CEPSA 30TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

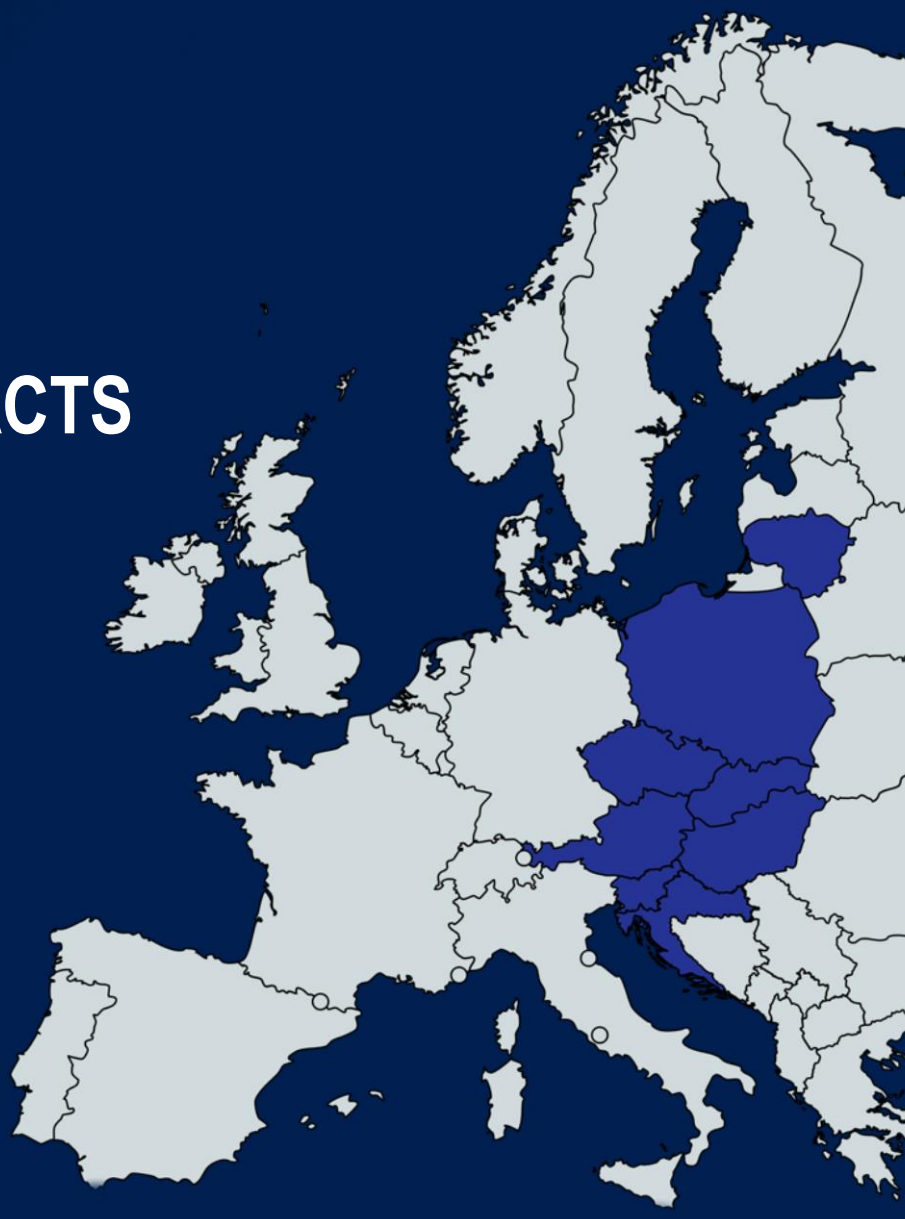
30 Years of CEPSA – 30 Shades of Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe

Historical Legacies, Democratic Challenges, and the Politics of Freedom

24–25 September 2026

Pilsen, Czechia

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS



Edited by
Simona Kukovič
& Vladimír Naxera

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PREFACE

The 30th CEPSA Conference, held in Pilsen under the theme "30 Years of CEPSA – 30 Shades of Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe: Historical Legacies, Democratic Challenges, and the Politics of Freedom," brings together scholars to examine one of the defining questions of the region's political development: what does freedom mean in Central and Eastern Europe today?

More than three decades after the democratic transformations of 1989, freedom can no longer be approached simply as the outcome of transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. Across the region, its meaning and practice are being reshaped by democratic backsliding, the rise of populism and illiberal politics, geopolitical and security crises, changing patterns of political competition, declining trust in political institutions, and new forms of political communication and participation.

The contributions to this conference reflect the multiple dimensions of these developments. They examine democratic resilience and restrictions on freedom, populism and the political instrumentalization of freedom, electoral competition and the rule of law, media and academic freedom, civil society and political participation, as well as trust and trustworthiness of political institutions. Other contributions place contemporary developments within broader debates on historical memory, political thought and ideology, international security, foreign policy and regional cooperation, while several panels turn attention to the local level and ask how democracy, participation, and freedom are experienced and negotiated within communities.

Taken together, these perspectives underline an important point: there is no single experience or understanding of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe. The "30 shades of freedom" therefore refer not only to thirty years of CEPSA conferences, but also to the different meanings, tensions, and political realities associated with freedom across the region. Freedom may be understood as an individual right, a democratic principle, a collective achievement, a question of national sovereignty, or a political claim – and these understandings do not always coexist without tension.

This makes the theme particularly appropriate for CEPSA's 30th conference. Since its establishment, CEPSA has followed and contributed to scholarly debates on the profound political transformations of Central and Eastern Europe. Over three decades, the questions have changed: from democratic transition and consolidation to the resilience, quality, and in some cases

erosion of democracy. Yet the region remains an important space for comparative political science and for understanding broader changes affecting contemporary democracies.

The abstracts collected in this volume capture this diversity of questions, approaches, and cases. We hope that the discussions in Pilsen will provide an opportunity not only to assess where Central and Eastern Europe stands after more than three decades of political transformation, but also to consider how freedom is changing, what challenges it faces, and what its future may look like in the region.

Editors

KEY-NOTE ADDRESS

Political Patronage, Autocratization and Democratic Resilience

Petr Kopecký, Leiden University, Netherlands

How do illiberal leaders undermine democracy? What mechanisms drive the advancement of autocratic projects? Using insights from Hungary and Central Europe, this lecture will show that political patronage – understood broadly as the power of political parties or politicians to appoint loyalists and dismiss unfriendly ones – is a critical enabling mechanism of autocratization. Political patronage is deployed by autocratizing governments as a strategy to first initiate democratic regression and subsequently to entrench and reproduce hybrid regimes that are emerging. This kind of autocratic patronage fundamentally changes the character of the state and raises questions about democratic resilience and the prospects for democratic restoration.

Institutional Trust and Digital Migration: Rethinking the Decline of Legacy Media in Arab and Western Media Systems

Batal Almutairi, Arab Open University, Kuwait

The proliferation of social media platforms has reshaped the global media landscape; however, its disruptive impact on traditional media remains uneven across geopolitical contexts. This paper examines how variations in institutional trust shape the degree of media digital migration, contrasting selected Western public-service and liberal media models with state-influenced or state-controlled media systems in the Arab world. We argue that social media technology itself is not the sole driver of traditional media's decline; rather, pre-existing levels of public trust in legacy institutions act as a critical intervening variable. In many Western contexts, despite the rise of digital alternatives, relative journalistic independence and established public trust have served as a structural buffer, mitigating large-scale audience disengagement from legacy outlets. Conversely, in the Arab world, a historical deficit in institutional trust toward state-directed traditional broadcasting has accelerated audience migration toward digital platforms. In this environment, social media platforms are leveraged not merely as alternative communication channels, but as primary counter-hegemonic spaces for information seeking. Utilizing a comparative political communication approach, this study synthesizes empirical data from prominent international and cross-national datasets, including the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Arab Barometer, Edelman Trust Barometer, and the World Values Survey. By cross-referencing indicators of media credibility with shifting audience consumption patterns, the findings suggest that the structural vulnerability of traditional media to digital disruption is profoundly intertwined with the political economy of the media system. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader sociological and political discourses on media governance, public trust, and digital transformation across authoritarian and democratic contexts.

Keywords: Institutional Trust, Digital Migration, Comparative Media Systems, Legacy Media, Media Credibility

Weaponization of Law in Authoritarian Populist Regime

Attila Antal, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

The paper examines how the laws created and weaponized by authoritarian political regimes in certain European Union member states (authoritarian legalism) have affected the legal systems of those member states and, through them, the legal structure of the community as a whole. The main question of the research is: How does authoritarian legalism affect democracy itself, and does the authoritarian turn of a member state have a spillover effect on EU law? Drawing on social theoretical and critical legal studies literature, relying comparative legal methods and using the Hungarian example as a case study this study paper in detail the process of the weaponization of law under the Orbán regime. It has been argued here that constitutional changes created by the Orbán regime have moved the Hungarian constitutional system towards constitutional dictatorship. The systematic transformation of the public law and its use against social groups (civil society organizations, political parties, LGBTQ+ groups) have not only destroyed the rule of law of liberal democracy, but Orbán's dual state has also created authoritarian legalism. The main conclusion of the study is that the weaponization of the constitution and autocratic legalism are common features of authoritarian systems that are increasingly forming international and European alliances. The paper examines the spillover effects of authoritarian legalism in the EU and the measures taken by member states and the EU to counteract these effects within the framework of militant democracy.

Keywords: Authoritarian Law, Populism, Hungary, Legalism, Weaponization

Freedom Through or Freedom From the European Union? Sovereignty and Trust in the EU in Hungary, 2010-26

Krisztina Arató, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary & **Boglárka Koller**, Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary

Following the regime change in 1989, Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004 was celebrated as another victory, marking the culmination of a long struggle for freedom and liberal democracy. It signified Hungary's return to Europe and to the European path of history. Two decades ago, both the political elite and the public broadly shared this vision. However, between 2010 and 2026, and especially during the illiberal Orbán era, the meaning of "freedom" underwent a significant transformation. It came to be interpreted as Hungary's national self-determination and as a "freedom fight" within the European Union, or, in political rhetoric, against Brussels. Consequently, the defence of national sovereignty became a central element of Hungarian EU and foreign policy. This, in turn, significantly affected public perceptions of and trust in the European Union, which became increasingly contested, reflecting tensions between membership in a supranational community and the preservation of national sovereignty. Hungary joined the EU in 2004, and after sixteen years of Orbán in office, the April 2026 victory of Péter Magyar's TISZA party opened a new political era. TISZA framed this shift as a break with the previous era and pledged to rebuild Hungary's relations with the European Union and NATO, reviving the earlier language of a "return to Europe". Based on public opinion data and an analysis of party manifestos and political documents speeches, we argue that trust in the European Union in contemporary Hungary is ambivalent. On the one hand, the EU is still viewed as a political community capable of ensuring freedom, rights, and belonging in its member states. On the other hand, especially during the 2010–2026 period, it has also been portrayed as a constraint that Hungary must protect its sovereignty and freedom against. Extending the analysis to 2026 reveals the re-emergence of a pro-European political project seeking to re-anchor Hungary within the EU. In our paper, we demonstrate how these competing narratives of freedom through and freedom from the European Union are reflected in public perception, political rhetoric, and political change.

Keywords: freedom, sovereignty, trust in the European Union, Hungary, EU membership

Attributes of trustworthiness in the political communication at social platforms: Central European politicians at Facebook

Pavol Baboš, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia

This paper focuses on the attributes of trustworthiness and their perception from the perspective of political communication. Facebook (FB) was chosen as the platform, and the dataset consists of posts by politicians from the countries represented in the panel, namely the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Slovakia.

Carl Schmitt and Radical Conservative Thinking in Hungary after the Millennium

Zoltán Balázs, Corvinus University, Hungary

As Jürgen Habermas was a constant point of reference on the leftist pole of post-Communist political thinking, with Roger Scruton being a counter-pole on the conservative side, after the millennium, more radical thinkers took over the scene. Marxist theorists became more popular on the left, and radical right theorists occupied the pulpit on the right. Arguably, Carl Schmitt emerged as the one read not just by academic philosophers and political theorists but political technicians, public intellectuals and pundits. And not just read but put to practice, in a few but important areas. First and foremost, his pan-political approach was widely accepted: there is no escape from the logic of politics. Second, this logic is fundamentally different from other duals, most significantly, the norms of moral right and wrong. Third, the concept of sovereignty became increasingly prominent, not only in international domains but, more importantly, domestically. Fourth, as an application of this, domestic sovereignty was identified with the capacity to decide on \'exceptions\' rather than with the execution laws. Finally, the ideal of the strong executive, the figure of the dictator, of the omnicompetent leader has enchanted the imagination of radical right thinkers and public intellectuals. The fall of Viktor Orbán may have a sobering effect but there is little chance for a conversion to moderate conservative thinking among them.

When Freedom Turns: The Contested Legacy of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe

Barbara Balicka, University of Wrocław, Poland

Thirty years after the democratic transitions of 1989, the very language of freedom has become contested terrain. Across Central and Eastern Europe, populist and illiberal governments have not abandoned the rhetoric of liberty — they have captured it, wielding concepts of national sovereignty, popular will, and freedom from elite interference as instruments for dismantling the liberal institutions that democratic transitions were meant to consolidate. This paper examines how this process unfolds, what it reveals about the contested legacy of 1989 — and asks whether the freedoms won in 1989 were ever as secure as they seemed. The paper develops the concept of electoral majoritarianism — a hybrid regime logic in which democratic procedures are formally preserved while their liberal substance is systematically hollowed out from within — and argues that normative inversion, the systematic reframing of liberal-democratic concepts as elite privileges obstructing the popular will, is not merely a rhetorical strategy but a constitutive mechanism of democratic erosion. The central research question is: how do populist and illiberal governments in Central and Eastern Europe instrumentalise the politics of freedom to legitimise the dismantling of liberal democratic institutions? Drawing on a most-similar systems comparison of the Visegrád Group and process tracing across four cases, the paper traces how the language of freedom, sovereignty, and national self-determination — rooted in the anti-communist struggles of the 1980s — has been selectively appropriated and inverted. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia offer divergent trajectories: consolidated erosion, partial reversal, accelerated dismantling, and resilience — allowing systematic analysis of the conditions under which normative inversion succeeds or fails. The analysis draws on V-Dem indicators, discourse analysis of official governmental narratives, and comparative institutional analysis, tracing both structural mechanisms and the rhetorical strategies through which illiberal governments present authoritarian consolidation as the authentic fulfilment of the freedom promised in 1989.

Keywords: illiberalism, democratic backsliding, normative inversion, post-communist legacies, Visegrád

Risks in the Competition Policy of the European Union. A Rule of Law perspective

Ildikó Bartha & **Tamás M. Horváth**, University of Debrecen, Hungary

The boundary between actions taken by Member States that are non-liberal and those that still comply with the European Union's internal market law seems to be increasingly relative nowadays. Challenges such as the recent Coronavirus crisis and the energy crisis triggered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may even exacerbate this ambiguity. Despite expectations of deeper European integration, there is a contradictory tendency towards competitive advantages that are not classified as measures incompatible with EU law. In our view, such advantages may take the form of any kind of economic benefit (state aid, exclusive rights to provide certain services, exemptions from public procurement procedures, and so on) that can influence competition in the internal market by strengthening a company's competitive position, and that can be attributed to states or other public entities. European legislation has shown a trend for almost two decades of Member States' governments gaining more influence in economic sectors subject to EU-level regulation. Consequently, their discretion in determining national measures that comply with EU requirements has increased. This trend has also been supported by recent EU measures aimed at strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy, while giving more flexibility to Member States' economic decisions in certain areas (such as granting state aid to accelerate the transition to renewable energies). This trend could weaken integration as a whole, particularly given the scepticism of nationalist powers towards a stronger Europe, and pose objective risks to competition in certain Member States, not to mention the negative consequences for the rule of law. For example, the European Commission's recent annual Rule of Law Reports highlight that some countries (especially Hungary, Bulgaria and Poland until 2023) face objective corruption risks due to unclear public procurement legal conditions. This may mean that, if democratic control of a political regime is inadequate, competitive advantages may be granted in a way that goes against the normal operation of the market economy in the European Union. These issues will be analysed in sectors such as energy (electricity and gas), postal services, telecommunications, waste management and water supply. Nevertheless, changes to the regulatory framework have a significant impact on the broader context of EU market regulation, extending well beyond the aforementioned areas. As part of our research, we used an original database containing cases handled by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) between 2000 and 2025. We focused on cases involving interventionist decisions by national governments in the V4 countries. In our view, there is a correlation between broadening the scope of derogations from EU internal market and competition rules allowed for Member States and the tendency to interpret Member States' powers in CJEU case law. To prove this, our study combines analytical research with a legal

empirical method – specifically, a statistical analysis of CJEU case law. We conclude that, within the scope of its discretionary power, the CJEU takes a relatively extensive approach, being more receptive than rejecting towards Member States' derogatory instruments. This factor also contributes to the aforementioned risks to competition, with possible negative consequences for the rule of law in certain countries (particularly Hungary among the states examined). Our paper aims to contribute to current scientific discussions on changes in nations' attitudes towards supranational integration, focusing analytically on the link between changes in EU economic law and rule of law risks.

Keywords: rule of law, free market economy, economic crises, V4 countries, Court of Justice of the European Union

From Democratic Hope to Democratic Fatigue: Qualitative Evidence from Poland

Kornelia Batko, **Agnieszka Turska-Kawa**, **Christian Welzel** & **Tomasz Soliński**, University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

The paper investigates the phenomenon of democratic fatigue in contemporary Poland using qualitative evidence gathered within the TRUEDEM project. Based on focus groups conducted with citizens representing different age groups and social backgrounds, the study analyses changing attitudes toward democracy, political participation, and public institutions. The findings suggest a visible transition from the optimism and democratic aspirations characteristic of the post-transformation period toward increasing frustration, emotional exhaustion, and scepticism regarding the effectiveness of democratic governance. Participants frequently describe feelings of polarization, political alienation, declining institutional credibility, and limited influence over public affairs. Simultaneously, democracy continues to be perceived as the most legitimate political system, though it is increasingly viewed as fragile and vulnerable to manipulation, disinformation, and social conflict. The paper demonstrates that democratic fatigue does not necessarily imply rejection of democratic values but rather reflects growing tensions between democratic ideals and everyday political experiences. By focusing on narratives, emotions, and perceptions of ordinary citizens, the study contributes to understanding the social and psychological dimensions of trust and democratic resilience in Poland.

Keywords: trust, freedom, society, Poland, political culture

Security Narratives and Changing Understandings of Freedom in the V4 States

Helena Bauerová, University of West Bohemia, Czechia

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, continuing migration pressures, growing geopolitical instability after 2022 have significantly strengthened the importance of security in the political debate of Central and Eastern European states. In the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4), these external threats are increasingly presented as direct threats to national sovereignty and societal stability. As a consequence of these crises, the relationship between freedom and security is also undergoing a fundamental transformation. Tensions are increasing between protecting liberal-democratic principles and the political imperative to ensure stability, leading to a redefinition of the legitimate scope of individual and political freedoms in the region. The paper aims to analyse how migration and the war in Ukraine during 2022–2026 are constructed as existential threats within the political discourse of the V4 states, and how these security narratives transform the understanding of freedom and democratic principles. The research focuses on how political actors connect issues of security with appeals to restrict or regulate selected dimensions of freedom (e.g., freedom of speech or freedom of movement). The comparative perspective enables identification of significant differences within the V4, particularly between the securitisation strategies of the Czech Republic and Poland, on the one hand, and the specific approaches of Hungary and Slovakia, on the other. The theoretical framework is based on securitisation theory, which enables the analysis of the process by which political actors designate certain phenomena as existential threats, thereby legitimising extraordinary measures, strengthening security-oriented governance, and exerting discursive pressure to marginalise liberal freedoms. Methodologically, the paper employs a comparative qualitative analysis of political discourse, drawing on strategic documents, official statements by government representatives, and selected media narratives. The paper’s initial hypothesis is that contemporary crises lead to a shift from a liberal understanding of freedom to more pragmatic, security-oriented interpretations.

Keywords: Securitization, Visegrad Group, Political Discourse, Freedom and Security

Do Sources Agree? Government Position Estimates in Central and Eastern Europe

Matthew Bergman, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, **Vera Shmalko**, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary & **Siegfried Manschein**, European Union Institute, Italy

The role of government positions in policymaking draws on several literatures including responsible party government, veto player framework, and pledge fulfilment. Each requires an estimate of party positions, from which manifesto data, expert surveys, or public opinion are frequently cited. Building on recent studies that compare party positions across different sources, we examine whether government positions from those sources are correlated, with a focus on Central and Eastern European (CEE) governments. The CEE context is important because post-communist party systems and their volatility, rapid institutional change, and distinctive coalition dynamics can amplify measurement inconsistency and shape policy-making in ways that differ from established Western democracies. Our goal is to assess whether either cross-sectional analyses or longitudinal analyses of government positions are uncorrelated with each other. The results highlight measurement (in)consistency in studies of CEE policymaking. The underlying ideological positions associated with each government are made publicly available.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, government positions, party ideology measurement, veto players, measurement consistency

Javier Milei as a legitimation tool for illiberal politicians: the case of the Czech Republic

Jaroslav Bílek, IPS FSV UK, Czechia & **Barbora Vališková**, KPOL FF UHK, Czechia

Since his election as president in 2023, Argentine President Javier Milei has become a global phenomenon whose influence extends far beyond South America. Thanks to a unique combination of eccentric behaviour and a highly liberal economic agenda—cantered on liberation from the state and bureaucratic elites—he became, almost overnight, the biggest star of right-wing politics in the last decade. For today's right, he is a symbol akin to Hugo Chávez for the left. It is, therefore, no surprise that right-wing politicians around the world are trying to emulate him or refer to him when defending their own agendas and political goals. Somewhat surprisingly, the Argentine president has become the role model also among politicians with illiberal tendencies who moreover operate in countries that have contextually little in common with Argentinian situation in 2023. Thus, a paradoxical situation has arisen since political actors whose agenda in fact aims to restrict some freedoms converted libertarian defender of freedom into a promising tool for their legitimation. A quite visible such a case is the Czech Republic that at first glance seems to be far away from political and economic situation of Argentina, but where we can concurrently observe the tendency to imitate Milei for campaign and mobilization purposes by politicians with illiberal inclinations. The goal of the contribution is thus to explore how is the phenomenon Milei used as a legitimation tool of Czech right-wing politicians for justifying illiberal measures. For that purpose, the critical discourse approach (CDA) of Van Leeuwen (2007), developed by Reyes (2011) will be applied as it provides us with theoretical framework for the analysis of the discursive processes of (de)legitimization. The data will be gathered for the period from election of Milei as president in 2023 till 2026 from social media and Czech prominent national media.

Keywords: democracy backsliding, illiberal politicians, populism, right-wing, illiberal linkages

No quotas, just circles: Institutional and electoral dynamics behind the rise of women in the 2025 Czech elections

Petr Bláha, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University, Czechia

The 2025 Czech parliamentary elections produced the highest share of women in the history of the Chamber of Deputies, despite the absence of legislated gender quotas. This article investigates the institutional and electoral mechanisms behind this increase, focusing on the interaction between candidate supply and preference voting. Using a counterfactual decomposition and candidate-level data, the study demonstrates that the rise in women's representation was driven by both changes in party nomination strategies and voter-induced reordering of candidate lists. While improvements in candidate supply account for part of the increase, preference voting played a substantial and causally identifiable role. Importantly, the effects of preference voting were not uniform across parties or regions, but highly concentrated within specific political contexts. A comparison with the 2021 elections reveals that the 2025 outcome represents not merely a continuation of earlier trends but a structural shift in how preference voting translates into gendered representation. The findings contribute to the broader literature on open-list systems and gender representation by showing that preference voting can function as a selective and context-dependent mechanism of gender redistribution.

Local Development at the Ballot Box: Development-Oriented Local Referendums in the Czech Republic

Petr Blaha, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Czechia

The paper focuses on local referendums in the Czech Republic that addressed questions directly connected to local development, such as infrastructure projects, housing construction, environmental interventions, land use, and municipal investments. Based on a unique dataset of Czech local referendums, the study examines how development-related conflicts are articulated through instruments of direct democracy and what these cases reveal about local political participation, governance, and development trajectories. The paper aims to show that local referendums do not merely represent mechanisms of public participation but also reflect broader tensions between local elites, citizens, economic interests, and competing visions of local development in post-socialist Central Europe.

Challenges to a Consolidated Democracy: The Case of Croatia

Davor Boban, **Goran Čular** & **Darion Nikić Čakar**, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Since the end of the war in 1995, Croatia has undergone a triple transition toward an independent state, a liberal democracy, and a market economy. This thirty-year transformation has not been linear, and internal as well as external factors have shaped it in different ways. The process has been burdened by the social and political legacies of the war, deficiencies in the rule of law, widespread corruption, and the activity of illiberal political forces that have endangered the young liberal-democratic system. Their continued presence raises questions about the extent to which democracy in Croatia in 2025 can be considered positively and negatively consolidated, and whether there is a significant risk of democratic backsliding. Although domestic social and economic problems have impeded progress, they have not halted it. Externally, Croatia's accession to NATO in 2009 and the European Union in 2013 signalled substantial advancement; the EU had been the most important external factor of democratization during the pre-accession process. Internally, vibrant civil society and improvements such as more effective anti-corruption efforts, greater media freedom, and fewer criticisms of the electoral process have been notable. This interplay of obstacles and drivers has resulted, by 2025, in a political environment in which Croatia's democratic system is stronger than that of several neighbours - such as Hungary and Southeast European states outside the EU - although it still lags behind Western Europe and some East Central European countries. The aim of this chapter is to examine the ongoing impact of the 1991-1995 war, along with the structural and procedural factors that have contributed to both the advancement and obstruction of liberal-democratic values in Croatia over the past thirty years, and to demonstrate how illiberal forces continue to impede their further development.

Keywords: democracy, consolidation, party system, constitutional, Croatia

Emotionalized narratives and the support for immigration policy: Findings from a comparative survey experiment

Zsolt Boda, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary, **Attila Bartha**, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary, **Jonathan Kamkhaji**, EUI, Italy & **Claudio Radaelli**, EUI, Italy

Policy making needs a critical level of support from both policy actors and the general public, otherwise policy measures may provoke discontent, or even resistance in the society, and are bound to fail. What is the role emotional framing of policy narratives in creating policy support? Our study investigates the impact of emotionalised narratives on citizens\' attitudes towards immigration and EU immigration policy in four member states: Germany, Hungary, Italy and Poland. In August 2025, an online survey experiment was conducted with a representative sample of 4,004 EU citizens aged 18–65. We used four emotionalized narratives, in the format of vignettes, as experimental treatments. The emotionalized narratives elicit empathy and hope (for the positive emotions valence scale) and fear and anger (for the negative emotions valence scale). Participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups: four groups were presented with emotionally framed narratives (empathy, hope, anger and fear), while a fifth group was presented with a neutral, evidence-based narrative. We expected that policy narratives with positive emotions would increase the support for more liberal immigration policy, while negative emotions would fuel more restrictive preferences. We also hypothesised that general attitudes towards immigrants and asylum seekers would be less affected by the emotionalised narratives than attitudes towards policies. Our expectations are broadly speaking corroborated, but with important and interesting cross-country differences. For instance, while West European citizens are more receptive to empathy and anger narratives, the attitudes of Hungarians and Poles are more effectively shaped by hope versus fear narratives. Overall, the findings contribute to the study of emotions as an effective dimension of policy narratives: the emotional framing shapes immigration policy attitudes in nuanced, context-dependent ways.

Keywords: emotions, policy support, survey experiment

Poland and Hungary chose political change. What is the influence of informal Institutions in both countries? A Comparison of five significant informal Institutions in Poland and Hungary.

Johannes Böhnlein, University of Wuerzburg, Germany

Informal institutions exist in every country to varying degrees. They can strengthen or weaken the formal institutional structure. Since some years, not only their formal but also the informal institutional structure has changed in different forms, strengths, and effects. What is the influence of informal institutions on developments in Poland and Hungary? The aim of this research project is to investigate the causes of different development processes of informal institutions in East-Central-European-countries. The focus is on development paths and their interdependencies. Based on historical institutionalism, development processes (change, strength) of informal institutions can be investigated. Historical institutionalism interprets institutions not only as formal, but also as informal in the sense of norms, processes, attitudes, networks, and conventions. Often informal institutions are difficult to analyse because, unlike formal institutions, they are not visible. However, they are an elementary component of social order. The political change in Poland 2023 and Hungary 2026 can be transferred to an institutional change if there is a corresponding actor who is able and willing to change. Change can lead to transformation, strengthening or weakening of an informal institution. A transformation can be the disappearance, further development, rededication, or re-emergence of an informal institution. The research project analyses networks (clientelism and corruption), attitudes (preference for a strong leader and trust in political institutions) and culture (nationalism). Their development and impact are comparatively examined in two representative countries: Poland and Hungary. The methodological survey takes place within the framework of a partially standardized guideline questionnaire with qualitative interviews. For this purpose, experts from science, politics, journalism, and international institutions were interviewed.

