directly attributed the high inflation to mismanagement of the monetary policy by the Head of the National Bank of Poland, Mr. Glapiński, an old political comrade of Jarosław Kaczyński. PiS on the other hand, tried to put the blame for high inflation on Putin’s war against Ukraine, which did not convince the majority of voters. The themes of cronyism, corruption and mismanagement of the economy were as present in the opposition campaign as were the topics of rule of law infringements and conflicts with Brussels and Poland’s key partner countries.

The opposition also tried, with some success, to disarm some narratives that had been central in earlier successful campaigns. On migration, Donald Tusk consistently used the language of security, declaring that securing the borders in the face of Russian and Belarussian hybrid aggression would be a priority for his government. He criticised PiS government for their track record in this field. The opposition narrowed down the irregular migration issue to the corruption scandal in the Polish Foreign Ministry, where top officials allegedly covered up practices of selling Polish (Schengen) visas to citizens of some countries from the global south. This hit hard at the one of the core narratives of PiS that the opposition would let large numbers of irregular migrant from ‘culturally distant’ countries into Poland.

In a similar way, the PiS government’s claim that they are tough on national defence crumbled when a group of army generals publicly announced their resignation, saying that PiS mismanagement of the armed forces is putting Poland’s defence capacity at risk. Once again, a crucial issue of security, one of the cornerstones of the populist claim to be in power, was effectively used to undermine the government’s legitimacy.

Last but not least, despite the official propaganda efforts to paint the opposition as ‘foreign (particularly German) agents’, the opposition politicians regularly used the language of patriotism and national interests, demonstrating a critical distance to some German and European policies, e.g., on Russian or on migration.
The oppositional agenda

While the dominant narratives concerned the threats to democracy and economic mismanagement, for the opposition criticising the government was no substitute for showing the public that they had their own concrete programme, which it will carry out, once elected. The opposition parties revealed their own comprehensive sets of electoral promises. At the same time, on the initiative of a group of NGOs, including the Institute of Public Affairs, and under the auspices of the most influential independent weekly magazine “Polityka”, a series of bi-weekly debates on different policy areas, from climate change to foreign and security policy, took place during a year before the start of the election campaign. In each debate, key representatives of the democratic oppositional groupings debated the issues in the presence of experts and civic activists. In result, the organisers produced a comprehensive policy report with 200 hundred policy recommendations for a future democratic coalition. The report, entitled “Poland after the 2023 elections” was endorsed by the leaders of the democratic parties as a sign of oppositional unity and confirmation that the opposition was willing and able to create a coalition government after the elections.

Photo 3: Leaders of four democratic parties with copies of the report at the final conference organised by “Polityka” weekly.
The role of civil society

Polish civil society organisations have long fought against the democratic backsliding and the curtailment of civil rights. They experienced first-hand the shrinking civic space during the eight years of the PiS-led government and clearly understood the significance of the 2023 elections as an opportunity to reverse the authoritarian direction that Poland took in 2015. One of the primary concerns was the state of the electoral system which could not guarantee that the will of the voters would be reflected in the final results. Both local and national CSOs engaged in training election observers and in raising public awareness, in Poland and within the international community about the threats. On election nights the Committee for Defense of Democracy organized an independent exit poll, whose results proved more accurate than the other poll conducted by a well-known opinion research agency. Across Poland, tens of thousands of volunteers monitored the voting and vote counting process to limit the possibility of electoral fraud.

Civil society also played an important role in countering the damage to electoral integrity stemming from the organisation of a populist referendum. The referendum questions made little sense as policy choices and their aim were to amplify populist narratives of the government as well as to suspend restrictive campaign funding rules, which are much more liberal in case of national referenda. Thus, the referendum opened the way to funding what was essentially election campaign materials by state-owned companies. In response, a broad coalition of CSO produced their own materials pointing out to legal doubts about the constitutionality of the referendum. Some of these materials were broadcast by public media, which by law could not reject any referendum content from an organisation with a statutory interest in the referendum issues. In this way they could reach out to many PiS voters with a narrative strikingly different than the official government propaganda. In results of these calls for the voters to boycott the referendum questions and cast a vote in parliamentary elections, the campaign resulted in bringing down the number of votes below the threshold of 50% eligible voters, which rendered the referendum results ‘non-mandatory’.

Pro-turnout campaigns: women and young voters

Low electoral turnout has been for decades one of the problems of Polish elections, which populists exploited to their advantage by focusing on older voters, who had traditionally been more disciplined than younger cohorts. In order to mobilize the groups of voters, who were particularly critical of the government, there was a number of pro-turnout campaigns, focusing on women, particularly young women, and the younger voters in general.
The importance of these groups was also appreciated by political parties, which focused some of their messages and campaign promises on the young and women voters. For the first time competing parties put so much effort into formulating sets of specific electoral promises aimed at women. The opposition parties also put a record high number of women (44% of all candidates) on prominent places on electoral lists, which resulted in the highest ever percentage of women in the Polish parliament. The following graph shows the difference in electoral turnout between the elections in 2019 and 2023. The most remarkable difference is a strong mobilisation of young voters in 2023.
The increase in voters’ turnout was registered among all age categories except for the oldest voters (60+), where turnout slightly decreased. The consequences of this selective voters’ mobilisation can be seen on the following graph. While the older citizens were more likely to vote for Law and Justice, among the young people only 15% voted for PiS.

