POLITICS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

THE JOURNAL OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

Volume 22
Number 3
November 2026
ISSN 1801-3422

METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY PRAGUE PRESS

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The Journal of the Central European Political Science Association

Volume 22 Number 3 November 2026 ISSN 1801-3422

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Politics in Central Europe – The Journal of Central European Political Science Association is the official Journal of the Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA). *Politics in Central Europe* is published quarterly (March, June, September, December), double-blind, peer-reviewed publication.

Publisher:

Metropolitan University Prague, o. p. s.
Dubečská 900/10, 100 31 Praha 10-Strašnice (Czech Republic)

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ISSN 1801-3422
MK ČR E 18556

POLITICS IN CENTRAL EUROPE is listed
in the internationally recognised database Scopus and Erih.

POLITICS IN CENTRAL EUROPE is indexed
in the internationally recognised databases:
Baidu Scholar, CEJSH (The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities), Celdes, CNKI Scholar (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), CNPIEC, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), EBSCO (relevant databases), EBSCO Discovery Service, Google Scholar, J-Gate, JournalTOCs, KESLI-NDSL (Korean National Discovery for Science Leaders), Microsoft Academic, Naviga (Softweco), Primo Central (ExLibris), Publons, ReadCube, Summon (Serials Solutions/ProQuest), TDNet, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory/ulrichsweb, WanFangData, WorldCat (OCLC).

ISSN 1801-3422 ČÍSLO REGISTRACE MK ČR E 18556

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ESSAYS

Does Ideology Structure Redistribution Preferences? Evidence from Cross-National Variation in Europe

HUONG LE, BUI THI LY AND NGUYEN VAN THAO

Politics in Central Europe
(ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 22, No. 3
DOI: 10.51870/pce-2026-0013

Abstract: *Why does political ideology shape support for redistribution more strongly in some European countries than in others? Using Round 11 of the European Social Survey across 28 countries, this study examines the political, economic, and value-based foundations of redistribution preferences. Country fixed-effects ordered logit and multilevel models show that right-leaning individuals are consistently less supportive of redistribution. Economic insecurity increases support, while higher household income reduces it. Helping others also has a strong positive association, showing that redistribution preferences extend beyond material self-interest. Trust in parliament further conditions the ideological divide, with stronger ideological differences at higher levels of trust. Most importantly, the effect of ideology varies substantially across countries. A random-slope model significantly improves model fit, confirming that the ideological divide over redistribution is not uniform across Europe. These findings show that redistribution preferences reflect political beliefs, material circumstances, and individual values, while highlighting cross-national variation in how strongly ideology structures public support for redistribution.*

Keywords: ***income redistribution, political ideology, economic insecurity, helping others, institutional trust, European Social Survey***

Introduction

Economic inequality remains a central challenge across European democracies. It raises an important political question: who supports government efforts to reduce income differences, and why? This question has become more important

as European welfare states face demographic change, economic uncertainty, and political polarization. Public support is essential to the legitimacy and sustainability of redistributive policies. Yet citizens differ considerably in how they view the role of government in addressing inequality.

Traditional explanations of redistribution preferences emphasize material self-interest. Individuals with lower incomes or greater exposure to economic risk are expected to support redistribution because they are more likely to benefit from it (Meltzer & Richard 1981; Alesina & Giuliano 2011). Other research shows that these preferences are more complex. Expectations of social mobility, perceptions of economic position, and the structure of inequality can also shape support for redistribution (Piketty 1995; Benabou & Ok 2001; Cruces, Perez-Truglia & Tetaz 2013; Lupu & Pontusson 2011). Economic position therefore matters, but it does not provide a complete explanation.

Political beliefs and personal values add another dimension. Political ideology shapes how individuals understand inequality and the appropriate role of government (Alt and Iversen 2017; Rueda and Stegmueller 2019). Fairness beliefs and concern for others can also influence support for redistribution beyond direct economic interests (Alesina & Angeletos 2005; Fong 2001). Institutional settings matter as well. Research shows that welfare regimes and national political environments are associated with differences in redistribution attitudes across countries (Jaeger 2005; Jaeger 2009). These studies suggest that redistribution preferences emerge from political, economic, and value-based considerations rather than from material self-interest alone.

An important question, however, remains. *Does political ideology structure redistribution preferences in the same way across European countries?* Existing research provides strong evidence that left- and right-leaning individuals differ in their views of redistribution. Yet an average ideological effect may conceal important differences across national contexts. European countries differ substantially in welfare institutions, inequality, political competition, and histories of redistribution (Esping-Andersen 1990; Lupu & Pontusson 2011; Pontusson & Weisstanner 2018). It is therefore important to distinguish between two questions: Does ideology predict redistribution preferences across Europe? And is the strength of this relationship similar across countries?

This paper addresses these questions using Round 11 of the European Social Survey (ESS) across 28 countries. It examines how Political ideology, Economic insecurity, Household income, Trust in parliament, Political interest, Religiosity, Enjoyment, and Helping others are associated with support for income redistribution. These factors capture three broad dimensions of redistribution preferences: political orientation, material position, and individual values. Rather than treating these dimensions as competing explanations, the analysis examines their independent relationships within the same empirical framework.

The paper also moves beyond estimating a single average ideological effect. Country fixed-effects ordered logit models first identify the main individual-level relationships while accounting for country differences. Multilevel ordered logit models then account for the clustering of individuals within countries. Most importantly, a random-slope specification allows the effect of Political ideology to vary across countries. Country-specific estimates provide additional evidence of the extent of this variation. This strategy allows the analysis to test directly whether ideology structures redistribution preferences uniformly across the 28 countries.

The findings show a clear pattern. Political ideology remains a strong and consistent predictor of redistribution preferences. Right-leaning respondents are less supportive of redistribution, even after political, economic, value-based, and demographic characteristics are considered. Economic insecurity is associated with greater support, while Household income is associated with lower support. Helping others also has a strong positive relationship with redistribution support. In contrast, Political interest and Religiosity do not show significant independent associations in the fully specified models. Trust in parliament also conditions the ideological relationship. The divide between left- and right-leaning respondents becomes wider at higher levels of parliamentary trust.

The cross-national results provide an important qualification to the average ideological effect. The relationship between ideology and redistribution varies substantially across countries. The random-slope model fits the data significantly better than the model that assumes a common ideology effect. Country-specific estimates also show that ideology strongly structures redistribution preferences in some countries but has a much weaker relationship in others. The ideological divide over redistribution is therefore not uniform across Europe.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it shifts attention from whether ideology matters to whether it matters equally across countries. This distinction provides a clearer understanding of the political foundations of redistribution preferences. Second, it connects political orientation, material circumstances, and individual values within the same analysis. The results show that Political ideology, Economic insecurity, Household income, and Helping others retain independent relationships with redistribution support. Third, the paper provides direct evidence of cross-national heterogeneity in the ideology–redistribution relationship. It does not claim that particular welfare institutions, levels of inequality, or political systems explain this variation. These country-level mechanisms are not directly tested. Instead, the analysis establishes that the strength of ideological structuring itself differs across countries. This provides a foundation for future research on why these differences emerge.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and develops the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the ESS data, variables, and empirical strategy. Section 4 presents and discusses the fixed-

-effects, multilevel, and cross-national results. The final section summarizes the main findings, discusses their implications, and identifies directions for future research.

Literature review and theoretical expectations

Public support for income redistribution reflects more than economic self--interest. Research shows that redistribution preferences are also shaped by political ideology, perceptions of economic security, values, institutional attitudes, and social characteristics (Alesina & Giuliano 2011; Guillaud 2013; Olivera 2015; Rueda & Stegmueller 2019). These explanations are often examined separately. Yet individuals form redistribution preferences through several considerations at the same time.

This study brings these explanations together around three broad mechanisms. The first is political orientation, particularly ideology and institutional trust. The second is material position, including household income and perceived economic insecurity. The third is value orientation, including concern for helping others, enjoyment, and religiosity. These mechanisms are treated as complementary rather than competing explanations. The analysis then examines whether the relationship between ideology and redistribution varies across European countries.

Political ideology and redistribution

Political ideology is one of the most consistent predictors of redistribution preferences. Individuals on the political left generally support a larger redistributive role for government, while those on the right tend to place greater emphasis on markets and limited government intervention (Alt & Iversen 2017; Lupu & Pontusson 2011; Soroka & Wlezien 2010; Bansak et al. 2020; Blanchet, Chancel & Gethin 2020). Ideology provides a political lens through which individuals evaluate inequality and government intervention.

However, ideology does not necessarily structure redistribution preferences equally across countries. Welfare institutions, political competition, and existing levels of redistribution differ considerably across Europe. Earlier research shows that welfare regimes are associated with differences in redistribution attitudes (Jaeger 2005; Jaeger 2009). Comparative studies also demonstrate that redistribution preferences are embedded in broader political and institutional settings (Beramendi & Rehm 2016; Rueda & Stegmueller 2019).

This distinction is important for the present study. Rather than assuming a single ideological divide across Europe, the analysis allows the effect of ideology to vary across countries. The study therefore tests both the average rela-

tionship between ideology and redistribution and the degree of cross-national heterogeneity in this relationship.

H1: Left-leaning individuals are more likely to support income redistribution.

H2: The effect of political ideology on support for redistribution varies across countries.

Material position and economic insecurity

Material self-interest provides a second explanation for redistribution preferences. The median-voter model predicts that individuals with lower economic resources should favor redistribution because they are more likely to benefit from it (Meltzer and Richard 1981). Subsequent research shows that income and socioeconomic position are important predictors of redistribution attitudes (Alesina & Angeletos 2005; Alesina & Giuliano 2011; Corneo & Grüner 2002; Schmidt-Catran 2016).

Objective income, however, captures only part of an individual's economic position. Expectations about future mobility can also influence redistribution preferences. The prospect-of-upward-mobility argument suggests that individuals may oppose redistribution when they expect their economic position to improve, even when their current position is relatively disadvantaged (Benabou & Ok 2001; Piketty 1995).

Subjective economic conditions are therefore also important. Individuals experiencing economic vulnerability may value the protection provided by redistributive policies. Perceptions of relative economic position can also differ from objective circumstances and influence policy preferences (Cruces, Perez-Truglia & Tetaz 2013; Guillaud 2013). Redistribution attitudes may consequently reflect both what individuals have and how secure they feel about their economic circumstances.

This study captures both dimensions. Household income represents objective material position, while Economic insecurity captures respondents' perceived difficulty in living on their household income. Examining both variables helps distinguish the role of economic resources from perceived vulnerability.

H3: Greater Economic insecurity is associated with stronger support for income redistribution.

H4: Higher Household income is associated with lower support for income redistribution.

Other-regarding values and redistribution

Redistribution preferences cannot be explained entirely by material self-interest. Individuals also differ in how much importance they place on the welfare of others. Research on social preferences shows that fairness beliefs and concern

for others can influence demand for redistribution (Alesina & Angeletos 2005; Fong 2001). Individuals may therefore support redistribution even when they do not expect to benefit personally.

Schwartz's theory of human values provides a broader basis for understanding these differences. Values related to benevolence and concern for others emphasize the welfare of people beyond the individual (Schwartz 1992). These orientations are relevant to redistribution because redistribution involves judgments about how resources should be shared and the extent to which society should protect those facing disadvantage.

The present study uses the ESS item concerning the importance of helping people and caring for their well-being to capture this other-regarding orientation. The variable is therefore labeled "helping others" rather than the broader term "moral identity." This narrower label more accurately reflects what the ESS item measures.

The analysis also includes Enjoyment, based on the ESS human-values item concerning the importance of having a good time and enjoying oneself. This measure captures a different personal value orientation and is kept conceptually separate from Helping others. Both are single-item indicators and are not treated as comprehensive measures of moral identity or core values.

H5: Greater importance placed on Helping others is associated with stronger support for income redistribution.

Institutional trust and political interest

Institutional attitudes provide another political dimension of redistribution preferences. Redistribution requires government institutions to collect resources and allocate them across groups. Individuals' confidence in those institutions may therefore be associated with their willingness to support government redistribution.

The direction of this relationship is not necessarily straightforward. Trust may increase acceptance of government intervention when citizens believe institutions can administer redistribution effectively. However, individuals who trust existing institutions may also perceive current arrangements as satisfactory and therefore express less demand for additional redistribution. Earlier research demonstrates that institutional arrangements and perceptions of fairness are important for understanding redistribution attitudes (Jaeger 2005, 2009; Cruces, Perez-Truglia & Tetaz 2013).

The present study therefore examines Trust in parliament directly and also tests whether it conditions the relationship between Political ideology and redistribution. This interaction is important because institutional trust may have different implications for respondents on different sides of the ideological spectrum. Rather than assuming that trust has the same association for every-

one, the model evaluates whether the ideological divide changes across levels of parliamentary trust.

Political interest is included as a separate measure of political engagement. Politically interested individuals may have more structured policy attitudes, but the expected direction of its independent relationship with redistribution is less clear. It is therefore included as a political predictor without a directional hypothesis.