Keywords: Informal Institutions, Political Change, East-Central European countries, Historical Institutionalism, Critical Juncture

Freedom to Act? Slovenia, Palestine, and the Politics of Small-State Agency in Central and Eastern Europe

Milan Brglez, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

What kind of freedom does a small Central European state have to act internationally under conditions of geopolitical asymmetry, normative conflict, and domestic constraint? This paper addresses that question through the case of Slovenia's engagement with Palestine. It treats Palestine not simply as a foreign-policy issue, but as a revealing test of small-state freedom in foreign-policy agency: the freedom to recognize, to align, to invoke international law, to remain cautious, and to stop short of stronger forms of legal-political action. In doing so, the paper brings the CEPSA theme of freedom into dialogue with crisis, rule of law, and the politics of choice in Central and Eastern Europe. The paper develops a two-level framework. Externally, Slovenia is approached as a small-state actor positioned within asymmetrical international relations, where agency is real but conditioned and mediated through diplomatic and foreign-policy practices. Internally, the paper opens the black box of the state and treats foreign-policy conduct as the product of a strategically selective ensemble of legal, diplomatic, political, bureaucratic, and public-sphere relations. This internal-external synthesis is then extended through aleatory materialism, which allows the analysis to treat state action not as the expression of necessity or sovereign autonomy, but as a contingent stabilization produced through crises, institutional settlements, remappings, and blocked alternatives. Empirically, the paper uses Slovenia's politics of Palestine to show that foreign-policy freedom is neither absent nor whole. It is selective. International law, diplomatic visibility, coalition-building, and small-state legitimacy may expand room for manoeuvre, yet this room remains conditioned by external hierarchies and internal state selectivities. The paper is particularly interested in the tension between legal-diplomatic assertion and strategic restraint: between the possibility of speaking and acting in the name of international legality and the limits that emerge when a small state confronts highly polarized international settings. Read from a Central and Eastern European perspective, the case also reconnects contemporary foreign-policy agency to longer regional legacies of post-socialist transformation, semi-peripheral positioning, and the foreclosed but analytically recoverable horizon of Yugoslav non-alignment. The broader claim is that freedom in CEE should be studied not only as a domestic democratic value, but also as a differentiated capacity to act internationally under asymmetrical conditions.

Defending Democracy from Below: Budapest’s Municipal Diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe

Balazs Brucker, ELTE CERS Institute for Regional Studies

Cities, particularly capital cities, have increasingly emerged as important actors in defending democratic values and political pluralism in Central and Eastern Europe. Although foreign policy has traditionally remained the domain of national governments, municipalities today actively participate in transnational networks, European governance, and international advocacy. In countries affected by democratic backsliding and illiberal centralization, some cities have also become visible political counterweights to central governments. This paper examines how Budapest used municipal diplomacy during the final years of the Orbán era to promote democratic norms, European cooperation, and fundamental rights in contrast to the Hungarian government’s illiberal trajectory. Since the election of Mayor Gergely Karácsony in 2019, Budapest has developed a more autonomous international strategy based on direct engagement with European institutions, participation in city networks, and symbolic political positioning on democracy, solidarity, and inclusion. A central focus is the Pact of Free Cities, created by the mayors of Budapest, Warsaw, Prague, and Bratislava in response to growing tensions between several Central European governments and the European Union. Through this alliance, the capitals presented themselves as reliable European partners committed to democratic governance and European solidarity. The paper also explores Budapest’s response to the war in Ukraine. While the Hungarian government adopted a cautious position toward Russia, Budapest openly expressed solidarity with Ukraine through humanitarian assistance and symbolic diplomatic acts, including Mayor Karácsony’s visit to Kyiv and Bucha with other Central European mayors. Finally, the paper addresses Budapest’s international advocacy for human rights and minority rights protection, including support for Budapest Pride events. The paper argues that, during periods of democratic polarization, cities can become important democratic actors that defend European values and create alternative visions of political community and freedom.

Keywords: municipal diplomacy, urban governance, Pact of Free Cities, local governments, democratic resistance

Why don’t we trust them? The decline of trust in democratic institutions and processes in Central and Eastern Europe (case study of Czechia).

Ladislav Cabada, Metropolitan University Prague/University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czechia & **Petr Just**, Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia

The decline of trust in democratic institutions and processes has been one of the most visible phenomena in recent years all over the democratic countries. Paper will present partial results of the research project aimed at the study and research of trust in democracies, political institutions, political actors and decision makers, and democratic processes in European democracies. It will present the project’s results obtained by the qualitative research methods (interviews, focus groups) in Czechia, analysed within the framework of functioning of the Czech political system and state of the Czech political environment and political culture. It will define the roots and reasons for the decline of trust, its symptoms, implications and consequences.

Neither Realigning nor Maintaining Election: Czech Party System and the 2025 General Election

Jakub Charvát, Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia

Since the 2010 critical election, the Czech party system has undergone a significant transformation. Given that the party system stability is a core variable for contemporary comparative politics research, the proposed case study aims to explore the results of the 2025 general election within the framework of the recent dynamics of Czech party politics. To this end, the single-country case study focuses on both the electoral and parliamentary arena and employs a multi-component conceptualisation of party system dynamics, encompassing well-established indicators such as party system continuity, effective number of parties, party system volatility, and electoral polarisation, but also in terms of the party system format and its change. The study concludes that, notwithstanding the results of the 2025 general election, which suggests signs of continuity rather than discontinuity in the trajectories of Czech party politics, the election cannot be considered either a realigning, or a maintaining contest.

Formal Procedures, Unfree Competition: Digital Incumbency and Electoral Integrity, 2012–2024

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This paper examines whether government-sponsored digital manipulation restricts electoral freedom less through electoral administration than through the informational conditions of competition. Standard monitoring frameworks are well suited to detecting procedural failures such as irregular ballot conduct, compromised electoral management, and manipulated voter registration. Digital manipulation may operate elsewhere: in campaign media access, campaign fairness, and the deliberative environment in which parties compete and voters form preferences. This distinction is especially relevant in post-communist Europe and neighbouring democracies, where international monitoring and democracy-promotion regimes have made overt procedural manipulation more visible, while informational restrictions on campaign communication, media access, and public deliberation remain harder to observe. The analysis constructs a country-election dataset covering 106 elections in 20 countries in post-communist Europe and neighbouring democracies, 2012–2024. It links Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) election-level sub-indices with lagged country-year measures from V-Dem and the Digital Society Project. Procedural and informational dimensions of electoral integrity are modelled separately using OLS with country-clustered standard errors, controlling for prior electoral integrity and electoral democracy. The findings are consistent with the dimensional argument. Government-sponsored digital manipulation is negatively associated with overall electoral integrity, but this association is concentrated in informational sub-indices: campaign media, campaign fairness, and the deliberative environment. Procedural sub-indices show smaller and less consistent associations across specifications. The evidence suggests that formally intact electoral procedures can coexist with substantively degraded competition when incumbents shift restrictive strategies toward less visible informational arenas. For debates on freedom of elections and political competition, the paper identifies a measurable gap between electoral form and electoral function. In post-communist Europe and neighbouring democracies, digital incumbency may help explain how restrictions on electoral freedom persist without overt procedural breakdown.

Keywords: electoral integrity, digital manipulation, political competition, democratic backsliding, post-communist Europe

Political violence support: a cross national examination

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This paper examines the factors associated with individuals' acceptance of political violence across contemporary democracies. Acceptance of political violence, defined by attitudes approving of the use of violence (physical, psychological or otherwise defined) in order to achieve (explicit or implicit) political goals, has become an increasingly salient indicator of democratic vulnerability (Norris, 2017). Prior research highlights the roles of affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), threat perceptions (Huddy et al., 2006), and institutional distrust (Piazza, 2024) in shaping support for political violence, yet less attention has been paid to how prejudicial worldviews contribute to the legitimization of violent political action. Drawing on original survey data collected between 2 and 23 September 2025 using a CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) online panel, with a total sample of 10,111 respondents (n = 2,014 in Germany; n = 2,023 in Hungary; n = 2,010 in Romania; n = 2,053 in Spain; n = 2,011 in the United Kingdom), we analyse how misogyny, racism, and other forms of discriminatory attitudes correlate with the willingness to condone political violence, while controlling for political interest, institutional trust, and prior protest experience. We advance three hypotheses: H1: Individuals expressing stronger prejudicial attitudes, such as sexism or beliefs minimizing discrimination, will show higher acceptance of political violence. H2: Higher institutional trust will be associated with lower acceptance of political violence. H3: Engagement in non-violent political participation, such as protest attendance, will be negatively associated with support for political violence (Bosi et al., 2016). Preliminary analyses support these expectations: prejudicial attitudes, traditional gender norms, and perceptions that discrimination is no longer a problem are positively associated with endorsing political violence, whereas institutional trust, support for advancing women's rights, and recent protest participation predict lower acceptance. These findings underscore the importance of discriminatory worldviews as drivers of democratic instability and highlight how both institutional orientations and participatory experiences shape citizens' willingness to justify political violence.

Keywords: political violence, prejudice, institutional trust, political participation, democratic stability

Political Transformation, Border Regimes and the Cross-border Mobility - the Curious Case of the Railway Connection via Głuchołazy along the Polish-Czech Borderland

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The Czech-Polish border is 795 km long, and it is the longest border shared by Poland with its neighbouring countries. Historically, the border divided the territory of the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires (before 1918), Czechoslovakian and German states (till 1945) to become a demarcation line between Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic) and Poland. Throughout these years, the macro-structural geopolitical changes seriously influenced the border regimes between the enumerated political entities, together with the demographic, national, and socio-economic structure of those living along the border. The interdependence between the wide geopolitical transformations, the border regimes, and the local communities is well reflected by the cross-border railway connections affecting the cross-border mobility and the life of border communities. This study addresses the following research question: How did the geopolitical transformation in Central Europe affect the local cross-border mobility between the countries located along the contemporary Czech-Polish border? How has the EU integration process influenced the capacity for facilitating the cross-border mobility along the Czech-Polish border? These questions will be addressed by studying a curious case of the 60 kilometres long transit railway connection between the border towns of Mikulovice (CZ) and Jindrichov ve Slezsku (CZ) via the Polish town of Głuchołazy (Euroregion Praděd). The selected case gives a sound opportunity to trace intersections between huge geopolitical shifts and the local, cross-border movement. By applying the approach of global microhistory, supported by desk research and field observation, the author is going to investigate those intersections and demonstrate opportunities and challenges of fostering cross-border mobility along one of the EU borderlands.

Political Thought in the Transformation Process of the Polish and Czech Post-Communist Left after 1989

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This article analyses the role of political thought in the transformation of communist parties into post-communist parties in Poland and Czechoslovakia (the Czech Republic) after 1989 and their adaptation to the new conditions of democratic party competition. The post-communist left in Poland and the communist party in the Czech Republic adopted different paths and different transformation goals. In Poland, the post-communist left underwent a process of ideological correction and strong adaptation, becoming a social democratic party. In the Czech Republic, amid the existence of a traditional social democratic party and, consequently, the dual structure of the left, the communist party remained on its ideological foundations. The main research question concerns the role of ideology and political thought in this process. The thesis argues that the different transformation goals were associated with different approaches to ideology, including the ideological legacy of communism. Author asks questions about the attitude of both parties towards the communist ideology before 1989, what ideological changes influenced the programmatic goals of the parties with a clear indication of differences, what was the process of incorporating social democratic thought into the ideology of the post-communist party in Poland, and what elements of communist ideology remained unchanged in the ideological face of the communist party in Czechoslovakia (the Czech Republic)?

Shifting Attitudes Toward Ukrainian Refugees in Czech Municipalities: A Media Content Analysis (2022–2025)

Jakub Čapek, **Petr Jüptner** & **Jakub Hornek**, Charles University, Czechia

This article examines changing public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic from 2022 to 2025, with a particular focus on how these shifts are reflected and shaped by the media. Based on a large-scale content analysis of Czech print and online news, the paper tracks how narratives around Ukrainian refugees evolved in relation to the Czech municipalities. From initial solidarity and strong public support across the spectrum to more critical or hostile tones. This also influences the affected countries' approach to the European Union and European integration as such. In addition to appeals for European solidarity, Eurosceptic narratives are also becoming more common in the affected countries such as the Czech Republic. The research also links these shifts in discourse to political developments at the national and local levels, including the mainstreaming of anti-refugee rhetoric by some political parties. Special attention is paid to what milestones or events triggered changes in tone. The article provides important insights into the interplay between media discourse, local realities, and refugee-related policymaking and contributes to the understanding of the politicisation of migration in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Media monitoring, Czechia, Ukrainian refugees, Integration

From City Hall to Parliament: Electoral Performance of Mayors in the 2025 Czech General Election

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This article examines the electoral performance of mayors in the 2025 Czech general election, focusing on candidates from parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies. Amid the growing personalisation of politics, mayors are often seen as valuable assets to party lists due to their local visibility and perceived competence. Using a dataset of 2,052 candidates, we compare the electoral performance of mayors and deputy mayors against other high-status professions (medical doctors, lawyers, teachers) and incumbent MPs. Methodologically, the study employs a probit model to estimate the probability of election and quantile regression to analyse preferential vote gains relative to ballot position. The results confirm that mayors hold a statistically significant electoral advantage (+4 pp probability of election), yet they do not outperform medical doctors or incumbent MPs. The analysis further reveals significant variations across political parties and regions. While the STAN movement fielded the most mayors, their individual electoral impact was often surpassed by that of other professionals within the party. Conversely, the populist ANO movement successfully leveraged its mayoral candidates, who significantly outperformed the party's average. The findings suggest that while municipal experience remains a key recruitment channel in this multi-level political system, the "mayoral bonus" is finite and heavily dependent on party context and regional dynamics.

Keywords: Mayors, Parliamentary Elections, Personalisation, Czech Republic, Preferential Voting

The "Good" and the "Bad" Slovaks. Political thinking in Slovakia (1990-1998)

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The paper is part of the research complex on East-Central Europe studies. It also contributes to post-communist transformation research from the perspective of intellectual history, moving beyond “technical questions". It fosters a greater awareness of the political thinking of Slovak intellectuals in the 1990s. Slovakia’s multiple transformation processes brought to light ideological differences in Slovak society that had been frozen in previous decades. Two groups can be identified: The “liberal cosmopolitan democrats”, castigated by members of the Bratislava-based Slovak liberal intellectuals. On the other hand, “illiberal Slovak nationalists”, organised around the Slovak Matica (Matica slovenská) or the Slovak Writers’ Association (Spolok slovenských spisovateľov). They were linked to political parties such as HZDS and SNS. Both groups were irreconcilably opposed to each other. A mutual othering became clear: “bad Slovaks” vs “good Slovaks” or “decent citizens and good democrats” vs “nationalist extremists”. (The contradictions between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ Slovaks do not originate in the 1990s. Rather, at the latest, they have existed since the end of the 1930s.). However, the boundaries between the two groups were not as rigid as they might appear at first glance Exploring the political thinking of selected representatives of these groups, this paper illustrates how intellectuals from both groups commented on defining problems and events in the 1990s, including the Velvet Revolution of November 1989, “Mečiarism,” Slovakia’s statehood, Slovak nationalism, the state of Slovakia’s democracy, and the country’s foreign policy orientation. Based on this, the project addresses the type of democracy they prefer (e.g., liberal democracy with legally enshrined minority rights or radical majority democracy without minority protection). It examines the extent to which supporters of liberal democracy were [un]prepared after 1989 to face the challenges of nationalism. Questions regarding ideological influences and intellectual-historical contexts are addressed. The period under investigation is 1990 to 1998 (the specific endpoint is the elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic in autumn 1998, which marked the political end for Vladimír Mečiar). A new perspective on Slovakia's development during the multiple transformation processes of the 1990s will be provided. The intellectual debates of that era enhance understanding of Slovakia's current politics and foreign policy orientations. These contradictions are also significant and relevant in present-day Slovakia. The project highlights traditions in the history of ideas that are part of the “archive” and “laboratory” of political thought in Slovakia.

Keywords: Slovakia, Transformation Studies, Political Thinking, Democracy, Slovak Statehood

Populism Manifested: Modes of Control and Arbitration, a Comparison of Orban and Duterte

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The last two decades represent the liberal decay that democracies from all over the world have experienced. The neoliberal story that transcended during the rise, peak, plateau, and eventual decline was unexpected at first, and eventually inevitable with the given phenomena tagged as democratic backsliding. These transitions from countries may vary at face value, yet as this research argues carry on fundamentally similar systemic modes of manipulation and control, which have made the regimes of Orban in Hungary and Duterte in the Philippines possible. The paper establishes these comparative modalities using the modes of concession and arbitration, which lay out the foundations, phases, and actors that coincide to promote and support populists with autocratic characteristics through the mandate of the populace. Primarily, it critically explores, compares, and systematically organizes the stories of populist resurgence, reinforcement, and eventual decline through the stories both in Europe and the developing world, hereby highlighting the Philippines. Highlighting the stories of Hungary and the Philippines provides a unique opportunity and perspective on seeing the nuances of democratic and electoral culture in different geographies.

Keywords: Populism, Democratic backsliding, Duterte, Orban

Boomerang Effect: Anti-Colonial Thought, Intellectual Complicity, and the Populist Reordering of the Political

Jo Dillabough, University of Cambridge, UK

Drawing on letters and scholarly writings on nationalism and the 'conservative revolutionđ' from the Hannah Arendt Archives (Bard College) and the New School for Social Research, I identify the political figures and modalities of thought that shaped Arendt's concept of the 'imperial boomerang effect' and its bearing on the modern nation-building project. The paper takes the politics of freedom as its central thread, asking what Arendt's engagement with empire, nationalism and the scholar's complicity in war and atrocity can tell us about the conditions under which freedom is defended — or surrendered — in the contemporary academy, with particular reference to Central and Eastern Europe. The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, I examine Arendt's writings on the role of the 'scholar' in nation-building, in relation to her mid-twentieth-century interlocutors and their concerns with complicity and resurgent nationalism — questions Arendt worked through as a stateless refugee. I draw on her lectures, correspondence and course syllabi between 1935 and 1965, alongside personal letters on nationalism and 'federalism' in which her thinking about freedom, statelessness and political belonging is at its most exposed. Second, I bridge this archival work with contemporary writings on the 'imperial boomerang effect' and anti-colonial thought and bring Arendt into conversation with Sylvia Wynter's critique of the 'overrepresentation of Man'. Wynter both extends and tests Arendt: she pushes the politics of freedom beyond Arendt's European frame, while sharpening Arendt's question about who is permitted to appear as a political subject within nation-building's imperial grammar — a question of renewed urgency across Central and Eastern Europe. My aim is to identify new idioms for comprehending populist authoritarianism and its governing rationales in the academy — read through the conflicted figurations of the 'intellectual', the scholar-activist and the idealised 'post-' or 'anti-' colonial scholar (Al-Azmeh & Dillabough, 2023; Bose, 2021), now at the centre of a struggle over what freedom in and through the university can mean. I pursue this through two Central and Eastern European cases — the Czech Republic and Serbia — set against the current political landscape of the UK.

Universities, Populism and the Paradox of Freedom

Jo Dillabough, University of Cambridge, UK

Higher education (HE) has become a crucial site for examining academic freedom and the politics of appropriation amid populist resurgence, technocratic governance, and geopolitical conflict. I conceptualise the university as an experimental "problem space" (Scott, 1997, 2004) in which the unresolved contradictions of 'liberal' democracy are reproduced and contested. Academic freedom, I argue, cannot be understood solely as an institutional right or protection from external interference (see also Bragge, Dillabough & Peto, 2026); it is better understood as a historically contingent political practice, shaped by struggles over who has the authority to produce knowledge, exercise critique, and claim legitimacy amid rising distrust. Drawing on Arendt, Honig, Balibar, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Mbembe, I trace how nation-building, bureaucratic power, moralising state practices, and scientific rationalities have reconfigured HE's governing purposes, exposing universities to processes of appropriation through which the languages of freedom, democracy, autonomy, and public accountability are selectively adopted and redirected. Appropriation thus operates not only through censorship or political capture, but through the administrative management of critique, the instrumentalisation of scholarship, and the unequal extraction or displacement of marginalised intellectual traditions. Populism in HE, from this perspective, is neither a coherent ideology nor a discrete conflict between opposing political logics, but a complex assemblage of national and transnational forces rooted in the paradoxes of liberalism itself: the university promises critical independence while remaining embedded in state authority, market rationalities, colonial inheritances, and regimes of expertise. Situating academic freedom within these contradictions, I show how the university becomes a testing ground for wider crises of governance, knowledge-making, and political legitimacy. I conclude that academic freedom demands more than preserving institutional autonomy: it requires sustained attention to freedom's own appropriation amid rising populisms, and to the conditions under which universities can sustain the vital life of critical judgement.

Making the Nation Legible: The SZFE Crisis and the Illiberal University in an Age of New Extremes

Jo Dillabough, University of Cambridge, UK & **Elizabeth Maber**, University of Cambridge, UK

The danger of totalitarianism is always present in the modern world … and it is as modern as democracy itself," Agnes Heller once warned. Recent global shifts toward populist authoritarianism illustrate the continuing resonance of this claim, nowhere more visibly than in Hungary, which former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has described as an incubator for conservative political futures. Within this context, the academy emerges as both a fragile and vulnerable institution and a central battleground in what Quinn Slobodian calls struggles over "epistemic sovereignty." These struggles are both political—manifest in the state's appropriation of institutional mandates—and ontological, challenging "whose knowledge is of most worth" and undermining what Foucault named the "practice of freedom." This paper situates these dynamics within the Hungarian higher education sector, focusing on the 2020 government takeover of the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) in Budapest. The SZFE conflict crystallises how global right populist regimes and conservative intellectual networks have shape HE spaces deemed "too liberal" or "too woke," casting them as threats to neo-nationalist projects of moral and political legitimisation. By examining both far-right populist networks and student–faculty resistance to the takeover, we illuminate the ways in which authoritarian interventions produce a profound crisis of critique, collapsing the fragile interval of transgenerational care and the university's promise of sustaining a plural world. It also highlights the ephemerality of the promise of politics as a form of resistance to state dominance, drawing upon a bricolage methodological approach to illustrate the role of activists in the act of truth-telling in a time of political crises, with a particular emphasis on the narrative accounts of SZFE academic and student activists who formed the FreeSZFE movement. Theoretically, the paper engages Foucault's account of governmentalisation and J. C. Scott's notion of "political legibility" to show how the capture of higher education extends beyond overt coercion to a reconfiguration of the very terms of freedom and political life. We ask: what forms of political articulation and subjectivity are possible when the university is remade as an instrument of authoritarian reinvention? By tracing both the populist right networks and the practices of freedom articulated by SZFE students and faculty, we argue that while activist practices illuminate Arendt's vision of the "promise of politics," they also reveal its stark constraints under conditions of authoritarian capture and its associated elite networks.

Transatlantic Tensions and the Future of NATO: A Study of Defense Spending Discourse in Times of Crisis

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This paper examines the rising tensions within the transatlantic alliance and their implications for the future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) amid geopolitical instability, economic difficulties, and emerging security threats. NATO is still the main organization that keeps peace and security in Europe and North America, but more and more people are wondering how important it is strategically, how well it works together, and how long it can last. The study focuses on the conversation about defence spending during crises and looks at how different political, economic, and ideological stories affect the Alliance\'s priorities and agreements on how to share the costs. The study explores several interconnected questions that have defined NATO’s post–Cold War trajectory. It looks at the reasons why there are still disagreements between the US and Europe, such as arguments about NATO\'s eastward expansion, the effects of long-term military operations outside of Europe, and different views on Russia, terrorism, cyber insecurity, and climate-related threats. It also looks into whether NATO should pay more attention to China and how that might affect the Alliance\'s unity. Special attention is paid to debates over defence expenditure, especially the controversy surrounding NATO’s “2 percent rule.” The study investigates and foregrounds why major European economies, particularly Germany, struggle to meet agreed defence commitments and how domestic political and economic pressures influence military spending decisions. It also looks at how the EU\'s plan for strategic autonomy will change how Europe and the US work together on security issues. By situating defence spending discourses within broader global transformations including financial crises, public debt, demographic change, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising populism, democratic backsliding, and the disruptive impact of digital media technologies the research argues that NATO’s greatest challenge may not only be external threats, but also the gradual weakening of the political and ideological foundations of the US-led international order upon which the Alliance was built.

Keywords: NATO, Defense Spending, Transatlantic Relations, Security Crisis, Strategic Alliances

When does the rule of multi-term presidents end? The case of Polish cities

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Since 2002, the principle of direct election of city mayors has been introduced in Poland. Earlier, between 1990 and 1998, city councillors elected city mayors, but political parties played a decisive role in shaping city governments. In the first three terms (beginning in 1990, 1994, and 1998), the election of city mayors was therefore a consequence of coalitions formed between political forces represented in city councils, which predominantly adhered to party affiliations. Starting in 2002 (direct elections), the results of city mayoral elections have become more dependent on the will of their residents. Moreover, the local elections of 2002, 2006, 2010, and 2014 had no restrictions on incumbents – incumbent mayors could run for re-election without any limits on the number of their terms. During this period, re-elections of incumbent city mayors for successive four-year terms were relatively frequent. Since the 2018 elections, a two-term limit has been introduced, with the term extended from four to five years. So, in the most recent elections (2024), some mayors ran for re-election for the last time. The ability for residents to directly elect the city mayor was particularly important in large cities. While political parties generally play a weaker role in small local communities, in biggest cities, especially those with provincial status, their position on the local political scene is much stronger. The subject of this presentation is an analysis of the mayoral race in selected large Polish cities between 2002 and 2024. Its goal is to determine whether party affiliation accompanied re-election of mayors or whether it favoured an alternation of power. The second goal of the analysis—based on the 2024 election results—is to answer the question: do political parties determine the end of power (loss of elections) of multi-term presidents?

Performing Uncertainty: Russian Nuclear Threats in the Ukraine War

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This paper examines Russia’s nuclear signalling in the context of its war against Ukraine, advancing the hypothesis that Russian officials deliberately leverage ambiguity to exploit Western risk aversion. While nuclear threats have become more frequent and explicit, they are increasingly detached from Russia’s formal doctrine. The project identifies patterns in Russian nuclear threats by clarifying conceptual distinctions -- between strategy, doctrine, policy, posture, and types of nuclear signalling -- and by analysing the intellectual and institutional context in which Russia’s nuclear posture has evolved. Building on the foundational work of Thomas Schelling and Robert Jervis, and incorporating insights from psychology and strategic culture, the paper develops a theoretical framework to explain how ambiguity functions in nuclear brinkmanship. Given the limits of doctrinal analysis alone, it argues for an interdisciplinary approach -- drawing on neuroscience and decision theory -- to better understand how Russia constructs and communicates nuclear risk under conditions of deliberate uncertainty. Among other things, the paper interrogates whether Russian elites genuinely view limited nuclear escalation as a viable strategy, and whether nuclear posture emerges through centralized presidential control or through interaction among multiple actors -- questions central to assessing the credibility of Russian nuclear threats.

Keywords: Nuclear weapons, Russia, deterrence, European security

Local development driven by digital public policy tools

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The digital transformation of society is changing key aspects of how local governments operate, including the way local development is facilitated, proactively managed and supported. Using a multiple-case study methodology and an analysis of empirical evidence, trends, and current developments, this study examines the role of digital tools in creating, shaping and communicating public policies, with a particular focus on their application to local development. The study reveals that digital tools are inherently multifaceted, serving primarily as enablers of local development rather than ends in themselves. Their core function lies in improving public service delivery, enhancing residents\' quality of life, fostering community resilience, and reinforcing local identity. Accordingly, the study underscores the importance of local public authorities adopting digital tools not as a definitive objective, but as an instrumental means of advancing local development. Keywords: local development, public policy, municipalities, digital transformation, digital tools

Hungarian Far-Right Ambitions in the Late 20th –Early 21st cc. Toward the Revision of the Trianon Treaty

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The Hungarian right-wing movements often used the “card” of the Treaty of Trianon (signed in 1920) as a political tool, presenting it as a significant national trauma in order to gain domestic support and promote national goals internationally. The right wing has a long tradition in Hungary. (Földvári, 2025d). This paper is the third instalment of the author's “Trianon Trilogy”. The first article provided historical context for the Trianon Peace Treaty, highlighting how the Hungarian ruling elite had mistreated ethnic minorities, leading to a loss of support from Western powers. (Földvári, 2025a). The second article discussed the extreme, far-right, and authoritarian aspects of the Horthy regime, which attempted to revise the terms of the Trianon Peace Treaty by claiming territories that had been ceded to neighbouring countries. (Földvári, 2025b) In this third paper, it will be discussed the recent extremist right-wing approaches to the Trianon Treaty that have emerged in Hungary following the system transition after the collapse of socialism and the establishment of Orbán's illiberal government. This regime was characterised by racism and hostility towards neighbouring countries, particularly concerning Carpathian Ukraine. (Földvári, 2025c). Then, we are not only discussing the far-right and authoritarian Orban regime, but also the strengthening fascism represented by six members of the newly elected Parliament, after April 12, 2026, representatives of the “Mi Hazánk” (“Our Motherland”) Party. Notably, there is not left nor liberal party in the recent Hungarian Parliament, but three right parties. It may raise some doubt about the absolute democratisation of Hungary in its way of returning to Europe.

