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This is not an Arena for Party Leaders: Presidential Elections in the 3ʳᵈ Republic of Poland

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Abstract: Next to parliamentary elections, presidential elections in Poland are regarded as the key arena of political competition in Poland. On the one hand, the specific nature of the political system dictates that the significant, albeit negative, role of the head of state in shaping the law and the President's relatively broad prerogatives regarding the conduct of public business as compared to the standards of the parliamentary-cabinet system should be pointed out. On the other hand, the limitation of the real power of the President compared to the position of the Prime Minister does not provide an incentive for the leaders of the key political parties in Poland to abandon the struggle for the position of the head of government in favour of the presidency. This text addresses the issue of the nomination of candidates for the analysed office, attempting to answer the question of why it is not the party leaders who face off against each other, but rather the arena of competition between candidates from the second row of party structures. Conclusions from the case study suggest that the reasons for this are that party leaders, burdened by the negative consequences of political power, fear that they will not be able to surpass the 'glass ceiling' of party support. Thus, they fear that they will not only suffer a personal loss, but reckon with the consequences for the party as a whole. For each of the main parties, fielding a different candidate is seen as an opportunity to reach beyond the committed party electorate and escape the high negative sentiment around each of the two main leaders.

Keywords: *Presidential elections, creation of candidates, political parties, party leaders*

Introduction

The functions of presidential elections and of presidents themselves, i.e. from a formal point of view – heads of state, are very different in countries of the world. Looking at the issue under study from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe, where in most cases the president has exceptionally strong powers by the standards of parliamentary-cabinet regime conditions, seems justified (Baylis 1996; Hlousek 2013; Hofmann 2002).

A fascinating case in the issue at hand is Poland. Presidential elections in this country are extremely important (Chrobak 2013; Jagielski 2023) and are considered to be first-class elections (Reif & Schmitt 1980; Rief, Schmitt & Norris 1997; Hix & Marsh 2011). The good performance of candidates in this election very often foreshadows the high support given to the parties from which the presidential candidates ran. After all, it was when Andrzej Duda won the presidential election that Law and Justice (PiS) took over independent rule in the country for eight years. Although of course the reasons for the alternation of power are complex and cannot be attributed solely to success in the presidential elections, the victory of Andrzej Duda, who was condemned to defeat after announcing his candidacy, was like the wind in the sails of the Law and Justice party ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections (Markowski 2016; Szczerbiak 2017).

An additional aspect increasing the significance of presidential elections in Poland is their resonance within the party system. A very common practice is the formation of political parties on the basis of relatively high support for politicians from third and subsequent places in the presidential contest. These parties then enter the political scene with such favourable results that they bring their representation into parliament. Examples of this practice include the third-place finish of Paweł Kukiz in 2015, with more than 20% support. His grouping also came third in the parliamentary elections of the same year with almost 9% support. Another example is Szymon Hołownia, who came in third in the 2020 presidential election with almost 14% support. Three years later, his established Poland 2050 party, in a coalition election committee with the Polish People's Party (PSL), also came in third place in the parliamentary elections, with just over 14% support (Peszyński 2023; Wojnicki 2024).

Despite such an important function of the presidential elections in Poland, due to systemic conditions, it is not the leaders of the largest political parties who have held and continue to hold the Office of President of the Republic of Poland. This has been particularly evident since 2005. This situation, after 20 years and four presidential elections, requires an attempt to identify the reasons for this state of affairs. The aim of this paper is therefore to explain the reasons why the office of president in Poland is not held by the leaders of the largest political parties in Poland. This is the case despite the fact that the candidate

selection process ends, according to the statutes of the largest political parties and the described political practice, with a personal decision by the party leader (Kaczorowska 2022). Although he or she can count on the support of the party leadership, the final decision is often taken in an authoritarian manner. It seems, therefore, that party leaders would see themselves in this position.

In order to achieve this objective, two main research questions were posed: (1) What are the reasons that the leaders of the major political parties do not hold the Office of President of the Republic of Poland? (2) What are the reasons that the leaders of the largest political parties do not even run for the Office of President of the Republic of Poland after 2000?

Data and Methods

In view of the proposed questions for conducting the research, it was assumed most effective to use a comparative analysis (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003; Schneider & Wagemann 2012) of all seven case studies of presidential elections in Poland since 1990. Only a comparison of the foundational data collected by the State Election Commission allows the purpose of the study to be realised and the initial assumptions to be verified.

The method of conducting the considerations in a chronological and, at the same time, evolutionary manner is presented in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Procedure of conducting the research
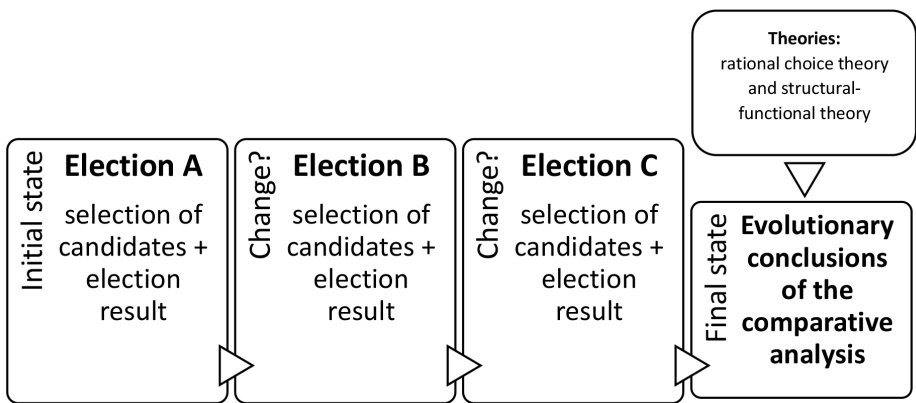
Source: Author

The research procedure prepared in this way makes it possible to indicate the change in the role of the President of the Republic of Poland in the political system over the course of successive elections, while comparing identical variables, thus allowing inferences to be made.

Theoretical background

An exploration of the reasons why leaders of the largest political parties in Poland do not hold the presidency can be explained by two independent theoretical approaches.

The first one is the application of rational choice theory (Goode 1997; Hechter & Kanazawa 1997; Lowett 2006). According to its assumptions on the issue under study, the leaders of the largest parties deliberately do not run for the office of president because of the (1) lack of real benefits for their power, image, prestige or connections, but (2) primarily due to the low chances of success. This is because they have a certain 'political burden' derived from the natural social discontent associated with the conduct of current politics, especially in highly polarised societies (Kinowska-Mazaraki 2021; Platek 2024). Political burden should be understood as a negative consequence of prolonged political activity, especially related to the exercise of power for a politician's political image and electoral potential. This is because decisions often have to be taken that are controversial or negative for various social groups, which generates dissatisfaction personally attributed to the person proposing or introducing them (Gajda & Giereło-Klimaszewska 2022). This burden may generate a lack of potential electability to the office of president. Distrust of party leaders by a section of the electorate in opposition to their party is an inherent feature of the strong polarisation which takes place in Poland (Tworzecki 2019).

This assumption was already confirmed in 2005 and 2010, when Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński had to acknowledge the superiority of the other candidates.[1] Consequently, the rational choice of political party leaders is to point to a candidate unencumbered in this way, who will have a chance to win the office. After all, the political practice of the cohabitation periods in Poland shows that having a party in the role of president means having an advantage in the political system (Jagielski 2022; Szczurowski 2016). This thesis is confirmed by the period when Lech Kaczyński of the opposition Law and Justice party was the president, while Donald Tusk of the Civic Platform (PO) headed the government (2007–2010). However, it is even more clearly confirmed by the period (2023–2025) when Andrzej Duda found himself in the role of a fuse for the interests of the Law and Justice party after that party's loss of power, forcing Donald Tusk's government to take extra-legal and extra-constitutional actions in order to implement political demands, including, in particular, the takeover of state institutions from the previous government.

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1 Significantly, however, although party leaders have reason to fear losing the presidential election, neither Donald Tusk nor Jarosław Kaczyński lost their positions in their parties after such defeats. This, however, does not undermine the indicated assumption, as not only are the indicated politicians the founders of their respective parties, but also the peculiarity of the clustering of both these parties around the leader makes his or her dismissal significantly more difficult.

Chart 2: Evolution of the political load of party leaders

Long-time leader of a major party personifies one side of a dispute in a polarised society.

The party is in power, the leader is identified with the policy being pursued (whether or not he/she is the Prime Minister).

There is an alternation of power, which puts the blame on the party leader, linking him to negative emotions on the part of a large part of the electorate.

Decline in social capital and support.

Lack of potential to gain broad support from many quarters and therefore no potential for victory in the presidential elections.

Source: Author

In the context under study, it is also justified to use structural-functional theory (Parsons 2017), which shows the problem addressed through the lens of the political system, as the resultant of institutional entanglements. These entanglements, however, are not just understood as posts and positions, but as the structure of power flows (Butler 2003). In the Polish political system, it is the prime minister who is the central figure, as the greatest resources and decisions flow through him. He is therefore at the centre of policy creation.[2] The exercise of the president would therefore, in a sense, push this individual to the margins of political activity, as he or she could not hold both offices simultaneously. Furthermore and importantly, he or she could not exert open pressure (though they could symbolically during public speeches), as this would be construed as bias (and the president of Poland should be the president of all Poles) or

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2 At this point, it should be pointed out that although Jaroslaw Kaczynski did not head the PiS government after winning the elections either in 2005, 2015 or 2019, this was due to image issues, thus benefiting the party and its government. However, Jaroslaw Kaczynski's influence on the exercise of power was colossal.

a desire to accumulate democratically illegitimised power. Through the prism of this theory, we can explain the willingness of party leaders to fight for real power – in government and parliament – rather than perform representational functions and, in a sense, fuse party interests.

The place of the president in the political system of the Republic of Poland

The collapse of communist rule and systemic changes towards democratisation in Poland, as in other CEE countries, necessitated a new organisation of the political power structure. The departure from the one-man management of the Communist Party secretary, supported by the central party body, was a necessity. In the new organisation of state power, the supreme role of the political parties in power in the socialist bloc was abandoned in favour of bodies found in democratic states. In this way, presidential offices were created as part of the executive, alongside the prime minister and the government (Welsh 1994).

However, the situation was somewhat different in Poland. The Office of the President had already been in place since 1921 (Dudek 2021). During World War II, despite the occupation of Poland by the Third German Reich and the Soviet Union, the continuity of state authority was maintained (Kruszewski 2011). After the end of the war, the Office of the President in exile functioned in parallel to the recognised, official state authorities (Kozłowski 2024). Although formally the office of the parliament-elected president was restored in Poland in 1989, in the face of the Round Table arrangements it was the leader of the Communist Party, Wojciech Jaruzelski, who was elected by the Parliament, in which the representatives of the Communist Party and its coalition partners secured a majority (Gancewski 2024; Wiatr 2024). Only the first fully free, general presidential election in 1990, which was won by the leader of the Solidarity movement in opposition to the communists, Lech Wałęsa, resulted in the transfer of the presidential insignia from the last President of the Republic of Poland in exile – Ryszard Kaczorowski (Gotowiecki 2020; Siwik 2024).

This brief historical introduction points to the important position of president as guarantor of the continuity of state power in Poland. Hence, it was the creation of a parliamentary-cabinet system with a corrective president (Wojtasik 2012: 203), or with a corrective position of the head of state (Antoszewski 2012: 47), with broad (by the standards of cabinet parliamentarism) powers and a very strong social mandate through the universality of elections that was socially and politically expected (Gebethner 1998: 13).

Nowadays, from the point of view of the political system, the position of president in Poland is not limited to representing the country externally. The very peculiarities of the analysed office and its broad prerogatives have consequences for the political system. The model of the presidency as introduced

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under the 1997 Constitution in Poland maintained the principle of assuming the position of head of state by universal suffrage, which creates for the president a legitimacy equal to that of the Sejm and the Senate. Such legitimacy equalisation may become a source of tension between the Parliament and the president, even assuming that the constitution seeks to counteract them (Antoszewski 1999: 109; Wojtasik 2012: 204). Confirmation of this assumption is provided by a negative analysis of the powers of the president of Poland. It is justified insofar as the legal analysis of prerogatives does not indicate how they are used in real and political terms, which is extremely important in Poland.

One of the key negative prerogatives of the president is the ability to refuse to sign a law. However, this can be rejected by a 3/5 majority of the statutory number of members of the Polish Sejm, though which is very difficult in political practice. This prerogative is of crucial importance especially in periods of cohabitation. At that time, the percentage of vetoed bills increases significantly, though less so when the president and the prime minister are from the same political camp (Wicherek 2023). The indicated phenomenon thus confirms that the position of president significantly increases in scope during periods of executive conflict of interest.

Another competence relevant in this context relates to the role of the guardian of the Constitution, allowing the president to refer laws to be assessed for compliance with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland via the authorised Constitutional Tribunal (TK) (Alberski 2010). Although, as with the vetoing of laws, presidents use this tool much more frequently during the period of cohabitation (Wicherek 2023); this scenario has taken on more special significance since 2023. According to many researchers, a politicised TK is unable to perform this task reliably (Florczak-Wątor 2020; Koncewicz 2018; Piotrowski 2016; Sadurski 2019; Schulz & Sawicki 2024; Szwed 2022). A peculiar situation occurred after the Law and Justice party's departure from power and the final conviction of two of its MPs, Mariusz Kamiński and Maciej Wąsik, both having been previously pardoned by President Andrzej Duda (using another of his prerogatives). However, Szymon Hołownia – the speaker of the Sejm – terminated the parliamentary mandates of the two recalled parliamentarians. The president considered that, in his view, this was unlawful and therefore any act passed by Parliament could result in a legal defect. Accordingly, he decided to refer each of them to the TK to assess, in particular, the constitutionality of the composition of Parliament (Bogdanowicz & Filipek 2024; Chybalski 2024; Woelke 2024). This situation resulted in a near impossibility to introduce legal changes on the statutory path. However, the recalled situation also indicated a significant weakness of the president vis-à-vis the government. The most media-attractive evidence was the detention of the recalled MPs Kaminski and Wąsik by the police in the presidential palace, where they tried to find refuge from law enforcement.

Another important issue that needs to be addressed is the joint conduct of foreign policy, together with the prime minister and the foreign affairs minister. Again, in this case, periods of cohabitation bring conflicts. Nowadays, during the presidency of Andrzej Duda, this was evident in the conflict over the appointment of Poland's ambassadors abroad, as the required approval for the government's proposals is not given by the president, but this did not prevent the prime minister and the foreign affairs minister from dismissing the ambassadors, pointing to the weakness of the presidential office (Jagielski 2024). During the first government of Donald Tusk of the PO and the presidency of Lech Kaczyński (PiS), the dispute over foreign policy was much stronger. It was not until the Constitutional Tribunal in 2009 that the conduct of the state's foreign policy was a power of the government (Constitutional Tribunal 2009). Before this could happen, the president and the prime minister appeared at a meeting of the European Council, where the president arrived by chartered plane, having been prevented from taking a seat on a government plane (Śliwonik 2022). Also, since their visits were separate, Lech Kaczyński's visit to Katyn (ending tragically in a plane crash in Smolensk) was to take place three days after Prime Minister Donald Tusk's visit (Lachowska 2023).

The analysis made in this chapter shows that the role of the president in the Polish political system significantly increases in scope during the period of cohabitation; however, skillful action by the government and parliamentary majority can effectively limit this increased role. This is when the holder of this office becomes the only real obstacle to the introduction of legal changes and the conduct of day-to-day policy by the government and the parliamentary majority behind it. In a situation where the president, the government and the parliamentary majority all come from the same party or coalition, the role of the president is almost exclusively limited to representational functions.

The functions and specifics of presidential elections in Poland

Presidential elections in Poland fulfil a number of important functions from the point of view of the political system and political practice itself. First and foremost is the creative function – presidential elections are supposed to allow for the selection of the person who will hold this office. This function is independent of the political situation, as it occurs in every case. This function was fulfilled even in the presidential elections of 1989, when the National Assembly appointed the communist leader, Wojciech Jaruzelski, to the office (Wojtasik 2012: 215).

As proposed by Robert Alberski (2002: 97–98), other functions of presidential elections in Poland also seem to be universal. The cited author considers as such, in addition to the creative function, the legitimising function for the power thus gained and the articulation and mobilisation function from the point of view of the electorate. Waldemar Wojtasik (2012: 215–233) also points

to the following functions: selection of political elites, ensuring control of those in power, enforcement of political responsibility, limited function of creating political programmes, expressing the will of the electorate and the function of selecting a stable government majority.

In line with the research approach in operation, successive presidential elections resulted in an evolution of the functions of these elections, making them dependent on the current political situation, while retaining in each case the functions indicated above (Alberski 2002; Wojtasik 2012). In this way, successive elections have assumed diverse functions. The 1990 election, thanks to the previously unknown Stanisław Tymiński reaching the second round, fulfilled the function of creating new or selecting political elites (Wojtasik 2012: 218). The situation was similar to the 1995 election, which became a plebiscite in which the most likely candidates to succeed were the incumbent president and symbol of the anti-communist opposition, Lech Wałęsa, and Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who came from the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), i.e. a post-communist party. In addition, entering the fray were a number of candidates wishing either to secure recognition, such as Andrzej Lepper, or to secure the support of their political parties, such as Jan Olszewski (Alberski 2002). The same was true of the 2015 presidential election, when Andrzej Duda, hitherto not very well known to the public, unexpectedly won, immediately becoming part of the political elite. Additionally, Paweł Kukiz, whose strong performance in the same election brought his political movement into Parliament (Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier 2016).

Elections in which the incumbent president renewed his mandate, on the other hand, fulfilled primarily a legitimising function. This was the case when Aleksander Kwaśniewski renewed his mandate in 2000 and when Andrzej Duda did it in 2020.

The predictive function of presidential elections is also worth mentioning here. The success of Lech Kaczyński in 2005 or Andrzej Duda in 2015 foreshadowed the high electoral outcome of Law and Justice in the parliamentary elections that followed shortly after the presidential elections. The situation is somewhat similar in the 1995, 2010 and 2020 elections,[3] when winning the presidential elections for the candidates of the party in power in Parliament was a confirmation of the public's support.

The above analysis confirms that the functions of presidential elections in Poland are diverse and evolve with changes in political reality. In one case they served to strengthen the legitimacy of the incumbent president, while in another they heralded the alternation of all power in the state. Only a thorough analysis of each election, however, makes it possible to indicate its specifics and fulfil the purpose of the work.

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3   Although the gap between the presidential and parliamentary elections was greater than in 2015, when the two elections were separated by just five months.

Analysis of the candidates and the results of the presidential elections in the Third Republic of Poland

Thus, starting from the proposed theoretical assumptions for a comparative analysis of presidential elections in Poland since 1990, it is reasonable to focus on the analysed issue in an evolutionary manner. The assumptions already indicated in this work dictate that the present state of affairs is the result of past events, and that politicians, learning from the mistakes of previous elections, do not repeat them in subsequent ones.

The first completely free and universal presidential election was held in Poland in 1990. Significantly, it was not a plebiscite to choose between the candidate of the hitherto pro-democratic opposition and the candidate representing the post-communist party. Indeed, the poll favourites of the competition were the candidates coming from the anti-communist opposition. The leaders of their political camps ran in this election. Notable among them were the first non-communist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Solidarity movement leader Lech Wałęsa, who were seen as clear favourites. Surprisingly, the previously unknown Stanisław Tymiński went through to the second round of the competition, along with Lech Wałęsa. In the second round, however, Tymiński had to acknowledge Wałęsa's (predicted) superiority (Jones 1999; Szulkin 1993).

Lech Wałęsa also appeared in the 1995 presidential election. The then ruling SLD-PSL coalition was in major conflict with the president (Materska-Sosnowska 2015). Faced with this situation, leader of the SLD Aleksander Kwasniewski stepped up to fight for the presidency. It was obvious that the other candidates had no chance of being elected. As expected, Wałęsa and Kwaśniewski made it to the second round of the election, receiving very similar support. After a difficult contest, the representative of the post-communist party (Millard 1996) became president and was also reelected five years later, helped by the capitulation of the Freedom Union (UW), which did not field a candidate at the cost of a heavy defeat in the parliamentary elections a year later. This was the only case where a candidate won in the first round of the presidential election, immediately obtaining more than 50% of all votes cast (Szczerbiak 2001).

As the above analysis indicates, in the 1990, 1995 and 2000 elections, the presidential office was won by key politicians who could be considered party leaders of their political camps. This was despite the fact that each of the three elections presented took place in a different political period. The first general election for the president of the Republic of Poland took place in 1990. In 2000, on the other hand, the first presidential election was held under the new Constitution. We were therefore faced with three completely different electoral and systemic situations. Despite the fact that in each of these three cases the struggle was for a different presidency at the level of the system, but also different ideas about it, resulting in different motivations of the competitors and their

Table 1: Support given to the two most important candidates in the presidential elections in Poland between 1990 and 2000

Year	Candidates	Support in the 1st round	Support in the 2nd round	Leader of a party/ political camp
1990	**Lech Wałęsa** Stanisław Tymiński	39.9% 23.1%	**74.3%** 25.7%	**YES** NO
1995	**Aleksander Kwaśniewski** Lech Wałęsa	35.1% 33.1%	**51.7%** 48.3%	**YES** YES
2000	**Aleksander Kwaśniewski** Andrzej Olechowski	**53.9%** 17.3%	X X	**YES** NO

Source: Author, based on Wicherek (2023: 40–42)

backgrounds, the common denominator of these elections was the struggle of party leaders for the presidency. It is highly significant that a change in the attitude of party leaders towards the Office of the President can be seen after 2005.

Both Lech Wałęsa and Aleksander Kwaśniewski were elected to the office in a situation of leadership over the strongest political groupings, and their candidacy in the elections could be treated as the natural culmination of their political careers to date. The selection process in these cases elevated the stature of the office by producing a figure who was a real political leader (Wojtasik 2012: 216–217). However, in this period – shortly after the political transition and amid the creation and slow development of the new Constitution – it seemed a rational choice for leaders to take advantage of their public recognition to run for the presidency during these difficult, transitional times.

After 2005, the presidential office was taken by politicians who were leading figures in Polish political life, but who remained in the shadow of their party leaders. The 2005 election marked the beginning of the dominance of the candidates of Law and Justice and Civic Platform, which has lasted to this day. Thus, the party system and the formation of two political camps led by the indicated groupings was solidified (Bojarowicz 2017; Walecka 2018; Wojtasik 2020). The first two presidential contests still featured candidates who were from the leadership of these parties, but in both cases they were up against politicians from within the party structures. In 2005, the leader of PO – Donald Tusk – competed against the brother of PiS leader and the mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński. Jaroslaw Kaczyński betting on his brother Lech seemed very rational. After all, he was a recognised anti-communist opposition activist, former minister of justice and president of the Supreme Chamber of Control, as well as a law professor known for his fight against corruption and abuse of power. In addition, he had already successfully won the election for mayor of Warsaw. After a very close battle and a narrow victory in the first round, he had

to acknowledge the superiority of the Law and Justice candidate in the final round (Szczerbiak 2007).

Five years later, the situation was reversed. The leader of the Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński, faced the speaker of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland Bronisław Komorowski from the Civic Platform. This time, the leader fighting for the presidency lost in both the first and second rounds of the presidential election (Cześnik 2014). However, these were very specific choices. Indeed, the expected repeat of the Lech Kaczyński-Donald Tusk battle could not take place due to the death of the incumbent president. Jarosław Kaczyński, with no alternative, was forced to face the fight alone. Consequently, the rational choice for Donald Tusk was to field a less polarising candidate against him. This was historian Bronisław Komorowski, who had thus far stood in the shadows. Importantly, however, in both of these elections, party leaders lost to relatively strong, recognisable and relevant candidates from the Polish political scene. Additionally, the parliamentary elections that took place shortly after the presidential elections confirmed the party preferences of the electorate.

Table 2: Support given to the two most important candidates in the presidential elections in Poland between 2005 and 2010

Year	Candidates	Support in the 1st round	Support in the 2nd round	Leader of a party/ political camp
2005	**Lech Kaczyński** Donald Tusk	33.1% 36.3%	**54.0%** 45.9%	**NO** YES
2010	**Bronisław Komorowski** Jarosław Kaczyński	41.5% 36.4%	**53.0%** 46.9%	**NO** YES

Source: Author, based on Wicherek (2023: 40–42)

The leaders of the major political parties competing for the presidency, having learnt from the mistakes of the two elections indicated, stopped running for the presidency. This is because the tactics of 2005 and 2010, indicating a greater chance of less polarising candidates, proved successful. Facing off in 2015 were incumbent President Bronislaw Komorowski of the PO and Andrzej Duda, the little-known candidate of the Law and Justice party, former member of the European Parliament and employee of the president's office during the time of Lech Kaczyński. Faced with being in opposition and with poor polls, Law and Justice decided to go va banque by not choosing a known candidate, but by creating one. Despite the crushing poll advantage of the incumbent president, the programme demands and the campaign run by the PiS candidate allowed him to spring a huge surprise. He won narrowly in both rounds of the election and assumed the Office of President (Chmielewska-Szlajfer 2018). He

was also reelected to it five years later. At that time, he ran again with the support of the Law and Justice party and was faced by Rafał Trzaskowski from the PO, the incumbent mayor of Warsaw. Donald Tusk therefore decided to follow the seemingly rational path of the Law and Justice Party from 2005 by fielding a fresh, but already successful, candidate from the local elections. Andrzej Duda won the first round of the election decisively and proved superior in the second round as well (Sula, Madej &błaszczyński 2021). Also noteworthy in these elections, the parliamentary elections that followed (in 2015 and 2019) confirmed the electorate's preferences expressed in the presidential elections, as these elections were won by Law and Justice, indicating the relevance of the candidates' party affiliation.

Table 3: Support given to the two most important candidates in the 2015-2020 presidential elections in Poland

Year	Candidates	Support in the 1st round	Support in the 2nd round	Leader of a party/ political camp
2015	**Andrzej Duda** Bronisław Komorowski	34.7% 33.7%	**51.5%** 48.4%	**NO** NO
2020	**Andrzej Duda** Rafał Trzaskowski	43.5% 30.5%	**51.0%** 49.0%	**NO** NO

Source: Author, based on Wicherek (2023: 40–42)

Significantly, the candidates in the 2025 presidential election representing the two largest political parties fighting for the presidency are also not their front-runners. Once again, rivals Donald Tusk and Jarosław Kaczyński decided not to try. Instead, they put up (respectively) local government official and mayor of Warsaw Rafał Trzaskowski, and the president of the Institute of National Remembrance – and thus far politically unconnected – Karol Nawrocki. Both party leaders know that they are polarising public opinion too much to get a chance of victory. On top of that, they seem to be interested in real and not just negative power in both government and Parliament. Consequently, they are using interesting political tricks. Based on his victory in the parliamentary elections and Trzaskowski's large voter base of 2020, Tusk wants to capitalise on his party's good moment. Kaczynski, on the other hand, knows he has nothing to lose. So he is repeating the 2015 manoeuvre by creating a candidate.

The analysis carried out makes it possible to indicate the evolutionary nature of the changes in the method of selecting candidates for the Office of President of the Republic of Poland. Immediately after the political transformation, party leaders decided to run for this office – and did so successfully. Later, however, changes in the party system involving the formation of two political camps

Chart 3: Evolution of candidate selection in two biggest parties in presidential elections in Poland between 1990 and 2020

2015-2025
the leaders do
not even take
off

2005-2010
the leaders
take off but
lose

1990-2000
the leaders
take off and
win
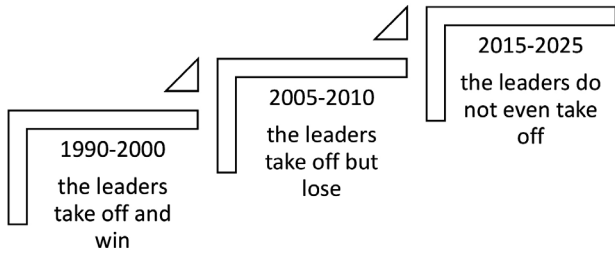
Source: Author

centred around two major parties – Law and Justice and Civic Platform – led to a situation in which only candidates from these two groups could effectively compete for the presidential office.

Although initially the party leaders tried their chances there, their electoral failures caused them to abandon further attempts. In addition to the desire to compete for more power in the position of the prime minister, this seems to be the result of the exceptionally high social polarisation evident in Poland (Tworzecki 2019) and the huge distrust of politicians, especially those burdened with power. Given these two factors, prominent leaders are concerned that they do not have adequate potential to win an additional moderate electorate, which is crucial for success in the presidential elections. Such an electorate has been able to be reached by lesser-known candidates, as evidenced by the electoral success of Andrzej Duda and the fact that Rafał Trzaskowski and Karol Nawrocki are competing in 2025. Party leaders therefore fear that they will not only suffer a personal loss, but reckon with the consequences for their party, and with polarisation so high, the loss of the presidency is of great importance.

Conclusions

Conclusions from the presented analysis indicate that the presidential election in Poland is a unique and at the same time important election. Indeed, the position of the President of the Republic of Poland is relatively strong by the standards of the parliamentary-cabinet system, although much weaker than the position of the head of government. Analysis of the president's negative prerogatives, and in particular the political practice of successive presidents in office, has proven that having the Office of the President is crucial for political parties in terms of the effectiveness of exercising power and the speed with which postulated solutions may be introduced. This is most evident when cohabitation occurs. This is when the president becomes a fuse of the interests

of the party from which he or she comes, making it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the opposing parliamentary majority to pursue effective policies.

It is significant that, under the current arrangement within the party system, it appears that only candidates from one of the two major parties have a chance at winning office. Since 2005, the office has been shared exclusively by the candidates of Law and Justice and Civic Platform. Previously, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, representing the Democratic Left Alliance, which dominated the Polish political scene at the time, was president for two terms. The other candidates are running for two main reasons. The first is that they are counting on a positive result that will pull their party ahead in the parliamentary elections. This succeeded, for example, in the cases of Andrzej Olechowski in 2000, Paweł Kukiz and Adrian Zandberg in 2015, Szymon Hołownia in 2020, and it is a situation specific to new candidates. The second is because of the negative consequences for the party in the event that they lack a candidate in the presidential elections (which succeeded, for example, in the case of Grzegorz Napieralski in 2010) – and is the situation of well-known politicians. A very poor result in the parliamentary elections of parties that did not put up a candidate in the presidential elections (such as the Freedom Union in 2000) should be considered as such. So while small party candidates are doing poorly in gaining support for their candidates, new candidates just entering the political scene may see the presidential election as a springboard for their careers and for the success of the political parties they are forming.

In order to identify the reasons why the leaders of the largest parties have not held the presidency since 2005 (although, as indicated, it is the representatives of these parties who win the presidential elections), systemic circumstances and those resulting from current politics are relevant. The low attractiveness of real presidential power compared to the role of the prime minister may cause reluctance on the part of major party leaders to run. Crucially, however, when the leaders of the major parties tried their chances at competing for the presidency, they lost, and they lost to candidates who are not the leaders of their parties. This was the case of Donald Tusk, who lost to Lech Kaczyński in 2005, or Jarosław Kaczyński, who had to acknowledge the superiority of Bronisław Komorowski in 2010. Neither of them dared to run again in the presidential elections due to (1) the desire to fight for real power in government and Parliament and (2) the low potential for election to the presidency due to the factors already indicated. This is despite the fact that they are still (respectively) governing the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice parties in succession (although Tusk took a break during his time as president of the European Council).

As has already been pointed out, while one of the fundamental reasons leaders of the major parties do not run in presidential elections is that they have little real political power compared to the role of the prime minister, the explanation for the electoral failures they have suffered is to be found in the political

burdens they have for holding important public office. Prominent leaders of the major parties fear that they will not be able to breech the 'glass ceiling' of party support. Thus, they fear that they will not only suffer a personal loss, but reckon with the consequences for the party as a whole, and in a polarised environment, the loss of the presidency has a huge negative impact on the party. On the other hand, for each of the main parties, fielding a different candidate (one who is less well-known and not associated with making the difficult decisions of proper governance) is seen as an opportunity to reach beyond the committed party electorate and escape the high negative sentiment around each of the two main leaders.