**Graph 3.** Electoral turnout among different age groups in 2019 and 2023

*Source: IPSOS Exit Poll*

**Graph 4.** Voting (in %) among different age groups for:
- Law and Justice (PiS)
- Civic Coalition (KO)
- The Third Way (Trzecia Droga)
- The Left (Lewica)
- Confederation (Konfederacja)

*Uwzględniliśmy tylko partie, które przekroczyły próg wyborczy*
Equally important was the electoral mobilization of women. In contrast to nearly all earlier elections, more women than men voted in 2023 elections. Women were more likely to support democratic opposition than men. According to some estimates, women voters gave the democrats the fairly comfortable majority in the new parliament.

Photo 5: Voters in the city of Wroclaw

Concluding remarks: what are the lessons for Europe from the Polish 2023 elections?

The first and most general lesson from the Polish 2023 elections is that the rise of populist parties in Europe is not inevitable. Even when populists become entrenched in government institutions, dismantle or damage key democratic institutions and restrict media freedom, opposition politicians and vigilant civil society can make a difference by working in concert to defeat them. Politicians need to speak loud and clear about the threat that populism brings to our European values. They need to follow the public mood and register the societal concerns without falling into populist narrative traps. They need to learn how to counter and disarm populist narratives while showing attention and respect to the concerns which prompt some citizens to vote for populists or withdraw from public life. Lastly, democrats need to learn to speak the language of security, patriotism and national interests rather than leave it for populists to exploit.
Civil society needs to understand that populists are not just another political group and how fundamentally different are consequences of populism in power for the civil society. Democratic politics, with its necessary compromises and slow progress on many issues can be frustrating to many civic activists and yet they need to understand that populism is a fundamental threat to their aims and values and work with democratic politicians to counter that threat. Making society at large aware of the consequences of political actions and mobilizing specific groups who have most to lose in case of populist victory should be a common denominator of different civic groups and organizations.

Last but not least, the Polish experience shows that international organisations, such as the EU, Council of Europe or OSCE can make a significant contribution to defending democratic values if they choose to work with national and international civil society organisations and speak out early enough when democracy is in peril in their members states.
AN ILLIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ON THE HORIZON?
THE RADICAL RIGHT IN THE 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Populist radical right parties have been on the rise in the European Union over the past years increasing their representation in national parliaments and often also securing positions in the governments of various member states. With their nativist, authoritarian, and populist ideology that on the European scene also entails sovereigntism and various degrees of Euroscepticism, these parties pose a challenge to European integration, both in its current form and regarding its future development. As the European parliamentary elections are approaching, it is worth assessing whether the rising national support may translate into a radical right shift in the European Parliament in June that could alter the political landscape on the EU level and what impact these forces may have on policymaking in the next parliamentary cycle.

Gaining traction in the European Parliament

Radical right parties are not new to the European Parliament. Such forces have long been around and even attempted to cooperate with one another; albeit success did not come easy. The first group that brought together members both from West and East European member states, the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty group, for example, did not even last a year after its formation in January 2007. Subsequently, it took until 2015 for the next political group composed of only radical right parties to be formed: yet, the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group survived the remaining political cycle after its formation. In 2019, ENF served as the core of today’s Identity and Democracy (ID) group, which lasted a complete cycle while facilitating the cooperation of parties from “old” and “new” member states.

Beyond the parties’ shared Euroscepticism, the factor contributing to the group’s survival was that its members managed to identify a common external enemy they could jointly rally against, namely immigration and (illegal) migrants from outside Europe. This enemy picture was large-
ly shared by members of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group too, which, founded already in 2009, brought together right-wing, conservative, and, with time, radical right parties. With the departure of the British Conservative Party upon the completion of the UK’s exit from the EU in 2020, the ECR group also assumed an ideologically more homogenous radical right profile.

Additionally, while radical right parties tended to be hard Eurosceptic previously calling for their country’s exit from the European Union, in the aftermath of the British Brexit referendum, they mostly softened their positions and the majority of them argued rather for reforming the EU from within and now advocates for a Europe of strong nation-states. In parallel, their representation in the European Parliament has also become more professionalised with members of these parties seeking to influence the European agenda and legislation rather than just obstructing it.

As of May 2024, the ECR group gathers 68 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), while ID holds 58 seats out of the 705 altogether. With these, the groups are fifth and sixth in size respectively. Additionally, members of some radical right parties, such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance from Hungary, or the Forum for Democracy from the Netherlands, are non-affiliated as the present parliamentary term is nearing its end.