Keywords: Hungary, Trianon, Orbán, extremism, populism

Synthetic Freedom: La Boétie's Voluntary Servitude Rebuilt for the Digital Age

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed that the English people were free only in the moment of walking to the ballot box — enslaved again the instant they returned home. This paper argues that we have since lost even that moment. What contemporary European citizens inhabit is not freedom but synthetic freedom: an engineered imitation of democratic agency that produces willing consent to arrangements often designed to work against the interests of those consenting — docility mistaken for sovereignty. The argument is grounded in Étienne de La Boétie's foundational analysis in the Discourse on Voluntary Servitude (1576): power sustains itself not through force but through manufactured dependency and normalized submission. What has changed across five centuries is the sophistication of the dependency-creation apparatus — and, critically, who operates it. Huxley's Brave New World imagined a dystopia maintained by an Alpha Plus governance caste whose intellectual complexity was the precondition for systemic stability. The contemporary condition inverts this assumption entirely: the tools of behavioural capture — cyber bondage through platform-optimized emotional targeting, micro-targeted tribal mobilization — require no superior intellectual capacity to deploy. They require only the willingness to deploy them without ethical restraint. Orwell's allegorical analysis in Animal Farm (1945) that power accrues not to the most capable but to the most willing to operate without normative constraint finds its contemporary political science expression here: the educated deliberative class, trained in argumentation and norms of evidential legitimacy, experiences manipulation as beneath the dignity of democratic contest. Those replacing them in popular disputes make no such distinction. This asymmetry of constraint, not asymmetry of capability, is the defining structural feature of contemporary democratic competition. Words have not merely lost precision. They have been deliberately evacuated of meaning and refilled with emotional content, because emotional content travels faster, resists rational rebuttal more effectively, and produces the dopamine-mediated tribal activation that platform architecture is specifically engineered to exploit. Drawing on Chomsky and Herman's manufacturing consent updated for the digital age, Zuboff's surveillance capitalism as the behavioural modification infrastructure through which that consent is now systematically engineered, Seligman's learned helplessness as a model for political passivity, and Kahneman's distinction between fast emotional and slow deliberative cognition, the paper traces the historical arc from forced obedience, through leadership commanding genuine conviction, to the present condition of subconscious steering — citizens pre-conditioned rather than convinced, tribally aroused rather than directed, their threshold for meaningful collective action reduced to

zero by the permanent digital provision of what Juvenal identified as bread and circuses. We no longer vote for something. We vote against something — vibrating intensely as a political body while never moving in any direction that matters. The paper concludes that synthetic freedom is more malignant than any prior architecture of unfreedom precisely because it generates no legible oppression against which resistance could organize. The captive population guards its own cage and experiences the arrangement as the free exercise of democratic will.

Keywords: Synthetic freedom, manufactured consent, voluntary servitude

From state capture to democratic backsliding: The tale of Slovakia in the Fico-era (2006-2027)

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For relatively long time, since 2006, the – rather moderate – democratic backsliding processes in Slovakia were the unintended consequence or collateral damage of the large-scale corruption in the country. We define the phenomenon often referred to as state capture or mafia state as a systemic, repeatedly occurring grand corruption organized by political and business elites to ensure sustained rent extraction for a small group of individuals at the expense of the society/taxpayers. The most important arena for it has been public procurements including EU funds. The governing populist elites by trying to ensure impunity for their crony oligarchs and themselves gradually undermined the rule of law, and thus the trust in institutions and this process later evolved to wider democratic backsliding. However, large-scale systemic attack against liberal democracy started only during the fourth government of Robert Fico (from 2023); following a period when corrupt politicians and their cronies – including PM Fico himself – has been facing not only political but also legal consequences due to their previous involvement in corruption scandals. Our aim is to examine this state capture – democratic backsliding nexus pointing to the specific nature of Slovak development in comparative perspective.

Keywords: State capture, democratic backsliding, rule of law, public procurements, corruption

Humanitarian Assistance and the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis in Hungary: NGOs Responses Since 2022

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Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 not only created a new geopolitical and security context but also transformed global and regional patterns of forced displacement, with millions of refugees recorded across Europe. Although the Ukrainian refugee crisis has been characterized by frequent border crossings, returns, and onward movements between host countries, Ukraine's neighbouring states emerged as the primary destinations for displaced Ukrainians during the early stages of the war. The sudden and large-scale movement of people placed significant pressure on receiving countries, prompting extensive humanitarian responses by state institutions, civil society actors, and non-governmental organizations alike. This article examines how Hungarian humanitarian organizations, including NGOs and charitable organizations, have responded to the displacement crisis during the four years of the war (2022–2026). Focusing on the evolving dynamics of humanitarian assistance, it explores how organizational practices shifted from providing immediate emergency relief to addressing the longer-term needs of Ukrainian refugees, increasingly filling the policy vacuum created by the persistent absence of a comprehensive Hungarian refugee and integration policy. The analysis draws primarily on semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of NGOs and charitable organizations in Hungary, complemented by policy analysis of organizational reports and data on aid provision. While the research assumes a positive correlation between the involvement of humanitarian actors and improvements in refugee conditions, it also highlights the systemic challenges associated with this surrogate role. It argues that the protracted nature of the crisis and the lack of state-led infrastructure place mounting pressure on refugee assistance, presenting significant challenges in addressing the long-term needs of refugees as the displacement situation becomes more prolonged.

Keywords: Hungary, NGOs, Ukrainian refugees, protracted displacement crises

Democratic innovations in the fight against recentralization in V4 countries. Lessons from metropolitan municipalities

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It is hard to disagree with the statement that the mayors-governments relations are the subject of numerous analyses, especially while taking into the account the willingness of mayors to implement the government policies. This issue is particularly important in a situation where, on the one hand, recentralization tendencies are becoming more and more important and, on the other, local communities are manifesting the need for autonomy. Taking into the account the functioning of the metropolitan municipalities in V4 countries, the paper illustrates the links between mayors' party affiliation and their usage of democratic innovations in terms of the fight against the recentralization pressure and, as a result, the protection of the local autonomy. As part of the methodological approach, documents, materials, and media coverage illustrating mayors' activities are analysed in a comparative perspective. The very first result allows to state that the usage of democratic innovations at the urban level is the domain of opposition mayors. It is clearly visible in Budapest and Warsaw, suggesting a link to a significant recentralization pressure.

Keywords: metropolitan municipalities, V4, recentralization, democratic innovations, mayors

The concept of freedom in the nationalist thought of Central and Eastern Europe from the 19th century onward

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When dealing with the discourse on “freedoms,” it is often identified with the reconstruction of the concept of “freedom” within liberal ideology. It is frequently forgotten, as suggested by the works of Isaiah Berlin, that there are various ideological models that relate positively to the concept of “freedom,” each offering a different interpretation of it. More specifically, there are as many “freedoms” as there are ideologies that posit them, even though these can be grouped into broader categories with more or less similar characteristics. One of these conceptions is, in effect, that of nationalism, which has manifested itself in numerous historical movements for national liberation and the formation of nation-states. The case of Central and Eastern Europe is particularly interesting in this regard, as it encompasses a geopolitical area that, in modern times, witnessed struggles against the great imperial entities that dominated those territories. The political struggle of nationalist movements in this vast European region for emancipation from the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires represents a textbook example of this particular nationalist conception of freedom. Moreover, this conception was not only applied at the moment of breaking away from pre-existing supranational orders, but also within a different mode of life implied by the social and political reforms envisioned by these movements. It is also interesting to note the development of this type of reasoning within the history of political thought, particularly through the relationships that some of the major theorists of nationalism, such as Giuseppe Mazzini, had with nationalist movements in Central and Eastern Europe. With this speech, we aim to examine the nationalist concept of freedom specifically in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, demonstrating the exemplary importance of its application in particular movements of liberation and nation-building. In doing so, we intend to establish a general interpretative framework for this model of freedom, comparing it with other conceptions of an individualistic and privatistic nature. We will therefore demonstrate not only the centrality of this European region to the development of modern and contemporary nationalist thought, but also how, in this context, such thought developed by providing key value parameters to nationalist movements worldwide.

Keywords: Freedom, Nationalism, Ideology, National liberation, Nation-building

The key factor of strengthening democratic institutions in the Western Balkans: The citizen

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Democratic deficits in the countries of the Western Balkans remain an apparent problem. Although some improvements have been achieved, strengthening democratic institutions' resistance to autocratic control by political leaders remains an important issue. Successful attempts by political elites to weaken political institutions suggest that the survival of democracy may depend on vertical accountability—the relationship between the electorate and its representatives. This paper therefore examines whether citizens have the capacity to counter government attempts to undermine democracy. Once political institutions are captured by incumbent politicians, the electorate remains the primary corrective. Elections are held to maintain a certain level of political legitimacy for the political regime, but even when manipulated elections pose risks for autocratic regimes, as outcomes retain a degree of unpredictability. Elections, alongside free assembly and protest, provide citizens with tools to hold elites accountable and potentially replace them. The study draws on theories of democratic consolidation and Europeanisation to analyse elite–citizen relations. Democratic decline is particularly visible in the Western Balkans, where dominant parties have eroded institutions, fostered clientelist networks, and enabled state capture. The paper aims to draw from individual case studies to assess the capabilities of the electorate and civil society.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Democracy, Accountability, Clientelism, Corruption

Geopolitical Changes in US Strategies - Consequences for Central Europe

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The article analyses geopolitical changes occurring in the third decade of the 21st century in relation to the US National Security Strategy 2025 and the US National Defense Strategy 2026, as well as in relation to selected geopolitical concepts. The main theoretical basis for the study is the ideas of Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman. The study will focus on the case of Central Europe. Based on an analysis of leading documents of the US foreign policy strategy, as well as on the main principles arising from the analysed scientific concepts, scenarios of possible geopolitical changes in Europe will be presented. The research methodology is based on source analysis and references to the relevant literature, as well as scenario forecasting based on theoretical assumptions.

Keywords: geopolitics, geoeconomics, geoculture, Central Europe, limited fragmentation

Who Counts as “The Public”? Public Opinion Orientations among Lithuanian Local Councillors

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Democratically elected local (municipal) councillors generally claim to know who they represent, but the channels through which they form that knowledge are neither neutral nor universal. In this article we use survey data of Lithuanian local councillors to investigate how their public opinion orientations – their tendencies to treat particular channels of engagement as the most useful and legitimate sources of public voice – are related to their institutional position and political values. Using a principal component analysis on 11 public opinion engagement channels, we identify three distinct councillor orientations: Participatory Civic Engagement (PCE), Representative Channels (RC), and Mediated Public Voice (MPV). Regression analyses show that younger councillors who are keen on representing marginalized groups and are outside of the ruling coalition are more likely to Favor participatory orientations, like community consultations. Representative Channels, like voting, are most favoured by councillors who are part of the ruling coalition, hold strong positions on party loyalty and are more aligned with representing the economically well-off. Mediated orientations are held by the ones who see traditional and social media channels as useful ways to communicate with citizens, focus on current, pressing issues like the environment, and see media as broadcasting or monitoring tools rather than means of citizen participation. Finally, we utilize k-means cluster analysis to identify three councillor clusters (profiles), who each construct “the public” in their own unique way. Our study contributes to comparative local democracy research through evidence from Lithuania and suggests that whose voices count as public opinion is shaped and structured by councillors' own institutional power and political values.

Keywords: public opinion, local councillors, democratic representation, political epistemology

"The Women Problem" in U.S. Politics? The relationship between gender and party identification in the context of the MAGA narrative

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The phrase "Make America Great Again" can be viewed not only as a phenomenon tied to a specific political concept and social movement in the U.S., but also as a distinct narrative of a return to a "glorious" past. Its structural framework is predicated on a delineation of successive phases and providing a visual representation of the desired world. This constitutes a promise to achieve shared goals, meet needs, and restore the traditional values of the community by defining the positions of individuals, including women and men. It can be observed that their roles in the MAGA narrative differ. In the U.S., women have been more likely to vote for Democrats for decades, although a large group is inclined to vote for Republicans – Donald Trump’s 2016 and 2024 presidential campaigns did not change this. The Democrats counted on women’s votes, but ultimately, most white women voted for the Republican candidate. This paper seeks to explicate the phenomenon of party identity taking precedence over gender identity in the context of the "Make America Great Again" narrative.

Keywords: MAGA, political narrative, political party identification, gender equality

Community Led-Development: Slovenian Municipal Councillors in a Comparative Perspective

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The paper examines municipal councillors as key actors in local representative democracy and addresses a significant research gap concerning the largest group of directly elected politicians. Building on previous studies of Slovenian local political leadership, the paper situates Slovenian findings within a broader comparative European framework. The analysis draws on the international research project Local Councillors in Europe II – The Return of Councillors, which investigates the political attitudes, motivations, career trajectories, institutional roles, and socio-demographic characteristics of local elected representatives. The empirical component of the study was conducted in Slovenia in 2023 and covered the entire population of municipal councillors (N = 3,367), with 1,164 respondents participating in the survey. The paper analyses key dimensions of political representation, including the relationships between councillors, mayors, and political parties, as well as selected contemporary challenges facing local democracy, such as the professionalization of local politics and the community-led local development. A particular contribution of the study lies in its comparative examination of the Slovenian local self-government model within the wider European context. This approach enables the identification of similarities, differences, and broader developmental trends in local political representation, thereby contributing to comparative political science scholarship and to a deeper understanding of ongoing transformations in local governance across Europe

Freedom just for some? Populists' construction of gender as part of anti-gender mobilization in the V4 region.

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Central Europe has long been discussed in the context of the erosion of democracy and the so-called illiberal turn. Particularly within the V4 group, politics is often characterized by a persistent emphasis on conservatism, a rejection of liberalism, opposition to minority rights, and a so-called gender backlash, which manifests itself in a halt to progress and even a certain degree of opposition to the rights of women and the LGBTQIA+ community. Part of this political shift includes populist political parties aligning with religious actors and radical political forces to form conservative coalitions and present themselves as defenders of traditional values and even the nation as a whole. So, what exactly is the relation between populism and gender? The concept of gender can be and is used to form the core populist dichotomy of the "morally pure people" in contrast to "the others," who do not conform to "traditional" gender norms. Furthermore, a specific anti-gender rhetoric prevails in the V4 region, positioning the "traditional family" as a sacred entity that must be protected from foreign "threats." On the other hand, gender equality or LGBTQIA+ rights are being portrayed as something that is being artificially imposed on the state, and that undermines its national sovereignty. To explore the relationship between populism and gender in the V4, the paper analyses the discourses on gender relations of the region's dominant populist parties: Polish Law and Justice (PiS), Hungarian Fidesz, Slovak Direction – Social Democracy (SMER), and Czech Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011). The analysis focuses on whether and how these populist parties use anti-gender rhetoric to mobilize their voter base, while also accounting for specific national contexts and the so-called host ideology with which populism is combined.

Keywords: populism, anti-gender discourse, populism and freedom, gender backlash, populism in V4

Continual Change: Party Systems in Central and Eastern Europe

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Over the past thirty years party systems in Central and Eastern Europe have been characterized by change. The initial period of instability owed much to the legacies and inheritance of four decades of communist rule combined with the challenges of transition to liberal democracies with market economies. But the continuation of weakly institutionalised systems into the twenty-first century owe less to the specifics of post-communism and more to the forces producing less institutionalised party systems across the globe. Weak partisan ties, the challenges of incumbency and governing, and new dimensions of competition all played out in a rapidly changed and changing informational and technological environment help explain the allure of new parties, but also their frequent demise. Drawing on recent elections in Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic, and using evidence from a series of specially commissioned polls and on-the-ground observations of election campaigns, this paper not only highlights the changing structures of party competition that do not fit into conventional left-right and GAL-TAN frameworks, but it also identifies the salience of issues such as anti-corruption appeals in political contestation. Moreover, the paper reveals the role of tactical and strategic voting fuelling bandwagon appeals for new political parties, and the limit of such bandwagon appeals. Furthermore, the paper reveals how some parties have managed to survive the storm and endure thanks to a blend of organisational structures, local activism, ideological appeals and leadership choices. Although many of these findings appear at first glance specific to Central and Eastern Europe, the paper concludes by demonstrating how these insights drawn from the experiences of one half of the continent have strong application in the study of contemporary Western European politics, especially given their increasingly fluid party systems and weaker partisan attachments.

Keywords: parties, elections, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria

Engaging the Divide: User Reactions to Anti-Populist Politicians' Messages on Social Media in the Czech Republic

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The success of populism has spurred the rise of anti-populist actors positioning themselves as defenders of democracy. This study examines how their communication engages audiences on social media, employing a quantitative content analysis of an original dataset of Facebook and Instagram posts by anti-populist actors before the 2021 elections in Czechia (N = 1,291). Using negative binomial regression, we demonstrate that constructive, expertise-based, and positive messages foster supportive engagement, whereas emotional appeals reduce anger, and conflict-oriented identity frames heighten angry reactions. The findings reveal how anti-populist communication navigates the tension between democratic resilience and affective polarisation during the process of redemocratisation.

Keywords: anti-populism, political communication, polarization, redemocratization, Czechia

Populist foreign politics: the substitution of politics for interests

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How can we characterize the foreign policy of populist leaders? This paper argues for the introduction of the concept of 'populist foreign politics'. Populist foreign politics is when politics trumps policy. In other words, we define the concept as the substitution of political criteria for interest-based considerations in the selection, retention and promotion of foreign policy allies, in countries led by populist leaderships. Based on four case studies from two countries led by populist leaders, the paper shows that populist foreign politics takes the form of supporting fellow populists even if they harm officially stated interests - and punishing non-populist actors because they are politically not in the camp of populists, even if interests align. Overall, the paper makes the claim that, under certain conditions, populist foreign politics, based on belief similarity is indeed a noticeable trait in the foreign policy of populists and that populism (and not their far-right ideology) has a direct impact on the substantive foreign policy preferences of populist leaders.

Keywords: populism, foreign policy, belief similarity, Orbán Viktor, Donald Trump

Discursive and Ideological Evolution of Václav Klaus's Euroscepticism

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There is little doubt that Václav Klaus has been a central figure in Czech debates on European integration since publishing his first comments and articles on the subject in the early 1990s. Although his prominence declined after the end of his second presidential term in 2013, he has remained an important participant in Czech public debate, including discussions concerning the European Union. This paper analyses the evolving character of Klaus's discourse on the EU from the early 1990s to the present. Drawing on a critical reading of a broad corpus of primary sources and adopting a history-of-ideas approach, it offers a discursive analysis that traces the development of Klaus's views on European integration, from a soft to a hard Eurosceptic position. Furthermore, the analysis examines the changing rhetorical devices he employs and the ways in which his discourse is embedded within a broader ideological worldview. Finally, the paper reconstructs the key narratives corresponding to different phases of Klaus's engagement with the EU.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, Czechia, Váaclav Klaus, discourse, narrative

Intersections of horizontal policies: child participation in municipal development policies – in the light of Hungarian and Polish experiences

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This paper examines child participation as a horizontal public policy issue within municipal development policies, drawing on Hungarian and Polish experiences. It argues that, despite strong normative commitments, child participation remains weakly embedded in local development policymaking and is largely confined to siloed youth or educational domains. Empirical findings show that development-related fields such as budgeting, spatial planning and public space management seldom integrate children's perspectives in a systematic and impactful way. The article highlights how the horizontal nature of both development policy and child participation creates specific governance challenges, including fragmentation, consultative bias and limited inclusion of vulnerable groups. It concludes that strengthening child participation in municipal development requires cross-sectoral integration across the full local policy cycle and incremental institutional reforms.

Boiling the Frog (2010–2026): The Gradual Erosion of Local Democracy in Hungary through Financial Centralization and Politicised Legal Supervision

István Hoffman, Eötvös Loránd University/Maria Curie-Skłodowska University/ELTE Research Center for Social Sciences, Hungary

Following the democratic transition of 1989–1990, Hungary developed one of the most decentralised local government systems in Central and Eastern Europe. However, since 2010 a gradual but profound transformation has reshaped this model into a highly centralised system. This paper analyses how, between 2010 and 2026, the erosion of local democracy has been driven by two mutually reinforcing processes: the restriction of municipal financial autonomy and the increasing politicisation of legal supervision. First, the paper examines the steady decline of local financial independence. Legislative reforms have redefined municipal assets as part of a broader national asset framework, enabling extensive waves of centralisation and nationalisation of public service provision, particularly in education, healthcare, and social services. Parallel to this, new instruments of central financial control have emerged, including strict debt management rules, centralised allocation of development funds, and real-time financial monitoring through digital administrative platforms. Together, these mechanisms have significantly reduced the effective discretion of local governments, creating structural dependence on central authorities. Second, the paper explores the transformation of the legal supervision regime. While European standards emphasise legality-based and proportionate oversight, the Hungarian system has evolved towards a more flexible and politically embedded model. The county (capital) government offices—headed by political appointees—have gained strengthened supervisory powers, including the ability to initiate judicial review procedures and influence municipal decision-making indirectly. Empirical analysis of judicial practice indicates an increasing focus on politically sensitive areas, such as local budgeting and governance structures, as well as a disproportionate targeting of opposition-led municipalities. The paper conceptualises these developments through the metaphor of the “boiling frog”, highlighting how incremental legal and administrative changes can cumulatively undermine local autonomy without formal institutional rupture. Methodologically, the study combines doctrinal legal analysis with empirical data on financial and judicial trends. The findings contribute to broader debates on democratic backsliding, demonstrating how hybrid mechanisms of fiscal control and politicised supervision can weaken local democracy within formally intact constitutional frameworks.

Keywords: local democracy, financial autonomy, legal supervision, centralisation, politicisation

Political Self-Defense and Criminalization

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The criminalization of certain individual and social behaviours, can be understood through the state's use of its legislative and penal power to create definitions and punish types of human conducts accordingly. In my research, I am looking to establish a clear definition of what constitutes crimes in the modern sense, and especially contra rem publicam crimes, while attempting to create a system that could set forth an unequivocal reference point to judge the states' tendencies in criminalization processes based on their democratic and legal merit.

Keywords: criminology, totalitarianism, legitimacy

The president-government-parliament triangle in the context of law-making activity: the case of Poland on the example of legislative initiatives regarding crypto-assets

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The paper examines broadly defined law-making in the field of economic freedom from the perspective of the relationship between key components of the government system (president, cabinet, and parliament, including pro-government and opposition parties). Particular points of reference are the tensions between the head of state and the government (both organs come from competing political camps). This political composition emerged in Poland after the 2023 parliamentary elections and intensified after the 2025 presidential elections, when Karol Nawrocki assumed office. The latter has resulted in increased activism in the use of presidential powers, particularly visible in the context of legislative initiatives and presidential vetoes. The problem will be illustrated through the long-standing conflict surrounding the regulation of the crypto-asset market. Legislative activity in this area simultaneously engages several important political players: not only the president and the government, along with the parties supporting the latter organ, but also the parliamentary opposition. This, in turn, provides a convenient point of reference for research on legislative initiatives viewed through the prism of strategies employed within political competition, including those related to emerging crises (regulation of the crypto-asset market in the face of the crisis caused by the collapse of Zondacrypto, Poland's largest cryptocurrency exchange). It can be argued that in this case two important elements are cumulated within the broadly understood law-making activity: the intensification of initiating laws and the blocking activity of the head of state. Last but not least, the political dispute over the legal regulation of cryptocurrencies, especially in the context of the emerging crypto crisis, largely concerns the scope of freedom in an area that has not been meticulously regulated so far.

Keywords: legislative initiatives, presidential veto, crypto-asset market, economic freedom, Poland

The Attempt of Further Autocratization in the Name of Protecting Sovereignty: The Hungarian Quasi-Transparency Bill under the Orbán Government

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Roughly one year before the 2026 parliamentary elections in Hungary, János Halász, a member of the Hungarian Parliament from Fidesz, introduced a bill entitled The Transparency of Public Life. The initiative of the governing party immediately triggered harsh criticism from opposition parties as well as from civil society actors. Critical voices also emerged internationally: among others, Michael O'Flaherty, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, and the European Commission called on Hungarian lawmakers to reject or substantially amend the proposal. Eventually, in June 2025, Máté Kocsis, the parliamentary group leader of Fidesz, announced that the adoption of the bill had been postponed. The paper examines the main provisions of the proposed legislation and the related domestic and international critiques in order to demonstrate that the initiative was not genuinely aimed at protecting national sovereignty from foreign interference, as suggested by its proponents. Rather, it represented another step in the Orbán government's broader strategy of constraining civil society organizations and independent media under the guise of transparency and national security. The paper adopts a comparative approach. On the one hand, it compares the Hungarian proposal to the Russian so-called "foreign agents" legislation, highlighting similarities in their potential chilling effects on civic actors and public discourse. On the other hand, it contrasts the bill with the European Commission's proposal for a directive on the transparency of interest representation carried out on behalf of third countries, emphasizing the fundamentally different logic, safeguards, and regulatory objectives underlying the EU approach. Beyond the comparison, the paper also seeks to explain the political reasons behind postponing the adoption of the bill. It argues that both international pressure and domestic political considerations – including the approaching parliamentary elections and concerns over reputational and electoral costs – contributed to the temporary withdrawal of the proposal. More broadly, the paper contributes to the discussion on democratic backsliding and autocratization by illustrating how sovereignty-based narratives may serve as instruments for legitimizing restrictions on pluralism and civic participation within hybrid regimes.

Keywords: Hungary, transparency bill, autocratization, Orbán Government

Zeitenwende, Rearmament and Security Commitments in Central and Eastern Europe: A German Shift Towards Balancing Against Russia?

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Germany significantly increased its security commitments to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since 2022. Following Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz proclaimed Zeitenwende which initiated, among other thighs, rearmament and enlargement of the Bundeswehr, deployment of a brigade to Lithuania and significant provisions of military aid to Ukraine. Given the growing role of Germany in ensuring the security of CEE states, the paper studies the implementation of German military rearmament from the perspective of balancing theories. Namely, the paper asks wherever Zeitenwende could be defined as a critical juncture in German balancing behaviour, breaking the long period of under balancing to sustained balancing against Russia? By applying neoclassical realist theory, the paper aims to identify how perspectives of German Central Foreign Executive and internal socio-political dynamics shaped its balancing behaviour since 2022. The paper applies process-tracing methodology and is primarily based semi-structured interviews with German security experts and other primary sources (official documents, speeches, etc.). The paper argues that a shift towards balancing is indeed taking place, while its sustainment beyond current electoral cycle remains unclear due to the raising popularity of political parties (AfD and die Linke) exhibiting a more favourable attitude towards Russia. Yet, one also observes changes in internal German socio-political dynamics (public attitudes and discourse on defence, threat perception, the significance of defence in political processes, etc.), reducing traditional constraints imposed on German political leadership to continue the current course.

Keywords: Neoclassical Realism, Balancing, Germany, Zeitenwende

The populist trap: Andrej Babiš and de-securitisation of the Czech security policy

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Abstract: The current Czech government of Andrej Babiš faces criticism, both in the Czech Republic and in the Euro-Atlantic security community, for circumventing the obligation to maintain defence spending at 2 percent of GDP and increasing it to meet the obligations arising from the Czech Republic's NATO membership. The failure of the Babiš government to fulfil this specific promise stems from the populist nature of the ANO party and long-term trends in ANO's election campaigns, focused on "peace" and the economic preferences of "our people". Based on an analysis of foreign and security policies and the rhetoric that legitimizes them, the authors examine the narrative that Andrej Babiš uses to downplay the political importance of security issues and the pressure of official Czech commitments to NATO and partner countries. In contrast to the standard concept of securitization that Babiš used to express his political preferences related to the migration crisis in 2015–2016, we can observe a specific strategy of de-securitization. The narratives of the ANO party and the government seek to frame Czech defence and security policy in isolation from the generally deteriorating European and global context, ignore growing global risks, and downplay the current and potential future impacts of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Preliminary findings, verified by broader research presented in the paper, show that Babiš initially sought to frame security issues as economic or cultural.

Keywords: de-securitisation, Czech Republic, populism, Andrej Babiš, policy narratives

The Architecture of Regional Cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe: Synergistic or Competitive Formats?