However, since the analysis shows that having the president on one's side in the political argument gives an advantage in the political system, parties field strong candidates, fiercely fighting for victory. This is a rational choice by party leaders for political advantage of their parties.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the role and functions of presidential elections and the political behaviour of presidents themselves are evolving. The analysis of all cases has shown that the importance of having the office on one's side of a political dispute increases significantly during cohabitation. The president then becomes the fuse of the party from which he or she comes and a formidable obstacle to major legal and institutional changes and the party affiliation of the president is important not only for the electoral success itself, but also for the way in which power is exercised.

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The Advantage of Incumbency among Czech Mayors: Analysis of Election Results in the 128 Largest Cities in the Czech Republic

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Abstract: The incumbency effect, where incumbents have a higher likelihood of electoral success, is a well-documented phenomenon globally but remains under-researched in the Czech Republic. This article investigates whether and to what extent the incumbency effect is present among Czech mayors. Using a dataset of the 128 largest Czech cities by population (excluding Prague) and covering elections between 2002 and 2022, the study analyses the success of incumbent mayors in retaining their positions. The findings confirm that over 50% of mayors successfully defended their posts. The research also examines the dynamics of mayoral re-election, highlighting that first-time incumbents enjoy a notable advantage, which tends to diminish with each consecutive term. These results contribute to understanding the mechanics of incumbency in proportional electoral systems and offer directions for future research, including the exploration of causal relationships and the impact of socio-economic factors on re-election rates.

Keywords: *Mayors, Incumbency, Municipal Elections, Local Politics, Czech Republic*

Introduction

Incumbency is one of the most significant factors, if not the most significant, for the success of candidates across different types of elections (e.g. Ansolabehere & Snyder 2002; Bernard 2012; Gordon & Landa 2009). Throughout numerous electoral systems, we observe cases where the incumbents significantly improved their previous results in the following elections. Entire careers can be built on such a success, which often starts at the lowest level of the political

system. An example of Czech politicians who have rocketed from the municipal level to the heights of national politics is the Czech minister of interior and leader of the party STAN[1], Vít Rakušan. As mayor of Kolín, a town with a population of 30,000, he managed to gain more than 4,000 votes when he ran as an incumbent for the first time. Similar results can be observed with other prominent Czech politicians who started their careers at the municipal level. It is precisely this issue that this article focuses on.

The advantage that stems from incumbency is a significant and prominent phenomenon, especially in the USA, where it is one of the most frequently studied factors in electoral research (e.g. Ansolabehere & Snyder 2002; Carson et al. 2020; Jacobson 2015). In the Czech Republic, this phenomenon has received more attention in the last decade. Bernard and Šafr argue that the Czech Republic is a great case for analysis because most of the theory on incumbency advantage was formulated in reference to traditional democracies and the Czech Republic was democratised only 35 years ago (Bernard & Šafr 2016: 268).

Apart from minor mentions, the incumbency effect within the Czech political system has been addressed by Voženílková and Hejtmánek (2015), who looked at its impact on the Senate elections. Bernard and Čermák (2021) have also touched upon this issue. There are articles focusing primarily on the incumbency at the regional level (Bernard & Šafr 2016; Linek & Škvrňák 2024) or on the female incumbents (Smrek 2020). At the municipal level of the Czech political system, it has been briefly addressed by Bernard (2012), Ryšavý (2016) and Balík (2010).[2] The issue of incumbency advantage in the case of mayors themselves has been addressed only in the bachelor or master theses of Čapek (2019, 2021) and Vavrečková (2016).

It cannot be said that incumbency advantage at the level of Czech local elections is a completely unstudied phenomenon. However, compared to the rest of the world, it still represents a certain blank space. The incumbency advantage is widely studied in the USA, where it has long been recognised as a significant electoral factor due to the structure of the majoritarian system. In recent years, interest in this phenomenon has also grown in continental Europe, where scholars have sought to understand how it manifests under different types of electoral systems (e.g. Dahlgaard 2016; Freier 2011, 2015; Mazurkiewicz 2021, 2022; Redmond & Regan 2015). Similar research is also developing in South America, where this phenomenon has been studied intensely focusing on mayors in Brazil after the electoral system reform that allows them to repeatedly run (e.g. Brambor & Ceneviva 2011; De Magalhaes 2015). Similar research also takes place in Asia and Africa (e.g. Lewis et al. 2020; Macdonald 2014).

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1   The full name of the party – Starostové a nezávislí – can be translated into English as 'Mayors and Independents'. This party consists mostly of mayors of smaller towns and municipalities (Maškarinec 2020: 27).

2   In those cases, there were only brief mentions of incumbency as a phenomenon.

This article aims to start filling the gap in the research on incumbency analysis in local elections in the Czech Republic. It focuses on the following: What makes incumbency effect analysis in the local elections in the Czech Republic so specific, what the biggest obstacles in the research are, and how it manifests itself in the context of mayors of the Czech Republic's most populated cities. It also offers other paths to research this phenomenon in the future and presents an extensive and unique database. In addition, it gives the reader an overview of the characteristics of the mayors in those cities. The database used contains information on mayoral elections in the 128 largest Czech cities by population, excluding Prague, over the last twenty years and the election results of all incumbents. Due to the comprehensiveness of the database, the analysis of the incumbency effect is supplemented by other relevant descriptive data, such as the characteristics of those mayors, which are primarily located in the appendix.

This article does not concentrate on explaining the incumbency effect in municipal elections using socioeconomic factors. Rather, it focuses on examining the size of the advantage held by incumbent candidates by using comparable techniques that have proven successful in other countries. It uses a comparison of re-election rates across several election periods and a comparison of the increase in votes received between elections. It is first necessary to confirm whether and how the increase in votes for incumbent mayors occurs and to discuss the specifics of the system. Only after these have been clarified can we then analyse to explain these phenomena.

Incumbency advantage in theory and the specifics of the Czech municipal elections system

Research regarding mayors and incumbents in general shows that incumbent politicians enter their next elections with a certain advantage (e.g. Hogan 2004; Mazurkiewicz 2021; Sloboda 2015, 2017). Voters base their electoral decisions on whether they are satisfied with the performance of the incumbent candidate (Bernard 2012: 636). Of course, they may not know or examine everything the incumbent candidate has done during their term in office. However, if the current officeholders avoid major scandals or do not visibly fail to do their job during their tenure, they usually have a better chance of defending their office than the newcomers do of winning it. This advantage lies in their knowledge of inside information, greater campaign resources, stronger support from their political party or the mere fact that their name is known to voters (Ansolabehere & Snyder 2002; Cox & Katz 1996).

Part of the advantage also lies in the greater opportunities of connecting with the electorate through the media. Mayors appear in the municipal or regional media throughout the four years they spend in office. This helps them not only in greater visibility to the electorate, but also in presenting the achievements

that the municipality has accomplished during their tenure. Thus, the mayors can spend virtually their entire term in office campaigning for re-election (Gordon & Landa 2009: 1493). Compared to the newcomers, who are usually candidates without prior experience or recruited from the ranks of ordinary councilors, mayors have an advantage stemming from the title of their office. For example, as Answorth and Mesquida (2008: 1006–1008) point out, politicians who hold senior offices are usually better positioned simply by virtue of holding a prestigious office.

It is also necessary to consider the fact that potentially strong challengers might be discouraged from competing against a popular mayor. Thus, the advantage does not just lie in the resources that the candidate's office provides. Cox and Katz refer to this as the 'quality effect', meaning that the incumbent often has low-quality opponents. Those challengers do not have such a strong and easily recognisable name, resources or support from their political party (Cox & Katz 1996: 478–479). Using the example of local elections in Poland, Mazurkiewicz further elaborates on the argument that weaker competition is a major advantage and is one of the reasons for the low competitiveness (Mazurkiewicz 2021, 2022). Czech municipalities are also increasingly struggling with competitiveness, as shown, for example, by Kouba and Lysek (2023) and the strength of incumbents could be one of the reasons.

When looking specifically at the cases of mayors and the manifestations of incumbency advantage in such cases, we must consider that this phenomenon has been studied in different settings of different electoral systems. The specific role of incumbents has long been the focus of American scholars. The pioneers in this field of study include Cummings (1966) or Erikson (1971), who were subsequently followed by other researchers (Besley & Case 1992; Campbell et al. 2010; King & Gelman 1991). Specifically, American mayors are directly addressed, for example, by De Benedictis-Kessner (2018). The consensus in the American debate is that the incumbency advantage is a phenomenon that manifests itself across different types of elections, especially in majoritarian electoral systems.

In general, research on incumbency and its effects is more common in countries with majoritarian electoral systems. In Europe, specifically regarding mayors, such research can often be found in countries that have direct elections, which are increasingly common. All the neighbours of the Czech Republic have them. In Slovakia, which shares much of its history with the Czech Republic, it was introduced just after the fall of the communist regime in 1990 (Maškarinec et al. 2018). In Poland, the direct election of mayors was introduced in 2002. In contrast to Slovakia, the Polish system has two rounds (Gendźwiłł & Swianiewicz 2017). Austria has directly elected mayors in all its federal states except for three.

Germany also has a larger number of federal states where the mayor is directly elected (Balík 2009: 117–118 and 127–130). Freier (2011, 2015) used

a sample of 25,000 cases from the state of Bavaria to estimate the chances of incumbents winning the election to be between 38–40 percentage points (Freier 2015: 17). He mentions that the municipality's expenditures and whether the mayor is working full-time both play an important role in the chance of defending. The higher these factors are, the bigger the chance of re-election for the mayor. The reverse proportion applies regarding municipal debt. A lower debt gives a higher chance of re-election (Freier 2015: 17–19).

Freier shows an interesting approach where he does not focus on the difference in the number of votes gained in each election, which is a common practice of American academics, but instead examines the success rate of incumbents. This approach was firstly used by Lee (2008) and is becoming increasingly popular in research on this phenomenon (e.g. Lucas 2021; Sloboda 2017). Sloboda used this approach in his research on the direct elections of Slovakian mayors in 2006 and 2010. He demonstrates that incumbents in those elections held a big advantage, especially in the very first election in which they defended their office. In the subsequent elections, their chances of defending decreased, but they were still higher than the chances of their challengers. According to Sloboda, the Slovak direct election system itself also provides strong predispositions for the defending mayors to dominate (Sloboda 2017: 10).

Unlike in neighbouring countries, the Czech Republic does not have direct elections of mayors.[3] Instead, the Czech municipal electoral system is proportional. In the Czech system, the citizens of each municipality vote for a council, which then elects a mayor from among its own members at its first meeting. Each voter has as many preferential votes as the number of seats on the council. They have the option of casting their vote for one of the candidate lists as a whole or to selected individuals across the lists. Alternatively, the two methods can be combined.[4]

The incumbency effect is more difficult to prove in proportional systems, such as the Czech local system. Redmond and Regan (2015) argue that in proportional electoral systems, the incumbency advantage is not as strong as in majoritarian systems, but it is still significant. Moral et al. (2015) elaborate that the phenomenon is present even in systems where voters do not vote for individuals but for party lists. Other European researchers have reached similar results by studying this effect in different types of elections (Ade et al. 2014; Dahlgaard 2016; Voženílková & Hejtmánek 2015).

Studies that focus on the incumbency effect in proportional electoral systems often use a regression discontinuity design (e.g. Dahlgaard 2016; Kotakorpi et al.

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3   There has been extensive political discussion on the topic, but it has never led to the introduction of direct elections at the municipal level (e.g. Jüptner 2009, 2012; Šaradín 2010).

4   This system has been criticised for its opacity. A candidate needs to get at least 10% more votes than the average of the votes per candidate on a given list, which many voters do not consider. As a result, the highest position on the list is essential for being elected (Lebeda 2009).

2017; Redmond & Regan 2015). Although it is a widely recognised method for estimating the causal effects of incumbency in proportional electoral systems, its applicability to the Czech case is limited. The absence of a centralised and complete dataset of mayors poses significant constraints on data collection. Moreover, due to the indirect nature of mayoral elections, where preferential votes do not directly determine officeholding, it is not possible to define a clear cutoff point required for the valid application of regression discontinuity. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that this article focuses on documenting patterns consistent with the incumbency effect while it does not provide a causal estimate.

Data

As has been already mentioned, research on mayors in the Czech Republic faces a problem with a lack of sources. Not a single Czech institution maintains a complete database of mayors over an extended period.[5] Thus, if researchers want to investigate a larger number of mayors or to look further into the past, they must track down the names of mayors on their own, usually from individual municipal offices. Because of this, political scientists in the Czech Republic mainly limit themselves to a single election period (e.g. Balík et al. 2015; Šaradín 2010) in contrast to researchers from other Central European countries, who can compare the electoral results of mayors from many municipalities by using publicly available data.[6]

Given the nature of this article, it was necessary to construct an entirely new dataset that would cover a longer period with a larger number of electoral years. Due to data collection issues, it was essential to limit the number of municipalities[7] and the number of elections that would be covered in the analysis. For the aforementioned reasons, mainly due to the missing database of mayors by names, one researcher cannot include all municipalities in the dataset. Two options were therefore considered. The first was to limit the analysis to a specific part of the Czech Republic. The second was to select a particular type of municipality.

Limiting the analysis to only a certain part of the Czech Republic could cover one or more counties.[8] Counties have been used in Czech political science for

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5   For example, in early 2020 the Ministry of the Interior provided a list of current mayors, which was compiled for the internal use of the Ministry of the Interior as a directory of contacts. At the same time, the Ministry stated in the same announcement that it does not keep information on former mayors.

6   For example, Freier's (2015) data set of more than 25,000 cases of independent mayoral elections in the state of Bavaria over the period 1945–2010 is something that is not possible to create in the Czech conditions.

7   There are 6,255 municipalities for a population of 10.7 million people. More than half of them have fewer than 500 inhabitants (Czech Statistical Office 2023). This makes the municipal structure of the Czech Republic one of the most fragmented in the world.

8   The counties were the old administrative units that brought together municipalities and carried out part of the state administration until 2002, when the county authorities were abolished. However,

various, mainly comparative, studies (e.g. Balík 2010; Maškarinec 2010; Valeš 2007). Although from the perspective of investigating the incumbency effect, those units have major shortcomings. Primarily, there is a large variance between the size of municipalities in each county, where small municipalities would have to be compared to larger cities with populations a hundred or more times bigger. Any comparisons across counties would then be complicated due to the huge differences in their size. Another limitation comes with the fact that in the case of small municipalities, it is often difficult to collect the names of former mayors to the extent that is needed for such an analysis. The websites of smaller municipalities are often insufficient, and some do not even have any available staff to contact. Additionally, as highlighted by Dvořák and Balík (2021), certain – primarily smaller – municipalities, face difficulties in even holding elections due to insufficient candidate lists.

After consideration, using a particular type of municipality for the analysis appeared to be a better solution. The largest municipalities in terms of population were chosen because of the easier collection of mayoral names, the greater homogeneity of the group, and the ability to make comparisons more easily. The dataset contains mayors from all Czech towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants.[9] This number of citizens is the threshold beyond which municipalities can significantly increase the number of their councilors.[10]

In total, the database includes 128 cities, of which 26 are statutory cities.[11] Sixteen of them have more than 50,000 inhabitants and a little more than a quarter of them have more than 30,000 inhabitants. The capital city of Prague was omitted from the research because elections to the local council in Prague are specific and different from the elections in other Czech municipalities. Similarly, the status of Prague is different from other cities and can be compared relatively to the status of a region (Act No. 131/2000 Coll. 2000).[12]

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counties still function as administrative units for a large number of fields such as the judiciary or land offices (Balík 2009: 23–25).

9   This is as of 1 January 2020, according to the Czech Statistical Office. This date was selected because the original data collection started at that time. The population in Czech municipalities is dynamically evolving, so some municipalities may have seen their population fall below this threshold for a certain period of time between 2002 and 2022.

10   While municipalities between 3,000 and 10,000 inhabitants can have 11 to 25 representatives, municipalities above 10,000 inhabitants can have 15 to 35 representatives. Municipalities with 15 or more councillors must always establish a municipal board. (Act No. 128/2000 Coll.).

11   This means that a primator, not a mayor, heads them. This is just a decorative label that carries no extra functions.

12   Also, the city of Olomouc was, until 2014, excluded from the research. The reason for this omission was that electoral districts were operating in the municipal elections in Olomouc, which skewed the results (Lebeda 2009: 333–335). Moreover, in the 2006 election year, the Czech Statistical Office server, otherwise used for all election results in the article, threw an error. Thus, it is not even possible to access the results from Olomouc for that time.

The first election year was chosen to be 2002, representing the third municipal election in the independent Czech Republic. This was the first election after the change in the method of counting votes in the municipal elections (Act No. 491/2001 Coll. 2001). It could be argued that in that year, the Czech Republic was finally consolidated compared to previous years when councilors and voters were getting used to the new system, which led to more interest from the researchers. Also during this time, the first more comprehensive works focused on Czech local politics started to appear (Balík et al. 2015: 6).[13]

The database sources include individual municipal offices that were contacted and asked about the names of mayors in the last seven electoral periods. Approximately 20% of the municipal authorities did not respond to further requests for information. It was then necessary to trace the names of those mayors in other publicly available sources, such as municipal documents, council meeting reports or media. Another database, kindly provided by Josef Bernard for research purposes, was used for data control.[14]

The Czech Statistical Office's election server was used as a source for the election results. The database, made for this article, contains complete data about every mayor who has defended their office at least once. It includes their election results, the parties and lists of candidates they ran for, their age, gender, the election results of their lists of candidates, and the number of city councilors or competing lists of candidates. Not all data are used directly in the article. However, this is a unique database in the Czech environment, which offers many possibilities for future use. It could be expanded to include complete data on all mayors who took office from 2002 to 2022.[15] At the same time, the database could be combined with other information about municipalities, such as their population or financial results. It would then be possible to look deeper into the socio-economic factors that may influence the incumbency advantage of mayors in the Czech case. The addition of socio-economic indicators could help extend the descriptive insight provided by this paper to causal implications.

The attached table serves as an overview since the analysis of two differently sized sets is conducted in the analytical part. The first part examines the success rate of incumbents. Thus, the total N is 583, consisting of all mayors who tried to defend their position in the last five local elections. In the second, longer part

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13 Czech political science is, in general, not very interested in the first few municipal elections, and some of the articles directly declare their lack of interest to be mainly due to the fact that the municipal political system was not yet fully crystallised at that time (Ryšavý 2006: 954–956).

14 Bernard's database was based on data from the Czech Statistical Office and could be used to track down the mayors who have already been elected once and have listed the position of mayor as their job position in other elections (Bernard 2013). Unfortunately, this database ends in 2014, covering only half of the electoral period used in this article.

15 This would require the involvement of more authors or a change in Czech institutions' approach to handling data concerning local political authorities.

of the analysis, which focuses on changes in electoral outcomes, only first-time incumbents are considered.[16] The total number of first-time incumbents is 163.

Table 1: Summary of the number of mayors used in the analysis

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022	Total N
Number of mayors/municipalities in the dataset	128	128	128	128	128	640
Number of candidates who ran in their next elections	107	115	127	113	121	583
All successful incumbents	59	57	62	58	61	297
First-time successful incumbents[17]	32	31	40	25	35	163

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Methodology

The literature explains that mayors should be advantaged in local elections, even if not elected directly. In this article, several different approaches to measurement are used and aligned with the chosen research questions. The comprehensive database used in the article, which the author is happy to provide, may be helpful to other researchers.

The first research question is inspired by the aforementioned research of Freier (2011, 2015), Sloboda (2017) or Lucas (2021). It addresses whether the incumbency effect can be observed by the increased chances of defending the mandate: 'How often do the mayors defend their office in the second election?' Several methodological concerns need to be clarified here. Given the Czech municipal election system, it is unclear whether the mayor's candidacy in the next election automatically implies an interest in defending the office. As stated above, a mayor is not directly elected in the Czech political system but by a council at its first meeting. Thus, it is not clear how often there have been situations where the mayors have tried to defend their position as opposed to situations where they have run for the council without seeking re-election.[18] This differs from the systems where the mayor is directly elected and where

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16 The article distinguishes between types of incumbencies. In the case of a mayor defending their position for the first time, this is referred to as a 'first-time incumbent'. The same logic applies to all other cases of incumbency.

17 These mayors are analysed in the second part of the analysis in relation to the second and third research questions. These address changes in first-time incumbents' election outcomes.

18 For example, there may be a situation where a mayor moves to the next level of the political system and runs in the municipal elections only to support their political party. Alternatively, they may decide they are too old or busy with other activities to be a mayor but want to be part of the city council anyway.

they are running to win the mayoral post. It is impossible to ask each mayor to clarify whether they were seeking re-election because of the sheer number of mayors and because some of them are deceased or unreachable. The other option would be to study the records of the first meeting of the newly constituted council and focus on the number of councilors who expressed an ambition to become mayor at that meeting. With this option, however, the question is how much of an informative value such data holds. There could be situations where the incumbents would defend their position, but before the first meeting of the newly established council, they knew that they had no chance of success. The analysis, therefore, works with the assumption that every mayor who runs again wants to defend their position.

It must also be noted that the mayor's first election is counted as the first, after which they were elected to office at the council's inaugural meeting. In some cases, especially before 2002, there were situations where a candidate became mayor during the term of office because the previous mayor resigned or was impeached. For this research, the first election is counted as the election after which the mayor was elected normally by the municipal council and completed the entire term.[19] In the case of the first research question, if the replaced mayor runs again in the subsequent elections, they are counted as a defending mayor. This measure was used because, for previous mayors, it was impossible to track whether they were replaced during the term in all cases.[20]

The following two research questions focus on testing the visibility of the incumbency advantage in Czech local elections. Only data of the first-time incumbents are used for this because there are only a small number of cases of multi-incumbency mayors.[21] For a broader analysis of multiple incumbency, we would need a higher number of cases, as shown, for example, by Sloboda (2017). Working only with the elections in which mayors first defended their office also preserves the homogeneity of the sample. At the same time, the manifestation of the incumbency advantage is the clearest in the first elections after the election to the office. In subsequent elections, that advantage is not as straightforward because these elections are not about a new incumbent but about an incumbent who prolongs their time as an incumbent.

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19 There are seven cases during the 2018–2022 election cycle where the mayor in one of the cities in the sample was replaced before the new elections. This did not affect the analysis of election results in any of those cases because they were not first-time incumbents. There were six cases of a mayor already being replaced after the 2022 election.

20 For the mayors after the 2018 election, this is only possible because the author continuously updated the database after the next election and could therefore find out if a mayor was replaced before the election or not.

21 There have been only 16 second-time incumbents (mayors who defended their position in two consecutive elections) between 2002 and 2022. There are 9 third-time incumbents and 7 four or more-time incumbents.

The second question asks, 'How often does the incumbent mayor win in the absolute number of preferential votes?' The same question has already been discussed in the Czech context (e.g. Balík 2010; Vavrečková 2016). The compiled database offers an excellent opportunity to apply the same procedure to the largest cities of the Czech Republic. When applying this approach, there is no need to deal with effects such as turnout fluctuations or the entry of other strong political parties onto the scene, which is a significant upside. Winning the second election is a clear indicator of whether the incumbent succeeded or not. It can be assumed that while the mayor was not always first in the total number of preferential votes in the first election prior to their election to office, in the next election, the mayor is expected to dominate because of the incumbency advantage.

The final research question builds on the previous question and asks, 'Does the number of preferential votes received for the mayor in the second election increase compared to the first election?' This measurement method of calculating the average vote gain for freshman winners who run again in the election is called the sophomore surge. It is a standard method used in the American research (e.g. Ansolabehere et al. 2007; King & Gelman 1991). The assumption is that the difference between the elections will be positive, making it clear that mayors have an incumbency advantage. The question is how significant the increases or decreases between the two elections will be.

Analysis

The sample of municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants can be divided into several categories. More than half of those municipalities have under 20,000 residents. Only a quarter of the cities have more than 30,000 inhabitants (see Appendix Table 1). This is another illustration of the Czech municipal structure's high fragmentation level.

The average age of a mayor in a Czech city with more than 10,000 inhabitants increased from 48.1 to 51.5 between the 2002 and 2022 elections. The average age of a mayor rose significantly more in smaller cities from the sample (see Appendix Table 2). This is likely due to the more frequent mayoral turnover in larger cities, where there is more competition and elections are more likely to reflect national sentiment and trends (Balík et al. 2015). The years in which the average age of mayors within a group of municipalities was significantly higher than in others indicate that a more significant proportion of them defended their positions. For example, more incumbents were present in the 2014 and 2022 elections. Alternatively, for smaller municipalities, the same happened in 2018. The natural turnover of mayors also impacts the average age. Mayors in the biggest Czech cities are generally younger than in the smaller ones (see Appendix Table 2).

The number of female mayors in large Czech cities increased sharply after the 2006 elections but has since been relatively stagnant, ranging between 9% and 13.5% (see Appendix Table 3). According to analyses conducted by the NGO Forum 50% (2015; 2020), after the 2014 elections, women made up 23% of all Czech mayors. Then, in 2018, it reached 24.3% of the total number. However, the analyses emphasise that there is an inverse proportionality whereby as the size of the municipality increases, the number of women in leadership decreases.[22] In total, 17 women, mainly those in larger cities, defended their positions between 2002 and 2022.[23]

Moving from the sample characteristics towards incumbency shows that the Czech mayors in large municipalities seek re-election very often. In the 2006 elections, almost 85% of the incumbents ran for re-election.[24] In 2010 and 2018, the number rose to 90%, and in the exceptional year of 2014, only one mayor from the sample did not attempt to run again. The number of first-time mayors is gradually decreasing. In contrast, the number of mayors defending their office for the third time or more is increasing. There seems to be a consolidation in the last election years, where voters have become accustomed to the new parties. Mayors from them have either established themselves or were replaced.

Table 2: Number of incumbents who ran in their next elections

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Successful incumbents	59	57	62	58	61
Unsuccessful incumbents	48	58	65	55	39
Non-candidates*	21	13	1	15	7

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office
Note: * Mayors who did not participate in the next elections

Regarding defending the post, 2006 was a very successful year for incumbent mayors. In these elections, the success rate was 55%, meaning that more than half of the mayors successfully defended their positions. In subsequent years, the re-election success rate stabilised at around 50%, with it picking up again

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22 A similar trend has been observed, for example, in neighbouring Slovakia (e.g. Lukáčová & Maličká 2023; Maškarinec et al. 2018; Maškarinec & Klimovský 2017).

23 Interestingly, between the 2002 and 2014 elections, only two female mayors were elected in the ten largest Czech cities, including Prague. In the last two elections, this number has doubled, and the mayor of Brno, Markéta Vaňková, even managed to defend her post.

24 It should be stressed here that, as discussed in the data section, mayors in the Czech Republic are not directly elected. This is the number of mayors who ran again in the council elections.

in the last election year. Second-time incumbents especially have a very high re-election rate in the last elections.

Table 3: Success rate of incumbents distributed by the number of terms in office

Incumbents	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Number of first-time incumbents	64	64	73	57	65
Success rate	59.4%	60.9%	54.8%	43.9%	53.8%
Number of second-time incumbents	31	38	36	35	25
Success rate	45.2%	36.8%	27.8%	57.1%	64.0%
Number of multiple-time incumbents[25]	12	13	18	21	30
Success rate	58.3%	30.8%	66.7%	61.9%	60.0%
Total number of successful incumbents	107	115	127	113	120
Total success rate	55.1%	49.6%	48.8%	51.3%	57.5%

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Looking only at the first-time incumbents, their success rate was around 55–60% between 2002 and 2014. This started to change with the 2018 elections, in which the success rate of first-time incumbents became significantly lower and the success rate of second-time incumbents higher. This pattern continued in 2022. In the case of the second-time incumbents, a drop can be observed in the 2010 and 2014 elections. In 2014, only 10 out of 36 mayors who had already served two consecutive terms were re-elected. This fact could be caused mainly by the emergence of new political parties led by STAN, a party built explicitly around mayors, and the populist ANO.[26] As a result, some mayors from more established parties, especially from ODS, were pushed into the opposition and failed to defend their positions.[27] Some of those were able to return to office in the next election because the mayors from ANO failed their runs for incumbency.[28]

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25 Mayors who defended their position three or more times.

26 To substantiate this interpretation, a more detailed examination of the candidate lists associated with incumbents would be necessary. A more robust approach would involve comparing candidate names across elections to capture continuity beyond mere party labels as there are some shifts in coalition structures.

27 After the 2014 elections, ODS lost seven incumbent mayors, while STAN won three new mayors and ANO won six.

28 Five of those mayors who lost their position in 2014 returned after the 2018 elections, which makes nearly 20% of mayors who were not able to defend in 2014.

It is important to highlight that the number of such mayors has been gradually increasing. In the last election, there were 30 of them, an increase of 150% over the last five terms. These are often mayors approaching the age of 60 or more and who are thus moving into the position of ordinary councilor. Equally, younger incumbents who defended their position of mayor multiple times often move to the next level of the Czech political system and do not seek the position of mayor again.[29] The pattern of ascending political careers is not limited to mayors but is also observed at other levels of Czech politics. Bernard and Čermák (2021) show that many Czech politicians follow a trajectory from local or regional politics to the higher levels.

Table 4 below shows the final position of the first-time incumbents when comparing the total number of preferential votes received among all candidates in the municipality. This refers to the election after which the mayor first took office and, thus, the election before becoming an incumbent.

Table 4: Final position of the first-time incumbent mayors in the number of preferential votes in their first election

Year	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
First	12	18	28	16	16
in percentages[30]	37.5%	58.1%	70.0%	64.0%	45.7%
Second	8	11	3	3	2
in percentages	25.0%	35.5%	7.5%	12.0%	5.7%
Third or worse	12	2	9	6	17
in percentages	37.5%	6.5%	22.5%	24.0%	48.6%
Total number of first-time elected mayors	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

A situation where the candidate who does not receive the highest number of preferential votes becomes mayor occurs often. In the 2002 elections, about two-thirds of the candidates who became mayors failed to win in the total number of preferential votes received. After the 2002 elections, a change in the behaviour of political parties in creating their candidate lists can be observed. Since then,

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29 Many high-profile politicians have done this in the past. In the current government, Minister of Finance Zbyněk Stanjura, Minister of Interior Vít Rakušan, Minister of Transport Martin Kupka and Minister of Culture Martin Baxa were all successful mayors and incumbents.

30 Percentages from the total number of first-time incumbents.

The Advantage of Incumbency among Czech Mayors   Jakub Čapek

most future mayors have been leaders of their candidate lists.[31] In the following election years, the number of mayors who won the elections in the number of preferential votes gradually began to increase. However, we can still observe a relatively large number of candidates who came in worse than first or second overall in the number of total preferential votes. In some instances, a future mayor may have been overshadowed by a popular candidate who did not seek the office. The fact that the mayor was not yet well known to ordinary citizens at the time could also play an important role. This changed significantly after the first term, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Final position of the first-time incumbent mayors in the number of preferential votes in their second election[32]

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
First	24	25	37	24	32
in percentages	75.0%	80.6%	92.5%	96.0%	91.4%
Second	3	6	3	1	1
in percentages	9.4%	19.4%	7.5%	4.0%	2.9%
Third or worse	5	0	0	0	2
in percentages	15.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.7%
Total number of first-time incumbents	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Looking at the performance of mayors as first-time incumbents, there is a significant increase in those who came in first in the total number of preferential votes received. Incumbents in the position of mayor have significantly improved their performance from their first elections. While only 12 out of the 32 candidates who eventually became mayors managed to win by the number of votes received in the 2002 election, this number doubled in their first elections as incumbents. In the last three municipal elections, only 5 out of 100 incumbents were not overall election winners. This data shows the clear dominance of incumbents over other candidates and that this dominance is growing over time.

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31 The results in the largest cities of the Czech Republic are consistent with earlier findings showing that in 2014, at least 90% of elected mayors in municipalities with over 5,000 inhabitants were leaders of their candidate lists (Balík et al. 2015: 92–93).