**Recent trends and predictions for the next parliament**

Since the last European parliamentary elections in 2019, the radical right gained momentum across the European Union in several member states. As the elections approach, as of early May 2024, radical right parties hold government positions in Finland, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia. They lead the polls in Austria, Belgium, France, Hungary, Italy, and the Netherlands, and have stable positions as mid-sized parties in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden. With few exceptions, radical right parties have thus become staple features of party politics across the European Union. It is also worth noting that radical right parties tend to score better in European parliamentary elections. Although these elections are generally considered so-called second-order elections, that is less important than national parliamentary ones, and overall have lower turnouts, it is precisely the radical right that tends to be able to mobilize its supporters more effectively in the EP elections.

Against this background, radical right parties will likely increase their representation in the European Parliament after the June elections. According to most projections, however, the rise of the radical right will not translate into a tidal wave challenging the majority of the mainstream political groups, including the European People’s Party (EPP), the Socialists and Dem-
ocrats (S&D), Renew Europe, and the Greens, even though all of them are predicted to shrink in size compared to their current size. The forecast of the European Council on Foreign Relations\textsuperscript{60} suggests that all mainstream political groups will experience losses and will be smaller in the new parliament than in the current one, while both ECR and ID will grow from 68 to 85 MEPs and from 58 to 98 MEPs respectively. This could mean that, according to these estimates, ID may become the third biggest group in the European Parliament ahead of Renew and the Greens, and ECR could stand a chance to be fourth.

The expected rise of ID is due to the increasing support behind the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the French Rassemblement National (RF), and the German Alternative for Germany (AfD). ECR is to grow thanks to the governing Italian Brothers of Italy party (FdI), which is set to become the biggest force in the political group rivalling the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) that was until now the leader of the group in terms of size. With Giorgia Meloni’s FdI in government, the party already started to gain more influence over the past years.

ECR could further grow in size should the Fidesz party (be able to) join the group. Having left EPP in 2021, the Hungarian governing party has been politically homeless since and its 12 MEPs were sitting among the non-aligned members of the parliament. The current setup is counter to Fidesz’s initial aspiration upon leaving EPP as it hoped to facilitate a merger between ECR and ID the likelihood of which ultimately faded with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine that divided the parties of the two political groups. Two years later, this division is still present, and it is unlikely to be set aside to pursue the merger of the two groups in the short term. Although Fidesz’s positions on Russia’s war on Ukraine also alienated it from its long-term ally, the Polish Law and Justice, after the latter fell out of government in late 2023, more room for reconciliation seems to have opened up between them. In late January 2024, former prime minister of PiS Mateusz Morawiecki signalled that ECR could welcome Fidesz to its ranks after the European parliamentary elections. Depending on the final election outcome in Hungary, it could mean an additional 10-12 MEPs for ECR which may put the group in a position to rival ID.

Practical implications of the radical right’s rise

The rise of radical right support will not challenge the majority of the mainstream political groups in the EP overall, but the shifts we will witness also have the possibility to gradually stir the course of the integration. Their growing representation gradually leads to the normalisation


The forecast is based on a statistical model that considers polling data from January 2024 but adjusts it to systematic differences between the polling data and how the party will likely perform based on the experience of the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary election predictions and results. See the above-referenced paper for more details on the methodology.
of these forces being seen as constituting elements of European policy-making rather than as temporary nuisances or outliers. In turn, this can open the possibility for the parties of ECR and ID to be taken more seriously and have a stronger impact than before. To begin with, their increased presence in the European Parliament will further amplify their Eurosceptic voices in the EU body and their potential to shape the political discourse around issues on the parliamentary agenda.

While the merger between ECR and ID after the EP elections continues to be unlikely, the two groups do not need to unite to cooperate and vote together on issues where their positions align. This tends to be on matters of national sovereignty which in the EU context translates into ensuring that the member states’ autonomy to act is not limited further, let that be in economic or fiscal terms, or related to specific policy areas like taxation or justice and home affairs, or the enforcement of EU values in the member states.

Although they might differ on certain aspects of it, the policy area where radical right parties sought to exert the most influence has been immigration and asylum. In fact, on this policy, the populist radical right increasingly sees eye to eye with parties of the mainstream right EPP, as well. Ever since the 2015-16 peak of the refugee and migration crisis, mainstream right-wing parties – and on occasion also left-wing ones, e.g. in Bulgaria – have shifted their positions toward the radical right adopting more restrictive attitudes and policies on immigration and asylum on the national level. The impact of such positions is also increasingly noticeable in the EU’s policy which also started to embrace a more securitized approach. It is conceivable that in the new European Parliament, (parts of) the EPP may engage in closer cooperation on this issue with the rising radical right either out of fear of the electoral challenge or out of conviction about the policy course. A coalition of EPP, ECR, and ID may even have the necessary majority in the next EP to pass legislation.

Such collaboration among the groups, however, would have consequences reaching beyond a single policy issue. Collaboration with and co-optation of the radical right marks the erosion of the so-called cordon sanitaire between it and the mainstream, which once torn down, further contributes to the legitimization of radical right forces. These developments also normalize previously marginal positions, potentially even contrary to European values, thus altering the realm of acceptable policy possibilities. Consequently, even if the radical right tide is not expected to take over the European Parliament, its rise can still pose challenges to the European integration directly or indirectly with mainstream parties also having a responsibility to keep its potential influence in check.

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