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This conference paper examines three key regional cooperation formats in Central and Eastern Europe – the Visegrad Group (V4), the Bucharest Nine (B9), and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) – focusing on their functions, interrelations, and their role in shaping regional cohesion and security. The analysis is grounded in selected theoretical approaches, including new regionalism, structural realism, open regionalism, and multi-level governance. These frameworks provide a basis for interpreting the nature and evolution of the studied formats, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their institutional logic and political significance. The presentation outlines the main goals, operational mechanisms, and areas of activity of the V4, B9, and 3SI, with particular attention to security, energy, infrastructure, and foreign policy cooperation. It highlights both synergies and tensions that arise from overlapping competences, divergent national interests, and political differences among member states. The study partially confirms the hypothesis of complementarity between these formats, while also identifying elements of competition and insufficient coordination. Importantly, this competition does not stem from supranational dynamics but rather from overlapping agendas and the strategic ambitions of participating states. Additionally, the identity narratives associated with each format differ significantly – ranging from cultural-historical (V4) to strategic and technocratic (B9, 3SI) – which affects their cohesion and long-term sustainability. A key observation is that, as intergovernmental platforms, these formats lack autonomous institutions responsible for communication and narrative-building. Consequently, their political meaning is largely shaped by member states and their respective communication strategies. The presentation concludes by outlining possible future scenarios, emphasizing the need for greater functional convergence and improved coordination in response to evolving geopolitical and institutional challenges in the region.

Keywords: regional cooperation formats, Visegrad Group, Bucharest Nine, Three Seas Initiative

History of the Present and Academic Freedom: A Turkish Case Study

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This article critically examines academic freedom through Michel Foucault’s concepts of power-knowledge, regimes of truth, and genealogy. Rather than treating academic freedom as a universal, static, and self-evident right, the study conceptualizes it as a historically constructed and continuously contested discursive practice within regimes of truth. It argues that higher education is not merely a space for producing and transmitting knowledge but also a site where legitimate knowledge, acceptable discourse, and academic subjectivities are produced and regulated. To make these processes visible, the article employs a Foucauldian genealogical approach and examines the history of Turkish academia as a case study. The analysis traces how institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, political interventions, and academic practices have shaped the conditions under which academics can think, speak, and act freely. Drawing on the concepts of descent and emergence, the study reveals the contingent and discontinuous historical processes through which academic freedom has been constituted. It concludes by emphasizing resistance and continuous contestation as essential to sustaining possibilities for academic freedom and alternative forms of thought.

Keywords: Academic Freedom, Foucauldian Genealogy, Power-Knowledge, Regimes of Truth, Turkish Higher Education

The symbolic dimension of freedom, or how the state's historical policy affects the present. The case of Poland

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Freedom is a value that politicians are very eager to use in a symbolic dimension. One of the tools that enable the manipulation of symbols and influence on current social moods is historical policy. In Poland, the use of the term depends on whether conservatives, (who often refer to values), or liberals (who draw visions of the future) are in power. In Polish political history, freedom is related to sovereignty, the economic market, and civil liberties. This research field was examined due to the threat of Polexit and frequent statements by populist leaders in Poland that the country's freedom is under threat. The research hypothesis assumes that - freedom is a word-symbol invoked in the framework of historical politics by right-wing populist groups. The myth of a great Poland in the past is confronted with the threats to freedom that the EU allegedly brings. The research methods used were comparative analysis and content analysis of right-wing politicians' speeches on freedom.

Keywords: freedom, symbols, historical policy, populism, party leaders

Nationalization, Entitization, or Regionalization of Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina? A Comparative Perspective

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This study examines the territorial structure of the party system in Bosnia and Herzegovina across the state, entity, and local levels. Using electoral data from the 2022 general elections and the 2024 local elections, the research analyses whether political competition is defined by processes of nationalization, entitization, or regionalization. Previous research has focused exclusively on the nationalization or regionalization of the party system at the state level. This study offers a new and in many respects unique perspective by examining the dynamics of party competition not only at the state level but also at the entity and local levels. The results indicate that the party system in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be considered nationalized according to classic comparative literature. Instead, it is structurally regionalized. At the state and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina levels, political parties rarely secure mandates across all electoral districts, and their support remains heavily concentrated within ethnically and territorially defined areas. Conversely, the party system in Republika Srpska shows characteristics of entitization, reflecting a more standard competition between government and opposition parties due to a more homogenous ethnic structure. However, full entitization is not confirmed because the ability of parties to win mandates across all electoral districts remains limited. Furthermore, the analysis reveals a significant vertical integration between the entity and local levels. Entity-level parliamentary parties dominate municipal councils, occupying 83% of seats in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and 92% in Republika Srpska, leaving minimal space for independent or purely local actors. This regionalized character is sustained by historical ethnic cleavages and institutional settings, particularly the low 3% electoral threshold applied only at the electoral district level. Understanding these linkages provides a framework for evaluating the decentralized political structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, nationalization, regionalization, party politics

When emotions rule: the roots of the success of populist parties in post-socialist periphery

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Voters are often influenced by emotions when choosing a political party in elections. In particular, populist parties try to evoke these emotions in their potential voters. This paper investigates the impact of emotional factors that populist parties try to induce in their voters in left-behind places and thus influence the choice of a political party. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with local leaders such as mayors, local council members, teachers, from two Czech left-behind places, which are characterised by above-average support for populist parties. The first region is the Podbořany region, which can be described as a classic rural peripheral area. The second region is the Mostecko region, which can be described as a structurally disadvantaged region. The interview suggests that residents of both regions surveyed are influenced by emotional factors—such as fear, nostalgia, or grievance—when choosing a political party in elections. However, even though some of these emotions stem from the same issues faced by the two regions under study, there are also region-specific issues that evoke emotions among voters. Often, these specific topics depend on the type of left-behind place in the region. Populist parties are able to exploit these specific and general issues—which evoke various emotional reactions in voters—to win votes in elections.

Keywords: Voting behaviour, Left-behind places, Populist parties, Emotional factors, the Czech Republic

The Politics of Freedom in Georgia after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Democratic Backsliding and Policies of De-democratisation

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Over the past three decades, Georgia's Europeanisation and cooperation with the EU have developed through political dialogue, institutional reforms, and gradual integration. Nevertheless, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgia's official pro-European stance has increasingly diverged from its domestic political practices. Despite obtaining a European perspective in 2022 and EU candidate status in 2023, this period also saw democratic decline, mounting pressure on civil society and independent media, and the emergence of anti-Western and Eurosceptic narratives and policies. This paper explores these developments as a policy-driven process of de-democratization. It argues that democratic backsliding in Georgia should be understood not only as institutional decline, but also as a strategic effort by the ruling party to reshape the language of freedom, sovereignty, dignity, stability, and national identity in order to legitimize illiberal governance. Particular attention is given to the series of restrictive political and legislative developments adopted in 2024, including the so-called Foreign Agents Law, anti-LGBT legislation, the increasingly hostile rhetoric toward civil society, and the government's November 2024 announcement on suspending the EU accession process until 2028. These developments marked a major turning point in Georgia's relations with the European Union and signalled a deeper shift from formal Europeanisation toward managed Euroscepticism and de-democratization. Methodologically, the paper relies on qualitative interviews, document analysis, and discourse analysis. It examines official speeches, party narratives, legislative initiatives, EU progress reports, and pro-government media discourse. The analysis focuses on how European integration is increasingly framed through narratives of external interference, moral threat, war risk, and the erosion of national sovereignty. Special attention is paid to the instrumentalization of "traditional values," anti-LGBT rhetoric, anti-war narratives, and the portrayal of civil society as externally controlled. The paper contributes to debates on democratic backsliding, Europeanisation, and freedom in Central and Eastern Europe by showing how de-democratization operates through institutions, legislation, media discourse, and identity politics.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, De-democratisation, Europeanisation, Euroscepticism, Georgia

Mechanisms of Power Consolidation in Contemporary Right-Wing Populism

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The paper analyses the strategies employed by contemporary right-wing populist parties to consolidate and maintain political power, with particular reference to Poland. It argues that, unlike the overtly coercive methods of communist regimes, modern populist authoritarianism operates within a nominally democratic framework, relying on elections, mass mobilization, and ideological narratives to legitimize its rule. Central to this process is the concept of "civilizational populism," which frames politics as a struggle between "the pure people" and "corrupt elites" allied with external threats. This binary worldview facilitates social polarization and justifies the erosion of liberal democratic norms. The authors contend that populist regimes exploit the concept of illiberal democracy, reducing democracy to the mere existence of elections while disregarding their fairness and competitiveness. Given the inherent instability of permanent electoral dominance in pluralistic societies, such parties increasingly resort to extra-legal measures to secure continued rule. These include the systematic weakening of democratic institutions and the dismantling of checks and balances. The analysis identifies several key mechanisms of power consolidation: control of public media for propaganda purposes; intimidation or acquisition of independent media; politicization of the judiciary; and the erosion of the separation of powers. Additional strategies include targeting universities as centres of dissent, using state-owned enterprises for political financing, and cultivating loyal elites dependent on the ruling party. Populist actors also manipulate public sentiment by exploiting fear of marginalized groups and implementing expansive social spending to secure electoral support, often at the cost of economic stability. Ultimately, the paper situates contemporary populism within a broader pattern of democratic backsliding, emphasizing that modern democracies are more likely to erode from within than collapse through violent coups. Despite the sophistication of these strategies, the authors note that populist regimes remain vulnerable to political miscalculations, particularly those stemming from overconfidence and hubris, which may create opportunities for democratic renewal.

Keywords: Civilizational Populism, Power Consolidation, Democratic Backsliding, Populist Authoritarianism, Illiberal Democracy

From Policy Performance Gaps to Democratic Disaffection: Populist, Authoritarian, and Democratic-Cynical Pathways in Central and Eastern Europe

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Dissatisfaction with the performance of political institutions is often treated as a general symptom of democratic malaise. However, what exactly follows when citizens perceive that governments underperform in policy areas they consider important? This paper argues that policy salience–performance gaps do not translate into one uniform form of democratic disaffection. Instead, such gaps become politically consequential because they activate different value concerns and are interpreted through citizens' prior orientations toward authority, security, representation. The paper distinguishes between three analytically distinct pathways; each rooted in a different value-based interpretation of policy underperformance. First, where citizens maintain a strong normative attachment to democratic procedures, policy salience–performance gaps may result in cynical democratic loyalty: citizens remain dissatisfied with institutions, but do not withdraw from democracy as the preferred political regime (D. Easton; C. Anderson). Second, where perceived underperformance activates concerns about popular sovereignty, fairness, and the moral distance between "ordinary people" and self-serving political elites, the same gaps may strengthen populist attitudes (C. Mudde; C. Rovira Kaltwasser; Y. Mény; Y. Surel). Third, where performance failures activate values related to authority, order, security, and social stability, they may reinforce authoritarian preferences when citizens come to interpret democratic procedures as insufficiently capable of delivering effective governance (P. Norris; R. Foa; Y. Mounk). The paper examines these pathways of democratic disaffection in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), in comparison with other (Western and Northern) European states. Marked by democratic backsliding, growing geopolitical insecurity, and substantial variation in regime trajectories, the CEE region presents a critical setting for analysing how citizens respond to perceived failures of democratic governance. Empirically, the paper uses comparative data from the 24-country survey conducted in 2025 as part of the Horizon Europe TRUEDEM project. The analysis constructs perceived salience–performance gaps across eleven policy domains: (1) economy, (2) rising prices, (3) unemployment, (4) healthcare, (5) elderly care, (6) national security, (7) crime, (8) public order, (9) immigration, (10) environment, (11) education. The paper tests under which conditions these domain-specific gaps are associated with each of three outcomes. The contribution is twofold. Conceptually, the paper disaggregates democratic disaffection into three analytically distinct responses to perceived policy underperformance and identifies the conditions under which each outcome becomes more likely. Empirically, it shows how policy-domain-specific gaps may help explain divergent political reactions to democratic underperformance in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: political performance, democratic disaffection, populism, authoritarian preferences, Central and Eastern Europe

The stalemate in the Russo-Ukrainian War and NATO eastern flank countries' security policy

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The offense-defence problem in the IR theory indicates consequences for war initiations and the probability of wars. The paper proposes to expand the mechanism to analyse indirect effect on security policy in the collective balancing effort. Specifically, it analyses NATO eastern flank's situation regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War. The lasting stalemate on the Russo-Ukrainian front seriously undermined the initial enthusiasm for delivering military assistance for Ukraine. The paper traces NATO eastern flank security policy by applying the offense-defence problem. Although the Russo-Ukrainian War is intense in terms of the use of weapons, munitions and the scale of opposing armies and casualties, the territorial as well as political dimensions suit to the category of lasting stalemate. This, in turn, modified NATO eastern flank policy. While its primary goal is still to counterbalance Russia, the security policy involves more diplomatic effort than delivery of direct military assistance. This makes a striking difference with the first year of the Russian full-scale invasion. The paper explains this transformation in the light of the offense-defence theory.

Keywords: the offense-defence theory, NATO, international security, the Russo-Ukrainian War

From Negative Liberty to Constitutional Value: EU Law, Democratic Backsliding, and the Hungarian Challenge

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This contribution examines how the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) redefines “freedom” through its interpretation of EU values in Commission v Hungary (C-769/22), a case concerning Hungarian legislation restricting access to LGBTQ+-related content. Beyond its immediate subject matter, the case raises fundamental questions about the architecture of freedom in European constitutional law and its contested reception in Central and Eastern Europe. The central research question draws on Isaiah Berlin's classical distinction between negative and positive liberty: is “freedom” in EU law primarily understood as non-interference by the State, or is it increasingly constitutionalised as a value-laden concept embedded in Article 2 TEU and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights? The contribution argues that the judgment reflects a significant shift toward the latter, a model in which national regulatory autonomy is constrained not only by internal market rules but by substantive EU values including human dignity, equality, and non-discrimination. Methodologically, the paper treats Commission v Hungary as a critical juncture in EU constitutionalism, combining doctrinal legal analysis with a broader political reading of democratic backsliding in the region. It situates the Court’s reasoning within the structural tension between supranational value enforcement and Member State claims to sovereignty and cultural self-determination, claims that carry particular resonance in post-communist societies, where national sovereignty and EU oversight are frequently framed as competing rather than complementary. The analysis concludes that the case illustrates a broader transformation of EU law from a market-oriented system into a value-enforcing constitutional order. This shift raises unresolved tensions between integration and pluralism, and between judicial authority and democratic legitimacy, tensions that are especially acute and politically charged in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Negative liberty/positive liberty, EU constitutionalisation, Democratic backsliding, Article 2 TEU values, Judicial sovereignty conflicts

Entrepreneurial Parties in Poland as a Byproduct of Political Competition between Mainstream Parties

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Political competition in Poland seemed quite stable in 2007, when only four parties (PiS, PO, SLD and PSL) crossed the threshold and entered parliament. The electoral system and public funding of political parties preserved this system, making it difficult for other parties to enter parliament. However, growing competition between the two main parties, Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS), caused the anti-establishment electorate to mobilise and gain support for entrepreneurial parties that criticised the mainstream (e.g. particracy, narrowing electoral competition to PO and PiS, corruption and nepotism), proposing alternative solutions such as changes to electoral law and public funding for parties, greater citizen control over state institutions, a referendum day and judicial reform. The Palikot Movement emerged in 2011, followed by Kukiz'15 and Ryszard Petru's Modern in 2015, and most recently, Poland 2050 led by Szymon Hołownia in 2023. All of these parties were created by charismatic leaders who, by using anti-establishment and often populist rhetoric, sought to express voter dissatisfaction with the status quo and transform politics (Hloušek, Kopeček & Vodová, 2020). Relying mainly on their leaders and having fragile programmes and a lack of structures, these parties were vulnerable to internal disputes and the gradual departure of MPs from their parliamentary groups. The aim of this paper is to examine the subsequent steps taken by entrepreneurial parties following their initial success, in order to determine whether they were able to survive the next parliamentary elections independently, in coalition with other parties, by placing their candidates on other parties' ballots, or as extra-parliamentary parties (e.g., through public debate, the media, or representation at the regional level). Qualitative methods are employed, drawing on the concepts of Harmel and Svåsand (1993), Arter (2016), and Cyr (2016), to identify the reasons for losing support after entering parliament for the first time and to examine the various survival strategies employed by Polish entrepreneurial parties. Data regarding party identity, structure, leadership, and both internal and external communication are analysed.

Keywords: entrepreneurial parties, political competition, party survival, Polish parties, challenger parties

Challenges of the European Union’s 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework

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The realization of the European Union’s strategic objectives depends on the effective functioning of its common budget, primarily embodied in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). During the 2021–2027 programming period, the MFF reached approximately €1.0743 trillion, representing an unprecedented level of financial integration and common responsibility within the Union. The past decade has demonstrated the need for a more flexible and resilient EU budget in response to multiple crises, including the global financial crisis, migration pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic consequences of the Russia–Ukraine war. At the same time, internal challenges related to democracy and the rule of law have increasingly shaped debates on the allocation and protection of EU financial resources. The introduction of rule-of-law conditionality mechanisms marked a significant shift in EU governance by linking access to Union funds to respect for fundamental values enshrined in Article 2 TEU, including democracy, judicial independence, and the rule of law. This development raises important legal and political questions concerning solidarity, accountability, and the protection of the Union’s democratic and financial integrity. Against the backdrop of the European Commission’s preparations for the 2028–2034 budgetary cycle, this presentation examines the main challenges of the 2021–2027 period, with particular attention to crisis management and rule-of-law conditionality and assesses how democratic governance considerations may shape the future of the EU budget.

Keywords: European Union, Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), 2021–2027 budget, 2028–2034 budget, strategic objectives, rule of law

Distrust in Political Institutions in Slovenia: Searching for Explanations

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Public opinion data for Slovenia indicate structurally low political trust with even a trend of a decline, and only occasional improvements. Political science scholars as a rule see low political trust as a problem for democracy for different reasons. Explanation for low levels of political trust range from corruption, lack of accountability and accessibility of politicians to lack of keeping promises gave in election campaign. Much less attention has been devoted to how political actors themselves understand political trust and distrust. The paper examines how institutional position and political level shape their understandings of political trust, particularly across local and national political settings. The paper builds on two kind of empirical data – public opinion survey and data gathered in interviews with politicians from different political institutions (party leadership, legislative and executive arena). We anticipate that the political institutions of interviewed politicians to some extent explains their views on political trust. Following the findings of other studies, it is expected that political trust is higher on a local level than on the national one. Local level political institutions mostly deal with particular issues and not general ones, citizens have better understanding of the functioning of the system on the local level than the one on the national or EU level and have better accessibility to local politicians than those on the national, or even EU level. Based on empirical data gathered within Horizon Europe project "Trust in European Democracies," we will analyse politicians' view on the issues exposed above. We expect to observe differences among politicians' coming from different political settings (different institutions, different levels) as well as among citizens when evaluating trust in political institutions on different levels.

Autocratization Consolidation in Serbia

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Serbia is one of the Central and Eastern European countries that has experienced a non-liberal democratic transformation. In 2025, the Varieties of Democracy project classified Serbia as an electoral autocracy. The post-communist development of its political regime has been non-linear: Slobodan Milošević consolidated a military-based authoritarian system until 2000; between 2000 and 2012, Serbia benefited from a process of democratization; however, since 2012, the country has increasingly drifted toward authoritarianism. This new form of (or competitive) authoritarianism maintains formally free elections that serve to grant or renew mandates for autocratic leaders, while relying on a strong populist party that manipulates society and abuses state power. In 2012, Serbia experienced a dual victory (parliamentary and presidential) by the anti-pluralist and populist SNS (Serbian Progressive Party). Since then, this party has governed through its control of parliament, government, and the presidency. This paper addresses the trajectory of Serbian authoritarianism from 2012 to 2025. The theoretical framework is based on the concept developed by Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, who divide the process of autocratization into three stages: democratic recession, democratic breakdown, and autocratization consolidation. After more than 13 years, Serbia appears to have reached the stage of autocratization consolidation. To trace this transformation that led to autocratization consolidation, Lührmann and Lindberg propose a quantitative tool: the Electoral Democracy Index developed by the V-Dem project. This index captures the dynamics of regime change and reveals authoritarian tendencies. It ranges from 0 (authoritarianism) to 1 (democracy). Serbia’s case shows declining scores, from 0.59 in 2012 to 0.32 in 2024, suggesting the deepening and widening of authoritarian practices in the country. The paper analyses the process of breaching the rule of law, undermining the separation of powers and checks and balances by the SNS, which controls state institutions. President Aleksandar Vučić is identified as the central figure in this process.

Keywords: Serbia, authoritarianism, autocratization consolidation

Freedom in formalization. Lack of regulations for large cities and their suburbs in Poland

Katarzyna Kuć-Czajkowska, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

Poland is characterized by a lack of legal regulations for large cities and their surrounding local governments. There is a single metropolitan association in Silesia. All major cities face problems related to, among other things, suburbanization, urban sprawl, growing competition between municipalities for new residents, circular migration, traffic congestion, free riding (a lack of correlation between where services are used and where taxes are paid), a lack of spatial planning across the entire area, a lack of common economic development directions, and problems with providing shared municipal services. The aim of this presentation will be to present: how is cooperation between cities and municipalities in the suburban zone coordinated in Poland? What are the methods for functionally connecting cities and suburban zones? What are the experiences of local governments in Poland in this regard?

Everyday Nationhood and Academic Freedom: How Banal Nationalism Shapes Knowledge Production in Albanian Higher Education

Kriton Kuci, Mediterranean University of Albania

Academic freedom has become a central concern across Europe amid democratic backsliding and resurgent nationalism, yet subtle forms of nationalist influence embedded in everyday academic practice remain underexplored. This paper examines how banal nationalism shapes academic life and knowledge production in Albanian higher education. Drawing on qualitative research (2023-2026),semi-structured interviews with faculty, institutional document analysis, and observation of public academic debates, it shows how nationalist assumptions operate not through overt censorship but through subtle mechanisms such as privileging nationally framed research agendas, marginalizing critical and transnational perspectives, symbolically elevating national themes in curricula, and informal expectations to protect national reputation. As a post-socialist country pursuing European integration while contending with strong nationalist discourses on history, language, and identity, Albania reveals the tension between internationalization and nationalization. The paper argues that banal nationalism functions as an implicit regulatory framework producing epistemic boundary maintenance, contributing to debates on academic freedom and the politics of knowledge in Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: banal nationalism, academic freedom, higher education, knowledge production, Albania

Bohemian/Czech Republicanism: Nonsense or a Rupture in the Traditional Canon of Czech Political Thought?

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Research on republicanism has experienced an unprecedented boom, shifting from its rediscovery as a Western European linguistic discourse to a broader exploration of classical and lesser-known works globally. This trend enables a revision of the foundations of republicanism, which were originally identified within Italian, Dutch, English, or American contexts, as a distinct alternative to social contract and liberal models. In recent years, the identification of domestic republican motifs has become a relevant field in Central Europe, particularly regarding the Polish-Lithuanian noble discourse and Hungarian anti-Habsburg resistance. This contextually defined research seeks historical understandings of political values, such as the state as a mixed polity, freedom as non-domination, and civic equality, that align with classical republicanism and transcend modern ideological frameworks like liberalism or socialism. Despite progress in Polish and Hungarian scholarship, a parallel Czech republican tradition remains largely overlooked. This paper investigates the reasons for this neglect and challenges the claim that the Czech environment lacked such a tradition. By examining the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it identifies key research gaps and potential republican motifs within the Czech intellectual horizon.

Transnational Networks and Cross-Border Cooperation in Central Europe: The Case of the Visegrád Group

Łukasz Lewkowicz, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

This paper examines the role of transnational networks in shaping cross-border cooperation within the member states of the Visegrád Group (V4), namely Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The study focuses on the political, institutional, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of cooperation developed in the border regions of Central Europe after the democratic transformations of 1989 and the subsequent accession of the V4 states to the European Union. The paper argues that cross-border cooperation has become one of the key instruments for strengthening regional integration and cohesion in Central Europe. Particular attention is devoted to the role of Euroregions, local governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and infrastructure networks in fostering transnational connectivity and regional governance. The research also highlights the importance of EU cohesion policy and financial mechanisms, especially Interreg programs, in supporting institutionalized forms of cooperation across borders. The paper adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from political science, regional studies, and international relations. It analyses selected examples of cross-border initiatives among V4 countries in areas such as transport infrastructure, environmental protection, crisis management, and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the study assesses the impact of contemporary geopolitical challenges — including migration pressures, security threats, and political divergences within the Visegrád Group — on the effectiveness and future development of transnational cooperation. The findings suggest that despite political differences among V4 governments, cross-border networks continue to play a significant role in promoting regional stability, socio-economic development, and multi-level governance in Central Europe. The paper contributes to the broader discussion on regionalism and transnational cooperation within the European Union.

Keywords: Visegrád Group, Cross-Border Cooperation, Central Europe

Back to Class? Changing Effects of Class on Party Choice in the Czech Republic between 1992 and 2025

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This paper focuses on the role of social class in shaping party choice in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections and situates these findings within a broader longitudinal comparison covering the period from 1990 to 2025. Using post-election survey data from ten national elections, we analyse the relationship between social class and party choice through multinomial regression models and summary indices of class voting. The study addresses two main research questions. First, it investigates whether class voting declined during the 2010s in connection with the rise of new political parties and whether it re-emerged in recent elections. Second, it examines the extent to which new parties have absorbed the electorates of traditional parties and reshaped class-based patterns of electoral support. The findings contribute to debates on dealignment and realignment by assessing whether the transformation of the Czech party system led to a weakening of class–party linkages or to their reconfiguration. Overall, the paper provides the most comprehensive longitudinal account of class voting in the Czech Republic to date and offers new insights into the changing social foundations of party competition in a volatile political context.

Defending the Democratic Shift: Russian Disinformation as a Strategic Threat to Ukraine’s Pro-Western Future

Konstantinas Lotiuk, Klaipėda University, Lithuania

Russian information operations represent a systemic existential challenge to Ukraine’s democratic trajectory, functioning as a sophisticated instrument of strategic sabotage against pro-European institutional reforms. This study moves beyond the analysis of isolated disinformation incidents to evaluate these hybrid operations as a cohesive strategic architecture designed to impede Ukraine’s Western alignment. Utilizing a theoretical framework of democratization and de-democratization, the research identifies how information warfare exploits domestic sociopolitical vulnerabilities to obstruct fundamental structural changes, particularly in the judicial, anti-corruption, and decentralization sectors. The analysis reveals that Kremlin-backed narratives are engineered to delegitimize these reforms by reframing sovereign progress as "Western colonization" or "national betrayal." By eroding the collective social contract and instrumentalizing historical memory, these operations foster scepticism toward European values and simulate the conditions of a "failed state" to disqualify Ukraine from Euro-Atlantic integration. This research adopts a multidimensional approach to examine how disinformation infiltrates reform-related debates to catalyse democratic backsliding. The study concludes that the resilience of Ukraine’s democratic transition depends on its capacity to insulate domestic discourse from narrative subversion. Furthermore, it posits that Ukraine’s historical context, coupled with the normative power of the West, remains essential for identifying and neutralizing the digital tools employed in contemporary global de-democratization.

Keywords: Information warfare, Disinformation, Hybrid warfare,

Between Rhetoric and Strategy: Is Poland Reorienting Towards Northern Europe?

Maciej Makulski, New Eastern Europe Magazine, Poland

In recent years, Poland's political and military elites have increasingly turned their attention toward cooperation with Northern Europe, particularly the Nordic and Baltic states. This shift has taken place against the backdrop of far-reaching changes in Europe's security environment—most notably following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the decision by Finland and Sweden to join NATO. Much of the existing literature describes these developments as a "Northern Turn" in Poland's geopolitical orientation, often treating it as a strategic shift that is already underway—or even largely accomplished (see, for example: Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe, 2025, issue 3.). This article revisits that assumption and asks a more cautious question: to what extent is this "Northern Turn" actually visible in the strategic thinking of Polish decision-makers? Are references to Northern Europe a sign of deeper reorientation, or do they primarily reflect a pragmatic response to evolving geopolitical pressures? The analysis also probes whether such references are anchored in broader historical experiences or identity narratives, or whether they remain largely contingent and situational. The study draws on qualitative content analysis of official statements, core strategic documents (including national security and defence strategies), and speeches by key Polish actors from 2022 to 2026. This is complemented by a series of semi-structured interviews with policymakers, analysts, and security practitioners. To make sense of the findings, the concept of "strategic reorientation" is approached through three dimensions: the prominence of Northern Europe in strategic discourse, the way this cooperation is framed (instrumental versus structural), and the extent to which it is embedded in historical or identity-based narratives. Taken together, the results point to a more layered reality than the dominant narrative suggests. Northern Europe has undoubtedly become more visible in Polish strategic discourse. Yet this shift appears to be driven less by a coherent, fully articulated reorientation and more by a combination of rhetorical adaptation and pragmatic responses to the evolving security environment.