32 An election in which they were incumbents for the first time.

Finishing first in the total number of preferential votes can be interpreted as winning the elections in the Czech system.[33] Results of the analysis indicate that a certain respect for the winner's right is still persistent in the Czech political system. It refers to the belief that the position of mayor, governor or prime minister should be occupied by the member of a winning party or the candidate with the highest number of preferential votes obtained. This is not something that is established in law. It is rather a matter of candidate and voter alignment, partially caused by the local electoral system not being completely clear to the voters (Balík 2009: 208–210). Respect for the winner in local elections in the largest Czech cities is very high. A candidate list with a candidate who became mayor for the first time won the election in 65–80% of the cases. In contrast, a candidate list with an incumbent mayor won the election 77–95% of the time.

A deeper look at the candidates who have made it to the mayor's office in recent years from a position other than first on the candidate list shows that this usually happens in two ways. One is where the head of the candidate list is a person who is expected to be mayor after the election, but unexpected personal events force them to change their mind after the election. The second, more frequent variant is when someone other than the head of the candidate list is expected to be mayor from the beginning. The populist party ANO has used this route several times. A locally well-known person was put into the position of the candidate list leader to increase the party's chances of success. After the elections, the leader did not seek the mayor's post and left it to the candidate number two or three.[34]

Incumbent mayors tend to move up on their candidate lists and often become the overall election winners regarding the votes received. This means that an increase in the number of votes received between the first and second elections should be expected.

Cases where mayors receive more votes in their second election than in their first are significantly more frequent. Of the 163 cases in which the mayors participated as first-time incumbents, there was an increase in the number of preferential votes received between the two elections occurred in 126 of them. This means there was an increase in the preferential votes received by incumbents in more than 77% of cases.

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33 The concept of winning in Czech local elections was discussed by Balík (2010: 26–27). There are two approaches. One considering the winning party as the winner of the election, and the other the candidate with the highest number of votes among all.

34 The specificity of the Czech electoral system, where the mayor is elected directly by the council, has led to some odd situations. In Opava, the number two candidate on the ANO list was nominated for the position of mayor. In response, the former mayor of Opava from ČSSD nominated the ANO number one for the position of mayor. He explained his move by saying the party leader should be the mayoral candidate. According to him, many voters fell for the impression that the leader of the candidate list should become mayor and were tricked to some extent.

Table 6: Change in the number of preferential votes for the mayors in their second elections

Year	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
Increase	29	20	28	23	26
in percentages	90.6%	64.5%	70.0%	92.0%	74.3%
Decrease	3	11	12	2	9
in percentages	9.4%	35.5%	30.0%	8.0%	25.7%
Total	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

As seen before, the 2010 and 2014 election years were not as successful, with incumbents displaying better results in only about two-thirds of the cases. This decline is similar to the drop in the number of successful incumbents in the same election years. Among incumbents in the 2010 elections, there is a relatively large number of cases where the mayor did worse in their second election than in their first election. There was also a low number of cases in that year where the mayor improved their previous result by more than 50%.

In contrast, while the number of mayors who scored worse remained similar in 2014, there was a significant increase in the number of mayors at the other end of the spectrum. This election year also saw the highest-ever increase in the votes received. The mayor of Čelákovice, Josef Pátek, and current Minister of the Interior Vít Rakušan, who was the mayor of Kolín at the time, recorded increases of nearly 150% in the number of preferential votes received. The absolute record holder in this regard is the mayor of Náchod, Jan Birke. He saw a 269% increase in votes received between the 2010 and 2014 elections. In total, 11 mayors have managed to at least double their results as first-time incumbents.

Increases in the number of votes are frequent and usually high. In contrast, declines in this regard are unusual and not so steep. Only six mayors fell by more than 25% of votes received in the period under observation, and almost half of the drops were below 10%. The record holder in this respect is the mayor of Jeseník, Zdeňka Blišťanová, whose votes fell by 43% as a first-time incumbent. This was a special case because Jeseník had lost almost 500 registered voters in the previous four years, and the council had shrunk from 25 seats to 21. This is the only observed case of a reduced municipal council and again shows that, unlike the systems with a directly elected mayor, many more variables are involved in the Czech system.

A comparison of the performance in the mayors' first and second elections clearly implies that incumbent mayors have an advantage in the Czech municipal elections. The factors influencing the increase in preferential votes received for Czech incumbent mayors can vary. Such variables include campaign funds, inferior opposing candidates, access to media and widespread awareness of their character among citizens (e.g. Bernard 2012; Freier 2011, 2015; Sloboda 2017).

Due to the database's scope, using those explanatory variables is not possible.[35] There are, however, electoral variables that can shed some light on at least part of the increase in the number of votes for the mayors in their successive elections.

Table 7: Regression model examining the effects of electoral factors on the final placement of a candidate in the election[36]

Year	Term	Estimate	StdError	tValue	PValue
2006	(Intercept)	1.178	0.953	1.236	0.222
2006	Pos	**0.208****	0.063	3.304	0.002
2006	VT	-0.008	0.017	-0.486	0.629
2006	Age	0	0.014	-0.023	0.982
2006	INCYES	0.12	0.218	0.549	0.585
2006	GDM	0.384	0.325	1.181	0.242
2010	(Intercept)	-0.311	1.625	-0.191	0.849
2010	Pos	**0.564***	0.277	2.037	0.045
2010	VT	0.007	0.025	0.263	0.793
2010	Age	0.01	0.017	0.6	0.55
2010	INCYES	-0.095	0.299	-0.318	0.752
2010	GDM	0.571	0.559	1.022	0.31
2014	(Intercept)	2.349**	0.699	3.361	0.001
2014	Pos	**0.143****	0.053	2.698	0.009
2014	VT	-0.018	0.013	-1.402	0.165
2014	Age	-0.003	0.009	-0.319	0.751
2014	INCYES	**-0.594*****	0.171	-3.475	0.001

35 As explained in the introduction and methodology – the aim of the article is not to study the factors that influence the incumbency advantage but to confirm whether it is present in the case of Czech mayors and what the possibilities for its measurement are. With this plan in mind, a database was prepared that thus includes only electoral factors.

36 < 0.001 (***) p < 0.01 (**) p < 0.05 (*)

2014	GDM	0.043	0.301	0.142	0.888
2018	(Intercept)	3.212	2.899	1.108	0.271
2018	Pos	0.335	0.6	0.559	0.578
2018	VT	0.076	0.055	1.394	0.167
2018	Age	-0.016	0.035	-0.448	0.655
2018	INCYES	**-2.864*****	0.63	-4.547	0
2018	GDM	**-2.176***	1.053	-2.066	0.042

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office
Dependent variable: FPos – Final standing in the election
Independent variables: Pos – Position on the candidate list; VT – voter turnout; Age – age of the candidate; INCYES – Incumbent (YES); GDM – Gender (Male)

A regression analysis examining the effect of several variables on the final position in the total number of votes shows that incumbency is statistically significant. In 2014 and 2018, it had a significant effect on the final position of the mayor in the number of preferential votes received. If the mayor was an incumbent, they achieved, on average, a better ranking in the total number of preferential votes received in these two election years. Position on the candidate list also has an effect, although generally lower, as can be seen from the values of the coefficients. The higher the position on the candidate list, the better the mayor's result. On the other hand, neither age nor turnout seems to be a factor.

Gender might have some influence, but in the sample of 420 cases, only 9% were women. The number of women among the incumbents is even lower than the number of women among the mayors. Situations where a woman is elected mayor but does not retain her position in subsequent elections occur often. The same analysis was conducted where the dependent variable was a log-transformed number of votes received.[37] In this case, incumbency also appears to be a significant variable (see Appendix Table 5).

Conclusions

The findings of this article strongly indicate the existence of an incumbency advantage for Czech mayors in the largest municipalities. Those findings are consistent with similar research from other countries (e.g. Ansolabehere et al. 2007; Freier 2015; Mazurkiewicz 2021; Sloboda 2017). Incumbent mayors in cities with over 10,000 inhabitants are better placed to win a mandate over their challengers, with their re-election rate averaging over 50%. Situations where a person who did not receive the highest number of votes is elected mayor only

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37   Log-transformation was used due to the large differences between the number of votes received.

to win the race four years later are very common. This conclusion corresponds with the results of other comparable analyses (Balík 2010; Vavrečková 2016; Čapek 2019, 2021).

Following Balik's approach that the winner of the election is the candidate with the highest number of preferential votes received (Balík 2010: 26–27), it can be concluded that incumbent mayors are election winners in most cases. These incumbents frequently improve on their performance from their first election. More than 75% of them saw an increase. These increases often exceed the 50% mark, and there is a larger number of incumbent mayors who have managed to win more than double the number of preferential votes when compared to their first elections. Cases where the number of votes for an incumbent mayor decreases between elections are uncommon. When they do occur, they are drops of a few units, at most a few tenths of a percent. Incumbency seems to be the most significant of the studied factors that play a role in the increase of votes between elections. Other factors, like age or gender, could play a role, but a more extensive dataset with the addition of more variables would be needed to confirm it.

These findings align with previous research from the Czech municipal (Bernard 2012; Ryšavý &bernard 2013) and regional elections (Bernard & Šafr 2016), which showed that incumbents are more likely to get re-elected. Re--election rates of Czech mayors are certainly a phenomenon worth monitoring in the future, as they may reflect on the quality of local democracy. As other researchers have shown, long-serving mayors and their leadership can have a positive impact on economic development (e.g. Calabrese & van Leeuwen 2024; García-Vega & Herce 2011). On the other hand, the persistence of incumbency could also lead to challenges such as reduced accountability and potential for corruption (e.g. Akhtari et al. 2022; Coviello & Gagliarducci 2017). A growing number of incumbents could also negatively affect the competitiveness of elections, as shown by Mazurkiewicz (2021, 2022).

The specifics of the Czech local political system, where mayors are elected by council members rather than directly by voters, must be considered. Other articles that focused on the effects of incumbency reached similar conclusions. However, the results do not compare very well because of different election settings. The findings of this article are limited to the most populous municipalities, and future research could expand the sample to smaller towns to see if similar patterns emerge. The problem of collecting data regarding the names of mayors in individual municipalities, which are not tracked by any authority, is a significant limitation.[38] Additionally, a further analysis combining more

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38 As discussed in the section dedicated to data, any major database expansion would require the work of more people, such as the 2014 project, which involved 26 students and still could not cover all the mayors from the selected elections (Balík et al. 2015: 6, 89).

socio-economic and personal factors, such as campaign funding, media access or opposition strength, could explain the re-election rates of the incumbents in more detail. Also, candidate list affiliation and its coalition potential, or candidate turnover between elections, could be included in the analysis as discussed in the article.

The unique dataset created for this article provides a foundation for further research, with several potential directions for future exploration. The next step might be a cross-state analysis, which is so far largely absent from incumbency effect research in general. Another possibility would be to expand the dataset to include a broader range of electoral trends, such as the results of all mayors. A regression discontinuity design could be applied to try to identify the causal effects of incumbency by focusing on elections with small margins between winners and losers. Alternatively, tracking how those mayors do in subsequent elections and how many are still running after losing their position would be a possibility.[39] Exploring those dimensions could enhance the understanding of the incumbency effect not only in the interesting case of the Czech local elections but in proportional electoral systems in general.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1: Number of municipalities of a given size included in the sample

Number of inhabitants	Number of cities	Percentage
10,000 – 15,000	42	32.81%
15,001 – 20,000	26	20.31%
20,001 – 30,000	26	20.31%
30,001 – 50,000	18	14.06%
over 50,000	16	12.50%
Total	128	100

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office valid as of date 1.1.2022

Appendix Table 2: Average age of the mayor in a municipality of a given size

Number of inhabitants	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
10,000 – 15,000	50.1	48.3	48.8	48.6	52.1	52.6
15,001 – 20,000	48.8	50.3	48.6	51.1	52.1	53.9
20,001 – 30,000	46.5	47.7	52.6	49.8	51.4	50.6
30,001 – 50,000	46.4	46.3	50.2	52.5	47	50.2
over 50,000	46.5	46.4	45.7	46.4	46.1	48.2
Total average	48.1	48.1	49.3	49.6	50.5	51.5

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Appendix Table 3: Proportion of female mayors in municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants

Number of inhabitants	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022
10,000 – 15,000	7.1%	7.1%	7.1%	7.1%	2.4%	7.1%
15,001 – 20,000	3.8%	7.7%	19.2%	7.7%	15.4%	19.2%
20,001 – 30,000	3.8%	7.7%	19.2%	11.5%	11.5%	7.7%
30,001 – 50,000	5.9%	29.4%	11.8%	23.5%	23.5%	23.5%
over 50,000	11.8%	17.6%	5.9%	0.0%	11.8%	17.6%
Total proportion of female mayors	6.3%	11.7%	12.5%	9.4%	10.9%	13.3%

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Appendix Table 4: Position on the electoral list in the mayor's first election

Year	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
First	22	28	40	20	32
Second	5	1	0	3	2
Third or worse	5	2	0	2	1
Total	32	31	40	25	35

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office

Appendix Table 5: Regression model examining the effects of electoral factors on the number of votes received (log-transformed)[40]

Year	Term	Estimate	StdError	tValue	PValue
2006	(Intercept)	9.129***	0.876	10.423	0
2006	Pos	-0.08	0.058	-1.378	0.173
2006	VT	0	0	-0.398	0.692
2006	Age	-0.012	0.013	-0.957	0.343
2006	INCYES	-0.122	0.2	-0.608	0.546

40 Number of votes received by the candidate was log-transformed due to the vast differences caused by the size of the municipality.

2006	GDM	-0.354	0.299	-1.185	0.241
2010	(Intercept)	8.185***	0.879	9.314	0
2010	Pos	-0.159	0.15	-1.064	0.291
2010	VT	0	0	-1.079	0.284
2010	Age	-0.003	0.009	-0.33	0.742
2010	INCYES	**0.406***	0.162	2.509	0.014
2010	GDM	0.342	0.303	1.129	0.262
2014	(Intercept)	8.187***	0.568	14.424	0
2014	Pos	-0.046	0.043	-1.059	0.293
2014	VT	0	0	-1.379	0.172
2014	Age	-0.007	0.007	-0.897	0.372
2014	INCYES	0.266	0.139	1.917	0.059
2014	GDM	0.278	0.244	1.14	0.258
2018	(Intercept)	9.519***	0.655	14.522	0
2018	Pos	-0.013	0.136	-0.094	0.925
2018	VT	0	0	-1.019	0.311
2018	Age	**-0.019***	0.008	-2.432	0.017
2018	INCYES	0.201	0.142	1.414	0.161
2018	GDM	-0.335	0.238	-1.409	0.163

Source: The author's own work on the basis of the data of the Czech Statistical Office.
Dependent variable: NVotes – Number of votes received by the candidate (log-transformed)
Independent variables: Pos - Position on the candidate list; VT - voter turnout; Age - age of the candidate; INCYES - Incumbent (YES); GDM – Gender (Male)

Possibilities of Implementing E-Voting System in Ukraine

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Abstract: There are constant risks and threats to fair elections against the background of the current crisis of democratic civic engagement and the global pursuit of convenience in the digital age. The political and institutional context in Ukraine, including wartime displacement, occupation of territories and a large diaspora abroad, requires innovative digital tools to ensure that all eligible voters can participate in elections. Therefore, the article aims to analyse the adherence to the principles of secret ballot and personal voting through alternative voting methods, such as e-voting. A four--level e-voting system is identified, having the legal, organisational, procedural and technological components. Moreover, the modern ways of securing, guaranteeing and ensuring the principles of secret ballot and personal voting in e-voting at these levels in Ukraine and abroad are clarified. To this end, the authors analyse legal approaches and electoral practice of foreign countries to determine how the substantive law is implemented in electoral procedures. It is established that the main problem of their unacceptability is the weak protection of confidentiality and the high probability of unauthorised interference with the voting procedure. However, it is possible to prevent such violations through a decentralised blockchain-based e-voting system. The article discusses the main advantages and disadvantages of using various platforms for e-voting, in particular Ethereum and the Hyperledger Fabric platform. Furthermore, the law of Ukraine is analysed concerning the possibility of using digital technologies in testing e-voting in elections and referendums.

Keywords: *electoral principles, secret ballot, personal voting, electronic electoral process, Ethereum platform, Hyperledger Fabric platform*

Introduction

In 2021, a petition was submitted to the president of Ukraine to create a voting mechanism based on blockchain technology (Electronic Petitions 2021). This petition proposed the possibility of introducing such a mechanism into the electoral system and providing the citizens of Ukraine with unique identification keys. Accordingly, such a system would make it impossible to fake, toss votes or use the voices of 'dead souls'. Apart from that, the author of the petition emphasised the possibility of using this system not only for the needs of the national vote, but also in certain regions and cities in order to resolve issues of local importance. However, this petition was not supported, gaining only 515 votes out of the 25,000 necessary. This indicates not only the citizens' lack of awareness about the opportunities offered by modern technologies, but also a certain distrust of electronic facilities that can simplify traditional methods and approaches to organising state processes.

In this regard, even in the most developed democracies of the world, where legitimate power institutions are trusted, the first concern is confidentiality. It is not only about citizens' daily activities, but also about exercising the right to vote. Given that electoral procedures include several levels (legal, organisational, procedural, technological), the starting point in their implementation is the legal level. It provides for compliance with the principles of electoral law, ensuring confidence in elections as a democratic instrument of a legitimate transfer of power. It includes international and national standards for voting (Spanos & Kantzavelou 2024).

While the traditional method of voting has a well-established universal set of principles, the e-voting alternative provokes discussion and concerns on the part of traditionalists. Thus, Kliuchkovskyi (2018) considers the role and problems of ensuring the principles of secret ballot and personal voting within electoral law to guarantee free elections. He claims that alternative voting methods weaken the guarantees of secret balloting in favour of the right to vote.

The use of blockchain for voting has attracted significant attention from foreign researchers because it increases the openness, safety and honesty of remote voting. Thus, Hajian Berenjestanaki et al. (2024) conducted a study of the advantages, challenges and impact of such systems. Moreover, they identified future areas of research. Furthermore, Horbenko et al. (2020) analysed the technical aspect of blockchain technology usage for voting. They identified a four-level system for organising and conducting e-voting. The scholars suggested, investigated and tested the two-level architecture (lower and upper levels) of the electronic blockchain voting system by physical prototyping. It was based on the research carried out by scientists from the United States, aiming to ensure protection from external interference of third-party users while operating the system (Pass, Seeman & Shelat 2017).

Moreover, Johnson (2019) argued that the potential for blockchain technologies to uphold the legitimacy of the US and EU constitutional orders is based on their accessibility, transparency, decentralisation and security. In particular, e-voting based on blockchain technology could serve as a platform for civic engagement, public debate and democratic competition, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the constitutional orders in question. In connection to this, Tokar-Ostapenko (2022) explored the legal and technical aspects of the Ukrainian version of e-voting.

Given the identification of a four-level system of e-voting, the purpose of this article is to establish ways to guarantee and ensure the implementation of the principles of secret ballot and personal voting in remote e-voting from the regulatory and technological perspectives in Ukraine and foreign countries. In accordance with the purpose, a scope of research objectives is set as follows:

- to define the architecture of blockchain voting,
- to determine whether such a system is able to protect the anonymity of e-voting,
- to analyse the prospects and threats posed by blockchain in order to comply with fundamental democratic principles related to the realisation of the right to vote and public involvement in decision-making.

Methodological framework

The first part of the study is focused on examining the electoral principles of secret ballot and personal voting. Therefore, the history of alternative voting methods is analysed. The legal and technical sides of electronic technologies application during elections is considered. Moreover, the development of the electoral law of Ukraine is analysed regarding the likelihood of using electronic technologies to prevent violations of these principles and international standards of democratic voting. In this regard, the norms enshrined in the Electoral Code of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2020), Law of Ukraine No. 1135-IX 'On the all-Ukrainian referendum' (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2023), and other legal documents regulating e-voting are considered.

The normative legal analysis involves the study of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and the Venice Commission's recommendations on the legal, functional and technical norms of e-voting, their conclusions on overcoming challenges of e-voting, compliance with international electoral principles and ensuring security when using digital technologies (Council of Europe 2005; European Parliament and the Council 2016; European Parliament and the Council 2019; Venice Commission 2004, 2018). In this context, one of the problems is to guarantee the reliability and safety of the digital means of voting. Therefore, it is important to consider the relationship among the functional, legal and technical characteristics of e-voting. To avoid massive falsifications of

voting results, a study of the lower and upper levels of the blockchain e-voting system is conducted.

In the second phase of the research, taking into account the legal, organisational, procedural and technological levels of e-voting, the ways of fixing, guaranteeing and ensuring the principles of secret ballot and personal voting in e-voting in Ukraine and foreign countries are clarified. To study the problems of using electronic technologies at all levels of the electoral process, the analysis of a decentralised blockchain-based voting system is carried out. In addition, an e-voting system on the Ethereum platform is considered. Apart from that, the analysis method was applied to specify the principles and algorithms by which the system solves the legal problem of protecting privacy using the Hyperledger Fabric platform. Moreover, the comparative method facilitates establishing the difference between these platforms, as well as their advantages and shortcomings regarding their implementation in e-voting.

A doctrinal legal analysis is applied to determine the legal and technical aspects of implementing the right to vote electronically, ensuring a blockchain-based personal and secret ballot system. Apart from that, the functional legal analysis is applied to prototype the main components of the two-level architecture of blockchain voting. Given the possibility of using automated information and telecommunication systems by the Central Election Commission of Ukraine (hereinafter – CEC), the procedure for administering the referendums and elections is difficult due to the insufficient regulation of its use. Thus, the regulatory impact analysis is employed to define problems and prospects for applying blockchain in referendums and elections in Ukraine. These methods allow for the further application of electronic technologies in the electoral process in Ukraine.

Results and discussion

Normative regulation of e-voting in the EU

There are hundreds of interpretations of democracy. Therefore, the processes of democratisation vary across different national contexts. There is no singular, universal approach to reforming former totalitarian systems that aim to establish genuine democratic institutions grounded in the rule of law (Barabash &berchenko 2019). The development of democracy as well as the standards of its observance are believed to be influenced by information and technical progress.

In this regard, alternative ways of voting, in particular postal vote, e-voting using special voting devices or remote voting through an application, are actually a victory of convenience over security. However, it is impossible to recognise the results of such a vote if the regulatory component does not provide a system

of guarantees, including technical ones, to prevent violations of generally recognised electoral principles. Otherwise, there can be no talk of any democracy (De Farias et al. 2024). Mechanical voting devices were introduced in the 19th century. Computers were introduced in the 1960s, while Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) systems were created in the 1990s and internet voting appeared after 2000 (Maurer 2020). Accordingly, Maurer (2020) notes that normative regulation of internet voting has evolved rapidly.

Thus, in Austria, it was recognised that the regulation of internet voting violated the constitution because it was not sufficiently detailed to allow members of election commissions to carry out their tasks without technical assistance. Since such regulation was not and could not be updated to meet the constitutional requirements, the implementation of online voting in Austria cannot yet be foreseen. In Switzerland, the analysis of the long experimental phase and the first-generation regulatory framework introduced in 2002 provoked an important update of the legal framework regulating e-voting in 2013. Thus, the second-generation regulation introduced new provisions that reflected a better understanding of digital technologies, namely: risk policies, verification requirements, broad control by independent and expert bodies, strict data protection, transparency requirements, etc. (Razali et al. 2024).

The recommendations of the Council of Europe on electronic voting (2005) were developed according to a similar scenario. Recent experiences in applying new regulatory provisions on e-voting in Switzerland and Estonia show the need for their further improvement in order to resolve the issue of verification or transparency. Such dynamics are interesting in the context of searching for other digital solutions. Accordingly, the EU adopted several normative documents that are related to cybersecurity and the protection of personal data in the electoral process such as Convention 108 + (Council of Europe 2018) and Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 (European Parliament and the Council 2016a). Paragraph 30 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 determines that it is possible for natural persons to be associated with online identifiers provided by a variety of devices, applications, tools and protocols. These identifiers may include, but are not limited to, internet protocol addresses, cookie identifiers and other identifiers such as radio frequency identification tags. Such data may result in the retention of digital footprints that can be used to create profiles and identify individuals when analysed with other data, such as unique identifiers and information obtained by servers (European Parliament and the Council 2016a). This stipulation may be employed to establish profiles of individual entities and ascertain their identity when coupled with distinctive identifiers and supplementary information procured from remote servers.

Furthermore, the European Parliament approved Directive (EU) 2016/1148 (European Parliament and the Council 2016b) in July 2016. In 2019, Regula-

tion (EU) 2019/881 (Cybersecurity Act) (European Parliament and the Council 2019) was adopted. Paragraphs 3 and 4 of this Cybersecurity Act prescribe taking all the required actions to improve cybersecurity in the EU to provide better protection against cyber threats to systems, digital products, communication networks, services and resources used by the general public, organisations and enterprises, i.e. small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In addition, the European Agency for Network and Information Security (ENISA) was created by Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council (EU) No. 526/2013 (European Parliament and the Council 2019). Consequently, enhancing cyber-security in the EU for SMEs and startups should involve providing the public with the access to relevant information.

Legal framework of e-voting in Ukraine

According to the degree of automation, e-voting systems can be divided into three types:
1. systems that use electronic devices to read marks from paper ballots and count votes,
2. systems that use voting machines with electronic displays and buttons (or touch-sensitive displays) instead of paper ballots, while the voting results are stored in the memory of the voting machine,
3. systems that implement remote voting via the Internet using crypto-graphic protocols (Horbenko et al. 2020).

The first and second types for e-voting are indicated in Article 18 of the Electoral Code of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2020) as a pilot project for using innovative technologies in the electoral process that may relate to voting at a polling station using technical means and software (machine voting). They can also be used to count votes by means of technical means for electronic vote counting. Moreover, they can be applied to prepare protocols on vote counting and voting results using an information and analytical system. However, the legislator warns that the conduct of these experiments should not create a false impression among voters about replacing the election procedures provided for by the Code with the procedures of the experiment or the pilot project. All other norms of the Electoral Code of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2020) are related to the traditional method of voting and do not provide any legal basis for ensuring the principles of electoral law during e-voting.

In contrast, the Law of Ukraine No. 1135-IX 'On the all-Ukrainian referendum' (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2023) enshrines the possibility of exercising the right to vote electronically. In particular, Article 13 of this law determines that at a particular all-Ukrainian referendum each voter can exercise the right to vote only once and only at one polling station by submitting a ballot paper or

by e-voting. The law states that in order to prepare e-voting and count votes at the all-Ukrainian referendum, a special e-voting station is created on a temporary basis (Part 2 of Article 38). The law also establishes that a voter can apply for one's inclusion in the voter list of a special e-voting station to the body of the State Register of Voters five days prior to the date of the election. Such an application can be submitted by the voter personally in paper form or in electronic form by means of an automated information and telecommunication system. The application in electronic form is created using a qualified electronic signature (Article 57) (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2023). Thus, it is possible to claim that the procedure for holding the all-Ukrainian referendum includes the possibility of e-voting. However, it is only outlined in general terms and does not specify the technical aspect of its implementation, the principles of cybersecurity, secret ballot or personal voting.

An initial regulatory framework was created in Ukraine for further development of the legal framework of the e-voting procedure. Accordingly, the Law of Ukraine No. 2155-VIII 'On electronic identification and electronic trust services' (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2017a) enshrines the possibility of introducing modern electronic methods of identification in Ukraine, including Mobile ID. Moreover, the Law of Ukraine No. 2163-VIII 'On the basic principles of ensuring cybersecurity of Ukraine' (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2017b) delineates the primary objectives, strategic orientations and fundamental tenets that inform the government's approach to cybersecurity. It also defines the authorities and responsibilities of state institutions in this area. Apart from that, the Law of Ukraine No. 698-V 'On the state register of voters' (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2007) specifies that the State Register of Voters is maintained in electronic form, while the application for inclusion of a person having the right to vote into the Register may be sent by him/her to the body of the Register in electronic form with a digital signature.

In addition, the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine has been operating since 2019, which developed the Diia mobile application. This application provides access to administrative services, allows tax payments, and displays digital documents. Apart from that, it is used to conduct nationwide polls. However, in 2024, Diia crashed due to overload during voting in the finals of the national selection for Eurovision, which demonstrated the technical inability to process a significant number of requests simultaneously. This experience shows another advantage of decentralised blockchain technology, which has a large bandwidth for processing user requests (Tokar-Ostapenko 2022).

Although such modern technologies increase the efficiency of voting, they involve offline voting, i.e. with voters visiting the polling station. On the contrary, remote e-voting provides an opportunity to vote without visiting a polling station. While highlighting the pros and cons of remote voting using electronic technologies, it is important to emphasise the need to combat cybersecurity threats, prevent cyber-attacks and maintain voter anonymity (Balicki & Preisner 2007).

Challenges and threats posed by e-voting

In its recommendations on the subject of e-voting, the Council of Europe makes it clear that any system of this nature must adhere to the principles that underpin democratic elections and referendums. E-voting systems must meet the same reliability and security standards as those employed in democratic elections and referenda, which do not utilise electronic means (Council of Europe 2005). Such a position would seem unambiguous if not for the various existing methods of implementing the e-voting procedure, which ensures the principles of democratic elections, with secret and personal voting being the key ones. Their violations can lead to falsification of voting results.

It should be mentioned that compared to other alternative voting methods, remote voting is more difficult to implement because it is necessary to guarantee the confidentiality and integrity of data transmitted on the Internet. In the modern world, human beings are being constantly monitored, with their actions and movements recorded: telephone conversations, communication in social networks and video surveillance in public spaces. This means that the use of the latest forms of state control should be implemented, taking into account digital technologies and violations of privacy. This is also directly related to electronic procedures for organising elections and referendums.

Voting anonymity in its electronic format can be violated because while casting a vote a voter is identified. Therefore, hypothetically, it is technologically possible to fix the content of the cast vote, constituting a direct violation of the principles of secret ballot and personal voting. From a technical perspective, there is no connection between the voter as the subject of the electoral process and the content of his/her vote. It is noteworthy that in the Netherlands, public concern about compliance with the principles of secret ballot and personal voting when using e-voting caused a refusal to use e-voting devices in 2006. Up to now, Denmark and Germany have refused to introduce e-voting technologies (Kliuchkovsky 2018).

The practice of the Russian Federation is one of the most illustrative examples of the dangers of e-voting. When introducing online voting for regional elections in Moscow, numerous violations of the principles of free expression of will and transparency were recorded. Therefore, in the Russian context, digital platforms become a tool not for expanding citizen participation but rather for control and manipulation by the authorities, which undermines the legitimacy of the electoral process (Toepfl 2016). In 2019, the Russian authorities presented an e-voting system based on blockchain technology. However, on election day, significant technical failures were recorded, while independent experts identified critical vulnerabilities in the system's security. Thus, researchers from France were able to hack into the system, recreate the encryption keys and de-anonymise voters, which contradicts the secret ballot principle (Gaudry & Golovnev 2020).

Unlike Russia, where digital tools are often used as a repressive means, Ukraine demonstrates a different attitude towards e-voting, despite the fact that the Ukrainian Internet Association also warns against the precocious implementation of e-voting. Thus, it is claimed that online elections will lead to a loss of anonymity due to possible hacking. As a result, it may cause leaks of the base of citizens' votes from the system. E-voting also poses a threat of controlling voting results by third parties, leading to a complete distortion of the results and undermining the electoral system due to loss of confidence in it (UIA 2024). In this regard, it is worth recognising that the development of the Diia application, the introduction of digital signatures and BankID create the preconditions for a more secure and legitimate introduction of e-voting in Ukraine.

Exploring the problem of ensuring the implementation of the principles of secret ballot and personal voting, Kliuchkovskyi (2018) proves that the relationship between them is unlikely to exist. Thus, voting by proxy is not personal, but the requirement of secret ballot is ensured. On the contrary, although some alternative ways of voting are personal, they do not guarantee its secrecy. In this context, it can be stated that while personal voting does not ensure secrecy, maintaining a secret ballot does not guarantee that this choice was made by the specific citizen registered as voter. The vote must be secret, but the voter must be identified. In this context, the relationship between the principles of secret ballot and free elections is traceable.