H6: The relationship between Political ideology and support for redistribution varies across levels of Trust in parliament.

Religiosity and redistribution

Religiosity represents a further value orientation that may influence redistribution attitudes. Its theoretical relationship with redistribution is ambiguous. Religious traditions may emphasize compassion and assistance to those in need. At the same time, some religious orientations may be associated with beliefs about individual responsibility and social hierarchy (Laythe, Finkel & Kirkpatrick 2001).

This ambiguity makes a universal directional hypothesis difficult to justify. More importantly, the present analysis does not measure whether respondents live in contexts that specifically emphasize individual responsibility. The previous hypothesis predicting lower redistribution support among religious individuals in such contexts therefore went beyond what the empirical model could test.

Religiosity is consequently retained as an individual-level predictor, but no directional hypothesis is imposed. This allows the analysis to assess whether it has an independent association with redistribution after political ideology, economic circumstances, values, and demographic characteristics are taken into account.

An integrated framework of redistribution preferences

The theoretical argument can now be brought together. Redistribution preferences are understood as the product of three complementary mechanisms.

The first is political orientation. Political ideology structures beliefs about inequality and the appropriate role of government, while Trust in parliament captures attitudes toward the institutions responsible for implementing redistribution. The second is material position. Household income reflects respondents' economic resources, while Economic insecurity captures perceived vulnerability. The third is value orientation. Helping others captures concern for the welfare of others, while Enjoyment and Religiosity represent additional individual value orientations.

These mechanisms need not compete. A respondent may support redistribution because of economic insecurity, left-wing ideology, concern for others, or several of these considerations simultaneously. Conversely, high income, right-leaning ideology, and different value priorities may each contribute to lower support. The empirical models therefore estimate these factors jointly to determine whether each retains an independent association with redistribution preferences.

The comparative dimension adds a second level to this framework. The study does not assume that the ideological relationship is identical across Europe. Instead, country fixed effects account for stable differences between countries, while the multilevel random-slope model tests whether the association between ideology and redistribution varies across the 28 national samples. This provides a direct test of cross-national heterogeneity.

The framework does not, however, claim to identify which specific country-level institutions explain that heterogeneity. Welfare regimes, inequality, political competition, and other national characteristics provide plausible explanations discussed in the comparative literature (Esping-Andersen 1990; Jaeger 2005; Lupu & Pontusson 2011; Pontusson & Weisstanner 2018), but they are not modeled as Level-2 predictors in the present study. The empirical contribution is therefore narrower: it establishes whether meaningful cross-national variation exists rather than attributing that variation to particular national characteristics.

This framework connects political beliefs, material circumstances, and individual values within a single comparative analysis. It provides clear expectations that correspond directly to the variables and relationships tested in the empirical models.

Methodology, data, and model

This study examines public support for income redistribution across 28 countries included in Round 11 of the European Social Survey (ESS 2024). The analysis focuses on how political ideology, economic insecurity, institutional trust, personal values, religiosity, and socioeconomic characteristics shape redistribution preferences. It also examines whether the effect of political ideology varies across countries. The countries included in the analysis are reported in Table A1. The empirical analysis combines country fixed-effects ordered logit models with multilevel ordered logit models. The fixed-effects models estimate individual-level relationships while controlling for differences across countries. The multilevel models account for the nested structure of individuals within countries and allow the effect of political ideology to vary across national contexts.

Data source

The analysis uses data from Round 11 of the ESS (ESS 2024). The ESS provides harmonized cross-national survey data collected using common questionnaires and standardized procedures. This makes it well suited for comparing public attitudes across European countries. The sample size varies across model specifications because of missing observations on some variables. The first fixed-effects model contains 35,727 respondents, while Model 2 contains 35,008. The fully specified Models 3 and 4 use a common sample of 29,027 respondents. The multilevel null model contains 45,355 observations, while the full and random-slope models use 29,027 respondents. The main findings are therefore evaluated primarily using the fully specified models. Descriptive statistics for this common sample are reported in Table A2.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable is support for income redistribution. It is measured using the ESS question asking whether the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels. Responses range from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating stronger support for redistribution. The mean level of redistribution support is 3.909 in the complete-case sample, suggesting relatively high support overall. However, considerable variation exists across countries. Figure 1 presents the country-level differences in average redistribution support. Because the dependent variable is ordinal, ordered logit is used as the main estimation method. An OLS model is also estimated as a robustness check and reported in Table A3.

Independent variables

Political ideology is measured using the ESS 0–10 left–right scale. Higher values indicate a more right-leaning political position. Political ideology is the main explanatory variable because the study asks whether ideology structures redistribution preferences and whether this relationship varies across countries.

Trust in parliament is measured on a 0–10 scale, with higher values indicating greater institutional trust. Political interest measures respondents' reported interest in politics. The term "political interest" is used throughout the paper because it more accurately reflects the ESS measure than the broader concept of political engagement.

Economic insecurity measures how difficult respondents find it to live on their current household income. Higher values indicate greater economic insecurity. Household income is measured using income deciles and captures respondents' objective economic position.

The analysis also includes two value measures. Enjoyment captures the importance respondents place on having a good time and doing things that provide pleasure. Helping others captures the importance respondents place on helping people around them and caring for their well-being. These labels replace the broader terms "core values" and "moral identity" used in the previous version of the manuscript. They more closely reflect the specific ESS questions and avoid treating single items as comprehensive value scales.

Religiosity is measured on a 0–10 scale, with higher values indicating greater religiosity. The models also control for gender, age, age squared, education, residence type, and employment status. Descriptive statistics for the variables are presented in Table A2.

Modeling strategy

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, four country fixed-effects ordered logit models are estimated. Model 1 examines political ideology while controlling for demographic characteristics. Model 2 adds Enjoyment, Political interest, and Trust in parliament. Model 3 adds Economic insecurity, Religiosity, Helping others, and Household income. Model 4 introduces an interaction between Political ideology and Trust in parliament. The results are reported in Table 1.

Second, multilevel ordered logit models are estimated to account for respondents being nested within countries. The null model includes a country random intercept. The next model introduces Political ideology and demographic controls. The full model includes all main explanatory variables. Finally, the random-slope model allows the effect of Political ideology to vary across countries.

The multilevel model can be expressed as:

$$\text{logit}\left[P\left(Y_{ij} \leq k\right)\right] = \tau_k - \left[\beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}\text{Ideology}_{ij} + \sum \beta_p X_{pij}\right]$$

where i represents individuals, j represents countries, and X represents the individual-level predictors and controls. The country-specific ideology coefficient is allowed to vary as:

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j}.$$

This specification provides a direct test of whether the relationship between ideology and redistribution support differs across countries.

The random-slope model performs significantly better than the full random-intercept model, LR $\chi^3(2) = 536.54$, $p < .001$. The estimated ideology slope variance is 0.016. This provides evidence that the effect of political ideology is not uniform across the 28 countries. The complete multilevel results are reported in Table 2.

Importantly, this analysis establishes cross-national heterogeneity but does not identify which national characteristics explain it. Factors such as welfare institutions, inequality, and party competition may contribute to these differences, but they are not directly tested as country-level predictors in the current analysis. The interpretation of the results is therefore limited to demonstrating that the strength of the ideology–redistribution relationship varies across countries.

Descriptive statistics and robustness check

Descriptive statistics for the common sample of 29,027 respondents are reported in Table A2. The table summarizes the distributions of Redistribution support, Political ideology, Enjoyment, Political interest, Trust in parliament, Economic insecurity, Religiosity, Helping others, Household income, and Age.

As an additional robustness check, the full model is estimated using OLS on the same sample. The results are reported in Table A3. This analysis assesses whether the main findings remain similar when an alternative estimator is used. The ordered logit models remain the primary specifications because the dependent variable is ordinal.

Results and discussion

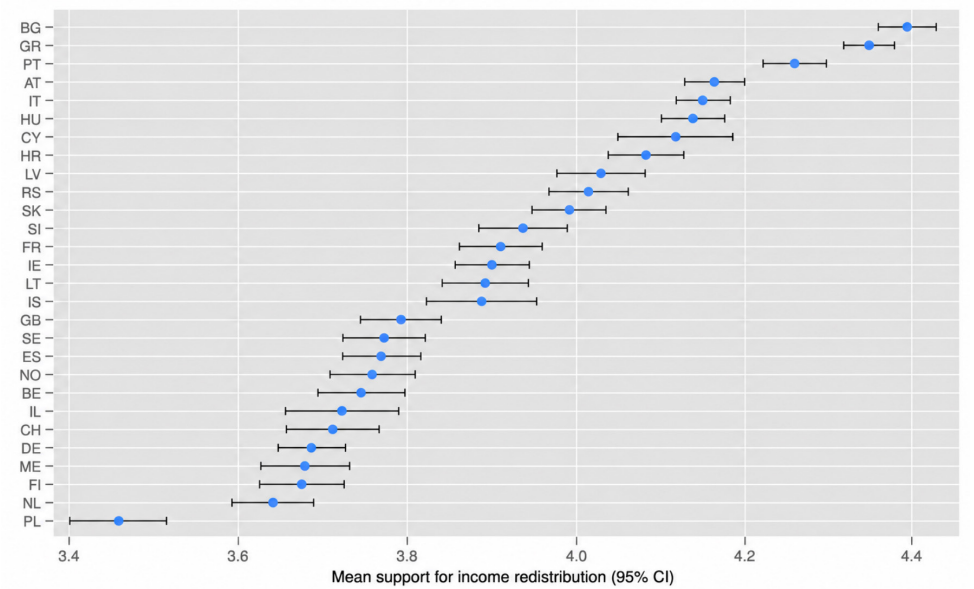
Cross-national variation in redistribution support

Figure 1 shows clear cross-national variation in support for income redistribution across the 28 countries. Average support is relatively high overall, but the level differs considerably across countries. Bulgaria and Greece show the highest average support, followed by Portugal, Austria, and Italy. At the other end, Poland reports the lowest average support, followed by the Netherlands, Finland, Montenegro, and Germany. Most countries fall between these two ends of the distribution.

The 95% confidence intervals provide additional evidence that some of these differences are unlikely to reflect sampling variation alone. At the same time, Figure 1 should be interpreted as descriptive evidence rather than as a test of why countries differ. The figure establishes an important starting point for the analysis: redistribution preferences are not distributed uniformly across European countries. This variation supports the use of models that account for national context.

Importantly, differences in average support do not necessarily mean that the same individual-level factors operate differently across countries. A country may have relatively high redistribution support while still showing a strong ideological divide, or relatively low average support while showing a weaker ideological divide. The multilevel analysis therefore examines this question more directly by testing whether the effect of political ideology itself varies across countries.

Figure 1: Cross-National Variation in Support for Income Redistribution



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Individual-level determinants of redistribution support

Table 1 presents the country fixed-effects ordered logit models. The results show that political ideology is the strongest and most consistent political predictor of redistribution preferences. Across all four specifications, the coefficient remains negative, highly significant, and remarkably stable. It ranges only from −0.163 to −0.166 ($p < .001$). Since higher values indicate more right-leaning positions, this means that moving to the political right is consistently associated with lower support for redistribution.

The stability of this relationship is important. The ideology coefficient changes very little when political attitudes, economic insecurity, personal values, religiosity, and household income are added to the models. The relationship therefore cannot be explained simply by differences in economic position or the other individual characteristics included in the analysis. Political ideology has an independent association with redistribution preferences even after these factors are taken into account.

Economic circumstances also matter. Economic insecurity has a positive and statistically significant coefficient in Model 3 ($\beta = 0.174$, $p < .001$), and the estimate remains unchanged in Model 4. Respondents who experience greater difficulty living on their current income are more supportive of redistribution. Household income shows the opposite relationship. Higher-income respondents are significantly less supportive of redistribution ($\beta = -0.055$, $p < .001$ in

Model 3). These findings provide support for the role of material interests, but they also show the importance of subjective economic vulnerability. Economic insecurity remains strongly associated with redistribution preferences even when household income is included in the same model.

The value measures provide another important result. Helping others has one of the largest positive coefficients in the full models ($\beta = 0.205$, $p < .001$ in Model 3). Respondents who place greater importance on helping others and caring for their well-being are more supportive of redistribution. Enjoyment also has a positive association, although its effect is considerably smaller ($\beta = 0.027$, $p < .01$ in Model 3). These results suggest that redistribution preferences are associated not only with political ideology and economic position but also with individual value orientations.

By contrast, political interest and religiosity do not have statistically significant independent associations with redistribution support in the fully specified models. Political interest remains small and insignificant after the other predictors are introduced. Religiosity is also insignificant in Models 3 and 4. These null findings are important because they indicate that these characteristics do not independently predict redistribution preferences once the other factors in the model are taken into account. No claim is made that they operate indirectly, since such a mechanism is not tested in the present analysis.

Trust in parliament shows a negative association with redistribution support. Its coefficient declines from −0.045 in Model 2 to −0.029 in Model 3 but remains statistically significant ($p < .001$). Thus, conditional on the other characteristics included in the model, respondents reporting greater trust in parliament tend to express somewhat lower support for redistribution.