Keywords: Poland, Northern Europe, strategic discourse, security policy, regional cooperation

From Biker Patriotism to Pro-Russian Proxy Actor: An Analysis of the Communication of Slovakia's Biker Group Brat za Brata

Michal Malý, Charles University, Czechia

Brat za Brata has become one of the most visible pro-Russian non-party actors in Slovakia. Presenting itself formally as a patriotic motorcycle community, the group has attracted public attention through its contacts with the Russian Embassy, campaigns against anti-Russian sanctions, and claims of creating its own "information service" to restore order in Slovakia. With more than 130,000 Facebook followers, its own merchandise infrastructure, and a broader media presence on Telegram, Brat za Brata represents an important case for studying how pro-Russian narratives are translated into locally resonant forms of online communication. Yet less is known about how the group communicates with its supporters in everyday digital interaction. This paper examines the Facebook communication of Brat za Brata and asks: What themes does the group communicate to its audience? How did its communication change between the year preceding and the year following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? The analysis is based on a dataset of 2,069 Facebook posts collected from the group's official page and coded through a predefined thematic codebook. By comparing pre- and post-invasion communication, the paper identifies the dominant themes through which the group constructs its public image, mobilises supporters, and embeds pro-Russian geopolitical narratives in patriotic, commemorative, and biker-subcultural frames. In doing so, the study contributes to research on pro-Russian proxy actors in Europe, particularly in contexts where more established actors, such as the Night Wolves, have faced sanctions and increased scrutiny.

Keywords: pro-Russian proxy actors, biker groups, Facebook, communication, Slovakia

Crisis and/or Resurrection? Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. The Case of Hungary

Tibor Mándi, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

The crisis of liberal democracy – manifesting in democratic backsliding and the rise of populism – has been a topic of intense discussion in political science for some time, not just, but especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Rather than cataloguing the signs of this global crisis, the paper attempts to place the issue within a broader theoretical and historical perspective. We begin by defining liberal democracy as a political system based on the uneasy marriage of the two distinct ideals of liberalism and democracy, which could also be characterized as an alliance between majoritarian rule and limited government. The history of liberal democracy, while being a history of recurrent crises (from the American Civil War in the 19th century to the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War and the challenges of fascism and communism in the 20th), is also a story of the constant recalibration of the intricate balance between the two constituent parts of the concept. Viewed from this theoretical and historical perspective, the populist challenge to liberal democracy could be characterized as the sharpening conflict between an ever more liberal (progressive) liberalism and an ever more democratic (majoritarian) democracy, or as Cas Mudde put it, as “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (Mudde 2021). Some of the first sings of the current crisis could be detected in the 2010’s in Central and Eastern Europe, in what Ivan Krastev described as “the strange death of the liberal consensus” after the earlier democratic regime change in the region (Krastev 2007). Following David Ost, Krastev ascribes the downward turn in the fortunes of liberalism as the consequence of elite overconfidence presenting liberalism as the only rational and acceptable approach to politics, which, in turn, gave rise to illiberal and populist challenges. The case of Hungary under the rule of Viktor Orbán served, for several years, as one of the most prominent, and certainly one the most durable examples of the illiberal challenge to liberal democracy. However, the landslide victory of Péter Magyar and his Tisza Party in the 2026 parliamentary elections seems to highlight certain inherent limitations of the illiberal project. First among these is, that to preserve any semblance of democracy, a political regime has to include at least some elements of liberalism in the form of limitations of government power (such as freedom of the press and political organization). While these freedoms were by no means fully realized in Orbán’s Hungary, what remained of them proved to be enough to make it possible for Magyar and his party to mount a successful challenge to the rule of Orbán. Second, the resilience of public support for basic rights and freedoms asserted itself on several occasions (such as the organizing of the Budapest Pride march in opposition to an attempted ban by the government), undermining the credibility of the regime. Third, the declining quality of governance produced by the illiberal Orbán regime

manifested itself in widely felt economic distress which fuelled dissatisfaction with the government. And fourth, the lack of a credible geopolitical alternative to liberal democracy, expressed in the popular chant “Russkies go home” also contributed to the downfall of the regime. It remains to be seen if the success of the Hungarian opposition to illiberal democracy leads to the reestablishment of the basic the features of liberal democracy (such as the rule of law, or the system of checks and balances) downgraded by the previous illiberal government, and marks a turning point in the 21st century crisis of liberal democracy.

Keywords: crisis of liberal democracy, illiberalism, populism, Viktor Orbán, Péter Magyar

Spatial Dimensions of Electoral Democracy in Czech Local Elections

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Much of the literature on quality of democracy is case study-oriented and focused on nation states. In contrast, this paper contributes to our understanding of how democracy works from below. Based on Dahl’s procedural democracy (i.e. two theoretical dimensions of democratization, namely participation, and contestation), on a very detailed spatial structure and an extended yearly time series (2010–2022). Its main goal is to examine the spatial dimension of the disparities in subnational electoral democracy in local elections at the level of all (more than six thousand) Czech municipalities.

Keywords: subnational democracy, local democracy, quality of democracy, Czechia

Changing security environment and factors of societal resilience: Lithuanian case study (2022-2026)

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Under conditions of military and socio-economic insecurity, civil society may be more willing to accept limitations on freedom in exchange for stability as well as to revise its expectations towards the nation-state. The questions arise: how does societal resilience reveal itself in the context of national security? Which factors of societal resilience undergo the most important changes? How might societal resilience be enhanced in democratic settings? We begin with an overview of "societal resilience", place an accent on engagement and highlight the micro, mezzo and macro-level factors. The empirical part concentrates on the artists as a specific social group (has an audience, spreads values). Artists engage not only in creative activities within the country but also contribute to strategic communication and public (P2P) diplomacy. We postulate that factors of societal resilience are expressed through the artists' civic stances. Our primary data consists of two data sets. In the first episode (summer of 2023) we conducted 9 semi-structured interviews with Lithuanian artists (engaged in the support of Ukraine fighting against Russia). In the second episode (under conditions of #cultureprotest in Lithuania in late autumn 2025-early winter 2026) we collected empirical information (from social media) and conducted a few semi-structured interviews (with the same artists whom we have interviewed in 2023). Our empirical analysis dwells on the premises of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and coding categories were generated deductively and inductively. Preliminary insights: in an environment of worsening national security, societal resilience undergoes important (positive) changes; the expression of individual resilience factors is maintained and strengthened; attention and demand for systemic (national, macro) level resilience factors are expanded; organizational level factors are newly included and activated.

Keywords: societal resilience, democracy, civil society, national security, engagement

Cynical Indifference – The Autocratization Processes of Politics

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The main focus of the paper is on the troublesome aspects of democratic backsliding and rising forms of authoritarianism, or the “grey areas of democracy”. In other words, the focus of the study is the proliferation of cynical, ruthless and blatant power-politics – or the noticeable steps towards clearly authoritarian policies that have taken place between 2010 and 2026, mainly in Hungary but also in a wider, global context. The persistently continuing autocratization processes of even some of the most established democracies in the world are a worrisome development for the whole international community (see e.g. Nyyssönen 2026). Also, political polarisation and open hostility towards the rule of law and separation of powers, occasionally even by the ruling parties themselves, are an important factor in these sorts of political shifts. One aspect of this are the “authoritarian innovations”, in contrast to the much more established concept of democratic innovations. A prime example of such an innovation is one of the peculiarities of the Hungarian politics, namely the “national consultations”, which are a series of questionnaires addressed to all citizens. In addition, these political performances are intimately tied to the illiberal style of doing politics. Consequently, we argue that a vertical and manipulative consultation has superseded referendums as a potential new form of authoritarian politics. In general, this form of politicking is quite rare outside Hungary, but still the authoritarian nature of the whole phenomenon should be taken seriously. The main motivation of this paper is to take part on the continuing discussion on the nature and future of democracy – the concept of democracy is highly contested one – and specially to shed light on the ideologies of various political movements hostile to the established democratic systems.

Keywords: Democracy, Authoritarianism, Illiberalism

Inheritors of Communism or New Warriors? Transformation of Left-Wing Actors in Central Europe

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Communism and its legacy have strongly shaped the position of left-wing parties in Central Europe. In many post-communist landscapes, left-wing actors have been systematically marginalized and associated with the crimes of former communist regimes. Despite these constraints, new radical left parties have gradually emerged, especially in its „social-democratic“ forms. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent crises further challenged the left, while the radical right more successfully mobilized protests against restrictions, vaccination, and support for Ukraine. This paper examines transformations in the radical left-wing party arena in Czechia and East Germany, focusing on 2020–2025. These territories share key similarities: bureaucratic-authoritarian communist regimes as framed by Kitschelt (1999), post-1989 economic transformation driven mainly by the right, and the absence of reformed communist successor parties. This makes them suitable for a most similar systems design. The analysis focuses on two dimensions of party institutionalization. First, it examines ideological and programmatic change through party documents and Comparative Manifesto Project data, with attention to the divide between progressive and conservative left positions. Second, it analyses organizational turns, including new parties and cooperation with protest movements and trade unions, using statutes, reports, and original fieldwork data. Concretely, the study compares Die Linke and BSW in Germany with the Social Democrats, Stačilo!, and the Communist Party in Czechia. Its contribution lies in comparing East Germany from a post-communist perspective and capturing recent transformations of European left-wing politics.

Keywords: left-wing politics, institutionalization, post-Covid politics, party politics, social movements

From Accession to Integration: Networks and Learning in EU Cultural Funding after Eastern Enlargement

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Research on the Eastern enlargements of the European Union has predominantly focused on either “hard” dimensions of integration, such as legal harmonization and economic convergence, or “soft” dimensions, including identity formation and cultural alignment. What remains underexplored is how these dimensions interact over time, particularly in less institutionalized policy domains. EU cultural project funding provides a useful analytical lens to bridge this gap, as it reflects economic capacities, political support structures, and ideational integration through transnational cooperation. This paper argues that success in EU cultural funding cannot be sufficiently explained by national resource endowments alone. While economic capacity or public spending may shape countries’ ability to participate, they are less decisive for actual funding success. Instead, participation is driven by integration into transnational cooperation structures. Prior experience with EU programmes, embeddedness in cross-border networks, and processes of institutional learning emerge as key explanatory factors. Countries with longer exposure to EU funding frameworks are better positioned to navigate administrative requirements, mobilize partners, and sustain successful applications. Participation in EU cultural programmes thus reflects not only cultural policy engagement but also broader patterns of European integration. Empirically, the analysis draws on a novel dataset of 5,091 EU-funded cultural projects conducted between 2000 and 2020, covering 73 countries worldwide. Combining country-level indicators with project-level network data, the study examines both determinants of funding success and the evolution of cross-national collaboration structures. The findings challenge conventional assumptions: neither national cultural expenditure nor governance effectiveness significantly increase the likelihood of acquiring EU funds. Instead, path-dependent dynamics and accumulated programme experience are the strongest predictors. Moreover, collaboration patterns show a gradual shift from nationally concentrated projects towards more cross-border cooperation. However, networks remain strongly shaped by prior integration trajectories as well as institutional, spatial, and cognitive proximity. Overall, the paper highlights the importance of networks and institutional learning in explaining unequal participation and sheds new light on the role of cultural funding in European integration.

Keywords: European Integration, Project Funding, Quantitative Methods, Time-Series Cross-Sectional Study, Networks

The Transition of the European Union from Normative Power to Securitising Actor: Still a Peace Project?

Anna Molnár & **Éva Jakusné Harnos**, Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary

The identity narrative of the European Union was founded on its being a normative power until the outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine war. The deteriorating security environment, however, has created contradiction by transforming the EU from a peace project into a securitising actor. A further dilemma is which institution of the EU has the power to securitise, and which has the power of purse in defence matters. In 2025, the adoption of the SAFE regulation (Security Action for Europe) served to demonstrate the effectiveness of the European Commission's role in the securitisation of European defence. When the EU's 27 Member States accepted the process recommended by the Commission, effectively bypassing the involvement of the European Parliament in the decision-making process, the EP decided to take legal action against the Council of the EU. The SAFE entered into force on 29 May 2025, and the implementation process is proceeding according to the original plans. As the leadership of the EU tries to adapt to the new geopolitical realities, the Commission announces extraordinary measures. The talk presents multidisciplinary research results of the analysis of Commission speeches between 2019 and 2025 from the perspective of the securitisation theory of the Copenhagen School and the Speech Act Theory. The findings test and re-define the components of securitisation by providing deeper insight into the types of speech acts and their functioning in strategic communication. The talk investigates how the Commission has become a security actor and what role it took in the securitising process.

Keywords: European Union, defence, security, SAFE, European Parliament

Pre-electoral alliances in the Czech parliamentary elections of 2025: patterns, motivations and electoral effects

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Electoral alliances1 have become a significant feature of recent parliamentary elections and of the broader development of Czech politics. Political parties increasingly use pre-electoral cooperation as a response to growing fragmentation of voter preferences and as a strategy to overcome institutional constraints of the electoral system, particularly the electoral threshold. This study analyses open and hidden pre-electoral alliances competing in the 2025 elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic and examines their effects on parliamentary representation. Methodologically, it combines qualitative analysis of alliance agreements and candidate lists with quantitative evaluation of electoral results. The analysis focuses on three dimensions: (a) a typology of alliances based on their electoral effects (sub-additive, additive, and super-additive); (b) the structural characteristics of alliances and the motivations of political actors to cooperate prior to elections; and (c) the success of candidates from individual political parties within joint candidate lists. The study contributes to understanding pre-electoral alliance behaviour in a fragmented party system.

Billboards: Propaganda and Protest in Hungary's 2026 Political Campaign

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In contemporary Hungary, political billboards have become central instruments of state communication and ideological control over public space. Under the governments of Viktor Orbán, billboard campaigns have increasingly shaped everyday urban environments and narrowed the boundaries of political expression. This presentation examines how these visual regimes influence the meaning and practice of freedom in an illiberal political context. The analysis focuses on the interventions of Hungarian activist-lawyer Péter Heindl, who became well known for "redesigning" government billboards during the 2026 campaign period. Through direct visual intervention, humour and acts of civil disobedience, Heindl challenged official narratives and transformed propaganda into a site of political contestation. Drawing on theories of propaganda, visual politics, and public space, the presentation conceptualizes billboards as infrastructures of political authority that seek to monopolize visibility and delimit legitimate interpretations of national identity and sovereignty. The Hungarian case contributes to broader debates on political resistance by showing how such interventions reveal that freedom can be enacted not only as a constitutional principle, but also as a situated practice of reclaiming public space and restoring pluralism and political dialogue.

Keywords: Hungary, political campaign, protest, billboards, propaganda

Conspiracy beliefs as a solution to organizing an unpredictable world - can trust moderate relation between conspiracy beliefs and depression amongst older people?

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This study investigates the relationship between conspiracy beliefs (CBs) and depressive symptoms in older adults (aged 65 and older), focusing on the moderating role of interpersonal and institutional trust. While CBs are typically linked to negative outcomes like heightened anxiety and distrust, they may also serve a psychological function in uncertain contexts. By offering simplified explanations for complex events, CBs can provide a sense of control. For older adults experiencing loneliness and shrinking social networks, these beliefs might act as coping strategies, even though prior research consistently associates CBs with depressive symptoms. Given these inconsistencies, this study examined whether institutional trust (e.g., in government or media) and interpersonal trust (e.g., in family or friends) could moderate the link between CBs and depression. One limitation of the study is the use of shortened questionnaires, which was justified by the need to minimize cognitive load and fatigue among older participants. We hypothesized that depressive symptoms would correlate positively with CBs, that both types of trust would moderate this association, and that institutional trust would be the stronger moderator. However, the results revealed a different pattern. While depressive symptoms did positively correlate with CBs, only interpersonal trust moderated this relationship. Specifically, the association between CBs and depressive symptoms was significantly weaker among participants reporting higher interpersonal trust. Conversely, institutional trust did not moderate the relationship. These findings suggest that interpersonal trust serves as a protective buffer against the negative emotional consequences of CBs in older adults. Since institutional trust showed no moderating effect, the results highlight the critical importance of maintaining strong, supportive social relationships in later life. Such connections not only promote general well-being but also provide a crucial defence against the psychological risks linked to conspiracy beliefs.

Keywords: conspiracy beliefs, depression, institutional trust, interpersonal trust

The AKP-era Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans: an interplay of neo-imperialism and pragmatism

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The main scientific objective of this proposed paper is to analyse and evaluate political actions undertaken by Turkey towards the Western Balkan states (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). In the aftermath of its resounding victory in the 2002 parliamentary elections, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has embarked on a mission to enhance Turkish engagement in neighbouring regions, utilising historical and religious references as foundational elements of its foreign policy doctrine. In this context, the primary ambition of Turkey, as outlined in the concept of strategic depth, was to achieve a status as a regional power within the geographical area of the former Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the Ankara-led cooperation initiatives in the Western Balkans did not yield the anticipated results. Following the introduction of the presidential system in 2018, Turkish diplomatic efforts have exhibited a marked shift towards pragmatism, with the aim of fostering economic relations between Turkey and six countries in the region. Based on an analysis of available original sources (official documents, public reports, interviews and speeches by AKP politicians) and review of relevant academic literature, the key determinants that shape Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans have been identified. The theoretical framework for this research is image theory in international relations, which provides a broad range of tools useful in exploring states' political endeavours. Drawing on qualitative research methodology (e.g. content analysis, political discourse analysis, comparative analysis), this paper attempts to answer the research question regarding the role of the Western Balkans in contemporary Turkish political discourse, as well as to predict future developments in Turkey's relationship with the region.

Keywords: Turkey, Western Balkans, foreign policy analysis, regional cooperation, historical legacy

Beyond Marxism: Juche as an Independent Political and Philosophical Framework

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The Juche ideology is a distinctive political philosophy and theory that does not derive from Marxism-Leninism, as most Western political scientists tend to perceive it. Although the Juche theory has been analysed by Western academia through the perspective of security issues and politics, this research aims to emphasize that Juche should be recognized as a complete philosophy and political ideology in itself. The present paper provides a brief historical overview of Korea and its experience of colonization, division, and war. It attempts to prove that Juche is a unique political ideology, as it was formed under certain circumstances and conditions and was created as a response to them. In particular, the paper focuses on the key concepts of Juche, including political independence (chaju), economic self-reliance (charip), and self-defense (chawi). Moreover, it makes a comparison between Juche and classical Marxism, which reveals some similarities between them and some differences, as well. In addition, the paper discusses the implementation of Juche ideology in the DPRK, focusing on its political, economic, and social components. Lastly, the paper addresses the issue of universality of the Juche philosophy and whether it can be implemented in different states.

Keywords: Juche, DPRK, Non-western ideology, ideology

The relationship between freedom and tradition as a criterion of divisions in Polish political thought after the fall of communism.

Leszek Nowak, University of Warsaw, Poland

Debates on freedom are one of the most important themes in Polish political thought following the fall of communism. In my paper, I will address the issue of the relationship between freedom and Polish tradition. I shall endeavour to substantiate the thesis that the issue of the relationship between freedom and Polish political tradition is one of the most significant themes defining political divisions in Poland. I identify three main positions in this dispute, which will be developed in the paper: 1) Conservatism treats tradition as a prerequisite for ordered and limited freedom. Proponents of this approach emphasise the need to reconcile freedom with other values and regard an antinomic approach to freedom (freedom as a rejection of tradition) as dangerous. Liberalism is seen as the second modernisation project, after socialism, that combats tradition. In the Polish conservatives' approach to freedom, it is worth noting the various ways of understanding tradition (republican, romantic, Catholic) 2) Liberalism views various aspects of tradition as an obstacle to freedom. Freedom is understood broadly in this context, encompassing economic, political and social freedoms. In all these spheres, liberals see a need to change or reject tradition. The socialist era is often viewed by liberals as a time of 'stagnation', rather than one of combating tradition. Thus, for liberals, criticising and combating the legacy of socialism and Polish tradition is part of the same reform project. 3) The New Left regards tradition as an obstacle to freedom. In this respect, it is similar to liberalism but differs from it in important ways. Firstly, it views economic freedom differently. Secondly, it treats the issue of personal freedom differently. Representatives of the New Left do not believe that the protection of privacy is justified in certain matters; the freedom of women or sexual minorities also requires changes in the sphere of private life, which may necessitate state intervention. This perspective helps to explain why, in the Polish context, liberalism has moved closer to the New Left, whilst conservatism is treated as an adversary by both movements.

Keywords: Freedom, Conservatism, Liberalism, New Left

Strategic Recalibration in Central Europe: U.S. Alignment, National Strategy-Making, and the Renewal of Regional Cooperation

Laura Nyilas, National University of Public Service, Hungary

In an era marked by geopolitical volatility and renewed great power rivalry, strategic planning in security policy has evolved beyond a technocratic exercise into a core instrument of political agency, resilience, and long-term positioning. This is particularly evident in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where states confront overlapping challenges, including a revisionist Russia, the consequences of the war in Ukraine, hybrid threats, and the shifting dynamics of transatlantic relations. This paper argues that state-level strategy-making is not only essential for managing uncertainty but also increasingly central to shaping regional cooperation in CEE. Strategic documents and planning processes define how governments interpret threats, prioritize alliances, and coordinate with regional partners. In this context, regional frameworks – especially the Visegrád Group – are not static constructs but are continuously redefined through national strategic choices. A key focus of the analysis is the anticipated foreign policy reorentation in Hungary and its implications for both national strategy-making and regional dynamics. The paper posits that a new Hungarian government is likely to pursue a more explicitly Euro-Atlantic-oriented strategy, strengthening commitment to NATO and the European Union while maintaining a pragmatic articulation of national interests. Crucially, this strategic recalibration is expected to be accompanied by a renewed emphasis on regional cooperation, potentially contributing to a more cohesive and functionally aligned Visegrád framework. Within this evolving landscape, the United States remains a pivotal strategic actor. Despite ongoing debates on European strategic autonomy and the emergence of a more multipolar order, U.S.–CEE security cooperation continues to underpin regional stability. NATO’s credibility, integrated planning mechanisms, and transatlantic security guarantees remain indispensable, while U.S. engagement also serves as a reference point for national strategic alignment. The paper explores how national strategies in Central Europe – particularly in the context of a changing Hungarian approach – may increasingly converge with NATO planning cycles and U.S. regional priorities. Based on a qualitative analysis of key strategic documents and recent regional initiatives, the paper demonstrates that effective strategy-making can act as a catalyst for stronger regional cooperation. It argues that the combination of domestic political change and external strategic pressures may open a new phase in Central European coordination, where a more aligned Hungarian foreign and security policy contributes to enhancing both transatlantic cohesion and the strategic relevance of the region in a transforming global order.

Keywords: Regional security, Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary, US foreign policy, NATO, strategy

Freedom of Expression and Communicative Mechanisms of Restricting Free Speech: A Comparative Perspective from Central Europe and Southeast Asia

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This paper examines contemporary forms of restricting freedom of expression in Central Europe and Southeast Asia, focusing on the interplay between legal frameworks and communicative mechanisms that shape the boundaries of permissible expression. Rather than treating freedom of expression solely as a formal legal right, the paper conceptualises it as a dynamic outcome of institutional practices, regulatory environments, and communicative strategies that influence what is made visible, amplifiable, or delegitimised in public life. The analysis adopts a comparative and exploratory approach, drawing on selected illustrative cases from Central Europe and Southeast Asia. The purpose is not to conduct in-depth country-specific or linguistically grounded discourse analysis, but to identify broader patterns of how states and institutions regulate expressive space through both direct legal instruments and more indirect mechanisms. These include media regulation, digital governance frameworks, platform-related restrictions, and institutional practices that shape access to public communication channels. Methodologically, the paper relies on qualitative document analysis, combining academic literature in political science, legal studies, and political communication with reports produced by international organisations and human rights bodies. This approach allows for the identification of converging tendencies across regions with different political and institutional configurations. The paper argues that contemporary restrictions on freedom of expression increasingly operate through dispersed and often indirect mechanisms that blur the distinction between legal regulation and communicative control. These mechanisms do not necessarily eliminate formal rights but can significantly constrain their effective exercise by shaping informational environments and institutional responses to expression. In conclusion, the paper suggests that understanding freedom of expression in contemporary political systems requires an integrated analytical framework that combines legal, political, and communicative perspectives, while remaining attentive to cross-regional patterns of democratic erosion and regulatory transformation.

Keywords: Freedom of expression, communicative governance, legal regulation, Southeast Asia, Central Europe, digital media regulation, institutional control, political communication, comparative politics, democratic backsliding

Neoclassical Realism theory in Changing Geopolitics. Case of the South Caucasus

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This paper examines the explanatory power of neoclassical realism in understanding the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus. By integrating systemic pressures with domestic-level variables, neoclassical realism offers a nuanced framework to analyse the foreign policy behaviour of regional actors such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as the influence of external powers. The study argues that shifting global power structures, regional conflicts, and internal political factors interact to produce distinct strategic outcomes in the South Caucasus. The paper demonstrates that neoclassical realism provides a more comprehensive explanation than purely structural or domestic theories alone. The South Caucasus—comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—has emerged as a critical geopolitical crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Historically shaped by imperial competition, the region continues to be influenced by the strategic interests of major powers and regional actors. Recent developments, including renewed conflicts, shifting alliances, and the recalibration of global power politics, highlight the need for a theoretical framework capable of capturing both systemic and domestic dynamics. Neoclassical realism, which bridges international structure and internal state factors, offers such an approach. This paper explores how neoclassical realism explains the foreign policy behaviour of South Caucasus states in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Neoclassical realism builds upon classical and structural realism by incorporating domestic-level variables into the analysis of state behaviour. While systemic factors—such as the distribution of power—set the broad constraints, leaders' perceptions, state institutions, and societal pressures mediate responses. The South Caucasus represents a complex geopolitical environment where global power shifts intersect with local dynamics. Neoclassical realism offers a robust framework for understanding this complexity by linking systemic pressures with domestic-level factors. The analysis demonstrates that neither international structure nor domestic politics alone can fully explain the region's evolving geopolitical patterns. Instead, their interaction—central to neoclassical realism—provides the most comprehensive explanation. Future research could further refine the model by incorporating quantitative indicators of domestic variables and exploring comparative regional applications.

Keywords: Neoclassical Realism, International Relations, South Cuacasus

Are we really free? Economic insecurity and the appeal of populism: lessons from Poland

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This paper examines the transformation of economic freedom in Poland by analysing the evolving relationship between the state, markets, and society. It traces the shift from the late socialist planned economy under state socialism, through the very liberal market reforms of the 1990s, to the contemporary emergence of increasingly interventionist forms of state capitalism. Rather than treating economic freedom as a linear process of market liberalization, the paper argues that Poland’s post-1989 trajectory reflects shifting and competing understandings of freedom, sovereignty, and economic governance.

Germany in the “Zeitenwende”: A Role Theory Perspective on Foreign Policy Realignment

Constantin Palmer, Andrássy University Budapest, Hungary

Drawing on role theory, this paper examines whether and how German foreign policy has changed in the context of the “Zeitenwende”, the declared shift in German foreign and security policy, and how this change is reflected in actual policy behaviour. The analysis focuses on the Ampel coalition government under Chancellor Olaf Scholz as well as the transition to a Christian Democratic-led government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul. After introducing role theory in foreign policy analysis, the paper traces continuities and changes in German foreign policy identity since 1990. It argues that German foreign policy has been shaped by multilateralism, European integration, economic interdependence, military restraint, and a strong commitment to a rules-based international order. This tradition is often described as a form of a "civilian power". The study is based on a qualitative content analysis of key speeches by German foreign policy elites and an examination of foreign policy behaviour since 2022. It assesses the extent of transformation after the “Zeitenwende”. The findings show that the Scholz government introduced rhetorical changes and policy adjustments after Russia’s war in Ukraine. However, implementation has remained uneven. The subsequent Christian Democratic-led government under Friedrich Merz signals a more strategic and proactive approach to foreign policy. This includes a stronger focus on security, capability development, and geopolitical agency. At the same time, core structures of German foreign policy remain stable. German foreign policy has shifted toward a stronger security orientation. This includes European security, military capability development, and the strengthening of the Bundeswehr. It also includes a revision of the earlier logic of “change through trade” in Favor of a more cautious approach to economic dependencies. Germany continues to support European integration and transatlantic alignment. However, questions of strategic coherence remain. These debates have intensified under Donald Trump’s renewed presidency, which has increased concerns about US reliability and strengthened demands for European strategic autonomy. Germany also continues to face pressure to assume greater international responsibility, which reveals a gap between external expectations and self-perception. A clear difference emerges in leadership style. Olaf Scholz follows a cautious and reactive approach to the “Zeitenwende”. Friedrich Merz emphasizes a more forward-looking and strategically framed understanding of foreign policy. Despite this difference, both governments aim to position Germany as a responsible actor in an increasingly unstable international order.