The fundamental tenet of free and fair elections is built on the principles of the freedom of expression and true vote. This is accomplished through the implementation of the principles of the secret ballot, impartial and transparent electoral procedures, fair and accurate vote counting and the subsequent declaration of the elected candidates (Mokhonchuk & Romaniuk 2019). This is done through the use of asymmetric cryptography, in particular digital signature algorithms and directed encryption (Zhan et al. 2024). To ensure complete anonymity, blind signature algorithms and homomorphic encryption are used. Such encryption does not require deciphering individual votes when counting (Horbenko et al. 2020).

Furthermore, any method of remote voting in an uncontrolled state environment creates risks for bribery and violation of the secret ballot. One of the most well-known methods of electoral fraud in the post-Soviet countries involves taking an unfilled ballot outside the voting premises and transferring it to a representative of a candidate or party. The representative would then fill out the ballot and ask other voters to throw it into the voting booth and take out a blank ballot for undue benefit. Thus, according to the circular principle, control is ensured over the voting results when bribing voters. In this case, remote voting will allow dishonest voters to vote under the direct control of the person who commits bribery.

One of the possible methods of guaranteeing the secret ballot and combating voter bribery may be the approach used in the Estonian elections. In Estonia, e-voting is possible along with traditional voting. Although during the last elections to the Riigikogu (the Estonian parliament), more than half of voters voted online, i.e. 312,181 out of 610,320 ballots cast (Vahtla 2023). In the period preceding voting, the voter is required to enter the system with either an ID card or a mobile ID, after which voting may commence. The voter's identification is eliminated from the ballot prior to its submission to the National Election Commission for the purpose of vote counting. This process is implemented with the intention of ensuring anonymity for the voter. Voters in Estonia are permitted to utilise the online portal to cast as many votes as they wish in the established pre-voting period. In accordance with the system's operational parameters, each vote is automatically canceled upon the submission of a new vote. Thus, voters are afforded the opportunity to modify their choice at any point during voting (Slinko et al. 2021). Since 2021, voters may modify their vote on voting day when digital lists of voters are introduced (Wright 2021). However, resistance to controlled e-voting will depend on the effectiveness of public surveillance and mechanisms of state control. In other words, the creation of a dependable, adaptable, transparent and secure voting system that also offers a reasonable cost-to-value ratio is a pressing necessity.

Blockchain-based voting: Principles, advantages and platforms

While modern e-voting systems raise concerns related to cybersecurity and are therefore unsuitable for use in public elections, offline voting entails considerably higher costs. Accordingly, e-voting based on blockchain technology, which is decentralised in its organisation and operation, appears. By applying blockchain technology to voting, it is possible to guarantee transparency and confidentiality as voter's data and aggregated information are maintained separately.

The distributed nature of blockchain renders it more secure than existing online voting systems that rely on a central server (Ahn 2022). In this regard, Ahn (2022) analyses the problem of fraudulent voting and suggests improving the safety and integrity of e-voting through the Ethereum system. Ethereum is a cryptocurrency, but its 'smart contracts' can be used in various financial areas where protection from unauthorised interference is required. It is possible to safely conduct business with an unknown entity, as long as the terms are explicitly defined in a blockchain-based smart contract (Bloomberg 2016).

Furthermore, a team of Indian scholars (Hajian Berenjestanaki et al. 2024) carried out research on the use of blockchain technology during e-voting. They emphasised that the principal advantages of blockchain-based voting systems are their capacity to enhance security, transparency and decentralisation. In contrast, aspects such as confidentiality, verifiability, effectiveness, trustworthiness

and audit capability are not essential. Furthermore, the researchers observed a paucity of emphasis on key factors such as availability, suitability and ease of use. While recognised, a comprehensive analysis of these aspects has not been undertaken to the same extent as that of the principal advantages inherent to the suggested solutions for e-voting systems based on blockchain. Meanwhile, their solutions for blockchain-based e-voting systems are designed with a focus on enhancing safety, openness, privacy and scalability through the utilisation of blockchain technology (Hajian Berenjestanaki et al. 2024).

Jayakumari et al. (2024) put forth a novel approach to online voting, proposing the use of blockchain technology in a hybrid cloud environment. This system was designed to address the limitations of the existing voting system. It was carried out in three stages – registration, voting and vote counting. The timestamp-based authentication protocol verifies voters and candidates digitally at the registration and voting stages. The use of smart contracts prevents third parties from intervening, while transactions are protected on the blockchain network. Further, to ensure trustworthy voting results, a Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT) is used, which prevents the voice from being changed or tossed. The results demonstrated a notable improvement in the performance of the system in comparison to the existing one. The subsequent analysis of performance was conducted with regard to the following factors: authentication delay, voice change, response time and delay.

Ukrainian developers of the technical component of decentralised e-voting argue that the physical prototyping allows asserting thoroughness and balance of the two-level architecture. They confirm its ability to ensure the fulfillment of the fundamental norms of e-voting and the security and integrity of digital technologies (Horbenko et al. 2020). The blockchain voting architectural model may be said to enhance public confidence in the veracity of services, a factor particularly salient to government institutions. Furthermore, this approach will result in a reduction in both time and expenses. In addition, such a system would effectively prevent any possibility of corrupt actions from being committed by centralised institutions. Finally, this will result in a notable enhancement to the credibility of information storage and the quality of the services.

Hence, in Ukraine, the lower (first) level of this system facilitates ensuring the implementation of all components of the electronic identification process using existing technical means and legal measures (for example, BankID, MobileID, digital signature, etc.). This will guarantee the compatibility of the voting system, the continuity of established national information systems and technologies (such as the national electronic trust services system), and the replicability of the outcomes from physical blockchain voting prototypes. The upper (second) level is designed to cast one's vote and count votes. This should guarantee the principles of democratic elections (approved by the Venice Commission), namely: independent control over the correctness of the voter

lists compilation; the potential for voting anonymously; immutability and irrefutability of voting results; easy and transparent verification of vote counting correctness, etc. (Horbenko et al. 2020).

During the full-scale armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, e-voting can become a key tool for ensuring a comprehensive and fair electoral process. In particular, one of the main advantages of e-voting is the millions of Ukrainian citizens abroad exercising their right to vote. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, more than 6 million Ukrainians were internally displaced or temporarily residing abroad as of June 2023 (Ukrinform 2025). According to the UN, more than 6 million Ukrainians had temporary protection in European countries as of the end of September 2024 (Zanuda 2024). However, the number of officially registered voters in a foreign constituency is much lower as people fleeing the war and trying to adapt to new realities are the last to think about elections. Traditional mechanisms of voting at consular offices or embassies are logistically complicated, slow and cover only a small part of the electorate.

E-voting based on modern digital identification technologies (e.g. Mobile ID, Bank ID, digital signature) can provide convenient and secure access to voting for citizens abroad without the need for physical presence at polling stations. This will increase the level of participation and ensure real representation of citizens in the political process, regardless of their location. Apart from that, e-voting can be a partial solution to the problem of holding elections in the temporarily occupied territories where physically opening polling stations is impossible. Although the full implementation of such a scenario requires additional measures for verification, security and prevention of external interference, blockchain technologies can offer mechanisms to control the integrity of the results through anonymous and one-time votes stored in a decentralised environment. In this context, it is worth considering the model of distribution of functions between the main government institutions for the implementation of e-voting in Ukraine (see Table 1).

The anonymity of blockchain-based e-voting and privacy protection is ensured by the use of one-time traceable ring signatures and a stealth address using the application-level protocol. This protocol serves as the basis for the CryptoNote family of anonymous cryptocurrencies. In this regard, Li et al. (2023) argue that the ring signature only allows the verifier to check the authenticity of the ballot and cannot reveal the voter's identity, thus protecting the voter's privacy. The essential function of a one-time traceable ring signature is to provide an immutable image that can be employed to address the issue of multiple voting and to guarantee the principle of 'one person, one vote'. A stealth address methodology concurrently creates an anonymous address through the voter's public key, consequently encrypting the data and trajectory of the ballot. Only after the conclusion of the electoral process is the voter able

Table 1: Functions of the main state institutions in the implementation of e-voting in Ukraine

Government institutions	Functions
Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine	legislative consolidation of the regulatory framework for e-voting, definition of electoral procedures and guarantees
Central Election Commission of Ukraine	organisation and administration of the elections, management of technical infrastructure and verification of security systems
Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine	technical implementation of digital identification components (Mobile ID, digital signatures, Diia), development of a mobile/web interface for voting
State Service for Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine	system security certification, audit and protection against cyber threats
National Security and Defense Council	risk management and rapid response to cybersecurity threats during elections
Civil society organisations and international observers	ensuring transparency, independent monitoring and increasing public trust in e-voting

Source: Authors

to disclose their private key for the purpose of verifying a specific candidate. Furthermore, blockchain technology provides a means of ensuring fairness and impartiality. Moreover, the blockchain provides transparency and security for the voting process, ensuring that each ballot is open and protected from forgery. In order to implement this voting system, the Hyperledger Fabric platform was employed (Li et al. 2023).

It is also possible to use the aforementioned Ethereum platform. Yet, there are differences between the Hyperledger Fabric and Ethereum platforms. Ethereum Blockchain is a fully transparent and completely decentralised network with crypto tokens, while Hyperledger Fabric is a network for dealing with regulations in a corporate environment, where data privacy, scaling, high transactional throughput and access control are required (Zfort Group 2019). Given the platform's technical characteristics and the modern need to ensure the electoral principles of secret ballot and personal voting, Hyperledger Fabric holds significant advantages for organising and conducting e-voting, as it is subject to preliminary preparation and testing. This position is supported by Stan, Barac and Rosner (2021) who regard Hyperledger Fabric as a permissive, easily customisable and integration-oriented implementation of the blockchain. In addition, this platform provides basic security aspects (for example, Sybil attack resistance) and performance measurements (for instance, block size, database performance). The difference with other platforms consists in a simple but safe architectural form that is focused on isolation and distribution of functions.

The key Council of Europe document that sets standards for e-voting is Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on standards for e-voting. This document, approved on 14 June 2017, updated the previous Recommendation of 2004 and sets legal and technical requirements for e-voting systems. As a member of the Council of Europe, Ukraine has the opportunity to adapt its national policy in the field of e-voting in accordance with the provisions of this Recommendation. They include mandatory requirements to ensure the anonymity, integrity, transparency, verifiability, accessibility and reliability of e-voting (Martínek et al. 2024).

In this regard, when developing blockchain-based e-voting systems, it is important to ensure compliance with the criteria set out in Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)5. Although blockchain systems can implement the principles of transparency and immutability, they raise questions about privacy, technical complexity and compliance with legal criteria. In this context, the choice between public and private blockchains is particularly relevant. Public blockchains like Ethereum have an open architecture where anyone can view data and interact with the system. It increases transparency but poses serious challenges to preserving voter anonymity and personal data. In this case, it is necessary to answer a number of questions related to the legal status of voters, the management and verification of the system, and the compliance of procedures with democratic norms (Cucurull et al. 2019).

In contrast, private blockchains, such as Hyperledger Fabric, offer a more flexible model where only certain nodes are authorised to validate transactions. Choosing this approach allows for more precise customisation of the system in accordance with national legislation and international standards. However, it requires identifying institutions that will support these nodes. In such a model, it is advisable to envisage that the nodes will be supported by independent state institutions (e.g. CEC, SSSCIP), international observers and possibly civil society to guarantee independence, transparency and compliance with democratic standards (Martínek & Malý 2024). Thus, for the effective implementation of blockchain-based e-voting in Ukraine, it is necessary to take into account technical aspects and ensure full compliance with legal and democratic criteria.

Conclusions

In the light of globalisation and general trends in the crisis of civic activity, which may pose a threat to the fundamental principles of constitutionalism, the struggle against traditionalism and the transition to a technological society, reevaluating the approaches to organising, administrating and conducting elections is inevitable, as they are the most important institutions of democracy.

Ukraine today faces new challenges caused by Russian full-scale aggression. In the post-war elections, the state will not have enough time to introduce e-vot-

ing, regarding its legal, organisational, procedural and technological aspects. However, the electoral and referendum legislation of 2020–2021 established the regulatory base for the possibilities of introducing digital technologies for elections.

Given the general trend towards digitalisation, Ukrainian electoral realities must correspond to such trends. The national electoral legislation, the creation of virtual user rooms, the widespread use of the Diia application and the introduction of a digital signature indicate not only technical progress, but also a desire and willingness to make operations and transactions more convenient and less expensive for Ukrainian citizens. Therefore, it is possible to assert that in Ukraine the issue of choosing an accessible and reliable platform for e-voting will become acute in the future.

The analysis shows that ensuring secret ballot, protection from cyber-attacks of voting results with personal and one-time implementation of electoral law according to the principle 'one person – one vote' are important for many countries before the implementation of e-voting. All the alternative methods of voting have sufficient shortcomings, containing risks of violation of compliance with electoral principles.

At the same time, electoral procedures should be flexible to modern realities and achievements. Based on blockchain platforms, a decentralised, secure and confidential voting procedure can be built. The Hyperledger Fabric platform can be a reliable platform for e-voting, provided that the financial and technical capabilities of the government are taken into account.

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Building Resilience Against Populism: The Crucial Role of Education in Promoting Human Dignity

PETRA KLEINDIENST

Abstract: In an era marked by the rise of populist movements, this article examines the role of education in reducing the effects of this phenomenon, particularly their often-detrimental impact on the concept of human dignity. The study investigates the ways incorporating 'education on human dignity' in the curricular activities can help counterbalance the divisive and sometimes dehumanising rhetoric of populism. The findings of the article point to the importance of education as a transformative force for making young minds able to critically assess and challenge the divisive narratives found in today's political landscape. In that context, the article discusses educational policies that could assist in fostering the realisation of human dignity in countries encountering the rise of populist ideologies. Finally, the article provides valuable insights and practical recommendations for educators and policymakers with the aim of ensuring that human dignity is viewed more holistically in education.

Keywords: *populism, education, human dignity, democracy, high schools*

Introduction

Research suggests that young people are especially susceptible to populist ideologies (Noack & Eckstein 2023). According to Foa and Mounk (2019), it might be easy to claim that young people's disaffection with democracy is simply a case of apathy, where younger citizens are disengaging from mainstream political processes. However, a more concerning interpretation is also gaining traction: initially cynical or apathetic voters may become active supporters of

anti-establishment parties and candidates who overtly challenge the founding principles of a liberal democracy, such as freedom of speech, press independence and the rule of law. Consequently, rather than rejuvenating centrist politics, the eventual mobilising of younger demographics might exacerbate political instability. Studies show that liberal democracies faced with unprecedented challenges to their legitimacy must rededicate themselves to the important need to impart their values to the younger generation (ibid.).

The article has two objectives. First, it explores the possible connection between education on human dignity and the populism phenomenon. As a fundamental value, human dignity is often strongly jeopardised in certain instances of populism. As the quintessence of humanity and a cornerstone of democracy, the promotion of human dignity is imperative. Here, education emerges as a potential mechanism for counteracting populism's adverse effects. This article accordingly centres on 'education on human dignity', proposing various methods and activities capable of enhancing the understanding and appreciation of human dignity. The goal of education on human dignity is to cultivate awareness of the intrinsic value of every individual and to foster the highest level of respect for others. Empirical research suggests that educational experiences can influence the degree to which young people are drawn to populist ideologies, although findings are often ambiguous and reveal significant gaps in existing research, as Noack and Eckstein (2023) noted. To address these deficiencies, the present article explores the potential for combating the negative facets of populism, more specifically those threatening the human dignity concept, through education on human dignity and outlines directions for future studies examining the impact of such educational initiatives on populist attitudes among youth. Numerous studies have looked at the negative aspects of populism (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Müller 2016, 2017; Galston, Hunter & Owen 2018; Halmai 2018; Urbinati 2019), while many others have pinpointed human dignity as the essence of democracy (Capps 2009; Chalmers & Ida 2007; McCrudden 2008; Dupré 2012, 2013; Kateb 2014; Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022), which is frequently undermined by populist tendencies. This is why the academic literature (Reardon 1995; Elbert 2000; Giesinger 2012; Sporre 2015; Bowie 2016; Hantzopoulos 2016; Masalesa 2022; Hoguane & Pinto 2023; Kleindienst 2024) also indicates the relevance of promoting human dignity in the educational process. Despite the extensive scholarship literature, a notable gap remains: Not one of these studies established a possible link between education on human dignity and the struggle to counter so-called hard populism. In response, this article focuses on the following research question: What does education on human dignity mean in the context of populism? This oversight in the literature suggests a critical area for future research that stresses the possible role of educational approaches in reinforcing democratic values and countering extreme populist movements. Rather than focusing on human rights education, which has an extensive body

of scholarship (Bajaj 2017), this article centres on human dignity, which, according to recent research (Kane, Killean & Tann 2024), serves as a goal, tool and foundational principle of human rights education. The contested nature of human dignity may provide opportunities to enhance human rights awareness and foster critical thinking skills within the framework of human rights education (ibid.). Reardon (1995) argues that human dignity is the central, generative principle driving human rights education.

Second, the article explores existing curricular approaches to education on human dignity. To that end, a qualitative study involving document analysis method as well as 16 semi-structured interviews with high school teachers from public and private high schools in Slovenia was conducted. The study sought to answer the research question concerning which curricular and extracurricular approaches are the most effective in educating students on human dignity in the view of teachers. While some studies (Kleindienst 2024) considered students' perceptions on this topic, our research fills a gap by examining how teachers view the matter. Teacher experience has already been explored in connection with human dignity curricula, particularly as a form of new socioemotional learning (Law 2024). This body of research suggests the need for future studies that include non-lesson-based strategies for incorporating socioemotional learning throughout the school day. These strategies might involve modelling desired behaviours during routine interactions with students, incorporating human dignity content into other subjects and integrating socioemotional elements into students' everyday interactions (ibid.). Our study extends this research by presenting a case study of Slovenia, focusing on both curricular and extracurricular approaches, a context that has not yet been explored in relation to this topic. In so doing, the study attempts to identify approaches educational institutions could take to offset the polarising and dehumanising language often associated with populism.

The phenomenon of populism

Populism is regarded as an essentially contested concept (Mudde 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Diamond (2019) states that populism has four primary characteristics: it is anti-elitist, anti-institutional, plebiscitary and ultra-majoritarian. According to Taggart (2000), populism may be compared with a chameleon since it changes to fit in with the local and ideological characteristics of its surroundings. In the political science, populism broadly refers to a range of political strategies, ideologies, styles and movements. It is often characterised as a *political style* (Moffitt & Tormey 2014; Block & Negrine 2017), especially with respect to its methods of communication (Jagers & Walgrave 2007) and persuasion (Kazin 1998). Populism typically avoids technical jargon, opting instead for slang and dramatic tactics to connect with everyday people

(Moffitt & Tormey 2014), expressing the core ideas through the media, speeches and other means (Kenny 2017; Eichengreen 2018). Prior and Van Hoef (2018) state that populism employs emotional reasoning and framing to incite anger and moral indignation against opponents and their followers. Some scholars depict populism as a *political strategy* harnessed by personalistic leaders to gain power through the support of large, mostly unorganised groups of followers. Populism can also be seen as a (*thin-centred) ideology*, separating 'the pure people' from the corrupt elite and advocating the general will of the people (Mudde 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In this perspective, populists often present or depict themselves as the genuine representatives of democracy, positioning themselves in opposition to the elites (Mudde 2007; Müller 2016), or as mass *movements* engaged in anti-establishment politics (Sikk 2009; Barr 2009). These movements claim that they represent 'the people', champion popular sovereignty and argue that their political agendas are entirely grounded in and derive their legitimacy from the people's will (Espejo 2012; Webber 2023). In summary, Donders (2020) notes that the common thread running through various definitions of populism is their anti-establishment and anti-elitist stance, with populist movements and parties claiming to represent the unheard voices of 'ordinary people' against the establishment and the elite (ibid.).

On one hand, many authors imply that the phenomenon of populism does not fit with a liberal democracy. Here, it is relevant to differentiate a democracy from a liberal democracy. In academic discourse, a democracy is frequently conceptualised in practice as a form of majoritarian democracy where the sovereign will of 'the people' is considered the paramount and often sole political influence of significance. Within the framework of a liberal democracy, the more adverse impulses of majoritarianism require a counterbalance through institutional and systemic safeguards for individual rights and for minority groups to uphold pluralist values. Many authors contend that a rejection of pluralism lies at the heart of populism (Müller 2016; Galston, Hunter & Owen 2018; Urbinati 2019) since it compromises the unity of the people and exalts them as an indivisible entity with shared values, desires and interests (Lavi 2022; Tomšič 2022). Populism often contests immigration policies and criticises pluralist values, thereby calling into question the significance of diversity and the rights of minorities (Donders 2020). Further, populism is also linked to the rejection of the traditional power division and elite-dominated political institutions like parliaments or courts (Stanley 2008; Tomšič 2022), frequently ignoring the rule of law (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Müller 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). According to Fabbrizi (2020), populism often poses a serious risk for a liberal democracy when diminishing or even eliminating the constitutional limits on the majoritarian hegemony. This shift disrupts the traditional checks-and-balances system, increasingly concentrating power in the executive branch at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches. Some authors

(Müller 2016; Weyland 2020) suggest that if populists gain sufficient power an authoritarian leadership might ensue, one that excludes those deemed not to be among the 'proper people'.

On the other hand, some authors contradict the opinions about the anti-pluralist aspects of populism, arguing that populism may in fact facilitate egalitarian practices (Frank 2017). Moreover, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) recognise inclusivity in the populism phenomenon, stating that populism can function as a democratically inclusive mechanism by actively engaging social sectors previously overlooked in other political engagements. Similarly, other scholars (Mény & Surel 2002; Laclau 2005) attribute populism with the potential to enhance institutions of political participation and improve the representative connection between politicians and citizens given its focus on vertical mechanisms of democratic accountability, such as elections and direct democratic mechanisms. Urbinati (2019) takes the argument further by stating that contemporary populism does not stem from any malevolent force and is instead an outcome of the representative and constitutional model of democracy that has provided for stable societies since the Second World War.

The contrasting negative and positive views on populism presented above can be better understood through the lens of 'hard' and 'soft' populism. This categorisation helps clarify the differing effects populism can have on democratic processes. Tomšič (2022) describes 'soft populism' as utilising populist rhetoric while adhering to constitutional norms such as the separation of powers and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. In contrast, 'hard populism' disregards these constitutional principles. Soft populism generally does not adversely affect a liberal democracy, whereas hard populism may pose significant challenges (ibid.). Similarly, Schmitter (2019) outlines the benefits held by populism like revitalising the political arena, breaking down rigid party systems, activating previously disengaged groups, and broadening political options. However, he also notes negative effects such as destabilising decision-making, fostering unrealistic expectations among citizens, sowing distrust in political systems, fostering exclusivity and intolerance, and leading to the professionalisation of politics. Tomšič (2022) argues that populism becomes particularly troubling when it is combined with personalised politics marked by a charismatic leader who makes decisions independently, often neglecting other branches of power. This concentration of power, along with a disregard for pluralist values, may culminate in semi-authoritarian practices, in turn undermining the rule of law, civil liberties and the control of media and civil society (ibid.). Turner (2024) notes that such issues become exacerbated when populism expresses racist sentiments against immigrants and refugees. Behaviours that fuel racial resentment, coupled with actions like rejecting multiculturalism, distrusting foreigners and showing hostility to racial groups and Muslims, contribute to a polarising 'Us vs. Them' dynamic (Norris & Inglehart

2016). Webber (2023) adds that populism can also be characterised by defining 'the people' through exclusionary traits like racism, religious intolerance, resistance to cultural and sexual diversity, and opposition to immigration, which contribute to a broader sense of grievance and vulnerability.

Human dignity within populist frameworks

After 1945, mentions of human dignity in international legal documents began to skyrocket, first appearing in preambles before gradually expanding to individual articles in documents. This sudden change emerged in reaction to the shocking number of civilian casualties and horrifying discoveries of the persecution of minorities during the Second World War (Chalmers & Ida 2007; Eckert 2001; McCrudden 2008; Dupré 2013). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 may be seen as the culmination of the significant historical development of the human dignity concept (McCrudden 2008) and is the basis for many legal documents. The adoption of this declaration indicated the idea that human dignity and human rights are fundamental values which must be respected in the pursuit of any policy. Further, the declaration implies that human dignity and rights belong to all human beings and that all human actions must be conducted in line with human dignity (Capps 2009). The focus on human dignity rather than human rights in our study stems from the foundational role of dignity in underpinning the framework of human rights. While human rights are codified in international law and institutional frameworks, human dignity represents a more intrinsic and universal value that transcends legal codification. Human dignity serves as the moral and philosophical basis upon which human rights are constructed (Capps 2009; McCrudden 2008). Human dignity embodies an unchanging principle of the inherent worth of every individual (Dupré 2012). By focusing on human dignity rather than on human rights, our study also seeks to address the ethical and moral dimensions of populism that are often overlooked in human rights-based frameworks.

Despite extensive scholarly attention (Capps 2009; Chalmers & Ida 2007; Dupré 2013; Barak 2013; Düwell et al. 2014; Kateb 2014; Becchi 2019; Bussey & Menuge 2021; Scharffs, Pin & Vovk 2024), the theoretical discourse on human dignity is still fraught with inconsistencies, indicating the absence of a universally accepted definition (Bagaric & Allan 2006). Some authors view the idea of human dignity as so subjective and diverse that it is simply a hollow concept (McCrudden 2008). Despite the ambiguity surrounding human dignity, authors and legal documents still acknowledge that it has an intrinsic value and is a defining characteristic of something. This defining feature of human beings is not accidental; it is universal and equal for everyone (Gluchman 2017).

The inner self forms the foundation of human dignity, but the nature of that dignity is variable and has evolved over time. In many early cultures, dignity was

attributed only to a select few, often warriors who demonstrated a willingness to risk their lives in battle. In other contexts, dignity was tied to one's membership in a larger group with shared memories and experiences. Conversely, some societies regard dignity as an inherent attribute of all human beings, rooted in their intrinsic worth as individuals with agency (Fukuyama 2018). Dignity is an 'ethos' rooted in the value accorded to human life, in the identification of shared qualities and in interrelationships (Barilan 2012). Numerous perspectives on dignity within moral and political philosophy support the human scope thesis, which asserts that dignity is attributed to human beings (Griffin 2008; Tasioulas 2013; Waldron 2012; Killmister 2020). According to the view that human dignity is inherent simply because one is a human being, the way others treat an individual should not substantially affect their sense of dignity. From this perspective, human dignity remains intact regardless of the treatment of individual by others (Somerville 1971). This could lead to the conclusion that it is impossible to strip someone of their human dignity, thus questioning the need for legal protections for it. Yet, this raises a contradiction: If human dignity cannot be compromised, why then are there numerous legal measures safeguarding it? How do we reconcile this with international human rights laws designed to protect human dignity? Human dignity should accordingly be considered to comprise two dimensions: initial and realised dignity (Kleindienst 2017). Initial dignity refers to the inherent and respectable status or intrinsic value every individual holds simply by being human. It can be described as a non-relational value of the human being since it is intelligible and independent of any interpersonal relations (Zylberman 2018). This dimension of human dignity is metaphysical, rooted in human nature, sets humans apart from other species and exists universally across different contexts and times. Realised dignity, in contrast, pertains to the extent to which an individual's dignity is actualised. It highlights that while all humans possess initial dignity, not all experience realised dignity to the same degree. Realised dignity is variable, temporary and subject to fluctuation, reflecting different levels among individuals. The loss of dignity typically refers to a reduction in one's realised dignity (Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022). Finally, realised dignity can be described as the inner sense of dignity (Fukuyama 2018) which seeks recognition. It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or do not acknowledge my existence. Self-esteem arises out of esteem by others (ibid.).

As an organisational structure, democracy prioritises both initial and realised human dignity, thereby preserving the core essence and identity of individuals while promoting their development towards self-realisation. Human dignity is at once a fundamental component and the ultimate objective of a constitutional democracy (Dupré 2012). Democracy is instituted to both safeguard and enhance human dignity and, conversely, the creation of democratic institutions

is based on the principle of human dignity, driving these institutions to advance their foundational values and cultural underpinnings. Given that human dignity encompasses the ability for autonomous decision-making, with a consideration for oneself and others, it establishes a solid foundation for individual engagement and oversight in the democratic process. Human dignity is also essential for the sustainability of a democratic system, forming the basis for collective self-governance where citizens are equal, free and actively involved.

In the context of populism, a review of the literature reveals two contrasting perspectives. On one hand, scholars argue that the appeal of populism is rooted in two fundamental human needs – the need for certainty and the need for dignity (Kruglanski, Molinario & Sensales 2021) – and that populist narratives in their various versions offer empowerment and promise a way to significance and dignity (Fiedler 2021). Similarly, Abdelal (2020) highlights that anti-systemic populist revolts in France and the United States were driven less by economic concerns and more by feelings of being left behind, stemming from a perceived loss of dignity and respect. A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage (Fukuyama 2018). According to Anderson (2018), conceptions of dignity animate our populists and shape their sense of political right and wrong. On the other hand, existing literature (Singla & Vishnivetz 2024) suggests that dehumanisation, including the erosion of human dignity, is inflicted, among other factors, by populism. Human dignity is often seen as the first value to be undermined through exclusionary rhetoric and divisive policies. Rostbøll (2023) argues that all forms of populism provide esteem and honour respect for one group in society in ways that are incompatible with the democratic norm of awarding equal respect for the dignity of each and every citizen. As acknowledged by left-wing populists like Laclau and Mouffe, populist rhetoric homogenises an otherwise diverse group to construct a collective identity of the people (Laclau 2005). According to Mckibben (2020), populism represents an attack on a person's dignity; by normalising hate and disrespect for persons or groups in society, populism presents a clear threat to two basic principles underpinning democracy: pluralism and recognition-respect. Populist movements frequently challenge the universality of human dignity by elevating the interests of 'the people' above those of marginalised groups, thereby eroding the pluralist foundations of democracy (Müller 2016; Donders 2020). Consequently, addressing human dignity directly enables a more holistic critique of populism, as it encompasses both the moral implications and societal consequences of populist ideologies. According to Fukuyama's (2018) definition of identity politics as a demand for dignity, the demand for recognition of one's identity is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today. This has direct implications for how we should deal with populism in the present.

According to Fabbrizi (2020), populism poses several problems, notably in its stance on constitutional governance. First, it becomes an issue when populists undermine the authority of constitutional or supreme courts, which are designed to protect against the overreach of majoritarian legislative and executive powers. Second, populists often argue that the legislative branch, deriving its legitimacy solely from electoral processes, should not be restricted by a higher constitutional authority. Third, populist constitutionalism argues that the constitution should not be seen as a law that transcends majoritarian politics, but as a product of political conflict and competition (ibid.). One of the key principles at risk with such a populist approach is human dignity, which posits that every individual possesses inherent worth and merits respect. Still, it is vital to recognise that 'hard' populism chiefly impacts what is known as 'realised dignity', which is inherently unstable and subject to change. Realised dignity varies among individuals, reflecting differences in the level of dignity each person experiences. In contrast, initial dignity remains untouched by external influences like populism. This type of dignity is intrinsically tied to human existence and immune to degradation or loss. It is universally inherent to all individuals, intrinsic and unalienable, meaning that it remains intact and inviolable regardless of any circumstances (Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022). It is essential to underscore that despite its immunity to external factors, initial dignity remains paramount because it constitutes the cornerstone of the democratic system from which all other democratic values and principles emanate. This inherent dignity lays the ethical and moral groundwork that underpins the principles of democracy, acting as a bulwark against the erosion of fundamental human rights and freedoms, and sustains a culture of mutual respect, which is a precondition for the flourishing of a democratic society that achieves a proper level of realised dignity. By steadfastly upholding initial dignity, democratic systems can more effectively counteract the simplifications and exclusions often propagated by populist rhetoric, thereby cultivating a more inclusive and robust political landscape.