Model 4 examines whether this relationship also depends on political ideology. The interaction between ideology and trust in parliament is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.015$, $p < .001$). This means that the negative association between right-leaning ideology and redistribution support becomes stronger as trust in parliament increases. Conversely, the ideological gap is smaller among respondents with lower levels of parliamentary trust.

This interaction should not be interpreted as evidence that trust causes respondents on the political right to oppose redistribution. The model identifies a conditional association rather than a causal mechanism. Figure 2 therefore presents predicted probabilities to make the interaction easier to interpret substantively.

In sum, Table 1 provides evidence for three distinct dimensions of redistribution preferences. Political ideology remains strongly associated with support even after extensive controls are introduced. Economic vulnerability is also important, with greater insecurity associated with stronger support and higher household income associated with weaker support. Finally, Helping others remains independently and positively associated with redistribution. Redistribution preferences therefore cannot be reduced to economic self-interest alone.

Political orientation, material circumstances, and individual values each retain independent associations with attitudes toward redistribution.

The country fixed-effects models, however, tell us whether these relationships hold across the pooled sample after controlling for country differences. They do not establish whether the magnitude of the ideological relationship is the same in every country. This distinction is central to the paper's main argument. The multilevel and country-specific analyses presented below therefore examine whether the ideological structuring of redistribution preferences varies across national contexts.

Table 1: Determinants of Support for Income Redistribution (Ordered Logit Models)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Political ideology	−0.166***	−0.163***	−0.163***	−0.164***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Enjoyment		0.039***	0.027**	0.027**
		(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Political interest		0.017	0.023	0.023
		(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Trust in parliament		−0.045***	−0.029***	−0.028***
		(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Economic insecurity			0.174***	0.174***
			(0.017)	(0.017)
Religiosity			−0.007	−0.006
			(0.004)	(0.004)
Helping others			0.205***	0.206***
			(0.012)	(0.012)
Household income			−0.055***	−0.054***
			(0.005)	(0.005)
Ideology × trust				−0.015***
				(0.002)
Observations	**35,727**	**35,008**	**29,027**	**29,027**
Log likelihood	−44,794.09	−43,805.18	−36,195.50	−36,158.22
Model χ^2	3,874.59	3,958.18	3,780.10	3,854.66

Note: *Entries are ordered-logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Higher values of the dependent variable indicate stronger support for income redistribution. Higher values of political ideology indicate more right-leaning positions, and higher household income values indicate higher income deciles. All models include country fixed effects and controls for gender, age, age squared, education, residence, and employment status. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.*

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Ideology and trust in parliament

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between political ideology and trust in parliament using predicted probabilities of strong support for redistribution. The results show a clear ideological divide. As respondents move from the left to the right, the predicted probability of strongly supporting redistribution declines at all three levels of parliamentary trust. However, the size of this decline differs depending on trust.

Among respondents with low trust in parliament, the predicted probability of strong redistribution support declines from approximately 0.38 among those on the left to 0.26 among those on the right. The decline is larger at the average level of trust, from approximately 0.38 to 0. 23. It is strongest among respondents with high trust, where the predicted probability falls from approximately 0.38 to 0. 21.

This pattern is consistent with the negative interaction between political ideology and trust in parliament reported in Model 4 of Table 1 ($\beta = -0.015$, $p < .001$). The ideological divide in redistribution preferences becomes wider as trust in parliament increases. Trust therefore conditions the relationship between ideology and redistribution support rather than simply having the same association across the ideological spectrum.

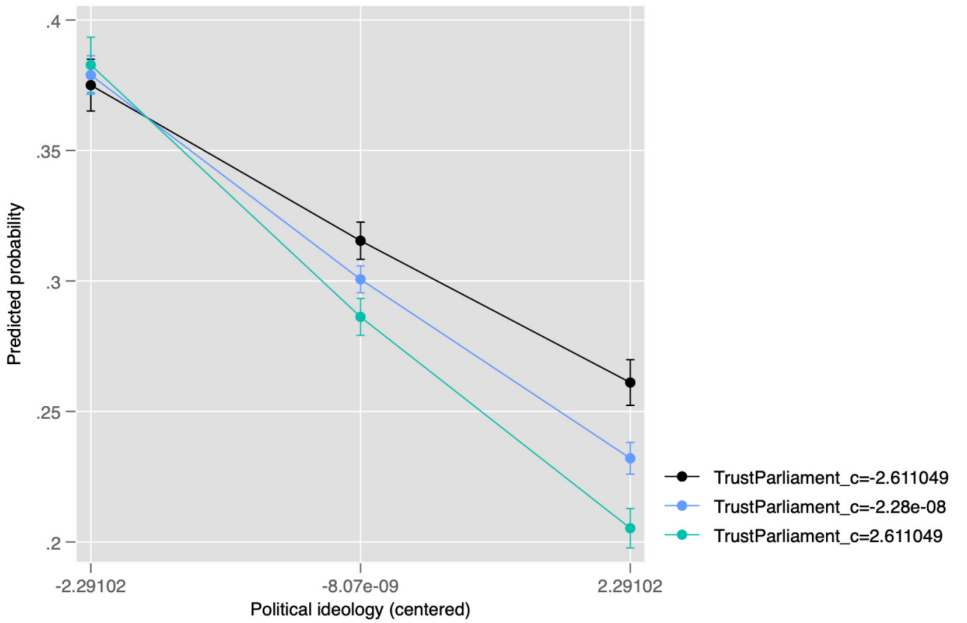
The pattern is particularly interesting because differences by trust are small among left-leaning respondents but become much larger as respondents move to the right. Among right-leaning respondents, those with high trust in parliament have the lowest predicted probability of strong redistribution support, while those with low trust show substantially greater support. This suggests that institutional trust is associated with redistribution preferences differently across ideological positions.

These findings should be interpreted as conditional associations rather than causal effects. The analysis does not establish why trust strengthens the ideological divide or whether trust itself causes changes in redistribution preferences. Instead, Figure 2 provides evidence that the relationship between political ideology and redistribution support depends on respondents' level of trust in parliament. This individual-level interaction also provides a useful transition to the next question: whether the strength of the ideology–redistribution relationship varies across countries.

Cross-national heterogeneity in the effect of ideology

Figure 3 provides stronger evidence for the paper's central argument by showing substantial cross-national variation in the relationship between political ideology and redistribution support. The country-specific coefficients range from strongly negative values to small positive values. This indicates that ideol-

Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Strong Redistribution Support



Source: Author's own elaboration.

ogy does not structure redistribution preferences with the same strength across the 28 countries.

The negative relationship is particularly strong in Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. In these countries, moving to the political right is associated with a substantially larger decline in support for redistribution. A similarly clear negative relationship appears in Iceland, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, and France. These patterns indicate a pronounced ideological divide over redistribution in a substantial group of European countries.

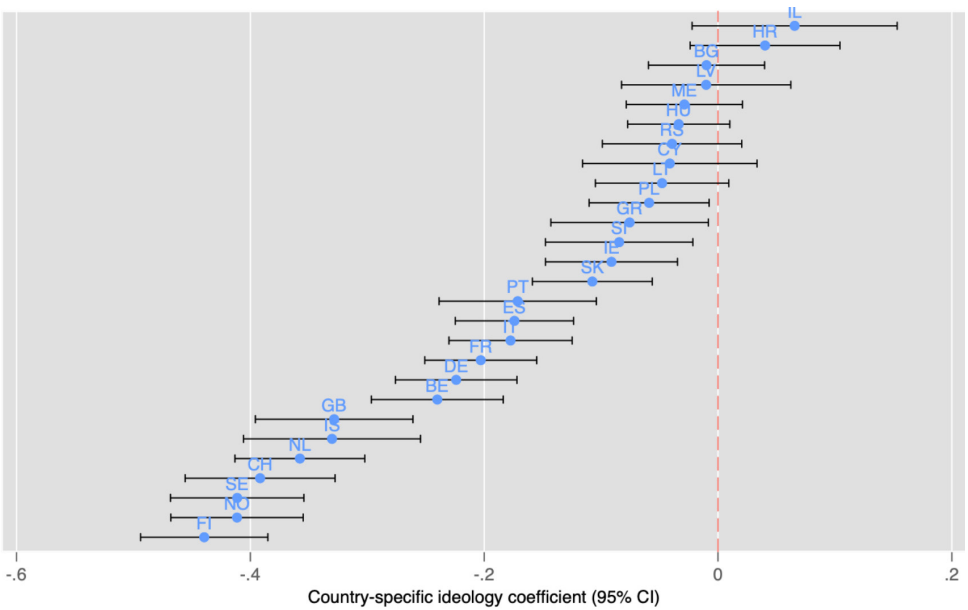
In contrast, the ideology effect is considerably weaker in several other countries. Lithuania, Cyprus, Serbia, Hungary, Montenegro, Latvia, and Bulgaria have estimates closer to zero. Their confidence intervals also approach or cross zero in several cases. Israel and Croatia stand out because their point estimates are slightly positive, although their confidence intervals include zero. The evidence therefore does not support a statistically reliable positive ideological effect in these countries. Rather, it indicates that the conventional negative relationship between right-leaning ideology and redistribution support is weak or statistically uncertain.

Figure 3 therefore adds an important qualification to the pooled results in Table 1. The fixed-effects models show a strong average negative relationship

between right-leaning ideology and redistribution support. The country-specific estimates show that this average masks considerable variation. Political ideology is a powerful organizing factor in some countries but a much weaker predictor in others.

This finding supports the paper's argument that the ideological structuring of redistribution preferences is not uniform across national contexts. However, the figure does not establish why these differences occur. Institutional arrangements, welfare-state characteristics, inequality, or patterns of political competition may be relevant, but these country-level factors are not directly modeled in the present analysis. The evidence therefore demonstrates cross-national heterogeneity in the ideology effect without attributing that heterogeneity to a specific national-level mechanism.

Figure 3: Cross-National Variation in the Ideology Effect



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Comparing the fixed-effects estimates

Figure 4 provides a visual comparison of the coefficients across the four fixed--effects ordered logit models. The figure reinforces the main results reported in Table 1 and shows that the key relationships remain stable as additional variables are introduced.

Political ideology is the most consistent political predictor across all four models. Its coefficient remains close to −0.16, with little change across specifica-

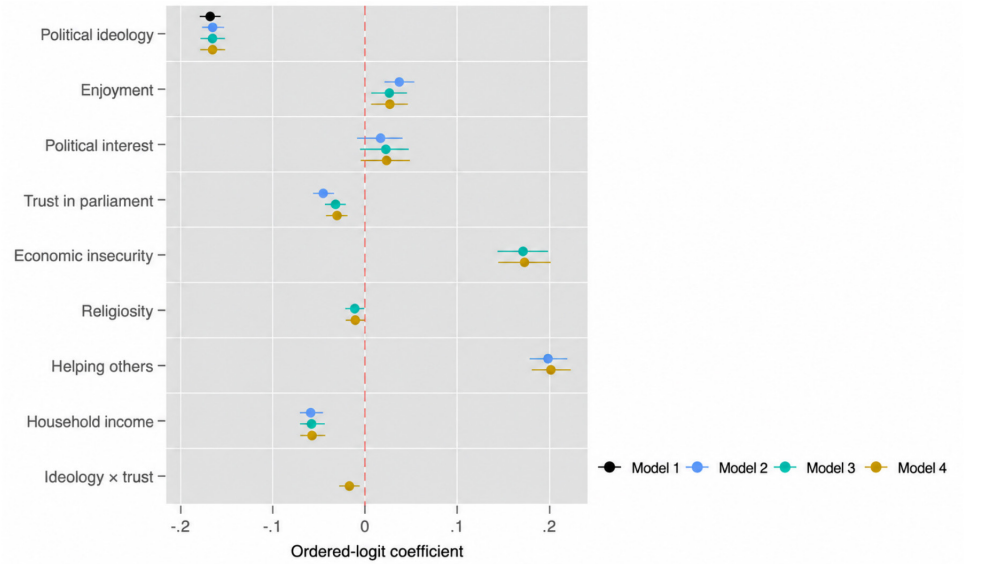
tions. This stability is important because the association remains strong after political attitudes, economic circumstances, personal values, and demographic characteristics are taken into account. Right-leaning respondents are therefore consistently less supportive of redistribution.

Economic insecurity and Helping others show the largest positive coefficients in the fully specified models. Greater economic insecurity is associated with stronger support for redistribution, while respondents who place greater importance on helping others also show higher support. Household income has a clear negative association, indicating that respondents in higher income groups are less supportive of redistribution. Together, these findings show that both material circumstances and value orientations contribute to redistribution preferences.

Enjoyment has a smaller positive association. In contrast, Political interest and Religiosity remain close to zero and their confidence intervals cross zero in the full specifications. The figure therefore makes clear that these variables do not show significant independent associations once the other predictors are included.