Keywords: Germany foreign policy, Zeitenwende, Role theory, Security policy transformation, International order/global instability

Sacred Boundaries of Freedom: Orthodoxy, Religious Diversity, and Illiberal Politics in Georgia (1991–2025)

Giorgi Pareshishvili, Caucasus International University, Georgia

Freedom, as a political value, is never negotiated in a vacuum. In post-Soviet Georgia, the boundaries of religious freedom have been systematically shaped - and constrained - by the dominant position of the Georgian Orthodox Church within both the constitutional framework and the broader political culture. This paper examines how the institutionalization of Orthodox Christianity as a marker of national identity has produced a contested understanding of religious freedom in contemporary Georgia, one that privileges the majority confession while generating structural pressures on minority faith communities and secular actors alike. Drawing on three decades of church-state relations (1991–2025), the paper traces how the Georgian Orthodox Church evolved from a suppressed institution under Soviet rule into a politically influential actor capable of shaping legislative outcomes, electoral behaviour, and public discourse. The Concordat of 2002 and subsequent constitutional amendments formalized the Church\'s privileged status, creating an asymmetric landscape in which religious diversity is formally tolerated but substantively marginalized. Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Muslim, and other communities have faced varying degrees of institutional discrimination, social hostility, and legal ambiguity -patterns that illuminate the tension between liberal constitutional commitments and the illiberal logic of religious nationalism. The paper further argues that Orthodox hegemony has increasingly functioned as a resource for illiberal political mobilization, used to delegitimize Euro-Atlantic integration, restrict minority rights, and define the boundaries of authentic Georgian citizenship. Methodologically, the paper combines institutional and discourse analysis with comparative reference to analogous cases in Central and Eastern Europe- particularly Poland and Serbia - to situate Georgia within wider regional debates about religion, populism, and democratic backsliding. Georgia\'s trajectory ultimately reveals the fragility of religious freedom where the sacred and the national remain deeply entangled.

Keywords: Religious nationalism, Church-state relations, Democratic backsliding, Religious pluralism, Post-Soviet Georgia

The relevance of negotiating Chapter 26 in the context of (shallow) Europeanization

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This paper examines the relationship between academic freedom and European integration through the context of negotiating Chapter 26 (Education and Culture). Particular attention is devoted to the discrepancy between formal compliance and practical implementation, demonstrating how weak conditionality within Chapter 26 enables selective adaptation without full democratic consolidation. This remains evident even in countries that provisionally closed the chapter almost a decade ago, such as Serbia. The paper further argues that Chapter 26 is both excessively broad and insufficiently specific to substantially influence the accession process itself. Unlike politically decisive chapters such as Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), and Chapter 35 (Other Issues, primarily concerning the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština), Chapter 26 occupies a comparatively marginal position within the overall enlargement framework. As a result, issues concerning higher education governance and academic freedom are frequently overshadowed by broader geopolitical and stabilization-related priorities. Although Serbia has formally aligned segments of its higher education framework with European standards through the Bologna Process and EU-related reforms, the substantive internalization of academic freedom norms remains partial and politically contingent. In this regard, democratic backsliding and stabilitocratic tendencies further increase the relevance of these issues. Drawing on the literature on Europeanization and normative power, the paper conceptualizes Chapter 26 as an illustrative example of the limits of EU transformative power in candidate countries. It argues that geopolitical uncertainty, stabilization-oriented enlargement policies, and domestic political centralization weaken the EU’s capacity to diffuse liberal democratic norms. Consequently, the Serbian case demonstrates how higher education governance can evolve from a seemingly low-politics accession field into a politically salient arena reflecting broader tensions between democratization, sovereignty, and European integration.

Keywords: EU accession negotiations, candidate countries, academic freedoms, de-Europeanization

Competing for the Agenda: The Long Campaign for the 2026 Hungarian General Election

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After the 2024 presidential pardon scandal involving then-president Katalin Novák, a former prominent Fidesz politician elected by the Fidesz-KDNP parliamentary majority, the emergence of Péter Magyar and the Tisza Party, and Tisza's unexpectedly strong European Parliament election result, Hungarian politics entered a near-permanent campaign state. As the 2026 parliamentary election approached, competition increasingly revolved around the struggle to dominate the national agenda: who could impose preferred issues on public discourse, capture attention, and interpret or exploit unexpected events, scandals and crises. This paper examines the changing national political agenda in Hungary from June 2025 to election day, 12 April 2026. Drawing on agenda-setting, attention-based politics and issue ownership literature (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Török 2005; Merkovity 2018; Gilardi et al. 2022), it investigates which weekly issues created political advantage or disadvantage for the main actors, especially Fidesz-KDNP and the Tisza Party. It also asks who initiated or amplified these issues, and whether they could be maintained over a longer period. The analysis relies on a weekly issue database. For each week, the most salient national political issues are selected through an assessment guided by agenda research (Török 2005; Birkland 1998; Boydstun, Hardy and Walgrave 2014). The selection does not claim to capture the entire political agenda but identifies each week's dominant agenda nodes in a comparable way. The selected issues are then coded and interpreted according to criteria such as political relevance, framing, and potential advantage or disadvantage for the main actors. The paper highlights how the pre-election period was shaped by a struggle between Fidesz-KDNP government-led threat, sovereignty, foreign-policy and identity narratives, and Tisza-oriented critiques centred on competence, credibility, corruption, public services, state capture, child protection and state failure. It also shows how strategic advantage is created when actors control, contest or reframe dominant campaign issues and narratives.

Keywords: Hungarian politics, election campaign, agenda-setting, party competition

Government Stability or Government Resilience? Rethinking Measurement in Hybrid Regimes

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The paper will address the problem of government stability in hybrid regimes from the perspective of resilience. Traditional approaches tend to equate stability with durability, focusing primarily on the length of government tenure and the frequency of cabinet changes. However, in hybrid systems, the long-term persistence of governments often coexists with limited governance quality and a reduced capacity to respond to political and economic challenges. The paper will conceptualize government stability as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing not only durability but also the ability to adapt and maintain effectiveness under conditions of pressure. In this context, resilience will be treated as a key complement to the classical understanding of stability. Methodologically, the study will propose an approach based on the Government Stability Index (GSI), which integrates four core components: legitimacy, durability, effectiveness, and corruption. The empirical reference to Ukraine will demonstrate that stability understood solely as government longevity may lead to misleading conclusions about the actual performance of the executive. The paper will argue that incorporating resilience into the analysis provides a more precise framework for examining government stability in hybrid regimes and for capturing their dynamics under contemporary political challenges.

Keywords: government stability, resilience, hybrid regimes, Government Stability Index (GSI), Ukraine

Recalibrating Transatlantic Ties: U.S.–Central European Relations and the Impact of Domestic Change in Hungary

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Abstract: The fundamentally transformed Euro-Atlantic security architecture – shaped by a resurgent Russia, overlapping crises, and the gradual erosion of liberal international norms – presents both constraints and strategic opportunities for Central Europe. For the Visegrád countries, the interaction between European integration and transatlantic relations remains the key structural determinant of foreign policy orientation. At the same time, the posture of the United States – marked by a more interest-driven, selective, and at times unpredictable engagement with allies – has reintroduced classical realist dynamics into the Euro-Atlantic space. This analysis examines how U.S.–Central European relations may develop in this changing environment, with particular emphasis on the Hungarian–U.S. relationship. It argues that domestic political changes in Hungary are likely to generate a recalibration toward a more explicitly Euro-Atlantic orientation by the time of the conference. This shift may not only redefine bilateral relations with the United States – potentially moving toward a more stable and cooperative framework from personal ties – but could also have broader implications for regional alignment and the prospects of renewed Visegrád cooperation. More broadly, the analysis situates Central Europe within the evolving U.S. strategic outlook, asking whether the region will regain importance as a reliable pillar of the Euro-Atlantic alliance or remain a differentiated and selectively engaged partner. It argues that a convergence toward stronger Euro-Atlantic alignment may enhance both bilateral cooperate on with the United States and the strategic relevance of Central Europe within the broader transatlantic framework.

Keywords: World order, Transatlantic relations, Central Europe, US foreign policy, Hungary

Perspectives of academic freedom in the Czech Republic after 2025 parliamentary elections

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After 1989, the collapse of communist rule and the ascendancy of liberalisation, internationalisation, and legislative reform reconfigured Czech higher education. HEIs moved rapidly from direct state control toward a regime of professionial self-governance. The Czech Republic is ranked on the top in the world in the Academic Freedom Index regarding academic freedom. Nevertheless, in regard to certain issues underestimated or not fully covered by evaluation (e.g. social well-being of academicians, academic capitalism, financial issues in the fields of humanities etc.).

Whilst science and research remain underfunded – a situation that even the previous government failed to improve, the 2025 general parliamentary elections in the country revealed a significant shift from liberal democracy towards illiberal and strong right populist tendencies. The program of the party Motorists for themselves, which became part of a governmental coalition, contains controversial slogans such as ‘education without political interjections’ and objections to the teaching of gender issues and ‘useless fields’ (e.g., gender studies) where students should pay tuition, critique inclusion, and portray topics of subjects on environment and climate change as ideologies. Motorists for themselves, together in coalition with the strongly populist ANO movement and the far-right SPD party, are also against NGOs' attendance at schools and stand against robust scientific evidence and particularly scientists in the field of environmentalism. Over 400 scientists signed a letter to President Petr Pavel and to the incumbent prime minister, Andrej Babiš, appealing an appointment of a politician from the Motorist party to the position of Ministry of Environment. Claiming that “the Charles Univesity is training terrorists”, the Chairman of the Motorist party Petr Macinka criticised a course focusing on the climate crisis, which condones forms of civil disobedience, including protest and sabotage. Macinka also proposed that students should pay to study certain ‘useless’ humanities subjects that bring no social value. Last but not least, there has been a serious public debate regarding the draft bill on the registration of entities with foreign links, which the Academy of Sciences, in its statement, considers to be potentially risky and, amongst other things, a threat to the principles of academic freedom and international cooperation. There are also other signs pointing to changes, such as the vilification and labelling of critics – both academics and students – who speak out against Israel’s actions in Gaza.

In my presentation, I argue that following the 2025 general election, there is a risk of fundamental change not only for non-governmental organisations and public service media, but also for academic freedom in the country, even though the initial statements and actions appear to be little more than rhetorical exercises.

Keywords: Academic Freedom, Czech Republic, 2025 general elections, Motorists for Themselves, shift

Burdened cooperation. How different interpretations of the past shape the current Polish-Lithuanian relations

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Relations between Poland and Lithuania have evolved through multiple historical stages: from coexistence within one country until the end of the eighteenth century, through political and territorial conflicts during the interwar period, to the current strengthening of cooperation within the framework of the European Union and the Lublin Triangle. Throughout history, these relations have been influenced by the coexistence of tendencies toward both integration and separation, interpreted differently by Poles and Lithuanians. During the interwar period, Polish federalist projects were viewed in Lithuania as attempts at political domination and an act of recolonization. Also, Lithuanian nationalism increasingly developed in opposition to Poland. Nowadays, bilateral and regional cooperation is based on voluntary participation and shared strategic interests. Despite this, Polish–Lithuanian relations remain burdened by historical grievances, stereotypes, and mutual distrust. Current tensions, articulated mainly by right-wing political circles in both states, revolve around conflicting interpretations of history, the situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania, and Lithuanian fears of political or cultural dominance by its larger neighbour. These anxieties are additionally intensified by paternalistic elements visible in parts of the Polish far-right narrative. The article analyses both historical and contemporary discourses concerning Polish–Lithuanian relations. The historical section focuses on differing interpretations of political union and interstate cooperation, while the contemporary analysis identifies both common interests and the persistence of historical prejudices and selective approaches to the past. The study aims to demonstrate how historical memory continues to shape present-day mostly right-wing narratives and contributes to the spread of biased or misleading interpretations. The research is based on archival sources, academic literature, and primary materials related to modern Polish–Lithuanian relations, with particular emphasis on right-wing discourse. The study covers the years 1918–1939 and 1989–2025, employing discourse analysis, observation, and comparative methodology.

Keywords: regional cooperation, historical memory, federalism

Between Security and Freedom: Democratic Resilience in Armenia after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

Shirak Safaryan, University of Wroclaw, Poland

This paper studies how security crises reshape the meaning and practice of democratic freedom in post-Soviet states, focusing on Armenia after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. While the relationship between war, insecurity, and democratic decline has been widely studied in consolidated and hybrid regimes, the Armenian case remains less examined as an example of democratic resilience under conditions of military defeat, territorial insecurity, refugee pressure, external dependence, and intense domestic polarization. The central research question is: How has Armenia's post-2020 security crisis affected the balance between democratic freedom and state security, and what does this reveal about democratic resilience in post-Soviet political orders? The paper argues that Armenia is a theoretically important case because it challenges the assumption that severe security threats necessarily lead to authoritarian consolidation or democratic collapse. After the 2020 war and the forced displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, Armenian politics entered a period of deep uncertainty. Public debates increasingly connected freedom with survival, sovereignty, and national security. At the same time, Armenia preserved key democratic mechanisms, including competitive elections, pluralistic public debate, and institutional contestation. This creates a paradox: insecurity has constrained democratic discourse and strengthened demands for order, yet it has not fully reversed the democratic opening that followed the 2018 Velvet Revolution. Methodologically, the paper uses qualitative content analysis of government speeches, parliamentary debates, party statements, civil society reports, and media discourse from 2020 to 2025. It traces how political actors frame freedom, security, sovereignty, and democracy in the aftermath of war. The analysis focuses on three dimensions: the securitization of public discourse, the resilience of electoral and institutional competition, and the role of external actors, especially Russia and the European Union, in shaping Armenia's democratic trajectory. The paper contributes to broader debates on freedom in post-socialist and post-Soviet contexts.

Keywords: democratic resilience, freedom in times of crisis, Armenia, security politics, post-Soviet legacies.

How the elites are faring: the case of Ukraine in the context of Central and Eastern Europe

Anzhelika Savchuk-Konarska, University WSB Merito, Poland

For three decades following 1989, the dominant narrative in our region was one of elite continuity, masked by institutional changes. Flags were changed. Constitutions were rewritten. Yet in many of our countries – and Ukraine was perhaps the most dramatic example – the same networks, the same families, the same oligarchic constellations retained control over economic resources and political power. We built the architecture of democracy on foundations that the old elites had quietly acquired. Ukraine in 2013 was a textbook example of this pathology. The aim of this article is to analyse a country with immense human capital, a proud civic tradition and a strategic geographical location – yet one dominated by rival oligarchic clans who treated the state as a private mechanism for extracting profits. The aim is to show that Yanukovych's system was no anomaly. It was the logical end point of the formation of post-Soviet elites: where political office and corporate ownership became indistinguishable, and the rule of law was a resource to be exploited rather than a principle to be observed. I would like to share some observations on Volodymyr Zelenskyy's policies and leadership during the war, and to summarise how the elites have changed now that these policies have proved successful.

Keywords: elites, politicians, Ukraine, Zelensky, war

Twin Paths of Cross-Border Suburbanization: From Zemplén to Rajka in the Shadow of Košice and Bratislava

Andrea Schmidt, University of Pécs, Hungary

This study compares two cases of cross-border suburbanization occurring along Hungary's northern border: the integration of rural settlements in the Zemplén region into the Košice agglomeration, and the transformation of Rajka into a suburban extension of Bratislava. In both cases, rising urban costs and increased mobility have prompted Slovak residents to settle across the border in Hungary. However, the scale, speed, and social impact of these processes differ significantly, reflecting the differing economic weight of the two urban centres. The study examines how these dynamics are transforming local communities, housing markets, and everyday cross-border practices. It also highlights how identity and belonging are evolving in regions where national borders are becoming increasingly permeable.

Interpretation and Canon Formation: The Historiography of Political Thought in Czech and Slovak Contexts

Marián Sekerák, AMBIS College, Czechia

Histories of political ideas are not only written in scholarly monographs but are shaped through pedagogical texts that organise and transmit them. This article examines the role of textbooks and mimeographed materials in shaping the historiography of political thought in Czech, Slovak, and formerly Czechoslovak academia. It treats these sources as key sites for the construction and transmission of interpretive frameworks within European political thought. Through a historically grounded analysis from the late nineteenth century to the present, the article traces how canonical authors are selected, ordered, and interpreted in these contexts. While Czech and Slovak accounts broadly follow established trajectories of European intellectual history, they diverge in the incorporation of national intellectual traditions into this wider narrative. These differences reflect shifting political regimes, ideological frameworks, and institutional settings, particularly during the socialist and post-1989 periods. The article argues that textbooks and mimeographed materials do not reproduce established knowledge but shape the historiography of political thought by stabilising interpretive frameworks and reproducing disciplinary canons. It highlights the role of pedagogical texts in formation and transformation of historiographical narratives within a specific regional context and contributes to broader discussions on interpretation, canon formation, and writing of history of political thought.

Councilors' Activeness in the Community: Examples from Lublin Municipalities and Counties in Poland

Monika Sidor, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

Councillors are political leaders in local communities. Upon assuming office, they pledge in an oath to work diligently for the benefit of residents. Their public activity is linked to their work on the municipal council, but also to maintaining ongoing ties with residents. However, the legislature has not specified how this obligation is to be fulfilled. Some councillors, therefore, schedule shifts at the municipal office, meet with residents at meetings of municipal auxiliary units, during various events, etc. It should be noted, however, that the municipal/county council cannot mandate the form of such contacts in its statute. Therefore, there may be individuals who do not demonstrate such activeness, and the municipal/county council has no means to discipline them. The aim of this study will be to determine the level of councillor' activeness in the community. The activity of councillors in non-governmental organizations will also be considered. National studies indicate moderate activity in this area. Only one in four adult Poles (24%) declares that they devote their free time to social activities, one in seven (14%) is involved in one organization, and one in twenty (5%) in two. This level of activity may be higher among councillors, given that they constitute the local political elite. The work is based on the author's empirical research. A quantitative method was employed, employing auditorium and postal surveys across five terms of local government in Poland.

Contesting the Past Online: Digital Memory Politics and Narratives about Russia in Czechia and Slovakia

Irena Skalová, Charles University, Czechia

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, historical narratives have played a significant role in political debates over national identity and geopolitical orientation in Central and Eastern Europe. This paper examines how political elites in Czechia and Slovakia mobilize historically framed narratives related to Russia in digital political communication, and how these narratives contribute to contested interpretations of history. Political actors reinterpret experiences of Soviet domination, the post-1968 period, and the post-1989 transformation in order to frame Russia as either an existential threat or a legitimate geopolitical actor, thereby contributing to competing constructions of "good" and "bad" history. The analysis focuses on political communication on social media published between the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the 2024 European Parliament elections. The study is theoretically grounded in the strategic narratives framework (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, 2013) and in the literature on memory politics, which conceptualizes narratives about Russia not as externally imposed influences, but as domestically produced interpretative frames actively mobilized by political elites. Empirically, the paper employs a comparative case study design and discourse analysis of a purposively selected corpus of social media communication published on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Telegram, focusing on posts by party leaders and members of parliament across political parties in Czechia and Slovakia. Comparing two closely related yet politically divergent cases shows how digital platforms transform historical narratives into flexible political resources through which competing visions of Russia, Europe, and the past are constructed and contested in contemporary Europe.

Keywords: memory politics, strategic narratives, digital political communication, Russia

Between Pro-Defense and Political Aides. Essence of Paramilitarism in CEE

Maciej Skrzypek, University of Wrocław, Poland

Paramilitary organizations (PmOs) became significant entities in Central-Eastern Europe since 2022. On the one hand, they were presented by NATO as pillars of a “whole-of-society” approach to protecting the nation against potential threats and played a deterrent role. On the other hand, PmOs became involved in public discourse on security and defence issues. It stemmed from their activities in military training after the annexation of Crimea (2014). However, some PmOs demanded an end to support for Ukraine and its citizens, which became a part of electoral campaigns in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. It is worth verifying which PmOs shifted into more politically engaged roles, and which remained concentrated on military training for civilians. The paper aims to present the results of testing the author’s own typology of paramilitary organizations in CEE. The research question: What is the relationship between involvement in activities aimed at national security and civil defence and political partisanship in domestic political competition? Hypothesis: that decreasing involvement in activities aimed at national security and civil defence coexists with increasing political partisanship in domestic political competition. The study draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis of Facebook content. The former were used to identify general attitudes toward national security, domestic defence, and cultural-economic orientation. In turn, the qualitative analysis assesses the scope of PmOs’ partisanship and involvement in political competition. The analysis covers the following organizations: Patrole Obywatelskie, Ruch Obrony Granic, Obrona Narodowa, and Strzelec (Poland); Branné oddíly ČR, Československá obec legionářská, and Military Experience (Czech Republic); and Bűnvadászok (Hungary). They were active PmOs in V4 states where general elections were organized in 2025–2026. It offers an explanation of how ideological orientation and organizational positioning within the state–society relationship are linked with political bias. A theoretical contribution is a typology of modern PmOs.

Keywords: paramilitarism, elections, pro-defence, security, defence

Critical Literacy of Public Administration Actors as a Safeguard of Freedom: Evidence from Slovakia and the Visegrad Group

Daniela Škutová, & **Katarína Liptáková**, Matej Bel University, Slovakia

Freedom in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe is not only shaped by formal institutional arrangements, but also by the epistemic capacities of those who govern. This paper examines the relationship between the critical literacy of public administration actors and the quality of public policymaking in Slovakia, embedding this inquiry within the broader regional context of the Visegrad Group. We argue that critical literacy - understood as the capacity to analytically and reflexively evaluate arguments, texts, and political narratives within their power and social context -constitutes a measurable and underexplored predictor of policy quality and, by extension, a structural precondition for the meaningful practice of freedom in post-communist democracies. Empirical evidence consistently shows that institutional trust in Central and Eastern Europe is increasingly determined by political-ideological affiliation rather than performance-based evaluation of institutions. Under these conditions, public administration actors who lack critical literacy are more susceptible to narrative manipulation, cognitive biases in regulatory decision-making, and the legitimation strategies employed by governments during crises - tendencies documented across V4 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022-2023 energy crisis. The study presents the conceptual model for the Critical Literacy Scale for Public Administration Actors in Slovakia (SKGAVS), the first standardized measurement instrument of its kind designed for the Central European public sector context. By linking individual-level epistemic capacity to systemic policy outcomes and democratic resilience, this paper contributes to the comparative study of freedom in the region - specifically to the dimensions of academic freedom, freedom and democratic backsliding, and freedom in times of crisis - and offers an evidence-based perspective on how critical literacy can serve as an institutional safeguard of freedom in societies navigating the pressures of populism and political narrative manipulation.

Keywords: critical literacy, public administration, public policy, institutional trust and freedom, narrative manipulation

Political Legitimacy and Legitimation in the Post-1949 China: On the Confucianism-Proletariat Dyad

Jiabin Song, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

This paper aims at shedding light on the problem of why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime's Confucianism-based legitimation policy has been changing towards its Chinese labour population. Through conceptualising three political legitimacy reasons: the justification reason of legitimacy, the instrumental reason of legitimacy, and communicative reason of legitimacy, the researcher establishes a research framework to investigate the chronological changes in the CCP's Confucianism legitimation policies to the Chinese labour population throughout Mao, Deng, Hu, Jiang, and Xi's periods. The study found that, in the course of implanting the antithetical communist ideology into a Confucian tradition society to legitimise the regime, there are two distinct periodic approaches to Confucian legitimation: the antagonistic proletarian suppression approach in the Mao period, and the assimilative nationalist incorporation approach in Xi's period. Further, these two approaches of Confucianism-based legitimation policies did generate some political legitimacy among the Chinese labour population.

Keywords: Political Legitimacy, Political Legitimation, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Confucianism, Chinese Labor Population

The Territorial Left: Party Family Competition Across EU NUTS Regions

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The electoral fortunes of social democratic, radical left, and green parties have been one of the central concerns of comparative party research, yet most existing evidence is drawn from national-level data. A growing body of work suggests that these three-party families share a partially overlapping electoral base, such that competitive dynamics between them, and with other party families, shape their respective vote shares. The subnational picture, however, remains incompletely mapped. The aim of the paper is to examine electoral support for social democratic, radical left, and green parties across NUTS 2 territorial units in EU member states, drawing primarily on the European NUTS-level Election Database (EU-NED). The central interest lies in how support for these party families relates to one another at the regional level, and whether the presence of multiple left party families tends to strengthen the overall left vote or simply redistribute it within a fixed electorate. These questions are pursued across time as well as space: whether the patterns identified hold across different periods, with the 2008 financial crisis and its political consequences serving as a natural dividing line; and whether they apply similarly in Eastern and Western European regions, given the distinct trajectories of left party development in post-communist contexts. Party family classification itself presents a further complication, as major comparative datasets such as CHES and ParlGov do not always assign parties to the same families, introducing a layer of uncertainty that any such analysis must acknowledge. The paper contributes to the literature on electoral geography and subnational party politics and speaks to broader questions about the conditions under which party family competition effects generalise across territorial and classificatory contexts.

Keywords: electoral geography, party families, party competition, subnational analysis, left-wing

Competing Visions of Germany's Foreign Policy: Role Conceptions of AfD and Die Linke after the Zeitenwende

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The aim of this study is to compare the foreign policy role conceptions of Germany's two populist parties, the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland – AfD) and Die Linke through the lens of role theory following the Zeitenwende announced on 27 February 2022. More recent approaches within Foreign Policy Analysis role theory focus not only on decision-makers in the narrow sense but also on the role conceptions of political parties, individual politicians, and public opinion. Although foreign policy in Germany primarily falls within the competence of the federal government, parliamentary parties are capable of exerting significant pressure on decision-makers. In certain areas — such as defence procurement, the deployment of armed forces outside federal territory, and the oversight of intelligence services — parliamentary actors play a decisive role. Following the 2025 federal elections, the AfD emerged as Germany's second strongest political party, while the far-left Die Linke also returned to parliament with strengthened support. Should the German economy fail to recover from its crisis, and social tensions remain unresolved under the government of Friedrich Merz, both populist parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum may continue to expand their electoral support in future federal elections. The study is based on a comparative content analysis of party programs and public statements. It demonstrates that the geopolitical crises unfolding since 2022 — including the war in Ukraine, the Gaza war, and the war in Iran — have had a measurable impact on the role conceptions of both parties. The study concludes that, in the case of AfD, the Iranian war generated role conflict within the party's conception of a realist "power state" (Machtstaat), whereas Die Linke modified its conception of Germany as a "peace power" (Friedensmacht) through a process of role learning following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Keywords: AfD, role theory, Germany, foreign policy, populism, Zeitenwende

Appealing Ideologies across Time and Regimes in Hungary

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The authoritarian regimes of our time are often characterized as being opportunistic and ideologically inconsistent. Hungary's Orbán regime, which held a supermajority from 2010 to 2026, is often described in a similar way. However, recent studies reveal that this regime was not only opportunistic but also adheres to identifiable and consistent ideological frameworks. These ideologies are not solely based on fear, rejection or opposition to the liberal democratic order; they also present the electorate with appealing proposals. Understanding these elements is crucial to find ways to strengthen CEE's democracies against authoritarian tendencies in the future. This paper argues that the core ideologies of the Orbán regime, including conservatism, a national identity based on the instrumentalization of Christian elements, and a nationalism rooted in nativism and exceptionalism, are not novel creations. Instead, these ideologies draw on traditions from Hungary’s 20th-century hybrid regimes and dictatorships. Through a historiographic analysis of documents from that period and secondary literature, this research reconstructs these traditions and traces their continuity into the present. The paper pays particular attention to how these ideological narratives redefine and appropriate the concept of freedom. They present national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and protection from external influence as alternative forms of liberty, rather than embracing the liberal democratic ideals of freedom, pluralism, and individual rights. This paper reveals how these ideologies resonated with voters and contributed to the regime’s resistance for 16 years. It offers insights into the relationship between authoritarian durability and the importance of the perception of freedom for the electorate. Furthermore, the paper suggests that recognizing the ideological appeal and historical context of the Orbán regime is essential to understand the previous, recent and autocratic attempts in the region.

Keywords: Orbán Regime, Authoritarianism, National Identity, Historical Continuities, Hungary

Strategic Autonomy Revisited: V4 Narratives and the Impact of Hungary’s 2026 Political Turn

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Abstract: EU strategic autonomy was once primarily a political slogan of the Emmanuel Macron’s leadership but evolving geopolitical dynamics and shifts in US foreign policy towards Europe have given the concept increasing relevance and momentum. Nevertheless, EU member states remain divided over its substance. One interpretation emphasizes increased military spending to strengthen NATO and foster a more balanced transatlantic partnership. Another perspective highlights the need for Europe to act independently—at times even in opposition to US foreign policy—an approach viewed less favourably by Atlanticist actors. The Visegrád Four (V4) countries have also exhibited divergent positions on this issue. Hungary has traditionally been a vocal supporter of strategic autonomy, while Poland has remained sceptical due to its strong security ties with the United States. Following the Russo-Ukrainian war, Czechia and Slovakia adopted more clearly Atlanticist positions. However, the re-election of Robert Fico introduced a more cautious and nuanced Slovak stance on transatlantic relations. A significant development shaping the regional discourse is the 2026 government change in Hungary. This political shift is expected to influence both Hungary’s foreign policy orientation and its approach within the EU, with potential implications for how strategic autonomy is interpreted and pursued. The new government may recalibrate Hungary’s position between Atlanticist and autonomy-oriented perspectives, thereby affecting broader V4 dynamics. This paper examines the period from 2014 to 2026, analysing evolving national narratives on EU strategic autonomy across the four countries. The study applies a realist constructivist framework and employs discourse analysis to capture how political change and external pressures reshape strategic thinking in the region.