Moreover, drawing on Laclau (2005) and Betz and Oswald (2022), the analysis of populism should commence on the individual level, suggesting that populism rises when individuals' aspirations are neglected within the current democratic structures, often due to a deficiency in political elite responsiveness. It is critical to understand that the populism–human dignity relationship is not merely antagonistic but can also be synergistic, particularly in the context of 'soft populism'. This form of populism, which respects constitutional boundaries while utilising populist rhetoric, might not only challenge the status quo but also foster broader inclusivity in the political discourse. Such inclusivity could serve to elevate previously marginalised voices, thereby enriching democratic deliberation and possibly leading to a more responsive and representative governance structure. Babones (2018) asserts that populism mandates the political

elite to acknowledge and respect the dignity of the electorate. He emphasises that for democracy to function effectively it is crucial for esteemed experts to earnestly consider the 'mundane' opinions held by ordinary citizens. It may consequently be inferred that soft populism, which employs populist rhetoric while adhering to constitutional norms such as the separation of powers, fundamental rights and freedoms, is in alignment with the concept of human dignity.

Education on human dignity and its interplay with populism

Education extends beyond the simple acquisition of information and knowledge. It functions as a conduit via which students can discover their self-identity, integrate fundamental values, develop personal responsibility and understand their distinct view on the world and identity (Saveikaitė 2014). Scholarly sources (Kristovič, Kristovič & Pangrčič 2023) advocate a holistic approach to education, suggesting that educational endeavours should foster the complete development of each individual by encompassing cognitive abilities, emotional sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation, personal accountability and spiritual values. Research (Desjardins 2015) indicates that, especially in the 21st century, following the rapid evolution and diversification of methods for generating and accessing knowledge, academic learning should be closely linked with the cultivation of students' values, goals, social roles and worldviews. Hoguane and Pinto (2023) suggest that humans can only fully realise their potential through educational processes, showing that an individual's development is profoundly influenced by the educational opportunities they are given.

Various scholars (Reardon 1995; Elbert 2000; Giesinger 2012; Sporre 2015; Bowie 2016; Hantzopoulos 2016; Masalesa 2022; Hoguane & Pinto 2023) believe that education plays a considerable role in promoting and protecting human dignity. The concept of human dignity is deeply embedded in the framework of human rights education. Educational activities that centre on human dignity have been identified as a tool for fostering understandings of human rights. This is evidenced in the range of curricula around the world that use human dignity to explore human rights (Kane, Killean & Tann 2024). Both academic literature (Reardon 1995) and international policy documents (Brander et al. 2023) emphasise its centrality. Research (Webster 2022) has indicated that human dignity could serve as a bridge for conveying human rights concepts to diverse audiences. Within this context, integrating human dignity into the educational process is seen as essential. Education that focuses on human dignity not only fosters critical thinking and tolerance but also equips future generations with the skills for peaceful conflict resolution. We subscribe to the concept of 'education on human dignity' (Kleindienst 2016), which is structured as three distinct segments. The first is education about human dignity. This component involves understanding the theoretical aspects of human

dignity and its relationship with the fundamental elements of a democratic political culture, using both explicit and implicit teaching methods. The second is education through human dignity. This focuses on experiential learning and active participation in both educational settings and community activities, including extracurricular activities, educational trips and project-based learning. While it relies on a practical teaching approach, it generally stresses more subtle (implicit) teachings of human dignity. The third is education for human dignity. Mainly occurring within classroom interactions, this section encourages reflective discussions and deliberations among students, utilising interactive techniques, creative assignments and problem-solving activities. It blends theoretical knowledge with practical teaching methods and includes both explicit and implicit elements. Ideally, this educational approach is the most effective when it builds on a solid theoretical foundation of human dignity enhanced by extensive experiential learning. Thus, this type of education provides students with the tools needed to explore the complex aspects of human dignity and cultivates a culture of respect for oneself and others (Kleindienst 2024). In 2017, the Human Dignity Curriculum, a new socioemotional learning curriculum, was introduced and piloted in various school settings across different countries (Law 2024). In human dignity curriculum students engage in a range of active learning activities, such as theatre skits, to explore, understand and express their personal interpretations of concepts like responsibility, honesty and creativity in their everyday lives. This innovative curriculum helps students recognise that understanding their own human dignity, as well as the dignity of others, is a foundational aspect of their personal identity as they develop a more inclusive worldview (Lansdown 2020). Teachers' attitudes toward the curriculum were largely positive. The research indicates that teachers prefer curricula that are focused, comprehensive, flexible and efficient, with lesson plans that provide clear instructions, prompts and engaging activities (Law 2024). This type of study has not yet been conducted in Slovenia, making this article a valuable contribution by focusing on a case study of Slovenia, a distinctive context characterised as a new democracy, as elaborated in the next chapter. By examining the integration of the concept of human dignity into curricular and extracurricular activities within the Slovenian context, this research seeks to address a significant gap in the existing literature and to explore the potential of education on human dignity in fostering socioemotional learning in this specific educational setting.

Existing research on pedagogical strategies highlights the importance of fostering critical thinking and active engagement to address the challenges posed by populism. The understanding of human dignity in educational contexts has already been explored within healthcare education settings. Macaden et al. (2017) demonstrate that equipping students to navigate the complex interplay of factors that promote or hinder dignity – routinely encountered in

practice – requires deep engagement with the concept of dignity. This involves not only understanding the underlying theory but also connecting conceptual knowledge to practical contexts, such as through experiential learning. Their study concludes that education on human dignity must occupy a well-defined place within curricula (ibid.). Additionally, existing research suggests the importance of participatory approaches in education, where students co-design curricula that reflect their perceptions of dignity (Macaden et al. 2017). These approaches include using educational materials and tools that enable students to engage in dignity 'learning' through processes of recognition, observation, experience, reflection and renewal. Moreover, storytelling has been identified as a powerful pedagogical tool (Brakke & Houska 2015), promoting moral and ethical development by fostering empathy and understanding of diverse experiences (Al-Hawamleh 2019). This approach is particularly relevant for topics such as human dignity in the context of populism. Furthermore, according to the students, human dignity should not be treated as a 'one-off' topic, addressed in a single lecture – for example, during the first year – and then disregarded. Instead, student nurses emphasise the importance of ongoing reflection and consideration of dignity as essential for both their personal and professional development (Macaden et al. 2017). This aligns with the concept of humanising pedagogy, which emphasises that the full development of the person is essential for humanisation. The journey toward humanisation is both an individual and collective effort aimed at cultivating critical consciousness. By fostering critical reflection and action, teachers can transform the structures that hinder both their own and others' humanness, thereby facilitating liberation for all. In this context, teachers hold the responsibility of promoting a more fully human world through their pedagogical principles and practices, embedding dignity not merely as a theoretical concept but as a lived reality within the educational experience (Salazar 2013). By employing pedagogical strategies within the context of education on human dignity – such as participatory learning, storytelling and critical reflection – teachers can equip students with the tools needed to resist the dangers of populism. This approach not only deepens students' understanding of dignity but also empowers them to advocate for the realisation of their own dignity and the dignity rights of others in a complex societal landscape.

Research framework

The research presented in this article encompasses a case study of Slovenia. We decided to conduct this research based on case study as the in-depth understanding gained from case studies provides particularly rich material for developing theoretical ideas (Ragin 2007). Slovenia is an example of a country with a short democratic tradition. Slovenia underwent democratisation during the third wave of democracies (Huntington 1993) and, as a post-communist country,

falls among the 'new democracies'. In new democracies, a democratic political culture is considered to be an especially important factor for the existence of a democratic system, along with the formal presence of democratic institutions (Norris & Inglehart 2016; Diamond 1999). Many scholars point to the instability of post-communist democratic systems (see, for example, Przeworski 1991). Diamond (1999) argues that governance norms in new democracies were not well established, making power susceptible to abuse. The reality is that post-communist countries in Europe face not only the process of democratic consolidation but also their development in an environment where rapid technological advancement and new communication practices are transforming the way politics is conducted. These countries are dealing with the integration of citizens into (democratic) politics, which is more individualised, fragmented and commercialised than ever before (Pettai 2007). This makes Slovenia a highly interesting case study for the purposes of our research.

The research was conducted in the Goriška region. Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2022) show that the region is inhabited by 118,202 individuals, representing around 6% of the country's total population. Spanning 2,325 square kilometres, Goriška region accounts for 11.47% of Slovenia's total territory and comprises thirteen municipalities. In the 2022/23 academic year, the region had a total of 4,240 secondary school students (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia 2023). Among the eleven secondary schools offering nationally accredited programmes, seven provide both general and technical secondary education, as specified by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The focus of our research was restricted to general high schools within this framework.

We selected a purposive sampling method. The findings based on this purposive sample are not generalisations that apply to the entire population but are specific to our studied purposive sample (Engel & Schutt 2009), which represents a limitation of our research. Our empirical research considered high school teachers from the Goriška region. This cohort comprised teachers from two public high schools and one private (Catholic) high school. We conducted a total of sixteen interviews – ten with public high school teachers and six with their counterparts at the private institution. The central research question guiding this research, as mentioned in the introduction, was further divided into three research sub-questions: a) *How frequently and in what manner do high school teachers mention and integrate the concept of human dignity into the teaching process? b) Do they convey knowledge about human dignity explicitly or implicitly? c) Which curricular approaches and activities do teachers perceive as the most effective for educating students on human dignity*?

The research utilised a qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured interviews. Given that the objective was to capture as comprehensive and profound an understanding of the studied issue as possible, we deemed the inter-

view method especially suitable. The interview is widely recognised as one of the most effective means by which researchers strive to comprehend their subjects (Fontana & Frey 1994). Semi-structured interviews facilitated adherence to the core focus of our research through the use of roughly predefined questions or themes (Galletta 2013). This approach also provided the possibility of either skipping over or adding questions and asking more sub-questions, ensuring openness to a broad spectrum of data concerning the area of study beyond the aspects that initially piqued our interest (Mesec 1998). Considering that education on human dignity remains a largely under-researched issue, we prepared for the eventuality of unanticipated responses, which might prompt further inquiries or the exclusion of certain preconceived questions. Consequently, we found the method of semi-structured interviews to be eminently suitable for this investigation. Throughout the study, we employed an eclectic approach to the research problem, while keeping our focus firmly on the principal research question. Teachers of history (all four grades), sociology (second and third grades), philosophy (fourth grade), Slovenian language (all four grades), and religion and culture (all four grades) from general high schools in the Goriška region were invited to participate in the research.

Document analysis: Research results and interpretation

This study employed a document analysis method, examining the curricula of five subjects: Slovenian language, philosophy, sociology, history, and religion and culture. The selection focused on subjects thematically connected to human dignity.

Subjects

1. Sociology
   - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the sociology curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: The theme is reflected through
     - Socialisation and identity formation, emphasising the respect for diverse cultural and social identities.
     - Discussions on social inequalities, addressing how stratification impacts individual value and roles in society.
     - Democracy and the rule of law, which indirectly promote awareness of the dignity of all citizens as a foundation of democratic principles.
   - Example: The chapter on social inequalities includes an analysis of the impact of social exclusion on individuals and groups.

2. History
   - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the history curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: The theme appears through
     - Emphasis on historical movements for human rights and social justice.
     - Understanding historical processes grounded in equality and freedom as fundamental human values.
   - Example: The coverage of civil rights movements highlights how the principles of human dignity were pivotal in driving social change.

3. Philosophy
   - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the philosophy curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: Addressed in discussions on ethics, moral responsibility and concepts of human nature as the foundation of respect for individuals.
   - Example: Examination of Kantian ethics, which underscores the idea of humanity as an end in itself.

4. Slovenian Language
   - Explicit mention of dignity: There are no direct mentions of human dignity in the Slovenian curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: Reflected in the promotion of respect for the language and cultural heritage as a basis for expressing and preserving human identity and integrity.
   - Example: Literary works exploring themes of solidarity, equality and human value.

5. Religion and Culture
   - Explicit mention of dignity: Human dignity is not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum.
   - Implicit mention of dignity: Indirectly addressed through
     - Personal and social values: Emphasising respect for others and fostering interfaith dialogue.
     - Theological concepts: Linking dignity to broader discussions about human value and responsibility.
     - Tolerance and coexistence: Promoting understanding and acceptance across cultural and religious differences.

- Examples:
  - Interdisciplinary integration: Development of intercultural and interfaith dialogue in connection with history and philosophy to deepen students' understanding of dignity.
  - Practical application of faith: Activities exploring religious rituals and symbols, teaching students to respect the practices of others and indirectly promoting dignity.
  - Values of solidarity and coexistence: Projects on solidarity and discussions on social exclusion provide practical experiences of how dignity can be realised in everyday life.

The theme of human dignity is not explicitly addressed in any of the analysed curricula. Instead, it is implicitly integrated into various subjects through related themes such as social values, ethics, human rights, solidarity and respect for diversity. Sociology and philosophy offer rich opportunities for implicit discussions on dignity through their focus on social justice, ethical frameworks and human behaviour. History and Slovenian language approach dignity within broader cultural and societal contexts, examining historical milestones and literary works that indirectly emphasise its importance.

Furthermore, the comparative research (Kleindienst 2021) indicates the relevance of the impact of state regulations on the promotion of human dignity. The fact that Californian private high schools are less constrained by federal, state and local regulations and standards (than California public high schools, which are more strongly bound to such regulations and standards) allows curricula in private high schools to be more flexible than in public high schools. This is partly due to the fact that private high schools are not funded by the state. Since Catholic private high schools in California hold greater autonomy in curriculum design than their public school counterparts, they are characterised by a greater degree of including topics on human dignity than public schools (ibid.).

In contrast, Slovenia, both in public and private high schools, is strongly bound by national guidelines when designing curricula, leaving limited room for autonomy in curriculum development. As a result, the inclusion of topics such as human dignity is largely dictated by the centralised educational framework, reducing the ability of individual schools to adapt or expand their curricular offerings to address such themes more comprehensively.

Semi-structured interviews: Research results and interpretation

In this section, we present the results of the semi-structured interviews conducted with secondary school teachers, along with an interpretation of their responses. The findings provide insights into how teachers address the theme of human dignity in their teaching practices and the challenges they encounter.

For a more structured presentation of the interview questions and a summary of responses, refer to Annex 1 of this article.

At the outset of the research, we investigated the frequency and manner in which the teachers mention and integrate the theme of dignity in their lessons, and whether they conveyed knowledge about human dignity explicitly (directly) or implicitly (indirectly) during class sessions. The teachers' responses revealed that human dignity is seldom mentioned explicitly within school content; instead, it is predominantly referred to implicitly, with thirteen of the sixteen interviewees included in the study confirming at least the implicit incorporation of the human dignity theme into the educational process. Further, among those, three interviewees made explicit references to human dignity – two from the private school and one from the public school – each of whom also utilised both explicit and implicit methods to address the subject of human dignity during lessons. This approach is exemplified by the following statement made by an interviewee:

> In my lessons, I explain that dignity means never doing to someone else what you wouldn't want done to you. Dignity is about being human. Origin doesn't matter – we're all equal. We also link this to the philosophy of Christianity, the foundations of Western societies. Even though I sometimes address the term dignity directly, I don't always use the term, but rather talk more about being human as a humane being. We also discuss this during class hours, like about helping each other out, fostering a culture of kindness, respect. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 3)

The research findings reveal that the teachers involved in the study chiefly employ an implicit method of imparting knowledge about human dignity. This approach is particularly evident within the high school subjects history, Slovenian language, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and religion and culture. The latter is only conducted at the private school included in the research. The presence of implicit education about human dignity is illustrated by the following teacher statements:

> Human dignity as a concept kinda pops up indirectly in history and sociology, you know, a bit blurry, and in philosophy too. (Teacher at a private high school, Slovenia, Interview 11)

> We don't really have this term in the curriculum, and it's not mentioned, so it's not really talked about as such, but I gotta say we do talk a lot about stuff that indirectly covers this concept. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 13)

The last statement is crucial because it highlights that the curricula do not explicitly address the topic of human dignity, a fact confirmed by all of the interviewees. The private school in Slovenia included in the research, aside from offering the subject religion and culture, follows almost the same curricula as public schools. Therefore, we did not anticipate significant differences between public and private schools in the area of education about human dignity before conducting the research. References to human dignity are thus absent from the curricula at both the private and public schools involved in the study, suggesting that any incorporation of this theme is generally the result of individual teacher initiative, as shown by the following statement by an interviewee: 'I feel like it's largely left to the teacher's discretion how important or unimportant this is... it really depends on how you, as a teacher, feel it's important to highlight this to the students' (Teacher at a private high school, Slovenia, Interview 4). The research also reveals that the high school teachers feel considerable autonomy in this regard: 'Fortunately, in philosophy, it's up to the teacher's preference what to focus on' (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 7).

During the interviews, we inquired about the content via which implicit education on human dignity is conducted. The most prevalent topics the teachers associate with human dignity (either explicitly or implicitly) include:

Psychology: This involves discussions on interpersonal relationships, communication, experiments in psychological science, associated human rights violations, prosocial behaviour and emotions.

Slovenian Language: The analysis of literary texts, focusing on recognising their ethical dimensions and evaluating those aspects.

History: Topics covered include ancient democracy, the concept of slavery (from patriarchal to Oriental and classical Roman, extending to modern forms of slavery related to human dependency and the degradation of human dignity), the Enlightenment, bourgeois society theories, wars, revolutions, the rule of law, separation of powers and undemocratic political systems.

Sociology: Exploration of the dignity of the body, social inequality, poverty, religion, war, norms and values, friendship, human rights and euthanasia.

Philosophy: Focuses mostly on ethics.

Religion and Culture: This subject covers topics such as humanity created in the image of God, human rights, the uniqueness of the human being and personal freedom. The subject of religion and culture is not offered at public high schools in Slovenia. Still, one can find examples of practices regarding the implementation of similar school subjects in other countries (Sweden, Norway, England, France) where students receive education in the field of religions, commonly referred to as religious education (for example, see Sporre 2015).

During the research, considerable attention was paid to the perspectives of three teachers who underscored the inadequacy of the fact that education on human dignity was solely implicit and revealed the need for explicit instruc-

tion on the subject. Further, one interviewee observed that simply mentioning human dignity directly is insufficient and does not produce positive outcomes. Instead, a more profound theorisation of human dignity is essential. Absent such depth, it is advisable to refrain from mentioning human dignity in teaching altogether because this superficial approach can produce more negative than positive effects. This viewpoint is exemplified by the following statement by a teacher:

> Just throwing out the word 'dignity' isn't gonna cut it. We gotta dig deep into it, or not bother at all, otherwise, we teachers just look like a bunch of phonies. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 5)

This statement shows the difficulties students encounter in grasping the concept of human dignity, as also evidenced by the remarks of six interviewees. For instance, one noted:

> In history class, we talk straight up about how dignity gets violated in wars, revolutions, concentration camps, and the massacres after a war. But just dropping those facts doesn't mean the students really get what dignity is all about. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 6)

This observation corroborates the previously noted inadequacy of merely explicitly mentioning human dignity, which proves to be insufficient for students to fully understand the concept.

In summary, explicit education about human dignity within high school subjects is infrequent and occurs only in a limited number of instances; the dominant method is the implicit transfer of knowledge in this field. This inclusion of human dignity topics in school subjects is slightly more stressed in the private school involved in the study than in the public schools. One reason cited by some teachers for avoiding explicit mentions of human dignity during lessons is their own lack of understanding of the true meaning of human dignity or insufficient knowledge about this concept. Teachers often implicitly convey the importance of human dignity through various examples which in their view is the simplest method due to their uncertainty about 'what would be understood under the concept of human dignity' (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 5). Theorising about human dignity is perceived by teachers as challenging: 'If I had to present the concept of human dignity in a lesson in a way that is just theoretical, I don't know if I could do that now. I wouldn't be able to' (Teacher at a private high school, Slovenia, Interview 14). We may conclude from this that the first step in the effective education of students about human dignity is not merely incorporating this topic into school content, but initially educating teachers on the concept of human dignity, its significance, relevance

and developing teachers' competencies regarding possible ways of transmitting knowledge about this concept.

The interview responses suggest that some teachers consciously eschew most forms of education on human dignity, both explicit and implicit. Even though these cases are infrequent, they were exclusively observed in the public schools, not the private school involved in the study. Deliberate avoidance of all forms of education on human dignity was identified among three interviewees who responded quite negatively to inquiries about whether they ever directly or indirectly mention the concept of human dignity in their subjects. One of these interviewees asserted that incorporating human dignity into educational content is completely irrational. He argued that teaching about violations of values, ethics, human rights and related themes essentially amounts to moralising, which is not received positively by students:

> How am I supposed to explain that human dignity is a value when it isn't? I can't theorise about something that is being devalued and trampled before everyone's eyes

> … Talking about human dignity comes off as moralising. You end up sounding like someone who is appalled and complains, and that's fundamentally not a good thing to do. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 7)

The last statement was made by a high school philosophy teacher and is relatively surprising. Given that human dignity is a quintessential philosophical concept (Riley 2019) deeply intertwined with numerous topics within the subject of philosophy, it would be both logical and appropriate to integrate it into the teaching of philosophy. Another interviewee, expressing a similar sentiment, even described teaching about human dignity as irresponsible:

> To talk and teach about human dignity in a world where it is completely trampled would be cynical and irresponsible. How can I talk about dignity in a world where many people have trampled their own dignity and that of others, yet they are still top politicians and business leaders? (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 8)

Teachers who consciously avoid addressing human dignity in their teaching may not do so out of a lack of interest or understanding of the topic but due to a profound scepticism about its relevance or feasibility in the contemporary world. This scepticism often stems from a perceived disconnect between the ideals of dignity and the socio-political realities students encounter. In contexts where students view discussions of dignity as abstract, moralising or even hypocritical – especially when juxtaposed with the systemic contradictions they observe

in society – teachers may feel ill-equipped to present the concept in a way that resonates authentically. Teachers may struggle to reconcile the aspirational nature of dignity with the pervasive violations of this principle in global systems, politics and even local communities. Such violations, often widely publicised, can lead to cynicism among students, who may question the sincerity of discussions about dignity in a world where it is so frequently undermined.

To address these challenges, it is essential to integrate the broader societal context into educational discussions on human dignity. Teachers should not shy away from systemic violations of dignity; rather, these instances should serve as critical entry points for discussion. By framing such violations as opportunities for analysis, teachers can empower students to explore the underlying causes and implications of dignity's erosion. For instance, examining historical and contemporary examples of dignity violations – such as systemic inequality, discrimination and abuses of power – can help students understand the structural dimensions of dignity and its potential for restoration through individual and collective action.

Moreover, fostering an open dialogue among teachers about the complexities of teaching human dignity is crucial. Professional learning communities or interdisciplinary workshops could provide platforms for teachers to share their experiences, strategies and challenges. These spaces would allow teachers to collaboratively develop pedagogical approaches that balance theoretical exploration with practical relevance, ensuring that discussions about dignity are neither overly abstract nor dismissively simplistic.

Addressing students' scepticism is equally important. Teachers might consider grounding their discussions in relatable, real-world scenarios that highlight both the fragility and resilience of dignity. For instance, exploring narratives of individuals or groups who have fought to uphold their dignity in the face of adversity can humanise the concept and inspire critical reflection. Such narratives not only make the topic more accessible but also challenge students to think critically about their own roles in fostering a culture of dignity.

From the foregoing, we can place the reasons for the absence of (particularly explicit) education on human dignity in high schools in three core categories. First, from an organisational perspective, a central reason for the lack (both explicit and to some degree implicit) of such education is the exclusion of the theme of human dignity from high school curricula. The interviews also reveal that teachers possess considerable discretion in deciding whether to integrate the topic of human dignity into their lessons. A significant barrier here is the existing shortage of class hours, which hampers the possibility of delivering sufficiently in-depth instruction on the required curricular content. It is important to acknowledge that mere curricular modifications would not necessarily lead to substantive changes in this area. Simply including human dignity in curricula will not ensure that the instruction will be any more than

rote teaching. A meaningful transformation in this area calls for embedding the importance of educating about human dignity in the consciousness and ethical foundations of teachers.

Second, some teachers shy away from explicitly mentioning and deeply theorising about human dignity due to their own misunderstandings of the concept. The term 'dignity' is frequently employed so vaguely that its mention rarely prompts reflection on its true meaning. Owing to this confusion, many teachers opt to subtly hint at the significance of human dignity through various examples rather than by directly addressing it. Effective solutions could involve comprehensive training for teachers on the concept of human dignity.

Third, a minority of teachers avoid both explicit and implicit education on human dignity, viewing it as moralising. These interviewees believe that by teaching about human dignity they inadvertently discredit themselves as students may see them as moralists or as individuals who lament and criticise the contemporary politico-social circumstances. These teachers regard human dignity as a concept which is so devalued that it exists solely in theory and cannot be applied in practice. The disconnection between theory and practice, which impedes the actualisation of theoretical principles, thus leads these teachers to eschew education on human dignity, considering it to be both cynical and irresponsible. This third reason is specific to public school education, noting that no analogous rationale was observed at the private school, likely due to the already deep integration of moral principles and values within the education, atmosphere and ethos of the Catholic private school included in the study.

The research shows that in certain rare cases at both private and public schools in Slovenia explicit mentions of human dignity are made during secondary education. Nevertheless, there is generally an almost complete absence of direct theorising on human dignity. This concept is often associated with content that encompasses an ethical dimension. The most common method of explaining the meaning of human dignity in the schools included in the study is through examples. Notably, these explanations typically do not rely on current examples from contemporary social practice (as students might mainly encounter in the media), but through historical events (for instance, in history), literary texts, myths (for instance, in Slovenian language) and similar sources. This suggests that the implicit mode of education on human dignity dominates. Surprisingly, at some schools the meaning of human dignity is least frequently explained (both explicitly and implicitly) in subjects that, in principle, are closest to this content, such as philosophy. The findings reveal a high level of autonomy among high school teachers in selecting educational content, which could hold negative implications for education on human dignity. Consequently, there is a risk that students may only encounter the theme of human dignity to a limited extent in their secondary education, thereby diminishing their opportunity to fully understand this concept.

Based on the analysis of the interviews, particularly the statements of eight respondents, it is evident that presenting and conveying real stories of individuals who have endured severe violations of their (realised) dignity is considered to be one of the more effective educational approaches and methods. This assertion is supported by the statement of a teacher below:

> With this story, I achieved something that rarely happens in class – students listened for 40 minutes without stirring. The story really touched them. Daily teaching about ways of living only triggers cynical remarks from students, the waving of hands, or they don't even listen. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 10)

In this context, nine teachers highlighted inviting guest speakers from practical fields as a good way of capturing the students' attention and as a more effective method for educating on human dignity. One teacher explained this in the following way:

> It seems to me that such topics at least momentarily resonate with students when a certain guest comes to the class. Recently, for example, we had a young man from a care and work centre visit us. He had suffered a stroke due to a misguided lifestyle, drugs and alcoholism. We are well aware of how such patients are stigmatised in today's society, which is a clear violation of human dignity. This young man is now recovering. He is still legally incapacitated, but is undergoing treatment with the help of professionals. (Teacher at a public high school, Slovenia, Interview 2)

Among the least effective methods is presenting human dignity in a political context, as confirmed by twelve of the sixteen interviewees. This principally refers to the depiction of human dignity within the framework of democratic political discourse, presenting human dignity as the essence of democracy, especially in connection with any political topics. Due to the growing distrust in political institutions and the negative connotations of political actions among students, teachers perceive political topics as unnecessary and unhelpful because current political actions are believed to be intertwined with low functional integrity. Teachers note that students view the political system as inefficient, with political actors tailoring their decisions and actions to their immediate benefits rather than governing as they should; politics is seen as far removed from its intended purpose. This attitude among youth has also been identified by other studies (Foa & Mounk 2019) that indicate dissatisfaction among the young and their apathy regarding democracy and mainstream political processes. Therefore, according to teachers, education on human dignity is more effective when initially discussed as something with a strong personal connotation, i.e.

presenting human dignity as the essence of every human being, as something that belongs to every individual simply because they are human. Educational approaches need to engage students' emotions and their personal life sphere in general through discussions on relevant topics. This conclusion is supported by the statements of twelve of the sixteen interviewees.

However, while there has been a noted decline in trust in political institutions, this does not preclude the possibility of making meaningful connections between policies that protect the most vulnerable and wider discourses on human dignity. Such integration is both possible and desirable, as it encourages a deeper understanding of how systemic factors influence personal experiences and vice versa. Policies aimed at protecting vulnerable populations provide tangible examples of how the concept of human dignity can be operationalised at the societal level. For instance, anti-discrimination laws, inclusive education initiatives and support systems for marginalised groups serve as frameworks that uphold dignity. These policies demonstrate how political institutions can translate abstract principles into actionable protections, reinforcing the idea that human dignity is not just an ethical ideal but also a societal commitment. The example of the guest speaker referred to in this article illustrates how personal narratives can bridge the gap between individual dignity and systemic support. This guest, who had overcome significant life challenges with the help of institutional frameworks, exemplifies how policies designed to assist vulnerable groups can restore and uphold dignity. Expanding on this example, teachers could highlight the interconnectedness of personal stories and the broader political systems that enable recovery and inclusion.

Conclusions

Populism often undermines human dignity through exclusionary practices and rhetoric that marginalise certain groups while homogenising others to create an imagined collective identity. The emphasis on the will of 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite' often leads to the erosion of pluralism and democratic norms. By embedding human dignity into educational frameworks, schools can provide students with the intellectual tools to recognise and critically evaluate such narratives. By fostering critical thinking, socio-emotional learning and a deeper understanding of dignity as an intrinsic and universal value, education becomes a transformative force in building resilience against the erosion of democratic principles.

The potential for education on human dignity to mitigate the negative impacts of populism lies in its ability to reinforce democratic principles and promote a culture of mutual respect. By embedding these principles in the education system, societies can cultivate a more informed, empathetic and resilient citizenry capable of sustaining the democratic ideals that uphold human dignity

and counter the divisive forces of populism. As the normative architecture of democracy derives from the concept of human dignity, the institutions of this very type of political setting are designed to protect the dignity of its people. The relationship between the institutional system and the cultural platform of society is thus mutually reinforcing (Kleindienst & Tomšič 2022). Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of human dignity education on students' political attitudes and resilience against populist ideologies.

The study reveals that the concept of human dignity is seldom explicitly mentioned in the high school process in Slovenia. This finding is in line with the educational trend where abstract concepts like dignity are taught indirectly (Saeverot 2022) – that is, they are often embedded within broader ethical or historical discussions rather than being addressed directly. The implicit approach allows teachers to weave the concept of dignity into various subjects without dedicating specific lessons to it. While beneficial in providing a holistic view, this method might lead to varying levels of understanding among students depending on the teacher's interpretation and emphasis on the concept.

The preference for implicit education on human dignity might stem from several factors. First, the concept's abstract nature can make it challenging to teach directly. Teachers may feel more comfortable embedding discussions of dignity within concrete examples, such as historical events or literary texts where the concept can be contextualised. Still, this approach has its limitations. Without explicit discussions, students may fail to grasp the full significance of human dignity, reducing it to a peripheral issue rather than a central ethical principle. This means that for a more comprehensive understanding, there is a need for both explicit education and innovative teaching methods that resonate emotionally and personally with students. Addressing these educational challenges can significantly enhance students' grasp of human dignity, preparing them to appreciate and uphold this fundamental principle in their personal and societal interactions.

The effectiveness of real-life stories and guest speakers highlights the importance of contextual and experiential learning. These methods make the concept of dignity tangible and relatable for students. For instance, hearing firsthand from individuals who have had their dignity violated personalises the issue, making it more impactful than abstract discussions. This aligns with educational theories stressing that the importance of emotionally engaging students in schoolwork has positive affects towards school work in general and been found to be related to overall development in adolescence (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong 2008; Debnam et al. 2014).

The low effectiveness of teaching dignity within a political context may be attributed to the current socio-political climate. The rising distrust in political institutions and perception of political actions as self-serving make students cynical about political discussions. This result is consistent with existing re-

search (Foa & Mounk 2019), which reveals dissatisfaction and apathy among young people regarding democracy and political topics. Among other things, this points to the danger of young people's susceptibility to populist ideologies, as noted in other studies (Noack & Eckstein 2023). This suggests that if education on human dignity is to be more effective, it must be separated from the negative connotations associated with contemporary politics and instead be rooted in universally relatable human experiences.