Trust in parliament remains negatively associated with redistribution support. Model 4 also shows a negative Ideology × trust interaction, consistent with the predicted probabilities presented in Figure 2. The interaction indicates that the negative relationship between right-leaning ideology and redistribution support becomes stronger at higher levels of parliamentary trust.

Figure 4: Fixed-Effects Ordered Logit Estimates



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Overall, Figure 4 shows considerable stability in the main coefficients across the fixed-effects specifications. Political ideology, Economic insecurity, Helping others, and Household income remain the most consistent predictors. The next section examines whether these relationships remain similar when the hierarchical structure of the ESS data is explicitly modeled and, most importantly, whether the effect of political ideology varies across countries.

Multilevel analysis of redistribution preferences

Table 2 presents the multilevel ordered logit results. These models account for the clustering of respondents within countries and provide a more direct test of whether the relationship between political ideology and redistribution support varies across national contexts. Figure 5 summarizes the main coefficients and shows how the estimates change across the multilevel specifications.

The results are highly consistent with the fixed-effects analysis. Political ideology remains negative and statistically significant. In the full random-intercept model, the coefficient is −0.163 ($p < .001$). In the random-slope model, the average ideology coefficient remains negative at −0.155 ($p < .001$). Thus, right-leaning respondents are generally less supportive of redistribution even when the hierarchical structure of the data is taken into account.

The other main predictors also remain stable. Economic insecurity has a strong positive association with redistribution support ($\beta = 0.173$, $p < .001$ in the random-slope model). Helping others also remains strongly positive ($\beta = 0.202$, $p < .001$). In contrast, Household income is negatively associated with redistribution support ($\beta = -0.051$, $p < .001$). Enjoyment has a smaller positive effect ($\beta = 0.028$, $p < .01$), while Trust in parliament remains negative ($\beta = -0.036$, $p < .001$). Political interest and Religiosity are not statistically significant. These results closely correspond to the fixed-effects estimates and strengthen confidence in the main individual-level findings.

The most important contribution of the multilevel analysis concerns political ideology. The random-slope model allows the ideology coefficient to vary across countries rather than assuming a common effect. The estimated ideology slope variance is 0.016, indicating meaningful cross-national variation in the strength of the ideology–redistribution relationship. The country intercept variance in this model is 0.144, showing that countries also differ in their underlying levels of redistribution support.

The model comparison provides further evidence that allowing ideology to vary across countries improves the analysis. The random-slope model fits the data significantly better than the full random-intercept model, LR $\chi^3(2) = 536.54$, $p < .001$. The log likelihood improves from −36,262.13 in the full model to −35,993.86 in the random-slope model. This provides formal statistical support for the cross-national heterogeneity illustrated earlier in Figure 3.

Figure 5 also shows that introducing the random ideology slope does not substantially alter the other main relationships. Economic insecurity and Helping others remain positive, while Household income and Trust in parliament remain negative. Political interest and Religiosity remain close to zero. The main difference concerns the uncertainty around the ideology coefficient, which becomes wider once its effect is allowed to vary across countries. This is expected because the random-slope model no longer assumes that ideology has exactly the same relationship with redistribution support in every country.

Table 2 and Figure 5 strengthen the paper's central finding. Political ideology is an important predictor of redistribution preferences across the pooled European sample, but its effect is not uniform across countries. The multilevel results therefore move beyond simply observing different country-specific coefficients. They formally show that allowing the ideological effect to vary across national contexts provides a significantly better representation of the data.

At the same time, these findings should not be interpreted as identifying why the ideology effect differs across countries. The models demonstrate cross-national heterogeneity, but they do not test specific country-level explanations such as inequality, welfare-state institutions, or party competition. Identifying the national characteristics that account for this variation remains an important direction for further research.

Table 2: Multilevel Ordered Logit Models of Support for Income Redistribution

Variables	(1) Null Model	(2) Ideology + Controls	(3) Full Model	(4) Random-Slope Model
Political ideology		−0.165***	−0.163***	−0.155***
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.025)
Enjoyment			0.027**	0.028**
			(0.009)	(0.010)
Political interest			0.022	0.013
			(0.014)	(0.014)
Trust in parliament			−0.030***	−0.036***
			(0.005)	(0.005)
Economic insecurity			0.177***	0.173***
			(0.017)	(0.017)
Religiosity			−0.007	−0.006
			(0.004)	(0.004)
Helping others			0.205***	0.202***
			(0.012)	(0.012)

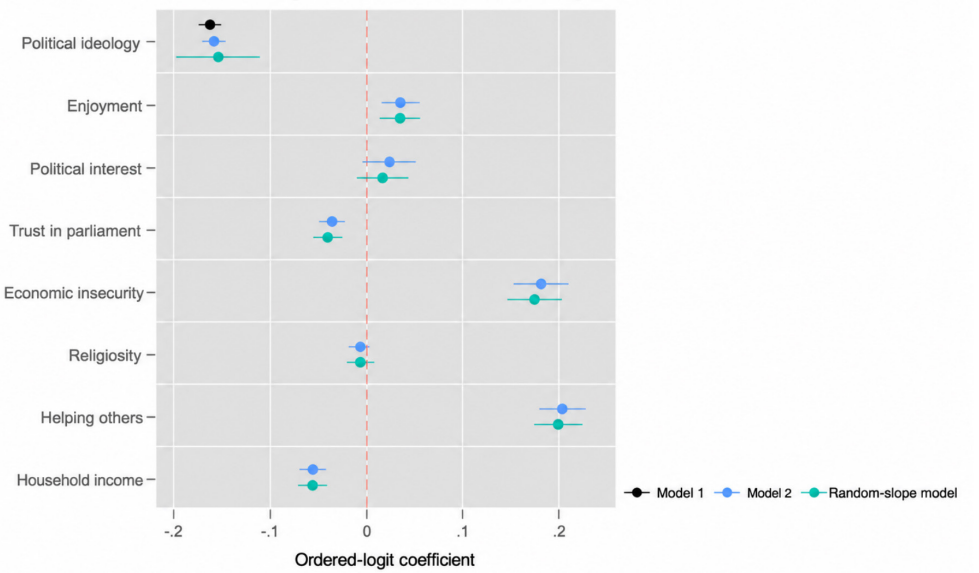
Variables	(1) Null Model	(2) Ideology + Controls	(3) Full Model	(4) Random-Slope Model
Household income			−0.055***	−0.051***
			(0.005)	(0.005)
Demographic controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country random intercept	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random ideology slope	No	No	No	Yes
Ideology slope variance				0.016
Country intercept variance				0.144
Observations	45,355	35,727	29,027	29,027
Countries	28	28	28	28
Log likelihood	−57,680.45	−44,867.16	−36,262.13	−35,993.86

Model comparison: *Random-slope model versus full random-intercept model: LR $\chi^2(2) = 536.54$, $p < .001$.*

Note: *Entries are multilevel ordered-logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is support for income redistribution, with higher values indicating stronger support. Higher values of political ideology indicate more right-leaning positions. Models 1–3 include a country-level random intercept. Model 4 additionally allows the effect of political ideology to vary across countries. Demographic controls include gender, age, age squared, education, residence type, and employment status. Blank cells indicate that the corresponding predictor or random-effect parameter is not reported for that model. The likelihood-ratio test compares Model 4 with Model 3. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.*

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 5: Multilevel Ordered Logit Estimates



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Robustness check

As an additional robustness check, the fully specified model is re-estimated using OLS. The results are reported in Table A3. Although ordered logit remains the preferred estimator because redistribution support is measured on an ordinal scale, the OLS model provides a useful test of whether the main findings depend on the estimation method. The results are broadly consistent with the ordered logit analysis. Political ideology remains negatively and statistically significantly associated with redistribution support. Economic insecurity and Helping others remain positive predictors, while Household income continues to show a negative association. Trust in parliament also remains negatively associated with redistribution support. In contrast, Political interest and Religiosity do not show strong independent effects. The consistency of these results across alternative specifications strengthens confidence in the main findings. In particular, the relationships involving Political ideology, Economic insecurity, Helping others, and Household income are not specific to the ordered logit estimator. The robustness analysis therefore supports the overall stability of the individual-level results, while the ordered logit models remain the primary basis for interpretation because they better reflect the ordinal nature of the dependent variable.

Discussion of the main findings

The results provide three main findings. First, political ideology is a strong and consistent predictor of redistribution preferences. Across both fixed-effects and multilevel models, right-leaning respondents are less supportive of income redistribution. This relationship remains stable after accounting for economic circumstances, institutional trust, personal values, and demographic characteristics. Political ideology therefore represents an important dimension of how individuals evaluate redistribution.

At the same time, the effect of ideology is not uniform across countries. Figure 3 shows substantial differences in country-specific ideology coefficients, while the random-slope model provides formal evidence of this heterogeneity. The significant improvement in model fit when the ideology slope is allowed to vary confirms that a single average ideological effect does not fully capture the European pattern. Ideology structures redistribution preferences much more strongly in some countries than in others.

Second, economic circumstances remain important. Greater Economic insecurity is associated with stronger support for redistribution, while higher Household income is associated with lower support. These findings suggest that both subjective economic vulnerability and objective economic position matter. Individuals who feel economically insecure may see greater value in redistribu-

tive protection, while those with greater economic resources tend to show less support. Importantly, these relationships remain significant alongside Political ideology. Redistribution preferences therefore reflect both political orientation and material circumstances rather than either dimension alone.

Third, individual values also contribute to redistribution preferences. Helping others shows a strong and consistent positive association with redistribution support. Enjoyment has a smaller but positive association. These findings suggest that preferences for redistribution are not based solely on material self-interest. Other-regarding values also matter. However, the results do not support equally strong roles for all attitudinal characteristics. Political interest and Religiosity are not significant in the fully specified models. This distinction helps identify which individual characteristics retain independent associations once political, economic, and demographic factors are considered.

The interaction between Political ideology and Trust in parliament adds another dimension to these findings. The ideological divide becomes wider at higher levels of parliamentary trust. As Figure 2 shows, differences by trust are relatively small among left-leaning respondents but become more pronounced among right-leaning respondents. This suggests that institutional attitudes and ideology are jointly associated with redistribution preferences rather than operating entirely independently.

The findings show that redistribution preferences have political, economic, and value-based foundations. Political ideology provides the most consistent political divide, but its strength varies substantially across countries. Economic vulnerability and income remain important, while Helping others adds an independent normative dimension. This combination helps explain why redistribution preferences cannot be reduced to a single mechanism based only on ideology or economic self-interest.

The cross-national finding requires careful interpretation. The analysis demonstrates that the ideology–redistribution relationship varies across the 28 countries, but it does not establish why this variation occurs. Differences in welfare institutions, inequality, party competition, or other national characteristics may help explain the pattern, but these mechanisms are not directly tested in the present study. The contribution of the current analysis is therefore to establish the existence and statistical significance of cross-national heterogeneity. Identifying the country-level factors that explain this heterogeneity provides an important direction for future research.

Conclusion

This study examines the political, economic, and value-based foundations of support for income redistribution across 28 countries. The findings show that redistribution preferences cannot be explained by material self-interest alone.

Political ideology, economic circumstances, and individual values each contribute to how citizens view redistribution.

Political ideology is the most consistent political predictor. Right-leaning respondents are less supportive of redistribution across all model specifications. Economic circumstances also matter. Greater Economic insecurity is associated with stronger support for redistribution, while higher Household income is associated with lower support. Helping others has a strong positive relationship with redistribution support. This shows that other-regarding values remain important even after political and economic factors are considered.

The analysis also shows that the ideological divide is not uniform across countries. Country-specific estimates reveal substantial variation in the effect of Political ideology. The random-slope model confirms this pattern and significantly improves model fit. Trust in parliament further conditions the ideological relationship, with a wider ideological divide at higher levels of trust.

These findings contribute to research on redistribution by showing that political beliefs, material circumstances, and individual values provide complementary explanations of public preferences. They also show that a single average ideological effect can conceal important cross-national differences.

The study has an important limitation. It establishes cross-national heterogeneity but does not identify the country-level factors that explain it. Future research should examine whether welfare institutions, inequality, party competition, and other national characteristics account for differences in the strength of the ideology–redistribution relationship. This would provide a clearer understanding of why political ideology structures redistribution preferences more strongly in some European countries than in others.