Keywords: V4, EU strategic autonomy, discourse analysis, realist constructivism, Hungary political change

Do Green Nudges Work in Low-Trust Societies? Evidence from Slovakia

Zuzana Šteučeková, Matej Bel University, Slovakia

This paper examines the extent to which political culture conditions public receptiveness to green nudges in post-communist societies, with a focus on Slovakia as a pilot case. While behavioural public policy has demonstrated the short-term effectiveness of nudges in promoting pro-environmental behaviour, less attention has been paid to the broader cultural and political context in which these interventions operate. This study argues that the long-term effectiveness of green nudges is not context-neutral but depends significantly on underlying features of political culture, particularly trust in institutions and environmental value orientations. Drawing on data from Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, the paper explores how levels of institutional trust and pro-environmental attitudes shape individuals' willingness to accept and respond to behavioural policy tools. The analysis situates Slovakia within the broader context of post-communist societies, where historical legacies of state intervention and comparatively low levels of political trust may influence perceptions of state-led behavioural interventions. The paper tests the hypothesis that individuals with higher institutional trust and stronger environmental values are more receptive to green nudges, while low-trust environments may foster scepticism towards such measures, potentially limiting their long-term effectiveness. In doing so, the study contributes to bridging the gap between behavioural public policy and political culture research by highlighting the conditional nature of policy effectiveness. The findings have important implications for the design and communication of environmental policies in Central and Eastern Europe, suggesting that the success of green nudges depends not only on their technical design but also on their alignment with societal trust and value structures.

Keywords: Political culture, Green Nudges, Trust in Institutions, Environmental attitudes, Post-Communist Societes

Hybrid Populism in Contemporary Poland: Strategic Adaptations in Presidential (2020–2025) and Parliamentary (2019–2023) Elections

Natalia Stręk, Jagiellonian University, Poland

Populism is a multidimensional and eclectic phenomenon that is difficult to capture within a single methodological framework. In the Polish context, its evolution has increasingly revealed not only bottom-up movements but also top-down adaptations by established political actors. To better grasp this dynamic, the concept of hybrid populism was introduced—understood as a form of populism that combines grassroots-elements of populism with strategic, institutionally driven implementation by long-standing parliamentary parties. This analytical perspective was applied to the most recent electoral cycles in Poland, particularly the presidential elections of 2020 and 2025 and the parliamentary elections of 2019 and 2023. The study relies on a modified version of Kurt Weyland's definition of populism and an interdisciplinary research approach, treating populism primarily as a political strategy grounded in appeals to the will of the people, an 'us vs. them' divide, and the construction of an enemy figure. By integrating these methodological assumptions with the concept of hybrid populism, the analysis demonstrates how established parties recalibrate their strategies to fuse populist appeals with institutional resources, reshaping both campaign communication and voter mobilisation. This framework enables a more nuanced understanding of the changing role of populist rhetoric in contemporary Polish politics, particularly during key presidential and parliamentary contests.

Keywords: hybrid populism, political strategy, electoral campaigns, populist rhetoric

Youth and the Far Right in Poland

Piotr Sula, **Kamil Błaszczyński** & **Michał Kuś**, University of Wrocław, Poland

The growing support for far-right parties among young voters has become a salient phenomenon across Europe, with important implications for party competition. This article investigates the drivers of such support in Poland, focusing on Confederation, the far-right party that competes with Law and Justice by advancing nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-EU, and anti-interventionist positions. Drawing on an original survey of 1,373 first-time voters (aged 18 - 19) in the Podkarpackie and Lubuskie regions, conducted in early 2023 the paper shows that support for Confederation is driven primarily by anti-interventionist, anti-EU, and anti-immigrant sentiments, while axiological beliefs play a limited role.

Keywords: radical right-wing party, Poland, youth, voting preferences

Beyond Western Climate Security Frames: Lessons from Southeast Asian Security Thinking for European Debates

Katarzyna Sypień, Jagiellonian University, Poland

Climate security research in international relations has expanded rapidly, yet its baseline concepts and causal stories remain strongly shaped by Western security traditions and the policy agendas that accompany them. This paper argues that a meaningful "reckoning" in climate security requires more than adding new cases. It requires treating regional security thought developed outside the Western canon as theory rather than as contextual detail. The paper mobilises Southeast Asian approaches to security, including comprehensive and cooperative security and development centred understandings of stability, to reconceptualise climate change less as a trigger of interstate conflict and more as a compound risk to livelihoods, governance capacity, and political legitimacy. The CEPSA-relevant move is to connect this conceptual shift to contemporary European debates about freedom, crisis politics, and the acceptable scope of state action under climate pressure. The paper advances the thesis that when Western climate security templates travel as default frameworks, they can systematically overemphasise coercive or emergency imaginaries and underweight the distributive and governance politics that often determine whether climate policy protects communities or marginalises them. In practice, this matters for how "security" is invoked to justify accelerated decision making, exceptional measures, or technocratic insulation, and for whether climate action is framed as collective protection or as a constraint on social and economic freedom. Two questions guide the analysis. First, which elements of Southeast Asian security thinking reorder the causal story of climate security by shifting attention from conflict prediction toward state capacity, social stability, and everyday resilience in development contexts. Second, what analytic distortions follow when Western templates are applied across regions, including the tendency to misread regionally filtered cooperation as weak multilateralism and to treat development trade-offs as secondary to security logics. The contribution is a framework for pluralising climate security concepts in a way that strengthens comparative analysis and avoids conceptual parochialism, while sharpening debate about how climate governance reshapes the practical meaning of freedom.

Keywords: climate security, Southeast Asia, non-Western security thinking, comprehensive security, freedom and crisis governance

Environmental security under polycrisis in Central and Eastern Europe freedom solidarity and crisis governance

Katarzyna Sypień, Jagiellonian University, Poland

This paper examines how polycrisis dynamics reshape environmental security priorities in Central and Eastern Europe and how these shifts reorganise the boundaries of acceptable public action. The point of departure is that climate stress, food price volatility, and disruptions in maritime logistics are rarely experienced or governed as separate problems. They interact as coupled risk pathways that move through supply chains, infrastructure dependencies, and market expectations, and they enter domestic politics as questions of affordability, stability, and state capacity. The resulting gap is conceptual and analytical. Existing work often addresses these pressures through sectoral lenses, while paying less attention to how security framings travel across policy domains and generate either coherence or fragmentation in crisis governance. The paper argues that environmental security operates as a policy-making frame that can facilitate rapid coordination under compounded pressure, yet it often does so by privileging short-horizon stabilisation and supply continuity over deliberation about distributive costs and accountability. It asks two questions. First, how do governments in the CEE region categorise and prioritise overlapping shocks, and which signals become politically dominant when climate pressures coincide with price spikes and logistical disruption. Second, under what conditions does environmental security framing produce cross-sector policy coherence, and under what conditions does it reinforce fragmentation by empowering parallel sectoral toolkits and shifting burdens onto particular groups. Methodologically, the paper proposes a process-oriented analysis of policy episodes and official communication, tracing how problem definitions authorise specific instruments, allocate responsibility, and normalise crisis modes of governing. The contribution is a theory-driven account of environmental security under polycrisis that specifies the mechanisms linking crisis framing to policy choice, coherence, and legitimacy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: environmental security, polycrisis, Central and Eastern Europe, food price volatility, crisis governance

AI as a Narrative Resource in Contemporary Campaign Communication – The Case of the 2026 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections

Orsolya Szabó Palócz, University of Szeged, Hungary

The presentation examines the role of artificial intelligence in political narrative-making during the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary election campaign, with particular attention to its functions within enemy-constructive campaign strategies. The paper does not approach AI primarily as an autonomous technological force or as a tool whose political effects can be assumed in advance. Rather, it asks what communicative and strategic functions political actors assigned to AI in an already digitalized, platformized and algorithmically organized campaign environment, and how AI-related communication affected the public perceivability of political opponents, conflicts and threats. The main argument is that AI-assisted content production did not necessarily create entirely new campaign logics but modified the operation of existing ones. Compared to earlier forms of digital campaign communication, AI offered new possibilities for the rapid variation, visual and linguistic intensification, personalization and repetition of political messages. In this sense, its relevance lies in how it could be used to make antagonistic narratives more adaptable, emotionally condensed and easily reproducible across different communicative contexts. This also raises broader questions about the credibility of political messages, the formation of collective identities, group boundary-making, and the ways citizens encountered competing claims of political and democratic legitimacy. The presentation focuses on enemy-construction as one of the central narrative mechanisms of contemporary political communication. AI became significant here not simply by producing synthetic images, texts or videos but by supporting the dramatization and reformatting of political opposition into morally, culturally or existentially threatening figures. The Hungarian case provides a relevant context for exploring these questions, as the 2026 parliamentary campaign unfolded in a highly polarised and digitally mediated public sphere. These functions were especially relevant where political reality was already fragmented, media environments were polarized, and competing interpretations of democratic freedom were continuously contested. The paper also considers how AI-mediated threat narratives may have reinforced identity-based polarisation by connecting political antagonism to collective identities, group boundaries and competing claims of democratic legitimacy. At the same time, the paper does not treat AI-mediated enemy construction as politically unlimited or automatically effective. Its significance depended on how it was embedded in existing campaign strategies, media structures, audience expectations and broader patterns of political antagonism. By examining the Hungarian case, the presentation contributes to a broader discussion on how technological change affects the conditions of public discourse, political competition and the symbolic contestation of freedom in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, without reducing the phenomenon either to manipulation alone or to a purely technical change in campaign practices.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, campaign communication, enemy-construction, political narratives, digital public sphere

Exploring the Impact of AI-Driven Persuasion on Political Support for Autocratic Leaders: A Case Study of Viktor Orbán's Supporters in Hungary

Julia Szamely, Central European University, Hungary, **Elisa Omodei**, Central European University, Hungary, **Thomas Costello**, Carnegie Mellon University, USA & **David Rand**, Cornell University, USA

This study examines whether large language models (LLMs) can reduce support for authoritarian political strategies through personalized, real-time conversations. Amid growing democratic backsliding worldwide, Hungary under former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán became a prominent example of illiberal governance and democratic erosion. Hungary therefore provides an important setting for examining why voters support leaders who weaken democratic institutions and whether rational persuasion can reduce such support. Prior research suggests that authoritarian attitudes are reinforced by identity-driven reasoning and cognitive biases, while recent advances in generative AI indicate that LLMs can generate persuasive arguments comparable to human-produced content. Using data collected during the Orbán era, we conducted an experiment with 1,000 Hungarian participants who engaged in three-round conversations with GPT-4 about the dangers of autocratic governance and the benefits of liberal democracy. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five conditions in a 2×2 factorial design plus control: goal-based persuasion, chain-of-thought (CoT) prompting, goal-based + CoT, default GPT-4 persuasion, or a non-political control conversation. The study tested five preregistered hypotheses concerning persuasion effectiveness, spillover effects on support for Orbán, moderation by perceptions of Orbán’s authoritarianism and respondent characteristics, and differences across prompting strategies. Linear regression models were used, with robustness checks addressing potential floor effects through multiple authoritarianism and Orbán-support cutoffs. Results revealed a small but statistically significant backfire effect at the 90% confidence level, with treatment groups expressing slightly stronger authoritarian attitudes post-treatment. Treatment did not significantly reduce support for Orbán overall, though participants who already perceived Orbán as authoritarian showed weaker reductions in support under treatment conditions relative to control groups. CoT prompting produced the strongest backfire effects, while goal-based persuasion showed weaker and mostly non-significant effects. These findings highlight both the promise and limitations of AI-mediated persuasion in altering deeply held political attitudes in contexts of democratic backsliding.

Keywords: authoritarianism, political persuasion, large language models (LLMs), AI-driven persuasion, persuasion backfire effects

Myths and Symbols in the construction of democratic order after authoritarianism - lessons from the Polish experience.

Bohdan Szklarski, University of Warsaw, Poland

The presentation is devoted to the study of the role of symbolic politics in the construction of democratic systems. Symbolic politics is a necessary component of democratic consolidation as well as a crucial component of the formation of national identity in the post-communist order. In 2026, under the strain of Russian aggressiveness East European countries are again going through aftershocks from the 1989 revolutions resulting in heightened attention to the concepts of freedom, sovereignty, identity politics and conservative populism. In this context the public sphere (street names, monuments, commemoration ceremonies, public rituals, national holidays and other manifestations of cultural heritage) becomes an area for manifesting divergent views of history as well as views of the future. History becomes politicized in politics of nostalgia as social and economic groups reach to national symbols to legitimize their actions. Symbolic politics also becomes a platform for public intellectual elites to take centre stage. The presentation is devoted to the study of key symbols, myths and rituals in the process of democratization.

Keywords: myths, symbols, public sphere, democratic consolidation, legitimization

Understanding International Migration in Times of Crisis - Society Under Pressure of Government-Driven Discourse

Istvan Tarrosy, University of Pecs/Stellenbosch University, Hungary

This paper examines the Hungarian case of migration governance in times of polycrisis and biopolitical panic, focusing on how government-driven discourse (re)shapes societal understandings of individual freedoms and collective security. Migration-related political communication has increasingly framed stability, sovereignty, and cultural protection as priorities that could justify restrictive policies and limitations on pluralism. The paper investigates how the Hungarian government's anti-immigration campaigns between 2015 and 2025, including billboard messaging, official political communication, and state-sponsored narratives, have contributed to constructing migration as a permanent societal threat. By examining the tensions between securitization, economic necessity, and societal perceptions, the paper deals with understanding how crises influence public acceptance of restrictions on freedoms in exchange for promises of order and stability. The dichotomy of fear and protection will be closely looked at in a framework inspired also by Amartya Sen's concept of freedoms and unfreedoms.

Keywords: migration, political discourse, billboards, securitization, unfreedoms

Security and Stability in Times of Crisis: Türkiye's Security Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa

Murat Özay Taşkın, University of Wroclaw, Poland

This paper examines Türkiye's security engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa through the lens of crisis politics, focusing on the Ethiopia–Somalia dispute as a critical case of regional instability in the Horn of Africa. The crisis, triggered by Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access through Somaliland and Somalia's insistence on sovereignty and territorial integrity, reveals how questions of security, statehood, and regional order intersect with broader debates on freedom in times of crisis. Rather than treating Türkiye's African policy solely as an extension of hard-power projection, the paper argues that Ankara's approach combines military cooperation, defence capacity-building, mediation diplomacy, humanitarian engagement, and strategic economic interests. The central aim is to assess how Türkiye positions itself as both a security partner and diplomatic mediator in fragile regional contexts. Somalia represents the most visible example of Türkiye's long-term security-oriented engagement, including military training, institutional support, and maritime security cooperation. At the same time, Türkiye's mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia illustrates an attempt to transform bilateral security tensions into a framework of negotiated stability. The paper therefore asks whether Türkiye's approach contributes to regional resilience and sovereign agency, or whether it reproduces new forms of dependency and strategic competition. By linking the Ethiopia–Somalia crisis to Türkiye's broader Africa policy, the study contributes to discussions on security, stability, and freedom under crisis conditions. It also offers a non-Western perspective on how emerging middle powers shape conflict management and political order in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Türkiye, Sub-Saharan Africa, Security Cooperation, Crises Diplomacy

Populism, Migration and Citizenship in Hungary: Migration Governance and Integration under Fidesz (2010–2025)

Gabriella Thomázy, University of Public Service, Hungary

Following its accession to the European Union in 2004, Hungary was widely regarded as a successful case of Europeanization. Since 2010, however, Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz government reshaped the country's political system with a populist and illiberal agenda centred on national sovereignty, anti-migration rhetoric, and opposition to supranational governance. During this period, migration became a central element of political communication and securitization strategies, despite Hungary remaining primarily a country of origin and transit rather than destination. The study focuses on four key dimensions: 1.) migration policy under Fidesz, 2.) extending citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living abroad, 3.) naturalization processes for immigrants residing in Hungary, and 4.) migrant integration policies and changing perceptions of migration-related security threats. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining the analysis of legislation, academic literature, statistical data, and international indexes. It explores how historical legacies, demographic challenges, and political strategies shaped Hungary's citizenship and migration regime. The findings suggest that migration and citizenship policies have served not only demographic and governance purposes, but also broader populist political objectives aimed at reinforcing national identity, securitizing migration, and consolidating the political power of Fidesz between 2010 and 2025.

Keywords: Populism, Migration, Citizenship, Integration, Hungary, Securitization

The Social Media Election: Digital Media and the Rise of Opposition Politics in Hungary

Ádám Tislér, University of Pécs, Hungary

The recent Hungarian elections offer a valuable case study for political science research. After sixteen years in power, the Fidesz–KDNP – having established a highly centralized political system with extensive control over state resources and dominant influence over traditional media – suffered a historic defeat in an election marked by the highest voter turnout since Hungary's democratic transition. Its challenger, the TISZA Party, emerged virtually from scratch in less than two years secured the most seats in the last 36 years. Beyond the electoral outcome itself, the election reflects a broader transformation in how citizens consume information and express political opinions. The rise of the internet and, especially, social media has fundamentally changed the way of information consumption, shifting public attention away from traditional media toward decentralized digital platforms. At the same time, online platforms have created new forms of political participation and public opinion expression, enabling citizens, activists, and emerging political actors to communicate directly with large audiences in real time. While state-controlled media continued to Favor the incumbent government, opposition actors increasingly relied on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and other social media channels to bypass institutional barriers and mobilize voters. These platforms offered relatively low-cost—and often free—opportunities to spread alternative political narratives and build political communities outside the traditional media landscape. My research examines this evolving media environment by comparing the communication strategies, resources, and opportunities available to the governing state apparatus and to the emerging opposition. The study aims to contribute to broader discussions on digital political communication, media power, and the changing nature of democratic competition in the age of social media.

Keywords: Hungarian election, public opinion, online opinion expression, social media

Social Media, Segmentation of Media Audience and Political Preferences of Youth: The Case of Slovenia

Matevž Tomšič & **Rok Bratina**, School of Advanced Social Studies, Slovenia

We have recently witnessed radical changes in the media space. The influence of traditional media is in decline. This holds for both printed and electronic media. This is reflected in their lower attendance (a decrease in circulation and a decline in the number of readers, viewers, etc.). On the other hand, digital and social media are gaining prominence. The latter can generally be understood as all digital platforms, services, and applications built on the interplay of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connections. In parallel with these changes, the media audience is being segmented, meaning that different social groups use different types of media as a source of information. The segmentation by age group is particularly evident. Many older voters still follow traditional media. They are subscribed to daily newspapers and regularly watch daily news programs. On the other hand, younger generations follow the news predominantly through social media, especially on mobile devices. Social networks also have an increasing influence on political communication. Politicians who aspire to win elections practically cannot afford to be absent from social networks or to avoid addressing potential voters through them. This is particularly important for addressing young (potential) voters. However, young people not only receive information via social media but are also increasingly active on it as information creators. These media thus significantly shape their lives and, in turn, influence their political values and beliefs. The present paper examines the relationship between the following new media and political preferences on the case of Slovenia, with an emphasis on young voters. The authors claim that the shift of Slovenian youth to the right, as shown by certain surveys and confirmed by the results of this year's parliamentary elections, in which younger voters overwhelmingly supported right-wing parties, is related to changes in media consumption habits. Namely, younger voters are significantly less influenced by traditional media, which in Slovenia are predominantly in favour of the political left.

Keywords: social media, media audience, political orientations, youth, Slovenia

Collective freedom practiced and statehood peacefully restored in the Western Balkans 20 years ago: the case of Montenegro and lessons from its historic trajectory

Csaba Töró, Karoli Gaspar University of the Reformed Church, Hungary

The stages of statehood in Montenegro: its origin, loss and gradual recovery - Congress of Berlin, 1878: formal international recognition and territorial extension - Extinction/forced disappearance in 1918: Occupation and annexation by Serbia - Partial rebirth: from 1945 to 2003 constitutive republic of the Yugoslav federal states in all of its variations - Independence and sovereignty retrieved (against all odds): referendum and revival in 2006 - Statehood and security in the Transatlantic alliance: NATO membership in 2017 - Final confirmation of statehood: through shared sovereignty and integration within the European Union = 28th by 2028? Identity and external definition, context and legacy, historic bonds and divisions in the Montenegro-Serbia relations - Separation: peaceful termination of their confederation in 2006 by the popular choice of unqualified independence of Montenegro - Contested validity of distinct Montenegrin identity: traditional component of the greater Serbian transnational community (Srpski Svet/ Russkiy Mir!) - Serbian Orthodox Church: vehicle for Greater Serbian political objectives and agenda - The ”ultimate betrayal” or illustration of full emancipation?: recognition of Kosovo - Traditional and contemporary geo-strategic significance of Montenegro as the maritime gateway for Serbia: vital transport arteries - EU accession before/without Serbia: divergence as nation-states and final complete affirmation of the rationality and viability of an independent Montenegro Montenegro and Russia - Historic roots in the Montenegrin theocratic state: prince bishops (vladika) in need of external patronage - Natural choice: orthodox imperial Russian with expansionist ambitions and interests in the Balkans - Unequal friends with benefits: alignment with Russian foreign policy aspirations in combination with political and financial support with occasional military alliance (1905) - Consequences: rival great power restraints on Montenegrin territorial extension as a Russian ally/client state (Kotor 1815, Bar 1878) - Montenegro reborn looking to the West: gradual and departure from historic Russian alliance despite deep-rooted sympathies - Strategic redirection: Transatlantic integration in contrast to non-alignment + in defiance of distractions and opposition from both inside and outside - Sovereign future challenged: last ditch combined Russo-Serbian efforts to derail NATO membership in an act of hybrid conflict by means of an unsuccessful coup d’etat attempt in 2016 = Montenegrin entry into NATO uninterrupted - EU membership aspiration prevails over tradition: EU CFSP full alignment = all sanctions on Russia adopted and applied

Keywords: statehood, independence, identity, NATO membership, EU integration

Governing the Digital Era: Challenges and Responses in Estonia and Hungary

Lili Tóth, University of Pécs, Hungary

The merits of New Public Management (NPM) have been debated for decades. While some critics question the doctrine's relevance and effectiveness, others seek to further develop and adapt its principles. One theory that aims to move beyond NPM is the Digital Era Governance (DEG) model. DEG represents a comprehensive approach affecting the entire executive branch. It considers the contemporary challenges of public administration and places the global process of technological transformation at its core. This includes the widespread adoption of digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) and their transitive impact on all areas of governance and administration. As the scope and complexity of state responsibilities continue to expand, the ability of governments to adapt to technological change has become a critical issue. Due to their size and geopolitical position, small states are particularly vulnerable to external and internal changes. Hungary's digitalisation performance presents a mixed picture, with some positive aspects alongside areas that require improvement. The country is often referred to as a digital challenger, indicating that it has a strong basis for electronic innovation. However, when it comes to the diffusion of digital technologies and the quality of digital public services, Hungary's performance remains below the European Union average. In contrast, Estonia is widely recognised as a frontrunner in digital governance, with information technology deeply embedded in its administrative and institutional structures. The proposed presentation comparatively examines how these two small states respond to the challenges of technological transformation and assesses the extent to which their governance practices align with the principles of Digital Era Governance. Employing a qualitative comparative case study methodology, the analysis draws on government strategies, policy documents, and legal acts. These sources are systematically reviewed and coded based on the core characteristics of NPM and DEG identified in the literature. The paper begins with identifying the core characteristics of the NPM and DEG paradigms. Sources are reviewed and findings are coded based on the generally accepted features of the NPM approach, as well as the categorisations developed by the literature associated with the concept of DEG. The research assumes that the analysis will generate findings that are relevant to the theoretical development of effective governance mechanisms in small states. It could also contribute to a re-evaluation of existing administrative practices and provide a clearer understanding of how governments adapt to technological change.

Keywords: Estonia, Hungary, New Public Management, Digital Era Governance, small states

The Formation and Representation of the National Interests of Lithuania in the Council of the European Union: The Case of Agricultural policy

Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

As part of the EU's common political system, Lithuania can influence EU decisions through various channels via its representation in EU institutions such as the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European Council. The Council of the European Union (EU) is one of the EU's two main legislative bodies. As an important intergovernmental institution, it coordinates national interests and translates them into collective European decisions. The Council of the EU has a major influence on the political systems and public policy decisions of all EU member states. Several theoretical and methodological approaches have been identified to understand how national interests are reconciled in the Council of the EU and what factors determine its effectiveness (Tallberg, 2008; Warntjen, 2010). While much of the research has concentrated on measuring the intergovernmental bargaining power of large states (Moravcsik, 1997; Golub, 2012), studies demonstrate that smaller EU member states can also influence collective EU decisions (Panke, 2015, 2016). This paper analyses how Lithuania formulates and defends its national interests in the Council of the EU, with a special focus on the Common Agricultural Policy. It also discusses the challenges Lithuania faces and the factors that determine its influence in negotiations. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with decision-makers, politicians, ministry officials, and diplomats. Additionally, interviews with representatives of Lithuanian interest groups will determine their involvement in shaping Lithuanian policy. Analysing documents and voting data will also be useful.

Keywords: the Council of the European Union, National interests, interest representation, EU politics, Lithuania

Securing the State or Empowering Citizens? Competing Approaches to Government AI in Central Europe

Anna Urbanovics, University of Pecs, Hungary

Artificial intelligence has become an increasingly important component of state governance and public administration, particularly in a period marked by geopolitical insecurity, democratic backsliding, and the growing digitalisation of political communication. These developments create new tensions between security, efficiency, and democratic freedom, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where political systems continue to be shaped by the legacies of post-socialist transformation and divergent institutional trajectories. This paper analyses how governments in Central Europe incorporate artificial intelligence into governance and public administration, and how these approaches reflect different understandings of freedom, state authority, and democratic control. The paper examines how artificial intelligence is framed and institutionalised in Hungary, Poland, and Czechia. It argues that AI governance in the region follows competing political logics. In Hungary and Poland, governmental approaches increasingly frame AI through the language of national security, cyber defence, hybrid threats, and law enforcement. In this context, artificial intelligence is primarily understood as a tool for strengthening state capacity and managing insecurity. The paper also analyses recent controversies related to AI-assisted political communication, data-driven targeting, and digitally mediated intimidation during electoral campaigns, highlighting broader concerns regarding media freedom, democratic accountability, and political control. By contrast, Czechia demonstrates a more technocratic and administrative approach to AI governance, illustrated by projects such as the ELITR speech translation system, which uses AI to support diplomatic communication and public administration rather than surveillance or securitisation. The paper aims to provide an insight into how different political and institutional contexts shape the acceptable uses of AI within democratic governance. The empirical analysis is based on a structured, focused comparison drawing on governmental AI strategies, policy documents, and selected public controversies related to AI use in governance and political communication. Comparing these cases within a shared European Union framework allows the study to distinguish broader regional patterns from country-specific approaches. The findings suggest that AI governance in Central Europe reflects broader political tensions concerning the meaning and institutionalisation of freedom. While some governments increasingly legitimise AI through security-oriented narratives, others emphasise administrative efficiency and public-service functions. Overall, the paper demonstrates that artificial intelligence is not merely a technological issue, but also a political instrument through which competing visions of democratic governance and freedom are articulated in the region.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence Governance, Central Europe, Democratic Governance, Digital Authoritarianism, Cybersecurity and Public Administration

Constructing Central Europe: political parties as actors in (sub)regionalism

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The aim of the article is to advance study of regionalism and EU subregionalism by incorporating political parties into the research. Article focuses on the role of political parties, both governmental and oppositional, as regionalizing actors in the context of Central European regionalization. On Central European case, relevance of political parties for (sub)regional relations is demonstrated and il/liberalism and populism are identified as factors worth further exploring. The role of political parties is not researched comprehensively and systematically enough. In order to demonstrate a possible way of how to think about political parties in (sub)regionalism, article is theoretically framed through broader study of regionalism in International Relations, mostly following social constructivism and new regionalism approach, and through EU subregionalism debate. Contestation of liberalism and populist regionalism literature are also considered. Such framing culminates in synthesis of relevant discussions, and therefore improved understanding of the role of political parties in (sub)regionalism. Moreover, expectations related to the regional activities of Central European political parties are formulated for subsequent examination. Drafted research approach may be used and useful also in other (sub)regions. Text likewise contributes to decreasing the divide between EU studies and IR literature.

Keywords: regionalism, political parties, Central Europe, contestation of liberalism, populist regionalism

Recoding Security and Foreign Policy Drift: From Militant Democracy to the Instrumentalizations of Threats in Slovakia within the Visegrád Context

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Abstract: Following its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, Slovakia’s security paradigm appeared firmly anchored in a liberal-democratic consensus, utilizing the concept of militant democracy to protect institutions from external threats and domestic extremism. However, recent geopolitical shifts and the 2023 parliamentary elections have catalysed a fundamental "re-coding" of security and a noticeable foreign policy drift. This paper examines the phenomenon of dual securitisation in Slovakia, where the legitimate defence against external hybrid threats is increasingly overshadowed by the instrumentalization of security rhetoric for domestic political struggles. Drawing on the theoretical framework of "abusive neo-militant democracy" and "ruling by cheating," the analysis demonstrates an inversion of threats: while traditional external threats (e.g., Russian aggression) are normalized or downplayed in the name of "sovereign isolation" and peace, pro-Western civil society, NGOs, and independent media are securitised as existential threats to national sovereignty. By comparing Slovakia’s trajectory with other Visegrád Group (V4) countries, this paper argues that the abuse of militant democracy tools not only delegitimises domestic opposition and civil society but also fundamentally alters the state's foreign policy orientation, turning traditional allies into perceived threats and challenging the cohesiveness of the region.