To conclude, the research findings lead to several good practice suggestions in the field of education. First, there is a need for comprehensive *training for teachers* on the concept of human dignity. Teachers should be equipped with both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies to teach this concept explicitly and effectively. This could include workshops, seminars and the development of teaching materials that focus specifically on human dignity. Second, opportunities exist for *curriculum improvements*. While integrating human dignity into existing subjects is beneficial, room should also be given for explicit discussions. Curriculum developers might consider incorporating dedicated modules or lessons on human dignity that can provide a foundational understanding before integrating it into broader topics. Third, *engagement through stories and invited speakers* should be at the forefront. Schools should utilise real-life stories and invite guest speakers to discuss issues related to human dignity. This approach not only captures students' attention but also helps them see the real-world relevance of what they are learning. Additionally, given the identified cynicism concerning political discussions, teachers should find *ways to discuss human dignity that circumvent political biases*. Focusing on universal human rights and ethical principles rather than contemporary political scenarios could reduce students' resistance and add to their engagement. However, teachers should embrace systemic violations of dignity as essential entry points for meaningful discussion. These instances, though challenging, provide valuable opportunities for students to critically examine the underlying structures and forces that perpetuate inequality, discrimination and oppression. By directly addressing such violations, teachers can move beyond surface-level discussions, fostering deeper understanding and engagement with the concept of dignity. By encouraging students to grapple with contradictions and complexities, teachers can transform scepticism into a valuable tool for deeper understanding and active participation in societal change.

To deepen our understanding of how students internalise the concept of human dignity, future research should prioritise qualitative methodologies, such as focus group discussions. These methods can yield valuable insights into students' perceptions, experiences and the cognitive and emotional processes through which they engage with the concept of human dignity.

Additionally, comparative studies are recommended to explore how different education systems and curricula address human dignity and their effective-

ness in countering populist rhetoric. This could include comparisons between countries with varying levels of populist influence and differing educational approaches. This research is limited by its focus on a case study of Slovenia. While the in-depth exploration of the Slovenian context provides valuable insights into the integration of human dignity in educational curricula, it is important to acknowledge that the findings cannot be generalised to other countries or educational systems. The unique socio-political and cultural characteristics of Slovenia may shape the outcomes in ways that differ from those in other contexts. Future research should consider comparative studies across multiple countries to better understand the broader applicability and variability of these findings.

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List of Interviews

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Interview 10, 20 September 2020

Interview 11, 1 December 2016

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EU Energy Transformation and Diversification: Energy Security in the Context of Geopolitical Changes

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Abstract: The presented topic deals with the transformation and diversification of the EU energy sector. Energy security is examined in the context of geopolitical changes and viewed through the lens of the interdependence between the EU and Russia in the import and export of fossil fuels. The topic is studied on the demand side and on the supply side. The political element plays a fundamental role in the territorial structure of energy flows. The descriptive analysis employed two case studies, which illustrated the transformation of the EU energy mix as well as the extent of the EU's import dependence on Russian gas. It is possible to observe the (a)symmetry of mutual dependence in the context of energy transformation. The key theme of the article is the assessment of EU energy security based on changes in energy resource flows through the lens of geopolitical changes. The research has demonstrated the need for a dramatic change in the EU energy mix, one which will reduce reliance on fossil fuels and increase the role of renewable energy sources. This trend is positive for the diversification of fossil fuel imports to the EU. Additionally, proposals and recommendations are put forward to help strengthen the EU's energy security in the future.

Keywords: *Energy transformation, diversification, energy security, geopolitical changes, European Union, Russia*

Introduction

Securing stable and safe supply of energy resources is currently one of the main tasks of state governments. The basis of the study is to clarify changes in

energy flows (with a focus on oil and natural gas) with implications for the EU based on economic and political-security analyses. As part of increasing energy security related to fossil fuels, the topic is implemented on two main levels: the demand side and the supply side. On the supply side, it is about ensuring long--term supplies of primary energy. Attention is also focused on the diversified structure of suppliers and oil and gas. On the demand side, there is an effort to reduce the consumption of certain types of energy, especially oil and natural gas, which continue to represent the main challenge for eliminating dependence on supplies from unstable regions, especially Russia.

An important localisation factor from an economic point of view is the energy intensity of countries. As a political element, the political and security situation in the supplier regions and current geopolitical developments in the world continue to play a significant role in the territorial structure of energy flows. Current developments and future predictions are key issues related to changes in the global economy, particularly as economic potential shifts to rapidly growing regions like Asia. In contrast, the concept of energy-saving economies in Europe, together with the diversification of suppliers of energy sources, appears to be competitively advantageous.

Energy resources have long been at the centre of the international situation. The dynamic development of the energy industry corresponds to the growing demand for primary energy in the world. The problems that have arisen with the exploitation and supply of resources to the regions have reached global dimensions, and the growth in the consumption of primary energy sources, especially oil and natural gas, has an important multiplier effect for the world economy. Many countries, as well as the EU, are trying to increase their competitiveness and make greater use of renewable energy sources.

There are still problems with ensuring stable supplies of energy sources in today's complicated geopolitical situation. In the context of current events, however, it is necessary to emphasise geopolitical factors, which have fundamentally influenced the flow of energy resources. This is especially so in the Eurasian area in connection with the sanctions on Russia, which is the main supplier of oil and natural gas. There have also been fundamental changes in these flows.

Energy is not only a basic industry, but also a strategic sector that plays a key role in geopolitical thinking and political decision-making. The European Union, as an important global player, faces many challenges in its energy policy, which is constantly reshaped by the dynamics of international events. Energy security and energy dependence are not only fundamental concepts, but also indicators of political and economic development and independence. Energy security is perceived as the ability of a state or a larger community, such as the EU, to effectively respond to external and internal threats that could threaten a stable supply of energy and, thus, overall economic and social stability. On the other hand, energy dependence reflects the extent to which the EU is depend-

ent on the import of energy resources from other countries and regions. This can lead to risk of geopolitical shocks. It is therefore an essential indicator for assessing safety.

While the EU is trying to reduce its energy dependence by diversifying sources and increasing the share of renewable energy sources, it still faces challenges brought about by constant changes in geopolitics. Enhancing energy security is so complicated. Natural gas as a transitional energy source on the way to decarbonisation has increased in importance in the EU in recent years. Its role in the EU's energy strategy was significantly strengthened by the partnership with Russia, but it was disrupted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This led to a significant cooling in mutual relations and raised questions about future supplies and the EU's strategic direction in the field of energy. Currently a very urgent question is how the EU will deal with the broken energy partnership while maintaining energy security and economic prosperity.

The State of the Art

The crises show how geopolitical events can affect the energy sector. But this relationship works both ways, and changes in energy markets can also have an impact on geopolitics. The ongoing energy transitions have an impact on the changing demand for energy resources and these processes will take long. It means that fossil fuel producers will still have influence. It can be assumed that due to the increase in the use of clean energy, this influence is decreasing. But energy transitions do not mean the end of geopolitical risks. The traditional risks associated with fossil fuel reserves are evolving and not completely disappearing. Transitions could be destabilising for weak producer states that are not successful in diversifying their dependence on oil and gas export revenues. At the same time, new emerging risks of clean energy can be observed in supply chains (Bordoff & O'Sullivan 2023). Both traditional and new security risks have worsened the situation in an international system characterised by rivalry and little cooperation. The introduction of clean energy in recent years and high fossil fuel prices may give further impetus to the transitions. However, geopolitical shocks do not allow long-term development to be predicted.

The key element in the future will be the development of rivalry and cooperation. Geopolitical factors unfold gradually, the relationship with Russia and its position in the international trade with energy resources is crucial. Clean energy cooperation can be protected from wider political tensions and global development can be accelerated in line with the NZE Scenario (IEA 2023: 68–69). The Net Zero Emissions by 2050 Scenario (NZE Scenario) is a normative scenario that shows a pathway for the global energy sector to achieve net zero CO_2 emissions by 2050, with advanced economies reaching net zero emissions in advance of others. This scenario also meets key energy-related

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular universal energy access by 2030 and major improvements in air quality. It is consistent with limiting the global temperature rise to 1.5 ºC (with at least a 50% probability), in line with emissions reductions assessed in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes' (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (IEA 2024). Undoubtedly, however, geopolitical tensions can reduce clean energy ambitions as well as fossil fuels.

Energy and geopolitics create a situation in international relations where competition for energy resources becomes a key factor influencing world politics (Krejčí 2001). The current energy situation is a result of long-term development and has a fundamental influence on the political and economic stability of states. The importance of energy as a key factor in global security has increased as a result of oil crises, where energy resources have been used as tools of economic and political pressure (Kempe 2023). The current situation in which Russia uses energy as a means of economic and political influence is an example of the geopolitical use of energy as a weapon. Russia has shown that energy resources can be misused for conflict and disruption of international stability (Wright 2022). A fundamental moment is the perception of the Russia-EU relationship, the influence of energy relations on the identity of the EU and Russia, the influence of ideological values on energy relations (Sharples 2011) and the formation of energy interests (Romanova 2016).

An essential element for the investigation of interrelationships is inclusion in the process of energy transformation in the present. Energy transformation in the past and its consequences, as well as the dynamics of change, are presented by Sovacool (Sovacool 2016). Some authors present a conceptualisation of changes related to energy transformation and their consequences (Stirling 2014). Some authors deal with the interdependent relationship between the EU and Russia. Their research is often limited to geopolitical aspects, where they are interested in geopolitical power in addition to economics. Krickovic (Krickovic 2015) states that interdependence in energy is an area that can bring about tension in security relations. This phenomenon erodes the mutual trust that has been built through business ties and long-term contracts. These assumptions do not respect energy cooperation and suggest that energy could be used not only for political purposes but also for security purposes. Geopolitical analyses in the context of energy transformation, consequences and risks have been written, for example, by Griffiths (Griffiths 2019). The intersection of geopolitics and energy security is a critical area of study that has gained increasing interest and signals critical areas of interest and collaboration (Wang, Ren & Li 2024).

The Theoretical Background and Methodology

It is possible to study the (a)symmetry of interdependence between the EU and Russia in the context of energy transformation. Transformation, as the second

theoretical pillar, is the impetus for future changes also manifested in power shifts. It can be expected that new technologies will make some states stronger, while others will be weaker. This fact is reinforced by a number of emerging studies on the topic of energy transformation (Taylor 2020; Gielen, Boshell, Saygin, Bazilian, Wagner & Gorini 2019).

Interdependence can be defined as a relationship between two or more actors, which assumes that a change in the position of one actor will affect other actors (Rosecrance & Stein 1973). The concept of interdependence makes it possible to analyse a whole range of problems (Binhack & Tichý 2012). Symmetrical interdependence is a relationship of equal reciprocal dependence of one subject on another and is the extreme of an interdependent relationship (Keohane & Nye 2001: 9). According to studies, an equivalent dimension of interdependence between states reduces the risk of involvement in conflicts and reduces the risk of disputes in trade relations (Barbieri 1996). Mitrany (Mitrany 1994) proposed a top-down approach directed by governments and governmental organisations responsible for connecting states in specific areas (Mitrany 1994). Deutsch focused on transactional relations between states. These transactions included the intensity of trade exchange, the flow of information and migration (Deutsch 1957). Deutsch assumed that the increased intensity of these transactions between states would necessarily lead to the creation of institutions that would eventually become the basis of a security community.

Nye and Keohane created the concept of complex interdependence by the state and manner of coexistence of states in the international area, which they defined by three characteristics (Keohane & Nye 1973: 24–29). In a situation of complex interdependence, international interactions take place through many communication channels. International relations in the model of complex interdependence is not only the domain of formal interactions between states, but includes many other formal and informal actors and relationships. The importance of individual actors is not only that each actor pursues its own goals, but that at the same time they increase the mutual sensitivity of the foreign policy of interdependent states (Keohane & Nye 1973: 25). Keohane and Nye further write that state policies in a state of interdependence are not subordinated to one priority, such as the military and the securing of defence (Keohane & Nye 1973: 26–27).

The possibility of using force is limited by the costs of interdependence. The costs of interdependence primarily represent the economic losses that a state would suffer from the interruption of informal, commercial, communication, infrastructural and other ties with another state when military force is used. The authors note that in developed countries these costs exceed the potential gains from new territory gained by military force (Keohane & Nye 1973: 29). Invoking an international military conflict also serves as a stabilising internal

political tool in a state of interdependence (Keohan & Nye 1973: 28). Interdependence should not necessarily be characterised as a situation of reciprocal dependence of one subject on another. Such a situation, called symmetric interdependence, is considered one of the extremes of interdependence. Keohane and Nye (Keohane & Nye 2001: 9) emphasise that the unequal distribution of profits and expenditures is at the centre of asymmetric interdependence that provides a source of power.

We assume that Russia will lose a significant part of its power to the EU due to the advancing energy transition. EU energy has major challenges as a result of geopolitical changes associated with the war in Ukraine, but also with other regions of tension such as the Middle East. The EU must deal intensively with energy issues, the main one being the transformation of the energy sector. The authors write that some countries will be significantly damaged by the decline in demand for fossil fuels (Mercure, Pollitt & Vinuales 2019). Countries with large reserves are trying to expand their strategy to slow energy transitions (Griffiths 2019) or create more interdependencies. A typical example is Russia's growing influence in developing countries, where it is building nuclear energy. In relation to geopolitical developments, there is a debate as to whether nuclear power should have a place in Africa's energy system (Payton 2023). Another strategy is influencing public opinion.

Our study identifies changes in fossil energy resource flows through supplier diversification to the EU in the context of Russia's geopolitical developments and policies. At the same time, we can also see the advancing diversification of oil and natural gas importers and Russia's increasing efforts to expand its influence in developing countries (see above). At the same time, we are monitoring the energy transformation in the EU, which is associated with risks and problems, such as securing the supply of specific and rare elements for the production of renewable energy, securing new technologies, managing markets and tenders, regulating market access and new standards, etc. Russia could use these risks and problems to slow down the transformation. Energy transition refers to a major structural shift in how energy is supplied and consumed, with a focus on clean energy. Most of the sustainable energy is renewable energy. Therefore, another term for energy transition is renewable energy transition. Many authors address the impact of political and economic decisions on energy mix and energy transition, as well as energy independence and security (Auer & Anatolis 2014; Díaz, Marrero, Puch & Rodríguez 2019; Meier 2021; Smil 2020; Rusin & Wojaczek 2023).

For the purposes of the study, which deals with the possibilities of reducing the EU's energy dependence on Russia, a suitable methodology has been chosen based on the theoretical framework described above. The methodological procedure is based on two pillars studying the dependence of subjects and the process of energy transformation. The dynamics of current geopolitical and

technological changes make it possible to perceive these changes in the mutual relationship between the EU and Russia.

The aim of this text is to examine the transformation process and diversification of the EU's energy sector. In this text, energy security is examined in the context of geopolitical changes and viewed through the lens of the interdependence between the EU and Russia in the import and export of fossil fuels. The key question is how the import dependence of fossil fuels is developing in the context of geopolitical changes and the existing interdependence of the EU and Russia. A descriptive analysis was carried out to assess the import dependence of the EU and to address the study's main objective. The analysis used a quantitative data series that adequately demonstrated the development of import dependence. The article also addressed the question of how the EU's energy security is changing and what other options exist for strengthening it.

Another approach will be the analysis of the current transformation of the energy mix in the EU, which includes changes at both the technological and institutional levels. Here we also see the various reactions of the EU member states to the energy transformation.

Each actor pursues its own goals, but at the same time they increase the mutual sensitivity of the foreign policy of interdependent states. Other Russian activities also aimed at reducing damage to Russian interests through energy transformation within the EU. The supply structure of energy resources to the EU has changed in the context of geopolitical developments in recent years. This is accompanied by energy transformation following technological development. At the same time, Russian interests in other countries are developing, as is the need to diversify the customer structure of countries with regards to oil and gas. However, the expanding influence of Russia in the field of nuclear energy in developing countries is key. This procedure is supplemented by a comparative element when examining the interdependence between individual EU countries and Russia. Other possibilities for research are undoubtedly in the comparative progress of individual EU member states, which can be the dominant method for analysing the EU's internal differentiation.

Our study used official documents such as strategic and conceptual documents and official studies of the authors dealing with the investigated issue. The database for analytical interpretation was based on the outputs of available data from renovated statistical agencies and international organisations such as Eurostat, the WTO, the International Energy Agency, the WNA and others. The analysis consists of comparing empirical data that show changes in the structure of the EU's energy mix. To evaluate mutual interdependence the commodity natural gas was chosen as a tool, which shows the changes associated with the decreasing share of imports into the EU. The combination of these results documents the importance of mutual energy relations at the EU-Russia level.

Energy Transformation of the EU

Energy consumption in the EU consists of energy produced in the EU and also imported from third countries. In our research, all energy production is presented in the context of imports. The EU covered 42% of gross annual consumption from domestic production and 58% of energy sources had to be imported to the EU in 2023. This shows a tendency of increasing dependence on the part of the EU, because compared to 2020 the EU covered 42.5% of domestic demand with its production.

Oil was the EU's main energy source in 2023. Its share in consumption was 37.7%, natural gas made up 20.4% and the dynamically growing share of renewable resources (19.5%) was in third place. Solid fossil fuels accounted for 10.6% of the energy mix and nuclear energy accounted for 10.6% (Eurostat 2025a). However, there are big differences between EU countries. The share of petroleum products in energy final consumption in 2023 was highest in Cyprus (86.3%), Malta (85.6%) and Luxembourg (61.1%), while natural gas was a significant source of energy in Italy (34.8%), Hungary (29.1%), the Netherlands (29.5%) and Ireland (28.5%). Renewable sources had the largest share in Sweden (50.2%) and Latvia (44.7%), while nuclear accounted for 39.1% of energy in France and 28.8% in Sweden. The share of solid fossil fuels was highest in Estonia (53.4%) and Poland (35.5%) (Eurostat 2025a).

We monitor the energy transformation through changes in the energy mix, the changes of which are a fundamental element of EU energy policy. One of the goals of the energy policy is to reduce the vulnerability and to ensure the resistance of the energy system against external influences. A fundamental element of these changes is the diversification of energy sources in the context of sustainable and low-emission energy. The EU is intensively transforming its energy mix with regard to reducing emissions and supporting renewable energy sources. These changes make the energy mix a strategic tool that strengthens energy security and maintains economic stability.

Changes in the shares of energy sources are key to understanding the development of the energy sector in the EU. Empirical data from this period over the last 22 years shows the increasing importance of renewable sources in the EU's energy mix. The energy transition strengthens energy security, but also moves towards a sustainable and ecologically clean energy sector. In the period under review, oil was still the dominant source of final energy consumption, while the share of natural gas decreased compared to 2000. Solid fuels had a significant relative decrease (from 19% to 11.8%). Renewable sources had positive dynamics and contributed more than 19.5% of the EU's energy mix in 2023 (compared to 2000 – 6.4%). The basic development tendency is reducing the share of fossil fuels in the EU's energy mix. The question remains about the use of nuclear energy, which is approached differently by individual EU

Table 1: EU energy mix in the years 2000–2023 (in %)

Primary source	2000	2010	2015	2020	2022	2023
Solid fossil fuels	18.6	15.7	16.2	10.5	12.0	10.6
Oil	38.7	34.5	33.6	32.6	34.9	37.7
Natural gas	20.6	23.3	20.5	24.4	21.7	20.4
Nuclear	14.8	14.1	14.1	13.1	11.5	11.8
Renewables	6.4	11.2	14.2	17.9	18.4	19.5
Others	0.8	1.2	1.3	1.6	1.5	–

Source: Eurostat 2024a, Eurostat 2025a

Table 2: EU electricity mix in the years 2000–2024 (in %)

Primary source	2000	2010	2015	2020	2022	2023	2024
Solid fossil fuels	30.6	24.2	24.7	12.8	16.2	11.8	9.8
Oil	6.5	2.8	2.2	1.7	2.0	–	–
Natural gas	13.6	20.8	14.7	21.0	20.1	16.9	15.7
Nuclear	32.3	28.6	27.1	24.5	21.6	23.0	23.7
Renewables	15.3	21.9	29.5	38.0	38.2	44,8	47,4
Others	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	2.0	3.5	3.4

Source: Eurostat 2024a; Rosslowe, Petrovich 2025

member states. This variability between states remains and is also part of this trend. Nuclear power accounted for 14.8% of the EU's energy mix in 2000. Its share in 2023 was 11.8% (Eurostat 2025a).

These trends show a great effort towards energy transformation and are moving towards a more sustainable and less dependent energy system. It can be seen even better in the changes in the electricity production mix. The share of solid fossil fuels in the evaluated period decreased significantly from 31% to 9.8%. Due to the different policies of the member states the share of nuclear fuel in electricity production is also currently lower (23.7%) than it was in 2010 (32%). What is crucial is the increase in the production of renewable energy sources, whose share increased from 15% in 2000 to more than 47% in 2022 (Rosslowe, Petrovich 2025).

If we evaluate the tendency of the EU energy sector to move towards less dependence and more sustainability, we can also argue for a change in the structure of the EU's own energy production. Renewable energy was the dominant

source in 2023 (46% of total energy production in the EU). The second largest source was nuclear energy (29%) followed by solid fuels (17%), natural gas and oil were at 5% and 3% respectively (Eurostat 2025a). There are differences between EU member states, but in 16 member states, renewable energy accounts for over 50% of national energy production.

Import of Natural Gas into the EU

Another example demonstrating the EU's level of energy security and import dependence is natural gas, which represents more than 20% of the EU's energy mix in the evaluated period. Import dependence is fatal due to domestic production and representation in the energy mix. Russia has long been the largest supplier of natural gas to the EU.

The energy dependence of European states (later the EU) on energy raw materials began to take shape in the 1970s. However, negotiations on oil and natural gas supplies between Western European states and the former USSR were highly constructive and simpler during the Cold War than they are today. Černoch and Zapletalová (2014) attribute this fact to the long-term maintenance of mutual relations between the East and the West at the same, albeit relatively cold, level. A fundamental breakthrough in economic relations between the East and the West occurred during the Ostpolitik period, an ideological pragmatic cooperation with the Eastern Bloc that occurred in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. It is already possible to identify the beginnings of the interdependent relationship between the USSR and the states of Western Europe in this period. This relationship was key – especially in the area of mutual cooperation between West Germany and East Germany. German Chancellor Willy Brandt actively promoted this policy.

It was the agreement on natural gas between West Germany and the USSR in the early 1970s that represented a major milestone in economic relations and the further promotion of Ostpolitik. While the Eastern states, including the USSR, needed hard Western currency in order to function and to implement foreign trade, the Western states needed energy supplies to function. Buchan also supports this argument (2009), noting that, due to the Cold War, neither Western Europe nor the USSR expected any significant change in their mutual relations. Negotiations on supplies or prices were therefore relatively simple (Buchan 2009).

Energy relations between the EU and Russia were built on the principle of interdependence, which applied from the collapse of the USSR until 2022. Russia was the main supplier of natural gas and oil to the EU, providing more than a third of its total gas and oil imports. Russia's dependence on gas and oil exports to the EU was similarly high, accounting for 70% of Russian exports. Even 90% of gas exports from Russia went to the EU. Both sources contributed

significantly to the income to the state budget of Russia (50%) (Tichý 2015). However, the abovementioned disproportion is more complex in nature. As a result of historical development an asymmetry appeared. The states of Eastern Europe imported energy resources from the Soviet Union when they were part of the Eastern Bloc. Therefore, they have created a much stronger energy dependency than the western EU member states. The principle of interdependence was important for both actors, but with different consequences. Although the Crimean crisis froze any further development of EU-Russia mutual energy relations, gas imports to the EU remained large. In the following years, even the import of gas from Russia to the EU increased mainly due to the opening of new transport routes (Nord Stream and Turk Stream).

The next step towards reducing mutual interdependence was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and a change in the geopolitical situation in Europe. The EU has since reassessed its energy policy and in order to strengthen energy security has begun to reduce its import dependence on Russia. The representatives of the member states declared this effort in the joint Versailles declaration in March 2022. This decision was motivated not only by the new geopolitical reality, but also by the effort to ensure the long-term energy security of the EU. The planned measures were to diversify energy sources and increase the share of renewable sources. This would make the EU less dependent on unstable suppliers. The EU Council accepted measures to ensure the security of gas supplies to the EU and to coordinate joint gas purchases. These steps were intended to strengthen solidarity between member states in energy crises and minimise the effects of gas supply interruptions. Better control mechanisms and improved cooperation between EU member states and with energy suppliers are key elements of the strategy to guarantee energy security (European Council 2024). Tables 3 and 4 show the decline in natural gas supplies from Russia to the EU and the diversification of imports after 2022. Compared to 2021, the flow of natural gas from Russia to the EU decreased to less than a third (from 157 billion cubic metres to 10 billion cubic metres in 2025). This decline has consequences for both Russia and the EU. However, there still remained some flow of Russian gas to the EU due to various exemptions and LNG supplies (Bruegel AISBL 2025). The most recent data shows that Russia's share of total gas imports into the EU was only 13 percent in the first quarter of 2025 and it was still 45 percent in 2021 (European Commission 2024: 4–5 and Bruegel AISBL 2025).

Immediate measures aimed at saving energy and increasing energy efficiency as the cleanest and cheapest way to solve the energy crisis, taken under REPowerEU, allowed a significant decrease in gas imports from Russia. The decline came in parallel with EU sanctions, which forbid seaborne imports of Russian crude oil, refined petroleum products and coal imports.

The annual amount of imported gas in 2023 was reduced by 72% compared to 2021. These changes will direct the EU to phase out Russian fossil fuel imports

**Table 3: EU quarterly gas import by countries 2021–2022
(in billion cubic metres)**

Country/Q	21/1	21/2	21/3	21/4	22/1	22/2	22/3	22/4
Russia	41.1	43.0	36.3	36.6	31.6	26.7	13.8	11.4
USA LNG	4.1	7.0	3.9	5.9	14.1	14.9	13.2	12.6
Other LNG	9.3	10.9	9.0	10.5	10.6	12.2	14.3	17.3
Norway	20.0	19.9	23.0	23.3	23.4	23.4	23.7	23.4
Algeria	10.1	9.8	8.2	8.7	8.6	8.4	8.5	8.7
UK	1,6	1.4	2.0	3.4	3.5	8.2	8.2	6.4
Azerbaijan	1.3	2.0	2.6	2.8	2.7	3.1	3.1	3.3
Libya	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.9

Source: Bruegel AISBL 2025

**Table 4: EU quarterly gas import by countries 2023–2025
(in billion cubic metres)**

Country/Q	23/1	23/2	23/3	23/4	24/1	24/2	24/4	25/1
Russia	10.5	10.5	11.5	12.5	13.7	12.8	14.1	10.0
USA LNG	14.1	16.8	14.5	17,0	15.5	12.3	12.7	18.4
Other LNG	13.2	14.6	12.7	12.2	9.1	9.9	7.1	8.1
Norway	23.5	22.4	20.6	23.9	24.2	23.9	24.9	23.6
Algeria	7.3	8.5	8.9	8.3	7,4	8.6	11.2	9.8
UK	4.6	6.5	3.6	3.1	1.9	3.6	2.1	1.9
Azerbaijan	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.4	2.8
Libya	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.2	0.3

Source: Bruegel AISBL 2025

as quickly as possible. This has also had major implications for Russia, whose revenues from gas sales (including LNG) to the EU have fallen by more than 70% since the peak of the crisis in 2022. Following the 14th sanctions package accepted on 24 June 2024, the EU banned transshipment services of Russian LNG on EU territory for export to third countries. The EU also prohibited new investments, technology and services to complete Russian LNG projects under construction, such as the Arctic LNG 2 and the Murmansk LNG. From August 2022 to May 2024, the EU reduced its gas demand by 18% and saved 138 billion cubic metres of gas (European Commission 2024: 4–5).

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The initiation of new sanctions probably began to work and the import of Russian LNG was delayed. The ships probably do not export the gas and store it in floating storage tanks. The EU has not completely banned the import of LNG because some countries such as Belgium, France and Spain are dependent on it. These countries probably did not buy gas from Arctic projects and Russia has to use the so-called shadow fleet for sales, which often uses old ships with unclear ownership. Despite the significant decrease in imports, the EU imported a significant amount of natural gas from Russia in the first half of 2024.

Despite efforts to diversify the import of energy sources some EU countries are still in a risky position (Austria, Hungary). Countries have long-term contracts. Voices for a total ban on gas imports from Russia are getting stronger, including from Germany, which was heavily dependent on imports in the past. For example, in 2023, Austria still imported 65% of gas supplies via pipelines from Russia. This example shows the necessity of comprehensive diversification and significant reduction of dependence on imports from Russia. Diversification will then lead to the strengthening of the energy security of the European Union and also to the political stability of the member states.

The consequences of this development in the European Union have negative effects on Russia, which is reacting and looking for new customer markets. Russia is intensively developing energy relations especially with China (the Power of the Siberia 2 project) and is trying to diversify its markets and reduce its dependence on the EU market. This development signals a fundamental change in the Eurasian energy system, one element of which in the case of the EU is the strengthening of energy security and the search for new supply centres. The second element is the strengthening of Russia's position in Asia and the development of energy projects and the search for customer markets. While gas and oil have long been Russia's main political tool, the situation has changed with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the EU has moved away from Russian resources. Russia is using another tool in addition to finding new consumer markets for fossil fuels. This is the development of Russian nuclear energy, which creates political ties but also disrupts the West's efforts to isolate Russia. Russia participated in half of all international nuclear power plant, reactor and fuel supply, decommissioning and waste management projects in 2022. Russia is establishing long-term relationships with these countries and gaining influence through these projects. It often uses a high level of cooperation and applies the built-own-operate model. Russia focuses primarily on the countries of the global south (e.g. Bangladesh, Turkey, Bolivia, Nicaragua, as well as African countries like Ghana, Zimbabwe and Mali) (Stognei, Parkin, Smyth & Moore 2024). The European Union significantly supports Ukraine financially and at the same time pays large profits to Russia for imported energy resources. This situation is not rational and although it does indicate significant changes in mutual relations it still has the character of mutual interdependence.

Conclusion

In the context of increasing EU energy security in the field of fossil fuels, the topic is implemented on two main levels: the demand side and the supply side. A political element plays a fundamental role in the territorial structure of energy flows, which is the political and security situation in the supplier regions and current geopolitical developments in the world, especially Eurasia. Energy resources have long been at the centre of international events, resource availability, stable supply, mining control and traffic chokepoint throughput are complicated issues. In the context of current international developments, energy is a strategic sector that plays a key role in geopolitical thinking and political decision-making. Energy security and energy dependence are not only essential concepts, but also indicators of political and economic maturity and independence. While the EU strives to reduce its energy dependence by diversifying sources and increasing the share of renewable energy sources, it faces challenges brought about by changes in the geopolitical environment. Enhancing energy security is highly complicated. The fundamental question is how to deal with the disrupted energy partnership and at the same time maintain energy security and economic prosperity. This text is anchored in the mutual interdependence of the EU and Russia in terms of the import and export of fossil fuels. It is possible to observe the (a)symmetry of interdependence in the context of energy transformation. Transformation, as the second theoretical pillar, is the driving force behind future changes, also manifesting in power shifts.

An example demonstrating the EU's level of energy security and import dependence is the import of natural gas to the EU. Import dependence is fatal due to domestic production and representation in the energy mix. Russia has long been the dominant supplier of natural gas to the EU. The principle of interdependence was important for both actors, but with different consequences. Another step towards reducing mutual interdependence was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and a change in the geopolitical situation in Europe. The EU changed its energy policy and, in order to strengthen energy security, began to reduce its import dependence on Russia. Between 2021 and 2023, the annual amount of imported gas decreased by 72%. These changes will direct the EU to phase out imports of Russian fossil fuels as quickly as possible. This has also had major implications for Russia, whose revenues from gas sales (including LNG) to the EU have fallen by more than 70% since the peak of the crisis in 2022.