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Appendix

Table A1: Countries Included in the Analysis

Country ID	Country Code	Country
1	AT	Austria
2	BE	Belgium
3	BG	Bulgaria
4	CH	Switzerland
5	CY	Cyprus
6	DE	Germany
7	ES	Spain
8	FI	Finland
9	FR	France
10	GB	United Kingdom
11	GR	Greece
12	HR	Croatia
13	HU	Hungary
14	IE	Ireland
15	IL	Israel
16	IS	Iceland
17	IT	Italy
18	LT	Lithuania
19	LV	Latvia
20	ME	Montenegro
21	NL	Netherlands
22	NO	Norway
23	PL	Poland
24	PT	Portugal
25	RS	Serbia
26	SE	Sweden
27	SI	Slovenia
28	SK	Slovakia

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table A2: Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used in the Analysis

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Redistribution support	29,027	3.909	0.995	1	5
Political ideology	29,027	5.030	2.291	0	10
Enjoyment	29,027	4.149	1.281	1	6
Political interest	29,027	2.525	0.907	1	4
Trust in parliament	29,027	4.727	2.611	0	10
Economic insecurity	29,027	1.847	0.810	1	4

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Religiosity	29,027	4.534	3.092	0	10
Helping others	29,027	4.877	0.969	1	6
Household income	29,027	5.779	2.650	1	10
Age	29,027	52.973	17.233	15	90

Note: *Statistics are based on the complete-case sample used in the full models. Higher values indicate greater support for income redistribution, a more right-leaning political ideology, greater endorsement of enjoyment, greater political interest, greater trust in parliament, greater economic insecurity, greater religiosity, greater endorsement of helping others, and higher household income, respectively.*

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table A3: Robustness Check: OLS Model of Redistribution Support

Variable	Coefficient
Political ideology	–0.080***
	(0.012)
Enjoyment	0.009
	(0.006)
Political interest	0.000
	(0.009)
Trust in parliament	–0.009
	(0.005)
Economic insecurity	0.073***
	(0.017)
Religiosity	–0.003
	(0.004)
Helping others	0.091***
	(0.013)
Household income	–0.030***
	(0.005)
Observations	**29,027**
R^2	**0.117**

Note: *Entries are OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The model is estimated using the same complete-case sample as the full ordered-logit specification. The dependent variable is support for income redistribution, coded from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating greater support. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.*

Source: Author's own elaboration.

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The Transformation of the EU Security and Defence Policy in a Changing Geopolitical Environment

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Politics in Central Europe
(ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 22, No. 3
DOI: 10.51870/pce-2026-0014

Abstract: *This article analyses the structural transformation of the European Union's security and defence policy following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Utilising an integrated analytical framework that synthesises neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist approaches, the study examines why defence cooperation accelerated rapidly and whether this shift signals a transition toward deeper forms of defence integration. It argues that the post-2022 momentum is driven by the interaction of external geopolitical shocks, shared threat perceptions, institutional adaptation and defence-industrial collaboration. However, empirical evidence regarding defence expenditures and material capacities reveals significant structural limits. While EU institutions have expanded their role in industrial coordination and capability development, national governments retain strict control over core security decisions. The article concludes that European defence cooperation is evolving towards a hybrid form of integration, characterised by closer practical cooperation alongside the preservation of intergovernmental authority.*

Keywords: ***European Union, Common Security and Defence Policy, intergovernmentalism, institutional adaptation, defence integration***

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed in European security. Assumptions that large-scale interstate war had become unlikely on the continent were overturned, while deterrence, military preparedness, defence production and critical infrastructure protection returned to the forefront

of political debate (Casier 2022). The conflict exposed weaknesses that had accumulated over several decades, including limited ammunition stockpiles, fragmented defence markets, dependence on external suppliers and uneven military readiness among European states (Fernández et al. 2023).

Its implications extended well beyond the battlefield. European governments found themselves confronting armed conflict on the Union's eastern border alongside intensifying US-China rivalry, instability in neighbouring regions, cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, energy disruptions and uncertainty regarding the future direction of transatlantic relations. Security policy became closely linked to debates on industrial capacity, technological competitiveness, economic resilience and Europe's position within a contested international environment (De Vos 2024).

Throughout most of its history, the European Union has exercised influence primarily through economic integration, regulatory power, diplomacy, trade relations and enlargement (Smith 2014). Defence has remained largely under national control. Although the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) created mechanisms for civilian and military operations, it did not fundamentally alter the balance between national sovereignty and collective action. NATO continued to provide the principal framework for collective defence, while EU cooperation in security affairs advanced cautiously and remained less integrated than other policy areas (Howorth 2014).

The post-2022 period altered this trajectory. New financial instruments, joint procurement schemes, initiatives supporting defence production, and measures designed to improve military mobility expanded the scope of cooperation among member states. The Strategic Compass provided political direction for many of these initiatives, while debates surrounding strategic autonomy acquired renewed prominence (Biscop 2022). Defence policy, once situated at the margins of European integration, became a more visible component of discussions concerning the Union's future role in international affairs (Tsoukalis 2022; Horak 2026).

Existing scholarship has examined the legal foundations of the CSDP, the evolution of strategic autonomy, the development of the European Defence Fund, and the changing institutional architecture of European defence cooperation (Haroche 2020; Fiott 2025; von Sydow et al. 2026). This literature explains individual instruments, strategic concepts and institutional developments, but it does not fully explain how the post-2022 acceleration emerged from the interaction of external pressures, changing threat perceptions, member-state preferences, institutional adaptation and defence-industrial requirements.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing these elements as parts of a single causal sequence, not as separate dimensions of European defence policy. Its contribution is threefold: it combines neofunctionalist and intergovernmentalist expectations in a common analytical framework; it uses process tracing to examine how geopolitical pressure was translated into political com-

mitments and institutional responses; and it assesses whether the resulting cooperation represents functional integration without a comparable transfer of formal authority. The article examines the new defence instruments created after 2022 and explains why cooperation expanded, through which mechanisms and with what limits.

The research question is: Why has the European Union accelerated the development of its security and defence policy after 2022, and to what extent does this process indicate a movement from strategic autonomy as a political concept towards deeper forms of defence integration?

The theoretical framework combines insights from neofunctionalist and intergovernmental approaches to European integration. Drawing on the neofunctionalist tradition of Ernst Haas (1964) and Sandholtz and Zysman (1989), as well as Sandholtz (2024), the framework provides a useful lens for examining how cooperation in areas such as industrial policy, defence research, procurement and capability development generates pressures for cooperation in related sectors. Concurrently, in line with Stanley Hoffmann's (1966) classic intergovernmentalist argument, these approaches remain essential for understanding why national governments continue to retain authority over core security and defence decisions. The two perspectives address both the expansion of defence cooperation and the political constraints that continue to shape its development (Keohane & Hoffmann 1991; Hooghe & Marks 2019; Udovič & Žipaj 2025).

In this study, neofunctionalism is used to identify functional and institutional spillover arising from growing interdependence among defence-related policy areas. Cooperation in one area is expected to generate additional coordination needs in adjacent areas where national solutions are insufficient to address collective capability, procurement, industrial or technological requirements (Haas 1964; Haroche 2020). Intergovernmentalism is used to identify the continuing influence of national preferences, bargaining and state control in decisions affecting core security and defence interests (Hoffmann 1966; Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015). The two perspectives are accordingly treated as complementary explanations of the same process.

The distinction between functional integration and supranationalisation guides the analysis. Functional integration is understood as the expansion of practical cooperation, common financing, joint procurement, industrial coordination and capability development across member states. Supranationalisation refers to the transfer of decision-making authority from national governments to EU institutions. The analytical expectation is that post-2022 developments may produce more extensive functional integration without a comparable transfer of authority. Evidence of the former is specifically sought in the expansion and use of common instruments, cross-border procurement and industrial cooperation, while evidence of the latter is assessed through changes in decision-making authority, institutional powers and the persistence of national control over core defence decisions.

Table 1: Analytical Framework for Assessing EU Defence Integration

Theoretical concept	Mechanism	Expectation	Empirical indicator	Evidence in the article	Interpretation
Neofunctionalism: functional spillover	Cooperation in one defence-related area generates functional needs in adjacent areas.	Cooperation should expand from individual policy areas towards related areas where collective solutions offer functional advantages.	Expansion from defence research towards procurement, industrial cooperation, technological development and capability coordination.	EDF, joint procurement initiatives, SAFE-supported common procurement, ammunition production, defence-industrial cooperation and capability development.	Evidence of more extensive functional integration.
Neofunctionalism: institutional spillover	Rising functional interdependence creates demand for common coordination and financing mechanisms.	Increased interdependence should strengthen the role of common EU instruments and coordination mechanisms.	New or expanded EU-level financial and coordination instruments.	Post-2022 increased use and political relevance of EDF, PESCO and CARD, together with ASAP, EDIRPA, SAFE and EDIP.	Evidence of institutional deepening without necessarily implying sovereignty transfer.
Intergovernmentalism: national preferences	Member States retain control over sensitive security interests and negotiate common responses according to national preferences.	Cooperation should reflect differences in national priorities and bargaining among Member States.	Divergent positions, differentiated implementation and national control over defence priorities.	Versailles bargaining, differentiated national spending trajectories, differing strategic preferences, and continued national responsibility for defence planning.	Evidence of persistent intergovernmental constraints.
Intergovernmentalism: national authority	Core defence decisions remain under national political control.	Expanded cooperation should not necessarily produce a transfer of authority over force deployment, defence planning or national security priorities.	Unanimity, national control over force deployment and national defence planning.	Continued national authority over core security and defence decisions and reliance on NATO for collective defence.	Evidence of integration without full supranationalisation.

Theoretical concept	Mechanism	Expectation	Empirical indicator	Evidence in the article	Interpretation
Deeper functional integration	Common financing, procurement and industrial cooperation increase practical interdependence among Member States.	Integration should become visible through more interconnected financial, procurement, industrial and capability arrangements.	Common funding, joint procurement, cross-border industrial cooperation and capability development.	EDF, EDIRPA, SAFE, EDIP and related defence-industrial initiatives.	Evidence of a qualitative deepening of cooperation.
Hybrid integration	Functional pressures for cooperation coexist with persistent national authority.	EU defence cooperation should deepen without creating a fully supranational defence actor.	Expansion of common instruments combined with continued national decision-making authority.	Expanded EU defence instruments alongside national control of core defence decisions and continuing NATO dependence.	Evidence of a hybrid form of European defence integration.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the official EU legislative acts, strategic documents and primary sources cited in the references.

The causal mechanism examined in the article links changes in the external security environment to changes in EU defence cooperation through a sequence of intervening processes: geopolitical shocks and strategic uncertainty alter threat perceptions among member states; changes in threat perceptions affect national preferences; where preferences overlap sufficiently, governments support common responses through intergovernmental bargaining; political agreement activates or adapts EU instruments; cooperation in one policy domain creates functional requirements in adjacent domains, procurement, industrial production, technology, and capability development. This sequence increases practical interdependence among member states without removing national control over core defence decisions (Haas 1964; Hoffmann 1966; Niemann & Ioannou 2015; Beach & Pedersen 2019).

The acceleration of European defence cooperation results from the interaction of four factors: geopolitical pressures generated by a more demanding security environment, convergence in threat perceptions among member states, institutional adaptation within the EU framework and the expanding role of defence-industrial cooperation. The interaction of these factors has produced one of the most extensive expansions of defence cooperation in the history of European integration. They have not, however, produced a fully autonomous European defence actor. Divergent national preferences, intergovernmental decision-making, uneven military capabilities and continuing reliance on NATO remain constraints.

Methodologically, the article combines qualitative document analysis, process tracing and empirical examination of defence expenditure and threat assessments. The document base consists primarily of EU strategic documents, Council decisions, Commission proposals and legislative acts that define, establish, modify or implement defence cooperation instruments. European Defence Agency data on defence expenditure and selected assessments of the European security environment complement these sources. Documents were selected for their direct relevance to the causal sequence examined in the article: changes in the security environment and threat perceptions, political commitments by member states, institutional responses, and subsequent developments in procurement, industrial cooperation and capability development. The selection was purposive, not exhaustive, focusing on documents that provide direct evidence for the transitions specified in the causal mechanism. The empirical period covers the development of EU defence cooperation from the pre-2022 institutional baseline to the post-2022 acceleration of cooperation, with particular attention to developments initiated or substantially expanded after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Bowen 2009; Beach & Pedersen 2019).

Process tracing is used as an explanatory method, not as a chronological description. It examines whether the evidence supports the proposed sequence from geopolitical pressure and changing threat perceptions to shifts in member-state preferences, intergovernmental bargaining, institutional adaptation and expanded functional cooperation. Evidence is assessed at each transition in the sequence. Strategic documents and threat assessments are used to identify changes in the security environment and threat perceptions; Council decisions and legislative acts are examined to identify political commitments, bargaining outcomes and institutional responses; and evidence concerning procurement, industrial cooperation, defence expenditure and capability development is used to assess whether institutional responses generated closer practical interdependence. The analysis distinguishes evidence supporting the proposed mechanism from evidence that merely documents temporal succession. A causal link is considered more plausible where official documents, legislative acts or implementation arrangements connect a preceding condition to a subsequent policy decision or institutional change, while evidence of persistent national control is used to assess the limits of functional integration and the continued relevance of intergovernmental constraints (Beach & Pedersen 2019).

The study uses methodological triangulation to assess the same transformation from different types of evidence. Policy and legal documents provide evidence of political commitments and institutional change; threat assessments provide evidence of changes in the security environment and threat perceptions; and defence expenditure data provide evidence of the material resources available to support the emerging policy trajectory. These sources are not treated as interchangeable measures. Their analytical value lies in their different posi-

tions within the causal sequence: threat assessments illuminate changes in the external and perceptual context, institutional documents capture political and policy responses, and expenditure data indicate whether these responses are accompanied by changes in material capacity. Triangulation helps distinguish changes in political commitment and institutional cooperation from changes in defence capability (Bowen 2009; Beach & Pedersen 2019).