Keywords: Securitisation, Militant Democracy, Foreign Policy Drift, Visegrád Group, Hybrid Threats, Slovakia.

Research on the History of Political Thought in the Czech Lands Between Democracy, Nazism, and Communism

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Research into the history of political thought is a foundational subdiscipline of political science that has played a crucial role in the Czech lands throughout various regimes, including the Habsburg Empire, the Czechoslovak Republic, the Nazi Protectorate, and the communist era. The development of this field underwent radical transformations alongside the dramatic geopolitical upheavals and regime shifts that defined 20th century Central Europe. These stages encompassed periods of flourishing democracy, military dictatorship, Nazi occupation, and several phases of communist rule, ranging from Stalinism to the liberalization of the Prague Spring and the subsequent Soviet occupation. Throughout these turbulent transitions, Czech political science was repeatedly born, renewed, ideologically constrained, or banned as a bourgeois pseudoscience. Despite these challenges, Czech scholarship consistently focused on the history of political thought, producing significant figures and diverse intellectual outputs. These included works supporting democratic governance and pro-Western orientations, analyses of the Nazi Führer principle, and histories grounded in Marxist-Leninist ideology. This paper outlines the developmental stages of the history of political thought in the Czech context and highlights key figures, such as Jiří Sedmík, Jan Mertl, and Zdeněk Mlynář, who significantly influenced national politics. Far from being confined to academia, Czech research in this field had concrete impacts on contemporary political thinking regarding democracy and its alternatives. Ultimately, these intellectual developments actively shaped the practical aspects of governance throughout the 20th century.

Political Trustworthiness in the Digital Age: Elite and Civil Society Perspectives from Slovakia

Aneta Világi, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia

This paper examines how political trustworthiness is understood and constructed in the context of the Slovak Republic, with particular attention to the role of social media in shaping contemporary political communication. Drawing on an original qualitative dataset of 30 in-depth interviews with political elites and civil society actors, the study explores trustworthiness not as a fixed attribute of democratic institutions, but as a relational and continuously negotiated construct. The first part of the analysis explores how key actors interpret and evaluate political trustworthiness. It investigates how trust in democratic institutions is defined, assessed and strategically claimed by political representatives, while also being scrutinized and contested by civil society actors. The findings highlight that trustworthiness emerges at the intersection of public expectations, elite narratives, and intermediary interpretation. Both groups position themselves within the society in distinct ways, attributing specific roles and responsibilities to themselves and others, thereby shaping the broader ecosystem of institutional trust. The second part of the paper focuses on perceptions of social media as a tool for building political trustworthiness. The interviews reveal an ambivalent stance among political actors: while many describe social media as a polarizing and trust-eroding environment, others emphasize its potential as a direct and democratizing channel of engagement with citizens. This duality reflects the broader tensions of digital politics, where visibility, immediacy, and responsiveness redefine the conditions under which trustworthiness is performed and evaluated. By integrating perspectives from both political elites and civil society, the paper argues that in the digital age, political trustworthiness is less a stable institutional quality and more a dynamic, relational performance shaped by competing communicative pressures.

Online Campaigning For All? Mapping The Digital Infrastructure Of The Czech Party System During The 2025 Electoral Campaign

Petra Vodová & **Alberto Lioy**, University of Hradec Králové, Czechia

This innovative article maps the digital infrastructure of the nine main parties in the Czech party system – ODS, KDU-CSU, TOP09 (all part of SPOLU), ANO, STAN, Pirates, SPD, Motorists and Stačilo! – in the month preceding the 2025 general election. By digital infrastructure we mean their formalized online presence over a range of online platforms, websites, and social media portals. Methodologically, this article performs qualitative coding for eight analytical categories, looking at these parties not only through their main pages, but also through the digital platforms of their best-known politicians and a sample of local/regional branches. By performing this mapping, we reconstructed the main features in their political communication and messaging towards the electorate at large. What the data reveals is the degree of personalism, professionalism, negative messaging, and issues of focus of the different parties and their candidates. Coming now to the research question, we wanted to investigate the degree of variation between parties in the level of development of their digital infrastructure and in their style of "platform politics" and see if we could find patterns between parties according to their characteristics. To do so, we formulated a series of clear hypotheses expecting the effect of party type, electoral size, internal centralization, and incumbency on the digital infrastructure of Czech parties. The findings do not fully support our expectations but point to a crisis of traditional parties in building digital infrastructures, and a partial success for some of the new parties. Overall, this article promises to change our way of thinking about the online presence of Czech political parties.

Political Transformations, Cross-Border Flows and Political Networks in Central Europe: Fidesz and Selected Czech and Slovak Political Parties

Lukáš Vomlela, Silesian University in Opava, Czech Republic & **Dalibor Mikuš**, University of ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

The conference paper examines cross-border flows of political ideas and party cooperation in Central Europe, focusing on the relationship between Fidesz and selected Czech and Slovak political parties. Fidesz however has been in power for the last 16 years promoting Hungarian national interests, with a focus on history politics. On the other hand, Fidesz was also spreading Eurosceptic views on different EU policies. The paper analyses formal and informal cooperation, including bilateral contacts, shared political agendas, and collaboration on key issues such as migration, national sovereignty, and regional policy coordination. The article explores their positions on migration, especially in relation to security, border protection, and solutions at the EU level, as well as their approach to the war in Ukraine. The paper also offers a perspective on the potential future development of these relationships, particularly considering the opposition role of Fidesz in the upcoming period. It can be expected that there are fewer points of friction between Hungary and the Czech Republic due to the absence of a shared border and the very small size of the Hungarian minority in the Czech Republic compared to Slovakia. Nevertheless, certain issues may still burden mutual relations, particularly differing perspectives on the politics of history as well as the issue of the Beneš Decrees, which represent a shared historical and political issue for all three countries, since they were issued during the existence of Czechoslovakia. The paper addresses following questions. What factors influence the cooperation between Czech and Slovak political parties and Fidesz? Are different perspectives on history politics in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary still relevant? Is the cooperation between Fidesz and Czech/Slovak parties more ideological or pragmatic? How has this cooperation changed since 2022 in the context of the war in Ukraine?

Layered Dependency: Hungary, China, and the Structural Limits of Strategic Autonomy

Zoltan Voros, Ludovika University of Public Service/University of Pécs, Hungary & **Viktor Eszterhai**, Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary

Hungary has become one of Europe's most revealing examples of the changing relationship between China, industrial transformation, and geopolitical constraint. What began as the "Eastern Opening" after the 2008 financial crisis was framed by the Hungarian government as a search for room to manoeuvre in an increasingly multipolar international system. Yet the results reveal a more complex reality. Chinese engagement did not free Hungary from dependency; it reorganized it. German automotive manufacturing, EU regulatory constraints, Chinese battery technology, and Hungary's peripheral position in European value chains have become layered on top of one another. The battery sector makes this transformation especially visible. Hungary set out to build a world-class EV and battery hub, but the landscape now shows both monumental opportunity and growing economic risk. Korean first movers are facing falling utilization and shrinking orders, while Chinese firms such as CATL, BYD, EVE Energy, and others are reshaping the balance of power across the supply chain. What arrives with Chinese investment increasingly departs with Korean contraction, producing structural substitution rather than simple industrial growth. This creates a strategic dilemma. Hungary remains anchored in Europe, but Chinese capital is now embedded in the very sectors that support German-led manufacturing and the future of European electric mobility. Even under renewed American pressure, decoupling from China is therefore not simply difficult, but close to impossible. Hungary is not an exception to Europe's China dilemma but an early indicator of it: de-risking is politically attractive, while the green-industrial transition continues to depend on Chinese capital, technology, batteries, and manufacturing capacity.

Keywords: Hungary–China relations, strategic autonomy, battery industry, electric vehicle supply chains, layered dependency

Cross-border Flows and Political Transformation of Small States: The Case of Multicultural Montenegro

Danijela Vuković-Ćalasan, University of Montenegro, Montenegro & **Pete Moore**, Case Western Reserve University, USA

Post-socialist Montenegro belongs to the group of small states, and this creates additional challenges when it comes to an environment characterized by often complicated regional relations and specificities in terms of migratory movements. In the last few years, Montenegro has become an increasingly attractive destination for economic immigrants, both from the region and beyond. This raises numerous questions, two of which are the most important: To what extent is the model of multiculturalism in the Montenegrin context adapted to new immigrant communities? Furthermore, what are the potential economic implications of such changes, especially when it comes to migrations from countries in the region but also from other, more distant areas? Small states like Montenegro face dilemmas in balancing development and openness. On the one hand, structural pressures compel these states to open to international and regional markets, conditions that can be associated with high per capita income. On the other hand, openness can pose political-economy risks particular to small states. Immigration is one of these dilemmas, and Montenegro is a prime global case. The aim of the presentation is to try to answer the above questions.

Territorial integrity in the Western Balkans in times of Russian and American neo-imperialism

Christopher Walsch, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

This article contributes to debates on the geopolitical positioning of the six states in the Western Balkans (WB). All of them aspire to become members of the European Union (EU). Since the 1990s the EU and the United States (US) are the decisive external actors to provide security and peace. The order is contested by revisionist and partly violent Serbian nationalism which finds a powerful ally in Putin's Russia and in Trump's US aspiring for "deals." The lacking reform efforts of WB governments, the EU's hesitant enlargement policies, Russia's aggressive neo-imperialism, Trump's cynical abandonment of the UN-based order, and the rising influence of the economic powers China, Turkey, and the Gulf states have altered geopolitics in the WB region. This article analyses the trade-offs of these relationships. The two main hypotheses are: First, European integration is the most sensible option for the respective WB governments and societies to secure peace and economic stability. Second, provided that WB governments stick to peaceful conflict solution mechanisms and the EU engages actively, the WB region is too marginal for US and too distant from Russian key interests to encourage a change in the territorial order.

Keywords: Western Balkans, territorial integrity, neo-imperialism, European Union, EU enlargement

The activity of local government officials in Poland. Does ecology matter?

Justyna Wasil, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

The aim of this presentation is to identify the types of activities and practices of local government officials – local leaders from municipalities in Poland. An attempt will be made to answer the research questions: into what categories can the activities of respondents/local government officials be divided? What are the motivations of local government officials after working for local government? Which entities do they collaborate with? What are the biggest problems in their municipalities? – with particular emphasis on ecology. The research utilized quantitative methods (online survey technique) and comparative methods. Empirical research was conducted among mayors and councillors. The research was conducted as part of a grant from the National Science Centre at the turn of 2022 and 2023.

The Paradoxes of Securitization of Polish Migration Policy

Helena Wyligała, DSW Ideis University in Wrocław, Poland

The paper will explore the changes that have emerged in Polish migration policy since 2015, i.e. during the EU migration crisis, which coincided with the change of government in Poland. In terms of the Kingdon’s window of opportunity model the crisis was used to create a new dimension of Poland\'s migration policy, which previously essentially does not existed in the public consciousness, reinforcing its top-down creation. The article will thus show how migration policy is securitised through the construction of the classic anti-immigration narratives. The article will analyse the narrative topos from 3 main parliamentary debates fundamental for the Polish migration policy: on the EU migration crisis in 2015, on the so-called Polish-Belarusian border crisis in 2021 and on the migration consequences of the war in Ukraine in 2022. These will be contrasted with actual and opposite events: the flow of Ukrainian workers and war refugees into Poland and the unexpected socialization of the migration problem. This paradoxical combination of factors raises questions about the permanence and scope of the securitisation of migration in Poland.

Keywords: migration, securatization, migration policy, Poland

Inflationary Pressures, Post-Neoliberal Intervention, and Democracy Trade-offs in Türkiye and Poland

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This study analyses whether inflationary pressures contribute to democratic trade-offs through state intervention in Türkiye and Poland within the context of post-neoliberalism. The study understands the context of Post-neoliberalism as a partial retreat from orthodox neoliberal policies toward more politically centralized economic policies. In both countries, governments have moved away from orthodox neoliberal policies for interventionist policies, such as price controls, fiscal spending, subsidized credits, energy and consumption subsidies, monetary policy interventions, and stronger government autonomy over economic institutions. The study aims to answer whether post-neoliberal interventions adopted in response to inflationary pressures contribute to democratic trade-offs in Türkiye and Poland. The context of "democratic trade-offs" is understood in this study as concentration of executive power through weakened institutional autonomy, lower government accountability, and lower checks and balances in the name of economic stability, social protection, and national economic sovereignty during periods of inflationary crisis. The study's preliminary assumption is that inflationary crises (e.g., post-pandemic inflationary dynamics of 2020 and energy crises due to the Ukraine war) contribute to centralized economic policies, thereby giving rise to interventionist governance and democratic trade-offs by reducing institutional resilience of state institutions and opposition capacity. In this regard, Türkiye experienced a deeper democratic trade-off, where inflation management has been accompanied by stronger centralization of political and economic authority. Poland experienced a limited interventionism, thanks to stronger institutional limitations, higher opposition resilience, and the European Union's role as an external veto player. Methodologically, this study uses a comparative case study approach. It focuses on the period from 2020 to 2026. It therefore contributes to the literature on post-neoliberal political economy, inflation, and democratic governance.

Keywords: Post-neoliberalism, inflation, state intervention, Poland, Türkiye

Grande Partenza as a tool of sports diplomacy. The start of the Giro d'Italia cycling race in Hungary (2022) and Bulgaria (2026) through the social media of the participants

Jiří Zákravský, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czechia

In previous years, the popular road cycling stage race across Italy, the Giro d'Italia, started in different countries, not just Italy. In 2022, Grande Partenza, the start of the Giro d'Italia, took place in Hungary; in 2026, it was organised by Bulgaria. The governments of both EU states decided to support hosting the cycling races to present their countries abroad. It is precisely road cycling – which does not take place in a closed stadium but instead has riders passing through the countryside and past historic landmarks – that seems to be an ideal way to showcase the country to an international audience. In an ideal scenario, this sporting event will help boost interest in the country and tourism in the future and contribute to building a positive image of the host country abroad. However, the organising of sporting events is connected with the double-edged sword of hosting. Ideally, it leads to the previously mentioned positive outputs. On the other hand, it does not work automatically. Criticism of the host country may arise in connection with its domestic and/or foreign policy, or with issues related to poor organisation, high financial costs, etc. These issues can ultimately have the opposite effect and, in fact, damage the country's image. The host country's image can also be influenced by the participating athletes themselves. In recent years, it has become standard practice for athletes to share their impressions, attitudes, and opinions on social media. In this way, they can directly or indirectly evaluate the host country as well. This conference paper focuses on this very topic. It aims to identify the perceptions of Hungary and Bulgaria held by participating cyclists through their official accounts on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, during the events.

Keywords: sports diplomacy, cycling, social media, Hungary, Bulgaria

Political Survival and Geopolitical Dependence: Belarus after the 2020 Political Crisis

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The author analyses the transformation of Belarusian domestic and foreign policy after the 2020 presidential election and the subsequent political crisis. The main research question is: to what extent did Alyaksandr Lukashenka's political survival after 2020 increase Belarus's geopolitical dependence on the Russian Federation? The author argues that the mass protests of 2020 and the international isolation of the Belarusian regime significantly weakened Belarus's political autonomy and strengthened Russia's influence over Minsk. In exchange for political, economic and security support, Belarus became increasingly integrated with Russian strategic interests. This process intensified further after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when Belarus gained renewed military and geopolitical importance within Russian regional policy. The study focuses on the political, economic and military dimensions of Belarus–Russia relations after 2020. Particular attention is devoted to the mechanisms of authoritarian resilience, Russian support for the Lukashenka regime, and the gradual transformation of Belarus from a relatively multi-vector actor into a state increasingly dependent on Moscow. The author uses the method of content analysis, examining official state documents, political statements, sanctions policy, and academic literature concerning authoritarianism, regional security, and post-Soviet politics. Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative content analysis based on official state documents, political statements, sanctions policy, and academic literature concerning authoritarianism, regional security and post-Soviet politics. The study also applies comparative analysis to identify changes in Belarusian foreign policy before and after 2020. The article seeks to demonstrate that the Belarusian crisis not only reshaped the internal political order of the country but also contributed to a broader reconfiguration of power relations in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Belarus, Russia

Strategic Dynamics of Development Assistance: Cooperation, Competition, and the Case of Polish Aid

Katarzyna Zalas-Kamińska, University of Wroclaw, Poland & **Michał Rutkowski**, The World Bank, USA

Development assistance is fundamentally aimed at supporting vulnerable communities in achieving sustainable social and economic progress. Yet, in practice, international aid operates within a complex environment in which donor states simultaneously cooperate and compete for influence, visibility, and strategic interests. This paper examines how such dynamics shape donor behaviour and affect the broader effectiveness of development assistance. The analysis applies selected concepts from game theory - particularly the Prisoner’s Dilemma and the Snowdrift Game - to interpret interactions between donor actors in the contemporary aid system. Drawing on examples from international development practice, the study places particular emphasis on the activities of Polish Aid in Georgia, Tanzania, and Lebanon. Through these case studies, the paper explores the tensions between collective responsibility and individual donor interests, as well as their implications for aid coordination and long-term development outcomes. The findings suggest that stronger multilateral cooperation among donors remains essential for improving the coherence and effectiveness of international development assistance in an increasingly fragmented global landscape.

Keywords: game theory, donor behaviour, multilateral development assistance, Polish Aid

From apparent participation and the crisis of evidence-based policymaking to the erosion of civic culture and democratic backsliding: the case of Poland

Agnieszka Ziętek, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

This presentation examines the relationship between token participation, the crisis of evidence-based policymaking, the erosion of civic culture, and democratic backsliding in contemporary Poland. The presentation is based on the assumption that deficiencies in participatory governance should not be understood solely as procedural or organizational problems, but rather as phenomena with broader social and political consequences affecting the quality and stability of democratic systems. In recent years, participatory mechanisms such as public consultations, civic dialogue initiatives, participatory budgeting, and other forms of citizen involvement have become increasingly institutionalized within Polish public administration. At the formal level, these developments may suggest the strengthening of participatory democracy and the expansion of citizen influence on public decision-making processes. However, empirical observations indicate that many participatory procedures function primarily in a symbolic manner. Citizens are formally invited to participate, yet their opinions and recommendations frequently have limited or no meaningful influence on final policy outcomes. Consequently, participation often assumes the character of token participation, serving legitimizing rather than genuinely deliberative or co-decisive functions. This phenomenon is closely connected with the growing crisis of evidence-based policymaking. Although contemporary democratic governance increasingly emphasizes the importance of evidence-informed decision-making, participatory evidence and knowledge generated through consultations and civic engagement is frequently marginalized, selectively incorporated, or treated merely as a formal procedural requirement. As a result, policymaking processes may become detached from both social knowledge and citizens' experiences. The analysis draws on empirical research combining qualitative in-depth interviews, desk research, and analysis of local consultation practices. The findings suggest that repeated experiences of ineffective and symbolic/apparent participation contribute to declining public trust, political alienation, consultation fatigue, weakening civic engagement. In the longer term, these processes may erode civic culture and create conditions conducive to democratic backsliding.

Strategic Exposure as a Deterrence-Amplifying Mechanism in Lithuania’s NATO Posture

Agniete Zotkeviciute Baneviciene, General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy, Lithuania

Building on the concept of strategic exposure, this presentation examines its empirical application in Lithuania’s NATO posture between 2022 and 2025. Using directed qualitative content analysis and process tracing of doctrinal texts and elite statements, it demonstrates how Lithuania publicly articulates vulnerability to mobilise alliance interdependence and frame defence as a shared responsibility. The analysis shows how strategic exposure contributes to shaping expectations about the speed, credibility, and political resolve of NATO reinforcement. The findings suggest that this mechanism can accelerate denial and punishment effects where commitments are institutionally anchored but may generate risks of backfiring where alliance cohesion is contested. The study clarifies how managed visibility operates in practice as a deterrence-amplifying strategy in asymmetric contexts.

Keywords: Strategic exposure, Deterrence theory, Small states deterrence, Alliance politics, Reputational binding, Normative framing, Performed vulnerability

Digital Media Use and Political Participation among Youth: Evidence from Slovenia's Rural and Urban Communities

Mitja Zupan, **Tine Šteger** & **Simona Kukovič**, School of Advanced Social Studies, Slovenia

Youth political participation is increasingly shaped by digital communication environments that create new opportunities for engagement while simultaneously transforming traditional forms of civic involvement. This paper investigates the relationship between social media use and political participation among young people in Slovenia, focusing on differences between rural and urban communities. The analysis draws on data collected within the Connected & Active: Rural Youth in Social Media, Leadership and Civic Engagement survey, conducted as part of the Interreg Danube Region project SMILE Incubator. The findings suggest that social media platforms have become important arenas for information exchange, public discussion, and political expression among youth. However, digital engagement does not automatically translate into active participation in formal political processes. While respondents report frequent use of online platforms for communication and information seeking, involvement in political organizations, advocacy initiatives, and decision-making activities remains comparatively limited. The results further indicate that patterns of engagement differ across issue areas, with political and public affairs receiving substantially less attention than entertainment-oriented content. The study contributes to debates on digital citizenship and youth political participation by demonstrating that online communication can facilitate awareness and low-threshold engagement but may be insufficient to generate sustained political involvement. These findings highlight the need for policies and institutional strategies that strengthen the connection between digital participation and democratic engagement among young people.

Keywords: political participation, digital citizenship, youth engagement, social media, Slovenia

Judicial Pathways to Marriage Equality: The Polish Case

Przemysław Żukiewicz, University of Wrocław/Karkonosze Academy of Applied Sciences, Poland

The paper examines the phenomenon of extending rights connected to same-sex relationships through court-imposed interpretations and obligations that subsequently force legislative or administrative adaptation, despite the absence of political willingness to introduce marriage equality directly through parliament. Using Poland as the central case study, the presentation analyses how domestic and supranational courts gradually become actors shaping the legal situation of same-sex couples in contexts where elected politicians avoid taking explicit responsibility for reform. The Polish case is particularly revealing because LGBTQ+ rights have long been treated by political actors as a highly polarized and electorally risky issue. Judicial interventions may therefore provide a politically convenient mechanism of change: instead of openly adopting legislation on marriage equality, governments and public institutions are compelled to adjust legal practice in response to constitutional interpretation, European human-rights standards, or binding judicial rulings. The paper situates the Polish debate within a broader comparative context by referring to countries in which advances related to marriage equality or same-sex partnerships were strongly shaped by judicial decisions, including Austria, Italy, and Romania, as well as cases influenced by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the European Union. The presentation also addresses the political and jurisprudential consequences of this process. Judicialization reshapes political accountability, because opponents of equality increasingly direct criticism toward courts rather than political parties. At the same time, LGBTQ+ communities often remain stigmatized as an 'external' ideological threat allegedly imposed by judges or international institutions. Finally, the paper discusses whether courts, through expansive constitutional and human-rights interpretation, begin to exercise a quasi-legislative function.

Keywords: marriage equality, judicialization of politics, LGBTQ+ rights, courts, Poland

ROUNDTABLE

Eupeace Roundtable on Local Democracy and Participation

This roundtable brings together political scientists and mayors to discuss the opportunities and challenges of democratic participation at the local level. Combining academic perspectives with practical experience from municipal governance, the discussion will explore different forms of citizen engagement, including local elections and referenda, participatory budgeting, and the involvement of civil society organizations in local decision-making. Particular attention will be paid to how municipalities can foster meaningful participation, strengthen trust, and respond to changing expectations of citizens. The roundtable is sponsored by EUPeace University Alliance.

Chair:
Pavel Hulec, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czechia

Speakers:

- **Ladislav Cabada**, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czechia
- **Petr Bláha,** Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Czechia
- **Jan Bozděch,** Mayor of Klenčí pod Čerchovem, Czechia
- **Tomáš Chmelík**, Mayor of Přeštice, Czechia

ROUNDTABLE

Historical policy of the V4 countries - the case of János Estreházy

The case of János Esterházy is one of the most controversial in the historical politics of the V4 countries. This politician of Hungarian nationality, with a Polish mother and Czechoslovak citizenship, has the potential to become a personal symbol of the region. Unfortunately, especially in Slovakia's historical politics (and to a lesser extent in the Czech Republic), the dominant perspective is developed by communist historiography, which results in potential political tensions. It seems that the more the Slovak authorities react to the positive image of the Hungarian politician and attempt to interfere in the beatification process of János Esterházy, initiated by the Archbishop of Krakow in 2019, the more vehemently the Hungarian minority in Slovakia demands the restoration of their pre-war leader to the memory of future generations. The aim of the roundtable is, on the one hand, to stimulate discussion on the historical politics of the V4 countries and attempt to reconcile positions, and, on the other, to implement scholarly findings into the political arena.

Keywords: post-Trianon, communist period, historical policy, Czechoslovakia, Central Europe

Chair:
Adamczyk Arkadiusz, Jan Kochanowski University, Poland

Speakers:

- **Arkadiusz Adamczyk**, Jan Kochanowski University, Poland
- **Peter Zachar**, Ludovika University, Hungary & **Istvan Jánek**, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary
- **Imre Molnar**, retired, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hungary
- **Dariusz Rogut**, Institute of National Remembrance, Poland & **Jan Ciechanowski**, University of Warsaw, Poland
- **Patrycja Jakóbczyk-Adamczyk**, Jan Kochanowski University, Poland

ROUNDTABLE

30 Shades of Freedom. Central and Eastern Europe

More than three decades after the democratic transformations of 1989, freedom in Central and Eastern Europe remains a dynamic, contested and increasingly vulnerable political and social project. This roundtable brings together scholars to discuss how freedom has evolved across the region and whether its democratic foundations are sufficiently resilient to withstand contemporary internal and external pressures. The discussion will address freedom from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, examining democratic consolidation, European integration, sovereignty, political participation, media independence, judicial and academic freedom, and the relationship between security and civil liberties. Particular attention will be devoted to the effects of democratic backsliding, populism, political polarisation, disinformation, declining social trust and geopolitical insecurity. The war in Ukraine has further demonstrated the region's exposure to military threats and information manipulation, while also raising difficult questions about solidarity and the legitimate limits of freedom in times of crisis. Drawing on developments in several Central and Eastern European countries, participants will consider whether freedom should be understood as an achievement of the post-1989 transformation or as a process requiring continuous renewal, institutional safeguards and active civic engagement. The roundtable will also explore what the region's experience can teach us about the broader challenges facing liberal democracy today.

Co-Chairs:
Agnieszka Kasińska, Jan Kochanowski University, Poland & **Boglárka Koller**, Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary

Speakers:

- **Petr Just**, Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia
- **Vít Hloušek**, Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia
- **Ladislav Cabada**, Metropolitan University Prague/University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czechia
- **Katarzyna Gruszko**, Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Poland
- **Daniela Škutová**, Matej Bel University, Slovakia
- **Katarína Liptáková**, Matej Bel University, Slovakia

ROUNDTABLE

Online Political and Social Participation of Rural Youth: Opportunities and Obstacles

Digital platforms are reshaping how young people access information, express their views and engage with political and social issues. Yet the opportunities they offer are not equally accessible. This roundtable draws on research conducted within the SMILE Incubator project across 14 countries of the Danube Region, focusing on the online political and social participation of young people living in rural areas. During the discussion, speakers from six participating countries will present selected national findings and reflect on them from a comparative perspective. Based on a regional survey of young people aged 15 to 29 and qualitative interviews with experts, decision-makers and civil society representatives, the debate will explore how rural youth use social media to engage in community life, social movements and public debate. It will highlight both shared regional patterns and differences between national, rural and urban contexts. The discussion will address opportunities created by digital platforms, including access to information, networking and new forms of civic action. It will also examine obstacles such as weak infrastructure, limited institutional support, low trust, misinformation, insufficient leadership skills and the short-term nature of youth programmes. Particular attention will be paid to transforming young people’s interest and occasional online engagement into meaningful, inclusive and sustainable participation.

Chair:
Simona Kukovič, School of Advanced Social Studies/University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Speakers:

- **Inez Fekete**, STRIA, Hungary
- **Sorana Constantinescu**, Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania
- **Teodora Ivanović** & **Maja Nikolić**, NGO UZOR, Montenegro
- **Petr Just**, Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia
- **Peter Csanyi, Rudolf Kucharcik** & **Michael Augustin**, Bratislava University of Economics and Business, Slovakia
- **Mitja Zupan** & **Matevž Tomšič**, School of Advanced Social Sciences, Slovenia

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