We suppose that Russia will lose a significant part of its power against the EU as a result of the advancing energy transition. EU energy has major challenges as a result of geopolitical changes linked to the war in Ukraine, but also to other centres of tension such as the Middle East. Our study identifies changes in fossil energy resource flows through diversification of suppliers to the EU in the context of geopolitical developments and the politics of Russia. At the

same time, we can observe the progressive diversification of oil and natural gas importers and Russia's increasing efforts to expand its influence in many developing countries. Diversification of energy supplies, both geographically and through transit routes, is a key element in strengthening the EU's energy security. Diversification of supplies can also be seen as a tool for strengthening the resilience of the European energy infrastructure. Diversification of suppliers undoubtedly increases flexibility and efficiency in energy substitution in the event of crisis. Natural gas supplies from Norway, the USA, Algeria and Qatar have increased, and LNG imports are a key component. The USA has gained a dominant position in LNG imports to the EU, and a further increase was expected in connection with the sanctions on Russia. Though LPG from the USA compensated for the loss of imports from Russia, there is currently concern that Donald Trump will use LNG as leverage in trade talks. Some companies are considering returning to gas supplies from Russia and there is talk of meaningful diversification. In practice, however, this would mean a relatively significant change in the overall direction of the EU. The EU is currently still planning to end imports of Russian fossil fuels by 2027.

The EU is leading to a reduction in energy dependence on Russia via energy transformation with a focus on the development of renewable energy sources and on changes and diversification of fossil fuel suppliers. As part of the analysis of the current transformation of the energy mix in the EU, we encounter different reactions of the EU member states to the energy transformation.

The EU is intensively transforming its energy mix with regard to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and supporting renewable energy sources. These changes make the energy mix a strategic tool that strengthens energy security and maintains economic stability. Renewable sources had positive dynamics and contributed more than 19.5% of the EU's energy mix in 2023 (compared to 2000 – 6.4%). However, the increase in the production of renewable sources in the production of electricity is essential, the share of which increased from 15% in 2000 to more than 47% in 2024. When we evaluate the tendency of the EU energy industry to shift towards lower dependence and more sustainability we can also argue for a change in the structure of the EU's own energy production. In 2023, renewable energy was dominantly the most important source (46% of total energy production in the EU).

Another recommendation for increasing the EU's energy security is the development of and investment in renewable energy sources. Investment in our own renewable sources is key. Additionally, investment in renewable energy sources must be part of broader political, economic and security strategies. Changing the energy mix and developing renewable sources will reduce import dependence and limit the impact of geopolitical pressures.

Even though the EU is trying to diversify the import of energy resources, some EU countries are still in a risky position and are bound by long-term

contracts. This indicates the necessity of comprehensive diversification and a significant reduction of dependence on imports from Russia. Diversification will then lead to the strengthening of the EU's energy security and also to the political stability of its member states. In addition to these consequences, we can also mention changes in the geography of suppliers of energy sources outside of Eurasia, the tendency towards sustainable and clean energy, etc. Russia is losing large profits from energy exports and is exposed to significant economic impacts. Russia is looking for new customer markets, and is intensively developing new energy relations, especially with China but also in the Global South (particularly in Latin America and Africa), and is trying to diversify its markets and reduce its dependence on the European market. With new projects, including the development of nuclear energy, it establishes long-term relations with individual countries and gains influence in them. In the relationship of mutual interdependence, it is also a consequence of the change in the geography of energy supply flows, even on the part of Russia as an energy exporter.

Technological innovation and modernisation of energy infrastructure are among the other basic recommendations for the transformation of the European energy sector. The construction and modernisation of clean energy production facilities is key to the energy transition. The development of modern energy technologies is closely linked to the availability of critical raw materials, which are essential elements for the production of modern technologies, especially in the field of electromobility and energy storage. Ensuring sufficient sources of these raw materials is therefore another crucial factor for sustainable development and technological progress.

Political and regulatory measures are a crucial part of the EU's energy policy. This includes the implementation of the European Green Deal, which aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Furthermore, it is the implementation of Fit for 55, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030. The EU's RePower programme aims to reduce energy dependence on Russia by developing renewable sources and modernising infrastructure. International cooperation, not only in terms of energy supplies but also in terms of technological cooperation, is also essential. The current sanctions on Russia remain an important tool of the EU's energy policy, but the turbulent policies of President Trump currently pose new challenges.

The EU will face geopolitical and other risks and achieve energy independence when the proposed measures are comprehensively adopted. The basis is the diversification of energy supply sources, including the diversification of transit routes. Investment in renewable energy sources and support for technological innovation are also essential. Modernising infrastructure, maintaining political stability and effective regulatory measures are the bases for achieving climate goals. A unified strategy will thus ensure energy security and sustainable economic development.

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The Integration of the Eastern Partnership Countries' Digital Markets into the EU Digital Single Market

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyse the motives for integrating the digital markets of the Eastern Partnership countries into the EU Digital Single Market, as well as the challenges and opportunities that this integration creates. The EU Roadmap 'Digital Compass 2030', i.e. the Union's strategic goals for Europe's digital sovereignty, was highlighted. The position of each of the recipient countries of the EaP in the digitalisation indices was represented. The issues and prospects of the integration of digital markets of the Eastern Partnership countries on the way to the EU Digital Single Market were pinpointed. It was proved that both the EU and the member states of the EaP are striving to remain competitive and to not be outsiders of technological transformations. The motivation for the integration of the digital markets of these countries into the Digital Single Market of the EU is, above all, the desire to be a full member of the Community.

Keywords: *digitalisation, digitisation, digital transformation, Eastern Partnership, Digital Single Market*

Introduction

Today, digitalisation is entering a new phase, fueled by the confluence of technologies that are gradually blurring the boundaries between the physical, digital and biological realms, thus expanding their scope of influence. Digital communication, social interaction, e-commerce and digital enterprises are constantly

changing our world, and this can be equated to the same fundamental transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Digital infrastructure, high-speed connectivity, innovation, digital solutions and networks, communication systems, artificial intelligence, and quantum and cloud technologies open up new opportunities for people in various spheres of public life – namely, economic, social, political, cultural and institutional.

Digitalisation also affects the European Union and its interaction with other international actors, shaping the nature of its cooperation. In this context the EU's collaboration with its Eastern partners, based on the promotion of democracy, good governance, economic prosperity and a sustainable society, can be facilitated by the integration of these countries into the EU Digital Single Market. At present, the effective achievement of these goals largely depends on the implementation of digital policy by the countries-addressees of the initiative, given that the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's armed aggression on the territory of Ukraine has highlighted potential threats in areas such as privacy, cyber security, personal data protection and societal digital incompetence in these countries. The use of digital technologies, the intensification of digital transformations and the adaptation of the states to rapid changes in new digital realities according to EU standards will help the EaP countries to resist these threats.

Meanwhile, the Council of the European Commission approved the concept of the EU digital development up to 2030. In this conception, the goals of digital transformation and ways to achieve it, the so-called 'European Digital Decade', have been formulated. The programme characterises the next decade as specific and ambitious; its main goals can be summarised in four points. The first concerns the digital education of the population and the training of qualified specialists in the field of digital technologies. The second direction is related to the creation of a safe, efficient and reliable digital platform. The third considers the digital evolution of business, and the fourth is about strengthening the digital public sector.

In order to be competitive on the global scale and to guarantee data protection for its citizens, the EU has aimed at technological autonomy. Being an influential global and regional leader, it spreads the trends of the digital agenda to the member countries of the Eastern Partnership, which have unequally integrated into the Digital Single Market of the EU. The reasons behind this are the political regimes in the specified countries and the foreign policy priorities of the member states of the EaP, as well as other varied motives.

Thus, important questions arise: What motivates the EaP countries to integrate their digital markets into the EU's Digital Single Market? What challenges and prospects do they face on this path? And what interest does the European Union have in this process?

Theoretical and methodological aspects of research

The research materials, which analyse and highlight the integration of the digital markets of the Eastern Partnership countries into the EU's Digital Single Market, can be divided into three groups. The first group includes the works that focus on the Digital Single Market Strategy and its three main pillars: access, environment, and economy and society (EU & Me 2019; European Commission 2020a, 2020b; European Commission 2023). Analysts focus in detail as well as on the key goals of the 'Digital Compass for the EU Digital Decade' (Dang & Pheng 2014; European Commission 2021a; European Commission 2020b). Attention is also focused on highlighting the promotion of digital transformation by the European Union in the countries of the Eastern Partnership (Koriavets 2023). Within this group, the 'EU4Digital' Initiative is considered the main driver of digital transformation, which is aimed at spreading the benefits of DSM to the countries of the Eastern Partnership, thereby focusing EU assistance on developing the potential of the digital economy and society (EU Neighbours East 2019).

The next important group of research is aimed at the detailed examination of the digitalisation of the Eastern Partnership countries using different indexes: the E-Government Development Index (EGDI) represents the state of e-government development (Moncada 2017; United Nations E-Government Survey 2022); the Global Innovation Index (GII) reveals the world's most innovative economies by assessing the innovation performance (Dutta et al. 2023; Dutta et al. 2022); and the Network Readiness Index (NRI) ranks a total of 134 economies that collectively account for 95 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP) (Dutta & Lanvin 2022, 2023). Special attention is paid to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) (European Commission 2022). The general digital productivity and the progress of the participating states of the EaP programme were analysed in detail in accordance with the key components of the Index – namely, Ukraine (Nanaeva 2021; Speedtest 2022a, 2022b; Statista 2022; World Bank Group 2016), Moldova (Speedtest 2022a, 2022b; United Nations Development Programme 2019; United Nations Development Programme 2020), Georgia (Galt & Taggart 2018; Hronová 2022; Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia 2023; Speedtest 2022a, 2022b), Armenia (Electronic Government 2023; European Training Foundation 2020; Speedtest 2022a, 2022b; The World Bank Group 2016), Azerbaijan (Lloyds banktrade 2021; Speedtest 2022a, 2022b; Yoon et al. 2019) and Belarus (Cisco 2019; Speedtest 2022a, 2022b; Zooinform 2021).

The last group of research highlights the main challenges (European Commission 2021b; European Society of Occupational Safety & Health 2023; Hronová 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2021) and prospects (European Training Foundation 2020; Official Website of

the Ministry and Committee 2023) of the integration of digital markets of the Eastern Partnership countries to the Digital Single Market of the EU.

The main goal of the EU Digital Single Market is to eliminate unnecessary regulatory barriers and move from separate national markets to a single market with a set of unified European rules in three sectors: telecommunications, trust services and e-commerce (UCEP 2021). However, the overarching motive for digital transformation and unification remains the issue of European Union leadership and its ambitions.

The 2023 Digital Strategy aims to consolidate the EU's perception as a reliable digital leader, a leader in artificial intelligence systems and the data economy. In turn, European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton, in the context of considering the next digitalisation strategy of the Union, noted that Europe has everything it needs for leading the 'big data' race, preserving technological sovereignty, strengthening its position as an industrial leader and maintaining economic competitiveness for European consumers (European Commission 2020a).

However, according to representatives of the European Economic and Social Committee, digitalisation creates not only opportunities but also challenges for the EU, which calls into question the ability of the European Union to become a leader in the digital sphere today. In particular, it is worth mentioning the vulnerability of the EU's cybersecurity, the mismatch between the growing demand for the latest technologies and their supply, the imperfection of the regulatory framework in this area, problems with the secure transfer of personal data, etc. (European Economic and Social Committee 2019).

According to Dimitar Lilkov, a research officer at the Centre for European Studies, the EU has many ambitions on the development of digital policy, and European leaders use the terms 'strategic autonomy' and 'technological sovereignty' to describe the EU as a 'geopolitical heavyweight' in the field of digital technologies. However, Europe's digital single market faces many challenges that hinder its transformation into a technology hub for global businesses (Lilkov 2023). The very term 'technological sovereignty', as defined by Jakob Edler, Knut Blind, Henning Kroll and Torben Schubert, is the ability of a state or an association of states to supply technologies that are critical to their well-being and competitiveness, as well as the ability to obtain such technologies from other economic actors without forming a unilateral structural dependence on them (Edler et al. 2023).

According to analysts, among the techno-authoritarianism of China and the capitalism of America, Europe is choosing a different path – a move towards greater digital independence. It is noteworthy that the European Union is now a trendsetter in digital policy and is manoeuvring between the advantages of being a 'technological sovereign' and a 'regulatory superpower'. Nevertheless, the European elite is afraid of not preserving the digital potential of Europe,

which, in this scenario, will only be able to imitate the standards set by others (Siebert 2021).

In addition, it is worth citing the opinion of European researchers Timo Seidl and Luuk Schmitz, who describe the EU's 'geo-dirigiste' turn in industrial policy and emphasise that it is the fear of falling behind that has been the driving force throughout all stages of European integration and is still relevant today (Seidl & Schmitz 2023). Under 'geo-dirigisme', scholars understand the idea that markets left unattended cannot provide technological competence and economic competitiveness in the modern world, described by former European Commissioner for the Security Union Julian King as 'geotechnological'. Thus, Timo Seidl and Luuk Schmitz believe that the European Commission, seeking political advantage, has strategically used the concept of technological sovereignty, which is ambiguous and controversial, as a convenient element to unite various actors behind an interim policy programme aimed at the modern rapidly developing market (UN. Secretary-General 1987).

History has shown that actors with different long-term interests can come together under a 'common discursive banner'. In the 1980s, the market discourse was such a 'banner' for the European Union, and today it is technological sovereignty. The use of technological sovereignty is a catalyst for the fact that economic policy cannot be implemented for efficiency reasons alone in a world based on power of various kinds – hard, soft or smart – and in which technology can be used as a weapon in a geo-economic or geopolitical context. In addition, technological sovereignty brings together actors with common goals that form a more stable foundation for cooperation between both groups (Seidl & Schmitz 2023).

Given the above-mentioned trends in Europe's digital transformation, it is important to consider the integration of the Eastern Partnership countries into the EU digital market through the prism of analysing the foundation of the EaP countries' relations with the EU. The EU's Eastern Partnership initiative reflected changes in the formats of the EU's influence on European countries. According to the Dutch political theorist Luuk van Middelaar, the project's launch phase was the embodiment of the 'normative power' of the Union through the spread of common European values, rules and norms (Sydoruk, Pavliuk & Tymeichuk 2022). The concept of a 'normative power' has been developed by Ian Manners, who was confident that the EU is a normative power. Professor Manners explained this due to the way 'it changes the global norms, standards and world politics prescriptions from bounded expectations of state-centricity, acknowledged as the universally applicable by the United Nations system'. The 'normative power' of the European Union is reflected in the ability to share the European norms and standards, ruled by the principles of liberty and democracy, respect for human dignity, rights and the rule of law, into the international communities. In general, Ian Manners described 'normative

power' as the ability of a single international entity to wield its ideological influence over other members within the realm of international relations (defined by the notions of the 'ideological power' and 'power over opinion'). Therefore, the analysed concept itself is not based on the economic resources of the EU, but it instead denotes the capability of spreading European legal and political norms, concepts, discussions and integration criteria, thereby influencing the global landscape through the application of these mechanisms (Manners 2009).

However, the Russian factor, in particular Russia's disinformation and propaganda policy against the EU, as well as Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, has become a significant challenge to the EU's integration policy towards its neighbours. Also, internal political instability and the crisis of values in the Eastern Partnership countries, in particular the divergence of EU values from the interests of the political elites of these states, have become threats to the 'normative power' of the European Union (Sydoruk, Pavliuk & Tymeichuk 2022). Besides, Carmen Decamps, member of the German Association of Energy and Water Industries, compares the EU's 'normative power' to chewing gum, which can be stretched but not without end, as it will eventually become thin and transparent and then break, explaining that the promise of accession to the EU (specifically for Ukraine) should not remain only in words, because then the 'normative power' will lose its attractiveness or collapse (Der (europäische) Föderalist 2023).

Therefore, an important role in the format of EU-EaP relations is also played by the EU's 'transformative power', which is mainly aimed at states that expected something from the Union; in particular, the 'promise of membership' is the biggest reward in this partnership (Sydoruk, Pavliuk & Tymeichuk 2022). 'Transformative power' is one of the instruments for spreading influence to other actors and often involves the formation of relationships based on economic interdependence, including economic factors and the 'attractiveness effect'. The 'transformative power' of the European Union is also linked to the external governance or integration of countries involved in various forms of regional integration. Along with economic incentives, transformative power operates with political instruments to support conditional reforms that are in line with the model of integration of third countries into the European Union. For the most part, the EU's transformative power is activated when the conditions and motives for reforms in other states are shaped in the context of a process that potentially leads to their eventual EU membership. The European way of integration under 'transformative pressure' includes the path to good governance – in particular, anti-corruption measures and public administration reforms. However, an important element of the concept of 'transformative power' is the spread of influence on entities that have a clearly defined goal to be realised as a result of the transformations – in particular, the goal of membership in the Union (Dimitrova et al. 2016).

As practice shows, the EaP countries have different motivations for integration with the European Union and are moving at different paces towards such rapprochement. While Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova intend to become full members of the Union and are making significant efforts to do so, the European integration of Azerbaijan and Armenia is slow under the pressure of Russian influence and uncertainty of intentions. On the one hand, the EU's 'transformative power' cannot be effective in forming relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia, where the motivation for EU membership is too weak. On the other hand, the EU's normative levers have repeatedly proved ineffective in the geopolitical confrontation with Moscow and are faced with the imperfections in the governmental policies of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Thus, scholars Richard Youngs and Kateryna Pishchikova argue that for the successful integration of Eastern Partnership countries into the EU, the Union should combine approaches, acting as a 'geopolitical transformational force', but remain committed to its normative principles. However, in this case, ensuring a balance between the two facets is possible only if there is a strategic consistency in the EU's actions (Youngs & Pishchikova 2013).

It is worth noting that the EU's desire to integrate the EaP countries into a single digital market can be interpreted as a concept of 'geo-dirigisme' and the process of ensuring the EU's status as a 'technological sovereign'. In this context, the use of 'transformative power' by the European Union is based on material incentives – i.e. mutual economic benefit. The benefits of the EU's digital single market are extended to the Eastern Partnership countries through the provision of assistance for the development of digital capacity, which should contribute to economic growth and business development, the creation of new jobs and a rise in living standards. The process of harmonising the digital markets of the EaP countries is a priority, as the EU sees significant prospects in developing the digital potential of its partners.

It is also worth considering the phenomenon of the 'Brussels effect' described by international trade law expert Anu Bradford, which means that the EU market can autonomously transmit its regulatory norms to member states and entities outside its borders. Thus, the EU's task is to regulate its own market, and this in turn becomes a driver of global regulatory influence. In particular, the process of integration of the Eastern Partnership countries into the EU's Digital Single Market shows that the EU's technological sovereignty is the basis for the formation of global standards in the digital sphere, which the Eastern Partnership countries seek to meet even without being full members of the EU. This is largely manifested in the desire of international actors to act in accordance with EU standards for data protection and cybersecurity. In addition, the effective functioning of the EU's Digital Single Market is an example that encourages integration and may even become a factor in EU enlargement. It is important to understand that the 'Brussels effect' has a significant impact on the enlargement

process, as even before gaining membership in the Union, candidate countries are already forced to adopt legal experience and adapt to the standards of the European Union (Bradford 2020).

Thus, the integration of the EaP countries into the EU digital market, despite the prospects and benefits that these states will receive, is part of the EU's action plan to consolidate its technological sovereignty and gain geopolitical leadership. However, as long as there is a potential gain for both sides to be had from harmonising the EaP countries' markets into a single common European space, the EU's undeclared motives do not pose a significant threat but rather create additional incentives. At the same time, the process of the digital integration of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine has once again highlighted the weaknesses of the Union's 'transformative' and 'normative' powers due to the historically formed difference in the EaP countries' aspirations for rapprochement with the EU.

There are three terms around which there is still terminological ambiguity – 'digitisation', 'digitalisation' and 'digital transformation'. These three terms have different meanings depending on the context in which they are applied.

The concept of 'digitisation' in its essence refers to receiving analog information and encoding it in a numerical equivalent, so that the computer is able to store, process and transmit it. According to Gartner's IT glossary, 'digitisation is the process of transition from the analog to digital form'. This definition is agreed upon by most scientists and researchers (Gartner Glossary n.d.).

As stated in the Gartner's glossary, 'digitalization is the use of digital technologies to change the business model and enable new opportunities to generate revenue and increase the value'. 'This is the process of transition to a digital business' (Gartner Glossary n.d.). The researchers at the Brookings Institution define digitalisation as follows: 'Digitalization is the process of using digital technologies and information to transform business operations' (Gobble 2018).

The meaning of the third concept, 'digital transformation', is significantly different from those mentioned above. The organisation can implement a series of digitalisation projects, ranging from automating processes to retraining employees to use computers. Digital transformation, on the contrary, is not something that enterprises can implement as projects. Instead, this broader term refers to a customer-driven strategic transformation of, for example, a business that requires end-to-end organisational change as well as the adoption of digital technologies.

Digital transformation has an impact on society as it affects the issues of education, jobs, wages, inequality, health, resource efficiency and security. Digital transformation encompasses five key areas of social life: economic, social, political, cultural and institutional. The economic sphere mainly covers issues of employment and job hunting, as well as the advantages of online stores. The social sphere includes the building of social ties and interpersonal communica-

tion, along with the increase in social capital. The political sphere comprises, among other things, participation in the political process (for example, related to elections) or in non-institutional politics (for example, in public debates on political issues) and civic participation. The cultural area covers cultural activity in the broad sense and the field of education. The institutional sphere includes the use of public services and information, as well as medical services (Małkowska, Urbaniec & Kosała 2021: 329):

The research methodology is based on the empirical quantitative data collected and interpreted in this article. The authors have used the E-Government Development Index (EGDI), the Global Innovation Index (GII), the Network Readiness Index (NRI) and the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) to learn, clarify and analyse the levels of the Eastern Partnership states in terms of their digital potential. For the years analysed, the authors used in their research the data of the abovementioned indexes. The system method was used to determine the features of the foundations of the EU digital single market agenda. Thanks to the structural-functional method, the difference between the terms 'digitisation', 'digitalisation' and 'digital transformation' was explained. The comparative analysis allowed for a detailed analysis of the level of digitalisation in the Eastern Partnership countries.

The EU digital market: The agenda and key priorities

The Digital Agenda for Europe envisages the creation of a single EU digital market (EU & Me 2019). The Digital Single Market Strategy was adopted on 6 May 2015 and it is one of the ten political priorities of the European Commission. The main objective of the DSM strategy is to create an area where businesses and consumers have unlimited access to digital goods and services across Europe, with the free flow of data and the environment that is conducive to both competition and innovation, and where the digital economy can grow rapidly and thereby create better economic benefits.

The DSM strategy consists of three main pillars: **access, environment, economy and society**. **Access** presupposes better approach for consumers and businesses to digital goods and services across Europe. As noted in the Strategy, better access to the above services can be achieved by eliminating obstacles in cross-border digital and electronic commerce, and access to digital information content of mass communication media, which in turn will strengthen the protection of consumer rights. **Environment** creates proper and equal conditions for flourishing digital networks and innovative services. The Digital Single Market aims to create an enabling environment for digital networks and services by providing high-speed, secure and reliable infrastructure and services supported by the right regulatory conditions. Key concerns include cyber security, data protection and e-privacy, as well as fairness and transparency of the online plat-

form. At this time, **economy and society** are focused on making full use of the digital economy's growth potential. The Digital Single Market Strategy aims to maximise the potential resources for the prosperity of the European economy, in particular within the digital sphere, where all citizens of the European Union take full advantage of its benefits, namely by improving digital skills, which in turn are essential for an inclusive digital society (European Commission 2020a).

The Digital Single Market Strategy also aims to reduce market fragmentation, increase data flows and update the existing rules for the digital age. All efforts are aimed at improving consumer access through banning unreasonable geo--blocking, content portability, end of roaming and WiFi4EU. The framework market conditions were aimed at the new telecommunications code, the Audio-visual and Media Services Directive, an updated copyright regime and platform regulation. Actions aimed at digital skills and the digitisation of industry and the public sector, combined with the new Digital Europe programme, can also significantly contribute to the digitalisation of the economy. The implementation of the rules adopted in recent years is ongoing, and the implementation of new rules remains a priority for the EU (European Commission 2020b). *DigitalEurope* is a new EU funding programme aimed at providing digital technologies to businesses, citizens and public administrations in 2021–2027. The programme provides funding for projects in five key areas – i.e. supercomputers, Artificial Intelligence, cyber security, advanced digital skills and ensuring the widespread use of digital technologies in the economy and society. The programme is designed to bridge the gap between digital technology research and market deployment. This will benefit European citizens and businesses, especially SMEs. Investments under the Digital Europe Program support the dual objectives of the European Union – i.e. green transition and digital transformation – while strengthening the sustainability and digital sovereignty of the Union (European Commission 2023).

The DSM strategy has also contributed to digital transformation through a range of support mechanisms, such as Building a European Data Economy and the Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech on the Internet. It also includes various political groups and workshops. Examples of such are the European Observatory and the Blockchain Forum, as well as the various working groups on the configuration of 5G networks. Inquiries and reviews have also become an important part of the Digital Single Market. For example, it included e-commerce inquiries that touched on both border barriers and antitrust issues (EU4Digital n. d.). Finally, the ERC strategy has created a number of funds, such as the Centers for Digital Innovation and the Fund for Future and New Technologies.

Strategic initiatives and investments remain important on the Digital Single Market agenda. The need for these actions is seen at all levels, as Europe lags behind other leading regions in some areas of development and adoption of digital technologies, relating to both mainstream digital technologies and

new high-tech technologies impact. Significant differences remain within and between EU Member States, and fragmentation itself is an obstacle to the development and implementation at the scale of European digital solutions, which often require a large critical mass – data, users or connected nodes – to be viable.

Among strategic initiatives, several key areas of implementation can be distinguished. One of them is developing and scaling EU technology ecosystems to match the best in the world and to position Europe as a leader in key digital cutting-edge technologies around centres of excellence through collaboration between super-universities, public authorities, established industries and active start-ups. Another important area is the creation of a digital leadership tool for innovative procurement of digital technologies of European strategic importance, combining innovation funding and public procurement. Additionally, the EU aims to establish data platforms for strategic B2B sectors, for example, enabling pan-European exchange of health data (or similarly utilities or transport data) to improve health outcomes, research and drive innovation, while respecting citizens' privacy and trust.

In the framework of such initiatives a significant focus is also placed on paving the way for trusted artificial intelligence (AI) worldwide. This involves facilitating AI-based innovation to drive economic growth and social innovation, while ensuring transparency and positive social impact, which may include social measures to counter potential negative consequences. This would distinguish the European AI solution as ethical and reliable. Moreover, empowering cities and communities across Europe is a priority, achieved by promoting and ensuring the development and equal access to citizen-centric smart city technologies for better public and private services in transport, health, energy and social and community services.

To strengthen cybersecurity, the EU is raising its cybersecurity shield to protect EU citizens, businesses and member states from attacks on their data and data systems. This involves protecting end-to-end technology supply chains, including foreign technologies, and increasing strategic autonomy for key technologies. Another critical measure is enhancing citizens' control over their personal data, building on the General Data Protection Regulation to improve understanding, user-centricity, control and effective enforcement of citizens' data rights, and enabling innovation and new business models based on data portability.

Furthermore, digital solutions are being facilitated to address climate risk prevention by promoting the positive potential of digital technologies to reduce CO_2 emissions and resource use in other sectors, and to reduce the growing contribution of ICTs to CO_2 emissions and natural resource use (in particular rare metals) through infrastructure (e.g. data centres) and ICT devices.

Finally, the EU is committed to supporting lifelong learning for future work to enable the large-scale reskilling of citizens (especially populations at risk

of unemployment) and equip all citizens with the digital and cognitive skills needed to succeed as regards future work (European Commission 2020b).

It is worth exploring in more detail the key areas of the Roadmap 'Digital Compass for the EU's Digital Decade' – namely those of skills, infrastructure, business and governance.

The Commission defines a qualified in the digital sphere population and highly qualified digital specialists as the first, strategically important goal. As noted, this should be facilitated by the development of a highly effective digital education ecosystem, as well as an effective policy of promoting connections and attracting talented individuals from around the world (European Commission 2021a). Digital skills will be essential to strengthen Europe's collective societal resilience. Basic digital skills for all citizens and the ability to acquire new ones for the workforce comprise the prerequisite for active participation in the Digital Decade, as explained in the European Skills Agenda (Dang & Pheng 2014).

The next issue to be considered is a safe, efficient and sustainable digital infrastructure. As stated in the Digital Compass, Europe will only achieve digital leadership by building it on a sustainable digital infrastructure of connectivity, microelectronics and the ability to process big data, since they act as drivers of other technological developments and support the competitive advantage of the European industry (European Commission 2021a). As the decade progresses, households will increase their use of such network technologies, reflecting their growing needs for very high bandwidth connectivity. That is why the Commission has set 2030 as the target for all European households to have gigabit network coverage and for all settlements to be covered by 5G.

Digital transformation of business is one of the key goals as well. Its success will depend on the ability of businesses to rapidly and pervasively adopt new digital technologies, particularly in lagging industrial and service ecosystems. The commission sees the potential for digital transformation through five key business 'ecosystems' (European Commission 2020b) – namely, manufacturing, healthcare, construction, agriculture and mobility.

The EU will promote its 'people-centred' digital agenda on the global stage and promote alignment or convergence with EU norms and standards. Besides, the union will ensure the security and sustainability of its digital supply chains and provide global solutions (European Commission 2021a).

Assessment of the integration of EaP Countries' Digital Markets into the Digital Single Market

The European Union remains the main partner of EaP Countries in promoting digital transformation. This involves providing financial assistance for the implementation of reforms through various initiatives and providing access

to EU funding instruments, as well as promoting better legislation and digital innovation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: EaP Countries' reforms and EU actions in 2022
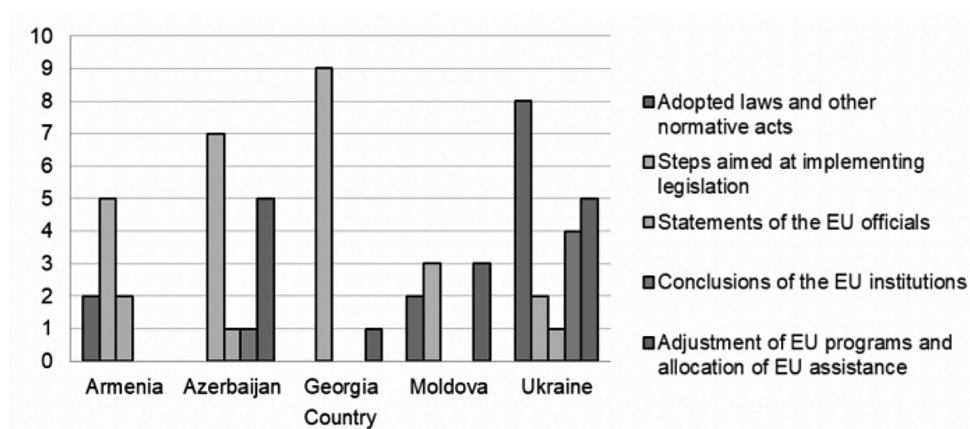
Source: Koriavets 2023

The EU shows great interest in the development of Armenia's digital economy and infrastructure. In **Armenia**, the main attention is paid to the management of information systems, the implementation of digital solutions in the country's management system and the improvement of cyber security systems. European Union activities in **Azerbaijan,** by contrast, are mostly focused on telecommunications and the startup ecosystem. The digitalisation initiatives of the Republic of **Moldova** are primarily focused on providing rural areas and students in schools with digital infrastructure. The EU has also paid more attention to cyber security, particularly in the context of the high vulnerability caused by Russia's war against Ukraine. An important direction of the EU's digital policy in **Georgia** is towards cyber security and e-government. Georgia's e-government sector has reached an important milestone with the launch of the my.gov.ge platform, which provides online access to government services. In light of the tense war between Russia and Ukraine, the EU has recognised the need to respond quickly to cyber threats and has taken significant steps to help **Ukraine** combat potential Russian cyber attacks. The importance of the cyber security agenda is also reflected in the actions taken by the EU, such as the deployment of Cyber Rapid Response Teams and the provision of more than EUR 10 million in funding to support the strengthening of cyber security and the availability of public services (Koriavets 2023).