The unit of analysis is the evolution of EU defence cooperation as a policy process, while individual instruments and policy episodes are treated as within-case observations of the transformation. The EDF, ASAP, EDIRPA, SAFE and other instruments are not treated as independent cases. They are examined as linked developments within the same institutional and geopolitical process. The design traces how changes in the external environment and member-state preferences were translated into successive forms of institutional adaptation and practical cooperation.

The design has an explanatory purpose. The analysis does not estimate the causal effect of individual geopolitical shocks or policy instruments, nor does it assume that the temporal association between an external event and an EU policy response establishes causation. Its purpose is to assess whether the observed sequence and documentary evidence are consistent with the proposed causal mechanism and with the theoretical expectations specified in Table 1. The empirical findings are interpreted as evidence supporting, qualifying or limiting the proposed explanation, not as statistical proof of causal effects.

The discussion is organised in three stages. The first chapter examines the geopolitical conditions that altered security perceptions within the European Union. The second analyses how these developments influenced debates on strategic autonomy, the Strategic Compass and defence cooperation initiatives. The third evaluates the relationship between defence expenditure, industrial capacity and the practical limits of defence integration. The conclusion discusses the implications of these developments for the future role of the European Union as a security actor.

Geopolitical drivers of the transformation of EU security and defence policy

The acceleration of European defence cooperation after 2022 cannot be explained solely by Russia's war against Ukraine. The invasion acted as a catalyst, but many of the pressures behind these developments had been shaping the European security environment for more than a decade (Tsoukalis 2022). Geopolitical rivalry, instability along the Union's periphery, hybrid operations targeting democratic institutions, supply-chain disruptions and the weaponisation of economic interdependence had already exposed weaknesses in Europe's security architecture (Karamanlis 2024). What changed after 2022

was the urgency with which these challenges were perceived and the extent to which they were viewed as interconnected.

Threat perceptions among EU member states shifted substantially. For many years, geographical location, historical experience and national security priorities produced differing assessments of security risks. Governments on the eastern flank focused primarily on Russian military capabilities and territorial defence, while southern member states focused on instability in North Africa, migration pressures and developments in the Sahel. Other countries prioritised economic competitiveness, energy security or terrorism. Such differences complicated efforts to establish common priorities within the framework of the CSDP (Schimmelfennig 2018).

The invasion of Ukraine narrowed part of this divide. Although national perspectives remain far from uniform, a broader consensus emerged around the view that Europe faces a more demanding security environment than at any point since the end of the Cold War. The document 2026 Global Risks to the EU survey reflects this trend (Anghel 2025). Interstate conflict, Russian revisionism, military escalation, cyber threats and attacks on critical infrastructure rank among the most serious concerns identified by experts. The ranking of individual risks matters less than the recognition that security threats now transcend national borders and policy sectors.

Convergence in threat perceptions carries political consequences. European integration has often advanced when member states identified sufficient overlap between national interests to justify collective action (Sandholtz & Zysman 1989; Niemann & Ioannou 2015). Security policy follows a similar logic. A more shared understanding of risks reduces political obstacles to cooperation in an area traditionally associated with state sovereignty.

The sequence after 2022 illustrates this mechanism. The Strategic Compass was developed from a threat analysis involving the intelligence services of all 27 member states and was revised during the negotiations in early 2022 to reflect the changing security environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The subsequent Versailles Declaration committed member states to substantially increase defence expenditure, strengthen collaborative investment and joint procurement, and reinforce the European defence industry (European Council 2022). These commitments did not reflect full convergence on the meaning of strategic autonomy, but they indicated sufficient overlap in national preferences regarding capability shortfalls, industrial capacity and preparedness to support common action. The Versailles process represents the intergovernmental bargaining stage of the mechanism, while the subsequent adoption of ASAP and EDIRPA represents institutional adaptation to the agreed priorities (European External Action Service 2022; European Union 2023a; European Union 2023b). The sequence is consistent with a mechanism in which a changing threat environment contributed to convergence in threat perceptions, convergence in

selected policy preferences facilitated intergovernmental agreement, and political agreement created demand for new EU-level instruments.

A second source of pressure stems from uncertainty surrounding external security guarantees. Since the end of the Cold War, European defence has developed within a security architecture heavily dependent on American military capabilities. This arrangement reduced incentives for many European governments to invest in autonomous capabilities, while confidence in long-term US engagement remained largely unquestioned (Schneiker et al. 2021).

Today, the debate is no longer centred on the value of the transatlantic partnership. NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defence for most member states. The issue concerns whether Europe can indefinitely rely on a model built upon extensive US military engagement while Washington devotes increasing attention to challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Even without any reduction in American commitments, uncertainty regarding future priorities affects strategic calculations across Europe (Schneiker et al. 2021).

Uncertainty about future US engagement has given new momentum to debates on strategic autonomy. What was once discussed largely as a political aspiration has become connected to practical questions of defence production, procurement, logistics, ammunition stocks, military mobility and technological capacity (Fiott 2018, 2025). The shift reflects a recognition that security policy depends not only on political commitments but also on the material resources required to sustain them.

A third source of pressure originates in the structure of international politics. European security policy has often evolved in response to discrete crises. The post-2022 period differs because policymakers are confronting several mutually reinforcing developments simultaneously. Military conflict, economic coercion, technological competition, cyber operations and attempts to influence democratic processes intersect, blurring traditional boundaries between internal and external security (Michaels & Sus 2025).

Russia's war against Ukraine forms part of this wider picture. Security concerns can no longer be separated from industrial resilience, technological capacity, energy security or the protection of critical infrastructure (Matelly 2026). As these domains become more closely connected, pressures for cooperation extend beyond traditional defence policy and spill over into adjacent sectors. Such dynamics resemble the spillover mechanisms originally conceptualised by Ernst Haas (1964) and later developed in the work of Sandholtz and Zysman (1989) and Sandholtz (2024), whereby cooperation in one functional sector generates integrationist pressures in adjacent policy domains.

The pressures described above have strengthened the rationale for collective action at the European level. While defence remains a national responsibility, many of the challenges confronting member states exceed national capacities. Defence-industrial production illustrates this problem well. Fragmented pro-

curement systems, duplication of weapons platforms, limited interoperability and small production runs have reduced efficiency across the European defence sector for decades. The war in Ukraine exposed these weaknesses more clearly by revealing shortages in ammunition stocks and constraints on production capacity.

The centre of gravity in European defence debates has shifted. Earlier discussions often focused on political ambition and institutional aspirations (Koppa 2022). Current debates focus far more directly on capability generation, industrial output, military mobility, technological development and defence procurement. Political declarations may signal intent, but they cannot compensate for deficiencies in production capacity, logistics or military readiness. Addressing such shortcomings requires coordination mechanisms, common funding instruments and long-term planning.

The institutional response after 2022 did not emerge from scratch. Instruments such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) were already in place before the war. What changed was the political environment in which these mechanisms operated. Geopolitical pressures increased incentives for governments to employ existing instruments more actively and to support additional forms of cooperation. External shocks can accelerate cooperation when institutional foundations already exist, as observed in earlier phases of European integration (Niemann & Ioannou 2015).

The distinction between institutional creation and institutional activation matters for assessing the post-2022 transformation. The EDF, PESCO and CARD provide evidence of a pre-existing institutional baseline, not of institutional creation caused by the war. Their increased political relevance after 2022, together with the establishment of instruments such as ASAP and EDIRPA, indicates a combination of institutional activation and subsequent policy expansion. The post-2022 period matters not simply because of the number of new instruments, but because geopolitical pressure increased the use, scope and functional interconnection of existing and newly created mechanisms.

Questions of authority and decision-making remain central to this process. Defence continues to be one of the most intergovernmental areas of EU activity, and national governments retain control over the most sensitive security decisions (Puetter 2014). Recent initiatives have nonetheless expanded the role of EU institutions in capability development, defence-industrial coordination and financial support mechanisms. The expanded role of EU institutions has not produced a transfer of defence policy to supranational institutions. The result is a hybrid arrangement in which member states remain the primary actors while relying more extensively on collective instruments to achieve objectives that are difficult to attain individually (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015). The persistence of national control alongside expanding cooperation illustrates the

continuing relevance of intergovernmental dynamics within European defence governance.

The expansion of EU institutional roles creates potential friction over the distribution of influence within European defence governance. As EU institutions take on additional responsibilities in financing, industrial coordination, procurement support and capability development, member states retain authority over the defence priorities and operational decisions that determine how these instruments are used. The resulting tension is not primarily a conflict over formal sovereignty transfer. It concerns the ability of EU institutions to shape national choices through funding conditions, coordination mechanisms and common capability priorities, while governments remain responsible for the underlying defence decisions.

The institutional evolution of European defence can involve an expansion of EU-level influence without a corresponding expansion of formal decision-making authority. The tension became visible in the development of the Readiness Roadmap 2030, when member states insisted that major capability initiatives should remain under member-state leadership, while the European Commission was assigned a facilitating, not directing role. The subsequent European Council support for strengthening the European Defence Agency can likewise be interpreted as an effort to preserve an intergovernmental counterweight to the expanding role of the Commission in defence-industrial policy and financial governance. Institutional adaptation has involved not only the creation of new instruments but also continuing negotiations over which actors should shape their priorities and implementation (von Sydow et al. 2026). From a neofunctionalist perspective, this friction shows how institutional influence may expand through functional interdependence even when formal authority remains intergovernmental (Haas 1964; Haroche 2020).

The acceleration of EU defence cooperation should properly be understood as part of a geopolitical adjustment, not as a temporary response to a single conflict. The war in Ukraine accelerated ongoing trends, but the underlying drivers originate in military competition, geopolitical uncertainty, technological rivalry and the diffusion of security risks across multiple policy domains. Under such conditions, closer cooperation becomes less a matter of political preference and more a practical response to a changing security environment.

Table 2 illustrates this relationship. No single geopolitical shock explains the expansion of EU defence cooperation. Russian revisionism strengthened concerns regarding territorial security, and uncertainty surrounding future US engagement reinforced debates on European capabilities, while hybrid threats, technological dependencies and defence-industrial fragmentation broadened the scope of security policy. Together, these pressures created incentives for new policy instruments and deeper forms of cooperation.

Table 2: Geopolitical Drivers and Illustrative EU Policy Responses

Geopolitical Driver	Security Implication	Illustrative EU Policy Responses
Russian revisionism	Territorial insecurity	Strategic Compass, EDF, ASAP
Uncertainty of US engagement	Capability concerns	Strategic autonomy agenda, SAFE
Hybrid threats	Critical infrastructure vulnerability	Military mobility, resilience initiatives
Defence-industrial fragmentation	Capability shortfalls	EDF, EDIRPA, EDIP
Technological competition	Strategic dependency risks	Defence innovation programmes

Note: *The policy responses shown in Table 2 are illustrative, not one-to-one causal effects; individual instruments typically respond to several interacting geopolitical and policy pressures.*

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the official EU legislative acts, strategic documents and primary sources cited in the references.

Russian revisionism and uncertainty surrounding future US engagement are analytically distinct but strategically interdependent drivers of European defence cooperation. Russia's war against Ukraine increased the immediacy of the territorial threat, while uncertainty about the durability and future orientation of US security commitments increased the perceived costs of continued reliance on external military capabilities. The combination strengthened incentives for European governments to improve their own defence capabilities and reduce selected vulnerabilities without implying a common preference for replacing NATO with an autonomous EU defence system. In this sense, the two pressures reinforced, but did not independently generate the post-2022 demand for further European defence cooperation (Schneiker et al. 2021; von Sydow et al. 2026).

Against this background, strategic autonomy gradually moved from the realm of political aspiration into the sphere of practical policymaking. Understanding how this transition occurred requires closer examination of the Strategic Compass, defence cooperation initiatives, and the institutional evolution of European security policy.

Strategic autonomy, the Strategic Compass and the institutional deepening of European defence cooperation

Debates on European strategic autonomy predate Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They emerged from a mismatch between the European Union's economic weight and its limited capacity to act independently in security and defence matters. The concept gained prominence following a series of crises that exposed European

dependencies, including the financial crisis, migration pressures, disruptions to global supply chains, shifts in US foreign policy and the COVID-19 pandemic. By the early 2020s, strategic autonomy had become one of the most contested concepts in European policy debates (Tocci 2022).

Much of the controversy reflected the absence of a common definition. For some member states, strategic autonomy referred primarily to defence capabilities and operational readiness. Others interpreted it more broadly, linking it to technological sovereignty, industrial resilience, energy security and supply-chain protection (Belan & Šrobárová 2026). These differences mirrored disagreements concerning the future trajectory of European integration and the relationship between the EU and NATO. France generally favoured a more ambitious interpretation centred on Europe's capacity for independent action, whereas several Central and Eastern European governments remained cautious, viewing strong transatlantic ties as indispensable to European security.

Such disagreements reveal a feature of European defence cooperation. Progress rarely depends on consensus regarding long-term political objectives. Cooperation tends to advance when governments identify practical areas in which collective action generates tangible benefits despite persistent differences over strategic preferences (Schimmelfennig 2018). The post-2022 evolution of European defence cooperation follows this pattern. Disputes surrounding the meaning of strategic autonomy have not disappeared; cooperation has expanded in areas where member states perceive common interests.

The Strategic Compass illustrates this process. Adopted in 2022, it sought to provide both a shared assessment of the security environment and a framework for collective action (Clapp 2022). The Strategic Compass matters less for the originality of its individual proposals than for its effort to connect threat perceptions, capability development, crisis management, resilience and external partnerships within a single strategic framework (Biscop 2022). The document reflected a recognition that security challenges could no longer be addressed through fragmented policy responses (European External Action Service 2022). It attempted to strengthen a common strategic culture among member states (Clapp 2022). Divergent historical experiences and security priorities have long constrained defence cooperation within the European Union (Smith 2014).

Although strategic documents cannot eliminate such differences, they can facilitate coordination by providing common reference points, a shared diagnosis of security challenges, and a common vocabulary for discussing policy responses. European integration theory offers a useful lens through which to interpret these developments. In line with Stanley Hoffmann's classic intergovernmentalist argument, defence has traditionally been viewed as a core element of 'high politics' where national sovereignty resists supranational encroachment, making it one of the least likely areas for neofunctionalist spillover (Hoffmann 1966). Developments, however, suggest a more complex dynamic. Cooperation

in defence research, industrial policy, military mobility, technological innovation and procurement has generated pressures extending into adjacent sectors (Haroche 2020). These forms of cooperation have created new patterns of interdependence that shape national decision-making and expand the scope of collective action without replacing national sovereignty (Wessels 1997).

The expansion of defence-industrial cooperation provides a clear example. Instruments such as the European Defence Fund, initiatives supporting ammunition production and programmes promoting joint procurement seek to address long-standing fragmentation within the European defence market (Fiott 2026). Their objective extends beyond increasing defence expenditure. They aim to influence how resources are allocated by encouraging coordination, interoperability and economies of scale. In practical terms, this marks a shift away from a model centred primarily on political declarations towards one focused on capability generation and industrial capacity.

The post-2022 period should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of a straightforward move towards supranational defence governance. Member states continue to control force deployment, defence planning, military commitments and national security priorities. The institutional architecture of the CSDP remains firmly rooted in intergovernmental principles, while unanimity continues to shape collective decision-making (Bicchi et al. 2024; von Sydow et al. 2026). Expanding cooperation has occurred alongside the preservation of national authority.

This coexistence of deeper cooperation and enduring national control represents one of the defining features of European defence governance. EU institutions have acquired a more visible role in agenda-setting, coordination, financing and implementation, while national governments remain the decisive actors. Defence integration has advanced in a manner that reflects the hybrid model conceptualised by the new intergovernmentalist approach, combining expanding collective instruments with the continued predominance of intergovernmental decision-making (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015).

The analytical framework distinguishes these developments according to their function and does not treat every new instrument as evidence of integration. An instrument is considered evidence of functional integration when it increases common financing, joint procurement, cross-border industrial cooperation or shared capability development. Institutional deepening is identified where common EU mechanisms acquire new functions or a stronger practical role. By contrast, continued national control over force deployment, defence planning and core security decisions is treated as evidence of persistent intergovernmental authority.

Distinguishing between strategic autonomy as a political ambition and defence integration as an observable process is essential. Strategic autonomy often serves as a vision of Europe's future role in security affairs (Fiott 2025).

Defence integration can be assessed empirically through institutions, budgets, procurement programmes, industrial cooperation and capability development. Evidence from the post-2022 period points to measurable progress in these areas. Whether such progress will ultimately produce a genuinely autonomous European defence capability remains uncertain.

The distinction between political ambition and institutional practice becomes visible in the instruments that have emerged around European defence cooperation (Koppa 2022). Strategic autonomy has attracted considerable political attention; the practical effect of post-2022 developments lies primarily in the gradual construction of mechanisms designed to reduce fragmentation within the European defence sector and strengthen cooperation in areas traditionally dominated by national policies.

Permanent Structured Cooperation, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, and the European Defence Fund occupy a central place in this process. Although these instruments differ in purpose and institutional design, they pursue a common objective: addressing collective-action problems that individual member states have struggled to resolve independently. Their significance does not derive from the transfer of sovereignty to EU institutions. They seek to shape national behaviour by encouraging coordination, information sharing, joint capability development and collaborative investment (European Commission 2023; European Defence Agency 2025; European Union 2026).

Such arrangements reflect the specific character of defence integration within the European Union. Unlike many areas of economic integration, defence cooperation rarely advances through binding supranational rules. Progress usually occurs through mechanisms that promote convergence while preserving national discretion. Although often criticised for their limited coercive capacity, these arrangements remain politically viable because they allow governments to retain control over sensitive security matters while benefiting from collective action.

The Security Action for Europe (SAFE) provides a clear example of this mechanism because its effects have begun to extend from institutional design to implementation. SAFE provides up to EUR 150 billion in loans to member states, with access generally linked to common procurement involving at least two participating countries. By 2026, 19 member states had submitted national defence investment plans, and the first disbursements had been made to several member states, including Poland, Lithuania, Croatia and Cyprus. Lithuania received EUR 956.3 million in June 2026, while Croatia received EUR 255 million in July 2026 as pre-financing under their respective SAFE arrangements (European Commission 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

The first SAFE disbursements provide initial evidence that the instrument is beginning to influence the financing and implementation of national defence investment and is moving beyond its previous status as a prospective policy

instrument. Its macroeconomic effects differ from those of budgetary instruments such as ASAP or EDIRPA because SAFE provides loans to member states, whereas these instruments provide fixed EU budget allocations. The instrument can therefore ease the short-term financing constraints associated with higher defence investment, while creating long-term repayment obligations; SAFE loans may have a duration of up to 45 years, with a possible grace period for principal repayment. The fiscal and macroeconomic effects of this shift will depend on how extensively member states use the additional financing for genuinely additional defence investment and not for expenditure that would otherwise have been financed through national budgets (European Union 2025b; European Defence Agency 2026).

The implementation evidence nevertheless remains insufficient to conclude that SAFE has already produced sustained convergence in defence procurement. The European Defence Agency reports that the fiscal uptake of SAFE and related initiatives remains uneven and that their macroeconomic impact cannot yet be fully quantified. At the same time, the early use of the EDA Government-to-Government platform, including the opening of existing contracts to potential partners, indicates that the financial incentives created by SAFE are beginning to affect procurement behaviour. SAFE is relevant to the neofunctionalist argument because access to its financial assistance is generally linked to common procurement involving at least one participating member state and at least one additional member state, EEA EFTA state or Ukraine. The financial instrument creates a functional incentive for governments to coordinate procurement across national boundaries in order to obtain access to EU-supported financing. This does not transfer authority over defence planning or procurement to EU institutions, but it changes the conditions under which national procurement decisions are made. The available evidence points to an emerging, not yet consolidated, form of functional integration: SAFE changes the incentives surrounding national procurement decisions, but the extent to which these incentives produce durable joint procurement, interoperability and capability convergence remains an empirical question (Haas 1964; European Union 2025b; European Defence Agency 2026).

The European Defence Fund illustrates this approach clearly. For decades, national procurement practices, overlapping capability programmes and support for domestic defence industries contributed to fragmentation across the European defence market. The result was duplication, reduced interoperability and inefficient allocation of resources (European Commission 2024). The EDF seeks to mitigate these problems by supporting collaborative research and development projects involving participants from multiple member states (European Commission 2023). Its importance lies not only in the resources it provides but also in its effort to encourage cooperation across national industrial boundaries (Fiott 2026).

Table 3: Main EU Defence Cooperation Instruments and Their Role in the Post-2022 Transformation

Instrument	Type	Implementation / Validity Period	Financial scale	Main function	Integration relevance
PESCO	Institutional framework	2017–	—	Capability cooperation	Coordination and joint capability development
CARD	Coordination mechanism	2017–	—	Defence planning coordination	Identification of cooperation opportunities
EDF	EU budget programme	2021–2027	€8.0 bn	Defence research and development	Cross-border R&D and industrial cooperation
ASAP	EU budget/ regulatory instrument	2023–2025	€500 m	Ammunition production	Industrial capacity and production cooperation
EDIRPA	EU budget instrument	2023–2025	€310 m	Common procurement	Incentives for joint procurement
EPF	Off-budget financial instrument	2021–	>€17 bn	Military assistance	Support to member-state and partner capabilities
EDIP	EU budget programme	2026–2027	€1.5 bn	Defence industrial capacity	Industrial cooperation and capability development
SAFE	EU loan instrument	2025–	€150 bn	Defence investment and procurement	Financial incentives for common procurement

Note: *The period refers to the period of implementation, validity or availability of the respective instrument; adoption dates are not shown.*

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the official EU legislative acts, strategic documents and primary sources cited in the references.

Table 3 shows that the post-2022 transformation has not resulted from the creation of a single integrated defence policy instrument. Instead, it has involved the accumulation of instruments with different legal, financial and institutional functions. Pre-existing frameworks such as PESCO and CARD provide mechanisms for coordination and capability planning, while the EDF, ASAP, EDIRPA and EDIP address research, industrial production and common procurement through EU budgetary instruments. SAFE adds a distinct financial mechanism based on loans to member states, whereas the EPF operates outside the EU budget and primarily supports military assistance. What matters here is less the number of instruments than their increasing functional interconnection.

The war in Ukraine accelerated the shift towards defence-industrial cooperation by exposing the practical consequences of fragmented procurement systems and limited production capacity. Supporting Ukraine while replenishing

national stockpiles revealed the difficulty of sustaining military commitments without a stronger industrial base. Defence-industrial cooperation moved from a secondary policy concern to a central component of European security debates (Hellemeier 2025; European Commission 2024).

Some observers view these initiatives as evidence of a gradual movement towards more integrated defence integration. Others emphasise the continued dominance of national governments and the limited transfer of authority to EU institutions. Both interpretations capture elements of the landscape. Cooperation has expanded substantially, while the political foundations of European defence remain overwhelmingly national.

The coexistence of these tendencies suggests that European defence cooperation after 2022 cannot be understood through a simple opposition between integration and sovereignty (Hooghe & Marks 2019). Member states have not abandoned control over defence policy. They have become more willing to employ collective instruments when national solutions prove insufficient. Defence integration advances less through centralisation than through coordination, joint investment and industrial cooperation.

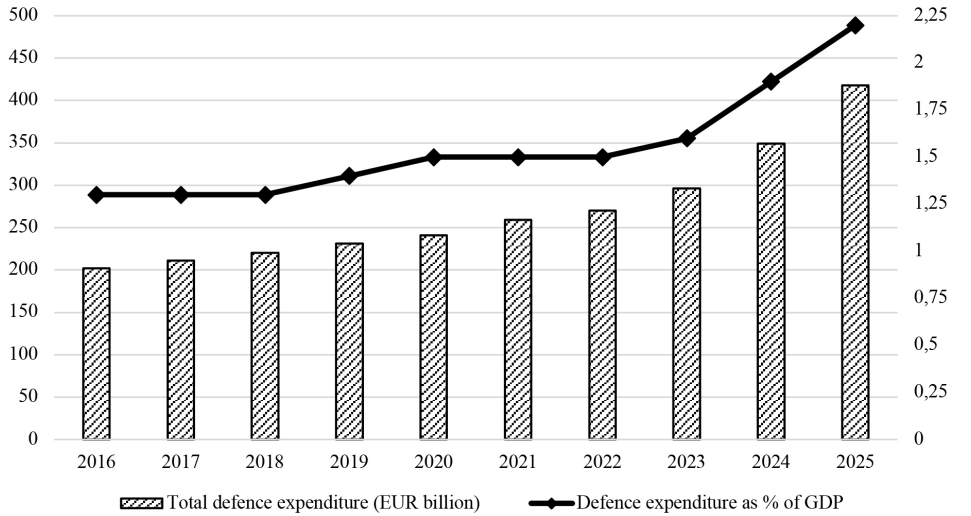
Whether this trajectory will ultimately produce a more autonomous European defence capability remains uncertain. The answer depends less on institutional innovation than on the material resources that sustain it. Defence expenditure, industrial production, technological capacity and military readiness will determine whether the ambitions associated with strategic autonomy can be translated into lasting capabilities.

Defence spending, industrial capacity and the limits of European defence integration

Institutional innovation and political commitment explain only part of the acceleration of European defence cooperation. Defence policy rests on material capabilities. Military readiness, force modernisation, ammunition stocks, industrial production, technological expertise and logistical support cannot be created through political declarations alone. Any assessment of the future trajectory of European defence cooperation must examine whether available resources are capable of sustaining the ambitions associated with strategic autonomy and further integration (Calcagno 2026).