If we analyse the digital integration of the EaP countries through the prism of geo-dirigisme theory, it is important to understand the strategic regulatory influence the EU has on them, particularly through regulatory coercion and

financing mechanisms. For Ukraine, adaptation to EU digital legislation is important both within the framework of digital visa-free travel and for the ambitious goals of full membership. The EU's levers of influence on Ukraine remain investment projects for the development of information technology, financing for digital transformation in Ukraine, development of digital skills of Ukrainian specialists and, to a large extent, cybersecurity (Digital integration n.d.). As for Georgia and Moldova, the European Union remains the main investor in digital infrastructure, which creates a certain financial dependence on EU assistance. In addition, Armenia needs to receive active funding for digital projects from the EU, which would reduce Russian influence on its digital sphere. Azerbaijan's weak legal harmonisation with the EU reduces the opportunities for regulatory coercion by the Union, but financial mechanisms of influence remain in place. Meanwhile, the EU's influence on Belarus is rather insignificant given the existing sanctions against the state and the suspension of Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership programme.

The EaP countries and the EU are also actively developing cooperation in the field of e-business, which contributes to their economic growth, competitiveness, transparency of economic operations and technological progress. In this context, the priority areas of cooperation are the development of the e-economy, cybersecurity of e-commerce operations, consumer data protection, legal framework for e-commerce, development of online trading platforms, digitalisation of SMEs, implementation of the payment system and improvement of the digital system. The positive effects of EU-EaP cooperation in the field of e-business include economic integration between the EU and EaP countries. In addition, the cooperation contributes to an increase in the GDP of the EaP countries, the creation of a common e-business market, the development of a free economy, digital transformation, and an increase in export and import operations between the EU and the EaP countries. An important result is also the attraction of investments to the EaP countries and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. However, cooperation also has negative consequences, including problems with national producers who do not have the necessary digital technologies, as well as weak competitiveness of national producers compared to European ones (Tsebenko et al. 2023).

The direct integration of the digital markets of the Eastern Partnership countries involves approximation of their national legislation in the field of digital technologies and the reforms within the key elements of digital transformation in the European Union; for this aim the 'EU4Digital' Initiative was established to become the driver of digital transformations in the Eastern Partnership countries. This is the Initiative to harmonise the digital markets of the Eastern Partnership countries with the EU's Digital Single Market, launched by the European Commission in 2016. It aims to spread the benefits of the DSM to the Eastern Partnership countries, focusing EU assistance on developing the potential of

digital economies and society to ensure economic growth, to create more jobs, to improve the level and quality of life of people, and to provide assistance to enterprises and businesses. Through the EU4Digital, the EU supports Eastern Partnership countries in reducing roaming tariffs, promoting the development and deployment of high-speed broadband for the economy and expanding e-services, harmonising digital public institutions in various areas such as logistics and health, as well as strengthening cyber security and the growth of digital skills (Troitiño 2022).

The 'EU4Digital' initiative brings together a range of actions and programmes within the European Union, including the following:

- **EU4Digital Networks**, which unifies representatives of the EU member states and the countries of the Eastern region for joint work in certain areas;
- **The EU4Digital programme** (2019–2022), which promotes key areas of the digital economy and society;
- **Digital 'broadband' strategies** (2018–2020), which supported the Eastern Partnership countries in implementing strategies in the field of broadband communication at the national level;
- **The 'cyber security – East' project**, aimed at increasing public trust in digital services and strengthen cybersecurity;
- **The 'EaPConnect' project**, focused on expanding network infrastructure to connect research and educational groups from the EU member states and Eastern neighbouring countries.

The long-term priority of the Initiative is the creation and further development of the digital community, and the key is an undisruptive digital transformation. This is due to the fact that sustainable digital transformation occupies an important place in the agenda of the EU's external actions. Also, the latter was identified as one of the five priorities to stimulate sustainable growth for both the EU and the Eastern partner countries in the Joint Communication on the Eastern Partnership policy after 2020, issued in March 2020 by the European Commission and the EU High Representative with issues of foreign affairs and security policy, as well as confirmed in the priorities of the Eastern Partnership after 2020. The agenda is underpinned by an economic and investment plan of EUR 2.3 billion in grants, blending and guarantees, with the potential to mobilise up to EUR 17 billion of public and private investment. The latest document sets out ten main EU targets for the Eastern Partnership, one of which is for at least 80% of households to have access to affordable high-speed internet by 2025 (EU Neighbours East 2019).

In 2021–2022, the political importance of the Initiative was considered and key areas were identified. These included developing framework rules (e.g. eCommerce, eGovernance) to compare with EU and world practices, establish-

ing the practice of reuse and EU decision-making (eDelivery, eSignature, SEED), mobilising stakeholders for cooperation, engaging international partners to create positive synergy and laying the foundations for large-scale digital solutions and projects.

In general, 'EU4Digital' is an initiative to harmonise the digital markets of the countries participating in the Eastern Partnership to the EU's Single Digital Market, the key priority of which is an undisturbed digital transformation, in particular through the convergence of national legislation and reforms in key areas of digitalisation. The initiative covers six key cooperation networks in the region: rules of telecommunication systems and networks, trust and security, electronic commerce (trade), innovations in the field of information and communication technologies, electronic health care system and digital skills. In recent years, within the framework of the EU4Digital Initiative, significant results have been achieved in the Eastern Partnership countries, in particular: the Model Law on Electronic Communications based on the EU regulatory framework has been agreed; the final version of the Regional Spectrum Agreement (RSA) was reached; Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine are selected to participate in the digital signature expansion pilot; consulting activities on the implementation of eDelivery have been introduced; collected data to assess the maturity of e-government; a check was carried out using the System Electronic Data Exchange (SEED) in the customs sphere; a national virtual warehouse was created to support small and medium-sized enterprises in the countries of the South Caucasus; launch of special platforms 'EU4Digital Smart Industry Community Space' in the field of ICT and eHealth in the field of health care, etc.

It is appropriate to consider the E-Government Development Index (EGDI), which represents the state of e-government development in UN member states. Along with assessing country patterns of website development, the EGDI includes access characteristics such as infrastructure and education levels to reflect how a country uses information technology to promote access and engage its citizens. The EGDI index assesses three important dimensions of e-government: online service provision, telecommunication connectivity and human resources. It is important to note that the Index divides countries into different groups according to the level of e-government development – i.e. very high EGDI group, high EGDI group, medium EGDI group, low EGDI group. According to the study for 2022, the very high EGDI group includes such Eastern Partnership countries as Ukraine and Georgia, the high EGDI group includes the Republic of Moldova, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Moncada 2017). In the e-government development rating, out of 193 countries, Ukraine ranks 46th, Belarus 58th, Georgia 60th, Armenia 64th, the Republic of Moldova 72nd and Azerbaijan 83rd (United Nations E-Government Survey 2022). The results of the analysis are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Positions of the participating countries of the 'Eastern Partnership' in the e-Government Development Rating (EGDI) (2022)
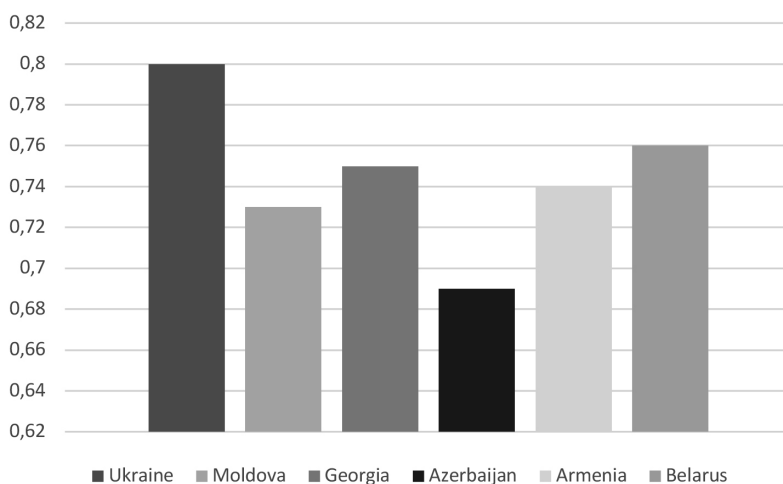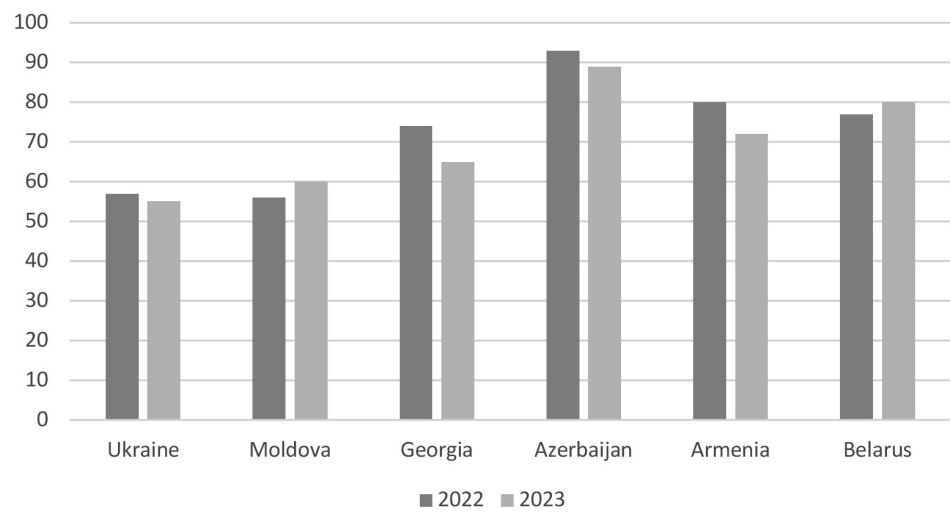

Source: Authors

One of the studies based on a comparative analysis of the dynamics of the EaP countries' ranking according to the EGDI index in 2003–2020 allows us to trace the trend of significant progress in the development of e-government. Thus, it was found that the most important component in the development of the EaP countries is human capital. At the same time, progress varies in the development of the Online Services and Telecommunication Infrastructure components. However, the overall state of e-governance improvement in all EaP countries is virtually at the same level (Tsebenko et al. 2022b).

The Global Innovation Index (GII) reveals the world's most innovative economies by assessing the innovation performance of approximately 132 economies, highlighting innovation strengths and weaknesses among different economic groups. So, in the specified rating Moldova is in the 60th position, Ukraine is 55th, Georgia is 65th, the Republic of Belarus is 80th, Armenia is 72nd and Azerbaijan is 89th (Dutta et al. 2023). For comparison, in 2022, the Republic of Moldova took 56th place, which means that in 2023 it fell by four positions. On the other hand, Ukraine, which in 2022 was in 57th place, despite all its challenges was able to rise in the ranking in 2023. It is obvious that in 2023 some states managed to improve their positions compared to 2022 (Georgia – 74th, Armenia – 80th and Azerbaijan – 93rd). Belarus, which in 2022 was in 77th place in the rating, showed a negative trend and fell three positions (Dutta et al. 2022) (see Figure 3).

It is appropriate to analyse the data provided by the Network Readiness Index (NRI). The Network Readiness Index 2023 ranks a total of 134 economies that col-

Figure 3: Positions of the participating countries of the 'Eastern Partnership' in the Global Innovation Index (GII) (2022–2023)

Source: Authors

Figure 4: The Network Readiness Index 2022–2023
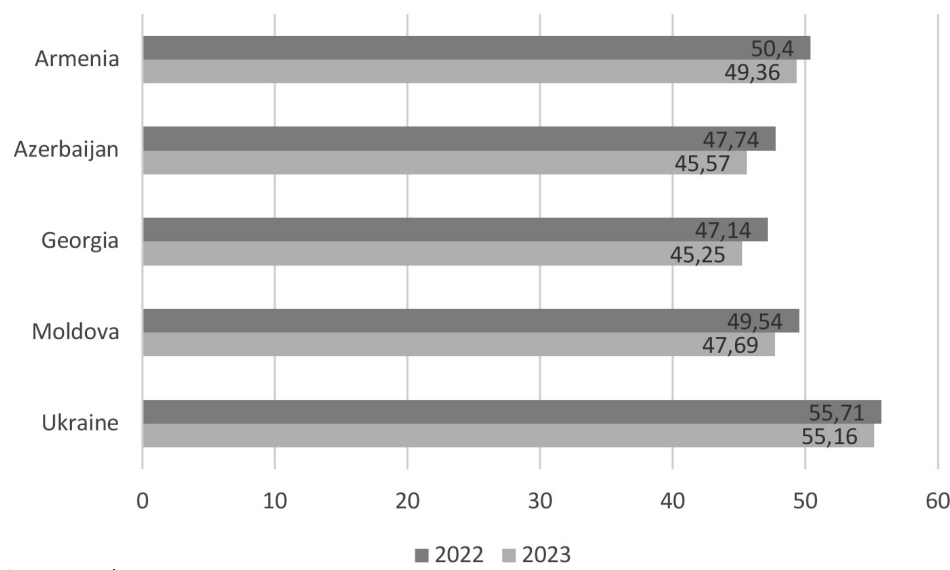
Source: Authors

lectively account for 95 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP). In 2023, Ukraine took 43rd place, thereby improving its results and rising in the overall ranking. For comparison, in 2022 it ranked 50th. Moldova in 2023 remained at the same level as in 2022 (67th place). In 2022, Azerbaijan ranked 74th and Georgia

ranked 75th, but in 2023, Azerbaijan dropped one position to 75th and Georgia ranked 78th. In 2023, Armenia managed to rise in the index by one position from the year before and occupy 63rd place (Dutta & Lanvin 2022, 2023) (see Figure 4).

It is worth considering the degree of digitalisation of the Eastern Partnership countries using the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI).

The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) tracks Europe's overall digital productivity and monitors EU countries' progress in digital competitiveness within five components – i.e. connectivity (fixed, mobile broadband penetration and coverage), human capital (basic and advanced digital skills), use of the Internet (citizens' use of Internet services and online transactions), integration of digital technologies (digitalisation of business and e-commerce) and digital public services (e-government) (European Commission 2022). Since DESI does not monitor the indicators of the Eastern Partnership countries, analysing similar indicators can provide a basic understanding of their digitalisation level and their progress towards integration into the EU DSM.

In the context of digital development, it is worth analysing the level of Internet access in the Eastern Partnership countries. The current data on coverage in Ukraine, especially fixed broadband, is considered highly inaccurate. According to Ookla, there is no 5G coverage in the country, though the equipment is installed and being tested in the largest cities (Speedtest 2022b). In 2021, according to Global Logic, 85% of the Ukrainian population had access to the Internet; and according to the World Bank 79% were Internet users and 71% of the population used digital services (The World Bank Group 2016). Despite 60% of Moldova's population living in rural areas, around 90% of the country has access to ultra-fast gigabit Internet (Speedtest 2022b). As of January 2022, there are 3.07 million Internet users in Moldova, which is about 76% of the population, 62% of whom are users of Internet services (Belan 2020). In Georgia, internet and mobile connectivity is uniform and reaches more than 70% of the country's population, a relatively high number given the hard-to-reach geographical regions (Speedtest 2022b). In 2020, 23.1% of the users made online transactions and ordered online services (Hronová 2022). In Armenia, 96% of households have at least basic access to the Internet and there is almost no gap in the Internet use between urban and rural communities. In addition, 99.61% of the population has access to the 3G-based network (Speedtest 2022b). In 2021, there were 2.02 million internet users in Armenia, who mostly used it to access communication and media services, and 8% of whom were involved in e-commerce (The World Bank Group 2016). As for Azerbaijan, the quality of the broadband services is low, i.e. the number of high-speed connections is consistently lower than 10% of all connections present in the country. As fixed by the Economist Intelligence Unit 2021 Inclusive Internet Index, about 78% of households have access to the Internet (Speedtest 2022b). Accordingly, 81.1% of the population are Internet users, using the network for online services, online

banking and online transactions (Lloyds banktrade 2021). In Belarus, more than 3.2 million people use broadband Internet access. The second generation (2G) mobile communication services are available in 99.3% of the country's territory, and the third generation (3G) in 98.4% of it (Speedtest 2022b). Existing data proves that online sales in Belarus increased by 42% and reached almost USD 1 billion, which makes 4.5% of the total retail turnover (Zooinform 2021).

As stated in the Speedtest Global Index 2022, in terms of mobile Internet speed Ukraine ranks 79th, Moldova 59th, Georgia 68th, Armenia 77th, Azerbaijan 61st and Belarus ranks 132nd. At this time, in terms of fixed broadband connection speed, Ukraine ranks 63rd, Moldova 24th, Georgia 115th, Armenia 99th, Azerbaijan 115th and Belarus ranks 73rd (Speedtest 2022a).

It is important to develop digital skills among citizens. In Ukraine, this is one of the strategic priorities of the Ministry of Digital Transformation. The share of the Ukrainians whose digital skills are below the basic level mark decreased by 5.2% (1.42 million people) and as of 2022 was 47.8% (which is less than in 2021); and those with no digital skills ('No skills') decreased by 4%, or by 1.09 million people (International Telecommunication Union (ITU) 2021). The opportunities for the citizens of Moldova to develop their technical capabilities are expanding, but they still do not meet the level of demand (United Nations Development Programme 2019: 8). In Georgia, the indicators of internet and digital skills among the population are rather low. As the research for 2020 shows, 26% of internet users have an average level of skills and only 12% are considered proficient (Hronová 2022). The population of Armenia has mediocre digital and internet skills, with fewer than 30% of citizens demonstrating basic knowledge (European Training Foundation 2020). Azerbaijan's authorities are trying to promote the development of digital skills among citizens – that is, about 62% of the population believe that they have developed their digital skills and knowledge to a basic level, and about 53% of the population can be considered digitally literate (Yoon et al. 2019). Belarus was at the middle stage of digital readiness of society as of 2019 (Cisco 2019), which was indicated by an acceleration of the citizens' digital skills.

Ukraine pays due attention to the integration of digital technologies in business and e-commerce and, as shown by 2019 data, the technological landscape 4.0 in Ukraine included 62 companies, which are distributed in 16 segments +1 by system integration, which is considered the most numerous (21 companies) (The World Bank Group 2016: 2). Furthermore, Ukraine is the 65th largest e-commerce market with a revenue of USD 1.1 billion in 2021 according to Statista Digital Market Outlook (Statista 2022). As for Moldova, small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of the country's economy; however, only 17% of them have integrated digital technologies into their work (United Nations Development Programme 2019). The e-commerce involvement in Georgia is very low (1.1% of retail sales), which is far below the European average of 12% (Galt & Taggart 2018).

Considering digital public services, it should be noted that the integral element of digital public services in Ukraine is the online platform and mobile application 'Diia' (9.5 million active users in November 2021) (International Telecommunication Union (ITU) 2021). Several e-government tools function in Moldova, such as the government data portal 'date.gov.md', a single window for all public services 'servicii.gov.md', digital mobile signature, MCloud, 'MPass', 'MPay', 'MSign', 'eVisa' and the government interaction platform 'MConnect' (United Nations Development Programme 2019: 10–11). The Unified Electronic Services Portal (MY.GOV.GE) in Georgia is a key element of digital public services in the country, which, as of 2020, provided information on more than 600 government services (Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia 2023). The provision of digital public services in Armenia is only developing. The country has a website that combines e-government tools and databases of state bodies (Electronic Government 2023). In Azerbaijan, ASAN, the electronic government portal organised on the principle of 'single window', provides 315 services across 11 government institutions, as well as from private companies and enterprises. It is accessible through 15 ASAN centres throughout the country and it is managed by ASAN xidmət, which is convenient for the citizens (Yoon et al. 2019: 20). Available information on the functioning of the e-government in Belarus is spotty, but there is an organisation called the National Center for Electronic Services (NCES), which is subordinate to the Operational Analytical Center under the President of the Republic of Belarus (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: The level of digital integration of the Eastern Partnership countries according to the key indicators of the DESI index
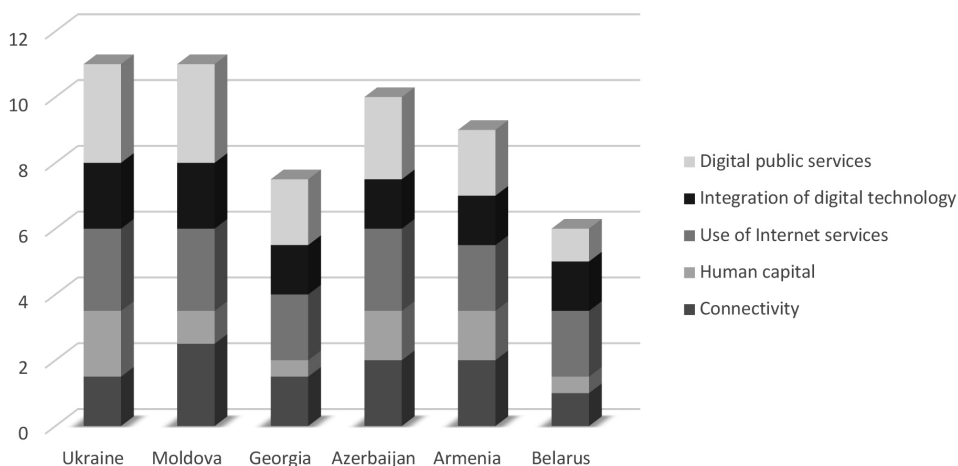
Source: Authors

The analysis of the Eastern Partnership countries according to the indicators of the digital economy and society index (DESI) demonstrated their level of digital integration in the key areas on the way to the EU DSM; the results are also highlighted in the author's diagram. It is important to understand that the high performance of the EaP countries and their progress in digital development is largely due to the EU's influence on these countries. Adaptation to EU norms, compliance with European standards, funding and investments from the EU are direct factors in the development of digital markets in the EaP countries with the prospect of integration into the Digital Single Market. The motivations of the state for digital transformation also play a significant role, as they directly affect the amount of effort the state will make in this process.

The challenges and prospects of the integration of digital markets of the Eastern Partnership countries participating in the EU initiative into the EU Digital Single Market

Despite the considerable and tangible achievements in their digital transformation, each of the countries of the Eastern Initiative – Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, the Republic of Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan – demonstrates unique problems and gaps that prevent the rapprochement; their study will help to clarify the key directions of development and prospects integration of the digital market of this or that country into the EU DSM.

Eastern Partnership countries should consider certain aspects that hinder digital harmonisation with the EU for transposition into national law; in particular, the 'bans and restrictions' for the import of certain goods into the national territory, as products sold online and sent from a third country to EU, are placed on the EU market, and therefore these products must comply with all EU product safety regulations (European Commission 2021b). In addition, the aspects of e-commerce standardisation are challenging as well; More precisely this refers to the lack of a 'Trustmark' for e-commerce websites. This refers to the national e-commerce certification scheme Trustmark, which certifies that an e-commerce company based on the national territory has undertaken commitment to work in accordance with the European Code of Conduct, guaranteeing ethical standards in the digital market (European Society of Occupational Safety & Health 2023). Parcel delivery is one more gap in cross-border e-commerce in the Eastern Partnership countries compared to the EU, as due to the limited size of the market, global private operators try to maintain high volumes of e-commerce, which leads to higher tariffs for consumers. The delivery terms are several days slower than in the EU, where delivery within 48 hours is common (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2021).

In Belarus, there is a general lack of experience and information on best practices for developing digital skills, and there is no single body to manage and

regulate the ICT sector as well. In addition, in some Eastern partners of the EU (Georgia, Moldova), there is a fear and reluctance to use digital technologies among the population, caused by the low level of digital literacy, which leads to a slowdown in the implementation of information technologies, lower competitiveness, higher costs and a decrease in economic growth in general. This is all despite the legislation on e-commerce, electronic signature and ICT training in schools (Georgia) (Hronová 2022). In Moldova, while there is a clear understanding that a strong digital economy is vital for innovation, growth, jobs and competitiveness, there is no clear long-term vision and policy on how digital skills can be developed at the national level. However, there is potential due to the new National Strategy for the Development of the Information Society 'Digital Moldova 2020' (European Training Foundation 2020).

Despite the good performance of the fixed broadband in the EaP countries and the improvement of the Internet speed in recent years, the current networks in the EaP countries are not yet able to provide gigabit speeds, which is an important requirement for EU DSM integration (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2021).

Ukraine is the most active country in this regard, especially in the areas of cyber security, government electronics, communications, trust and identity. Ukraine has the largest percentage of laws and regulations regarding the implementation of the EU digital strategy. In response to Ukraine's requests, the EU included the country's institutions in various joint projects. Granting Ukraine the status of a candidate for the EU has a significant impact on this (Koriavets 2023).

It is important to note that in the conditions of the war, the digital integration of Ukraine into the DSM of the EU has not changed its nature; notwithstanding the circumstances, it is accelerating. This is most evident in the fact that on 23 November 2022, an experimental project was launched on the mutual recognition of qualified electronic signatures of Ukraine and the EU with the proper protection of personal data, which indicates significant progress in the development of trust services according to EU standards. Furthermore, the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine is actively conducting a dialogue with European partners regarding the development of technical solutions and the clarification of legal issues related to the recognition by the EU member states of the electronic documents created by means of the Unified State Web Portal of Electronic Services 'Diia' using the means of unified and state registers of Ukraine. Besides, active cooperation for Ukraine to be included in the EU trust list for the recognition of Ukrainian documents in the 'Diia' application is being carried out (Official Website of the Ministry and Committee 2023).

To summarise, there are several potential scenarios for the development of the European Digital Agenda in the EaP countries. In particular, the first

scenario assumes that all EaP countries will implement a significant number of digitalisation reforms, approximating European standards as much as possible, which will lead to the creation of a single digital market of the EU and EaP countries. However, this scenario is unlikely in the short and long term, as there are many threats to the further format of cooperation of some states within the Initiative – namely Belarus. The second scenario involves a scenario in which the EaP countries will be divided into two blocs: the Associated Trio countries (Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova), which will be the most ambitious to join the EU and therefore will make the most efforts to implement the European digital course; and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, which will not be able to achieve full harmonisation with the European digital course. This scenario is most likely in the medium term. The next scenario is possible in the short term (due to the Russo-Ukrainian war) and unlikely in the long term. This scenario involves a difficult geopolitical situation in the region, in which EU reforms in the target countries will slow down. Another scenario, though unlikely, is that all EaP countries would reject the European digital agenda (Tsebenko et al. 2022a).

Conclusions

Thus, despite the fact that digitalisation creates huge opportunities for economic and social development in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, not all of the participants pay due attention to it. However, Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova show interest in cooperation in the Single Digital Market and are making efforts for further integration.

For Ukraine, integration into the EU Digital Market is not only about being globally competitive in terms of technology, it is also necessary in connection with the EU accession negotiations, defining clear sections and a cluster – Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth. Ukraine widely uses various digital services. An integral element of digital public services in Ukraine is the online platform and mobile application 'Diya', which has already become a well-known national e-government brand. The launch of the digital state platform 'Diya' united all institutions into one effective tool providing public services online. In addition, an electronic health care system (eHealth) and an information system for patients and storage of medical data (HELSI) are actively functioning in Ukraine. The Emalyatko service has been created for parents of newborn children, thanks to which, by submitting just one online application, you can easily register the birth of a child, as well as receive up to ten state services that are necessary for the birth of a baby. The Paperless service, which took on the function of ensuring document circulation in electronic form, became important and convenient for companies and entrepreneurs. Another component of the system of electronic exchange of documents between Ukrainian and European companies is

eSignature. The goal is to introduce a digital signature standard in Ukraine and guarantee its authenticity for EU companies and institutions.

The Republic of Moldova is making great efforts on its way to EU integration, including the implementation of internal digital transformation. Moldova's Digital Transformation Strategy aims to build a digital society and a competitive information and communication technology sector, develop a sustainable digital economy and digitise public services. It is important that these steps in the digital sphere not only contribute to the economic development of the state or the harmonisation of digital markets (Moldova-EU), but also bring Moldova politically closer to the EU.

Georgia is a country that, despite political instability, has made significant progress in the context of digitalisation, especially thanks to the EU's support for digital reforms. To a greater extent, this progress can be seen in the e-governance system. However, the process of gaining full EU membership, which has long been a motivation for Georgia in its reforms (the country even received the status of EU candidate), is now suspended, as is the EU's financial support.

If we analyse Armenia's success in the digital sphere, the main emphasis is on the development of information systems, integration of digital technologies into public administration and improving cybersecurity. It is worth noting that Russian influence has long weakened Armenia's motivation to join the EU, which suggests that Armenia's motivations for integrating into the digital market were economic and a desire to keep up with technological trends and developments in the global market. However, with Armenia's intensified intentions to become an EU member, this motivation may now become geopolitical.

Azerbaijan is another country where the economic motive and the desire to follow global digital trends have potentially driven digital transformation. Currently, Azerbaijan is actively implementing standardisation and accelerating the development of the digital sphere, and EU funding plays an important role in the implementation of digital projects.

The Republic of Belarus's suspension of its participation in the Eastern Partnership has 'paused' programmes involving Belarusian government agencies and state-owned enterprises. In addition, EU sanctions against Belarus are in place, which is unfavourable for the country's economic development and creates the need to finance digital transformation internally or with the support of other partners.

However, the countries still need to take a number of complex measures in order to achieve their goals and get all the benefits of the Single Digital Market of the European Union, as there are the following possible development trajectories of the integration of the Eastern Partnership countries into the Single Digital Market of the EU: the creation of the Digital Single Market for the EU and EaP countries is unlikely in the near future; there may be a slowdown in the integration of the Eastern Partnership countries into the EU DSM due to

the regional crisis caused by Russia's war against Ukraine; the Association Trio is likely to make more progress in digital transformation towards the EU DSM than the rest of the initiative countries; it is doubtful that all Eastern Partnership countries will cancel the European digital course; and it is likely that the EU will finally stop cooperation with Belarus within the framework of the digital initiative.

It remains obvious that each of the states participating in the Eastern Partnership programme differs from each other primarily in terms of the political situation. Also, the region is saturated with additional geopolitical challenges, and this affects the rapid and high-quality implementation of all digital transformation reforms proposed by the European Union. However, the EU understands this situation and shows patience in the form of various support mechanisms, such as funds, programmes and projects. Their implementation and application depend on the urgent needs of the state and, most importantly, on its political will.

As practice shows, the Eastern Partnership countries pay a lot of attention to the issue of digital transformation, despite the internal and external challenges facing them. This can be explained by the fact that they see it as a key component that provides additional opportunities for reform, recovery and digital resilience. After the start of Russia's illegal and unprovoked war against Ukraine, these issues became more relevant than ever and acquired new meanings, which became a direct incentive for the rapid implementation of the main components of digitalisation.

In this context, EU4Digital is one of the powerful tools that coordinates and facilitates the creation of a common framework aimed at spreading the benefits of the Digital Single Market in the Eastern Partnership countries. The key problem is that the level of political commitments and the intensity of domestic activities on the way to the digital transformation of states are out of proportion to their achievements. Therefore, within the framework of this initiative, each partner state, with the support of the relevant institutions of the European Union, should pay more attention to additional instruments in order to avoid future gaps in indicators.

The European Union faces significant challenges in implementing its foreign policy towards the EaP countries: its 'transformative power' is ineffective for Azerbaijan and Armenia, which have little motivation for membership, and its normative leverage does not guarantee success in interacting with reforms in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Given the different motivations pursued by the EaP countries in the process of integration into the Digital Single Market, the EU needs to combine different approaches in its policies, regarding both 'normative power' and 'transformative power', and take advantage of the 'Brussels effect'. This will allow the European Union to have effective instruments of influence in its arsenal that will simultaneously contribute to the sustainable

development of Europe and improve the EU's interaction with international actors at various levels.

Each of the states managed to achieve certain results that brought it closer to the common digital market of the European Union. However, the region is not marked by a high level of stability and the index indicators highlight fluctuations in the achievements of the participating states. Undoubtedly, all parties should focus as much as possible on the implementation of the set goals and contribute to the introduction of legal norms into domestic legislation that would speed up full integration into the EU's Single Digital Market.

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