Measured in financial terms, the post-2022 period marks a clear break with previous trends. Defence expenditure across the European Union increased sharply, while defence-industrial issues moved closer to the centre of policymaking. Initiatives that would have appeared politically unlikely a decade earlier—joint procurement, ammunition production, military mobility and collective capability development—became part of mainstream policy debates.

Figure 1: Evolution of Total EU Defence Expenditure and GDP Share (2025–2016)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the European Defence Agency, 2026. All expenditure figures are expressed in constant 2025 prices.

Table 4: National Variation in EU Defence Spending, 2025

Indicator	2025
EU Member States reaching 2% of GDP	23/27
Member States increasing expenditure in real terms	24/27
Member States increasing expenditure by >10%	15/27
Member States stabilising or reducing expenditure	4/27
EU defence expenditure	€418 bn
Defence expenditure as % GDP	2.2%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the European Defence Agency, 2026.

The composition of this additional spending matters. Defence investment reached EUR 134 billion in 2025, a 23% real increase from 2024, while defence equipment procurement alone reached EUR 115 billion. At the same time, defence R & D amounted to EUR 17 billion, or 4.0% of total defence expenditure. The rapid expansion of equipment procurement continues to outpace the development of longer-term research and technological capacity (European Defence Agency 2026).

Figure 1 shows a sustained increase in EU defence expenditure, with a pronounced acceleration after 2022. In 2025, defence expenditure reached EUR 418

billion, equivalent to 2.2% of EU member states' combined GDP, representing a 20% real increase compared with 2024 and a cumulative 47% rise (European Defence Agency 2026). The latest EDA data indicate that the acceleration has not been uniform across member states. Twenty-four member states increased defence expenditure in real terms in 2025, fifteen increased spending by more than 10%, while four stabilised or reduced their expenditure. The differences are visible among the largest European defence actors: In 2025, defence expenditure amounted to approximately 2.3% of GDP in Germany, 2.1% in France and 2.0% in Italy. At the same time, several eastern and northern member states recorded substantially higher defence burdens, with Poland and the Baltic states remaining well above the 2% benchmark. The aggregate EU trend conceals substantial differences in national spending trajectories and in the intensity with which governments have responded to the changing security environment (European Defence Agency 2026).

First, defence expenditure followed an upward trajectory throughout the past decade, suggesting that concerns regarding military preparedness predated Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Second, spending accelerated markedly after 2022, both in absolute terms and as a share of GDP. The war did not initiate the transformation of European defence policy; it intensified trends that had already emerged before the conflict.

Rising expenditure, however, should not be confused with rising capability. Defence spending remained overwhelmingly organised through national frameworks, often characterised by fragmented procurement practices, overlapping weapons systems and limited interoperability. Higher investment does not automatically generate improved military effectiveness when resources are distributed across multiple systems pursuing different priorities. The latest EDA data reinforce this distinction: although collaborative defence expenditure accounted for 24% of defence equipment procurement in 2025, European collaborative expenditure represented only 11% of aggregated investment, and reported national shares ranged from 0% to 55%. The EDA notes that national approaches continue to dominate capability development, while procurement initiatives and equipment life cycles remain largely unsynchronised. Rising expenditure has not yet translated into a comparable degree of European coordination, interoperability or long-term convergence (European Defence Agency 2026).

This divergence between national spending and European coordination is consistent with the intergovernmental constraints identified in the analytical framework. Member states may increase defence expenditure substantially while continuing to determine procurement priorities, equipment life cycles and capability development primarily through national decision-making. Differences in spending trajectories and procurement practices remain relevant not only as indicators of material asymmetry but also as evidence of the continuing

influence of national preferences on the direction of European defence cooperation (Hoffmann 1966; Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015).

Capability generation depends not only on the volume of resources but also on their coordination. A fragmented system may spend more while producing fewer operational capabilities than a more integrated one. Many initiatives introduced during the past decade seek precisely to reduce this gap between expenditure and effectiveness.

Defence-industrial capacity represents a second area where political ambition continues to exceed practical capability. In 2025, member states allocated EUR 17 billion to defence R & D, equivalent to 4.0% of total defence expenditure, while equipment procurement reached EUR 115 billion. The EDA notes that the gap between equipment acquisition and longer-term research and development continues to widen. This imbalance suggests that a substantial part of the spending surge is directed towards addressing immediate capability gaps and not towards building the longer-term technological foundations of European strategic autonomy (European Defence Agency 2026).

The war in Ukraine exposed shortages in ammunition production, stockpile management and industrial responsiveness across Europe. Governments discovered that supporting Ukraine while simultaneously replenishing national inventories required production capacities that had been reduced over several decades (Hellemeier 2025). Expanding output proved more difficult than expected because defence production depends on specialised labour, technological expertise, investment cycles, access to critical materials, and resilient supply chains.

For this reason, strategic autonomy cannot be evaluated solely through institutional reforms or political declarations. Its foundations are industrial and technological. A political actor cannot exercise meaningful autonomy in defence affairs without the capacity to produce critical equipment, sustain military operations, maintain supply chains and develop advanced technologies. Debates concerning European defence now centre on productive capacity, not institutional design alone (European Union 2025c).

The same logic applies to relations between the European Union and NATO. Public discussions occasionally present European defence initiatives as alternatives to the Atlantic Alliance. Such interpretations overlook the continuing complementarity between the two frameworks. Despite the expansion of EU defence initiatives, collective territorial defence remains heavily dependent on NATO capabilities and structures. European cooperation can strengthen the European pillar of security, but it does not eliminate the strategic importance of the transatlantic relationship.

This dependence on NATO highlights one of the central tensions within debates on strategic autonomy. Political discourse often implies a choice between dependence and autonomy. Empirical developments point towards a different outcome. European governments are attempting to reduce vulnerabilities, im-

prove industrial capacity, strengthen military readiness and expand their ability to act collectively. None of these objectives requires separation from NATO. What is emerging is a model based on stronger European capabilities operating alongside a continuing transatlantic security framework.

The period after 2022 produced a significant expansion of defence cooperation, collective investment and defence-industrial coordination. Progress in institutional cooperation has advanced faster than the generation of military capabilities. National governments remain the principal actors, industrial fragmentation persists, and capability development continues to vary across member states. European defence cooperation has entered a new phase, but the gap between political ambition and practical capability remains substantial.

Conclusion

This study has examined the drivers behind the acceleration of EU security and defence cooperation after 2022 and assessed whether these developments indicate a transition from strategic autonomy as a political concept towards deeper forms of defence integration. The post-2022 phase of European defence cooperation cannot be understood solely as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war served as a catalyst in an environment shaped by geopolitical competition, technological rivalry, external dependencies, changing threat perceptions and uncertainty surrounding the future distribution of power.

Four factors help explain the expansion of defence cooperation. Convergence in threat perceptions reduced political obstacles to collective action. Uncertainty regarding the long-term evolution of transatlantic security arrangements increased interest in strengthening European capabilities. Institutional adaptation within the EU framework provided mechanisms through which cooperation could expand. Defence-industrial capacity emerged as a central component of security policy, linking military preparedness to production, technology, procurement and supply chains.

European defence cooperation has moved beyond the largely declaratory approach that characterised many earlier discussions on strategic autonomy. Security and defence policy have become connected to industrial production, technological innovation, logistics, procurement practices and financial instruments. Defence integration is no longer driven primarily by institutional aspirations; it is shaped by material requirements.

The transformation has also exposed limits. Cooperation has expanded more rapidly than capability generation. Defence expenditure has increased substantially, new instruments have been created, and coordination has intensified across multiple policy areas. Industrial fragmentation, uneven capability development and persistent national differences continue to constrain the effectiveness of these efforts. Higher spending does not automatically produce

higher military capability when resources remain dispersed across national systems with differing priorities.

The findings support neither the expectation of a fully autonomous European defence actor nor the view that defence cooperation remains largely unchanged. The evidence provides support for the functional and institutional spillover expectations specified in Table 1: cooperation has expanded from defence research and capability planning towards procurement, industrial production, financing and related capability development, while common EU instruments have become more relevant in practice. The Versailles process provides evidence of the intervening role of member-state preferences and intergovernmental bargaining, while SAFE provides a concrete example of how financial incentives can encourage cross-border procurement without transferring formal authority to EU institutions. At the same time, the evidence supports the intergovernmentalist expectations concerning national preferences and authority. Large differences in defence spending and procurement patterns persist, national governments continue to determine core defence priorities and force-related decisions, and NATO remains central to collective defence. The resulting pattern is therefore best understood as hybrid integration: functional cooperation and institutional interdependence have deepened without a comparable transfer of formal authority to EU institutions. Process tracing supports this interpretation by linking changes in the security environment and threat perceptions to political commitments, institutional adaptation and subsequent forms of practical cooperation, while the expenditure and procurement evidence qualifies the extent of that integration.

The future of European defence cooperation will depend less on the creation of new institutional frameworks than on the ability to translate political commitments into sustainable capabilities. Industrial production, technological innovation, military readiness, defence planning and supply-chain resilience will play a decisive role in determining whether these ambitions can be converted into long-term strategic capacity. The trajectory identified in this article points towards a European Union that occupies a more prominent position in security and defence affairs than at any previous stage of integration. Whether this evolution ultimately leads to a more autonomous European defence posture will depend on the willingness of member states to narrow the gap between political ambition and practical capability.

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From Protecting State Borders to Corruption in Border Management: The Case of the 2023 "Cash-for-Visa Scandal" in Poland

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Politics in Central Europe
(ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 22, No. 3
DOI: 10.51870/pce-2026-0015

Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to explore intersections between politics, border protection, and corruption in the context of growing international migrations by studying the case of the "cash for visa scandal," which erupted in the midst of the parliamentary elections in Poland in 2023. The research employs the critical border studies perspective and the instrumental case study method. The research questions address the political environment conducive to the corruption scandal concerning irregular border crossing and its role in the dynamics of the electoral campaign. The study demonstrates a paradoxical situation in which the nationalist-conservative government ruling in 2015–2023 used tough action and rhetoric in favor of protecting state borders. At the same time, however, it created an institutional and discursive environment that increased the risk of the corruption scandal regarding the illegal entry of immigrants, thus undermining central features of its political identity as a protector of national boundaries.*

Keywords: ***corruption, border protection, critical border studies, cash for visa scandal, securitization of migration, Poland***

Introduction

On October 1, 2023, opposition parties in Poland organized a huge anti-governmental march on the streets of Warsaw, which gathered between 600,000 and 800,000 protesters according to the most reliable estimates (Onet.PL 2023a). Some protesters were carrying banners with a variety of anti-governmental

slogans, among them a man pretending to be a street vendor who was selling Polish visas "cheaply" (see the picture in the appendix). He had his own caricatural market stall with the Polish visas, which was a clear reference to the "cash for visa scandal" that had erupted two weeks earlier, becoming a significant issue of the parliamentary election campaign. Exactly 20 days after the march, Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the coalition that governed Poland for eight years, met with his followers in the town of Spała to summarize reasons behind the electoral defeat of the Law and Justice party in the October 15 parliamentary elections.[1] Among several factors, he pointed to the "visa scandal," estimating that the scandal deprived the party of approximately 3–4% of votes (Rogoziński 2023). He made this claim despite the fact that when the corruption story first gained public attention in September, he had dismissed its importance, insisting that no scandal existed at all (Nizinkiewicz 2023). These two figures—the protester and the leader of the governing coalition that is about to lose power—demonstrate that the "cash for visa scandal" became a significant issue during the electoral campaign, resonating in the popular consciousness and influencing the dynamics of the election. Its importance derives from combining two broad governance problems of contemporary politics, usually considered two separate issues: protection of state borders and corruption.

This article builds on existing scholarship on border corruption; however, it develops the literature by focusing on the political significance of the problem and how it became an important issue within a power struggle between major contending parties. By employing the critical border studies perspective, with its non-territorial understanding of borders as constructions embedded in group identities (Newman 2003; Scott 2011), the study explores the 2023 scandal in Poland, which concerned corrupt issuance of visas that facilitated irregular border-crossing. The author is mainly interested in tracing intersections between politics, border protection, and corruption by addressing the following research questions:

1. What was the political context conducive to the corruption scandal?
2. What was the importance of the scandal in terms of its implications for the electoral campaign in Poland in 2023?

The main argument of the article is that in 2023 Poland witnessed a paradoxical situation wherein the nationalist-conservative government of the United Right used tough action and rhetoric in favor of protecting state borders against unwanted immigrants. At the same time, however, this government implemented institutional and discursive transformations which increased the risk of a cor-

1 It must be noted that the ruling party secured the highest number of votes in the 2023 elections (35.4 % as compared to 43.6% in the 2019 parliamentary elections); however, it did not have a coalition building capacity, thus shifting to opposition status.

ruption scandal regarding the illegal entry of immigrants into Polish territory. Thus, the government created an environment undermining central points of its political identity and its electoral message, in which protecting the border against immigrants depicted as a security threat was presented as part of its mission and strength.

The article has the following structure. First, a brief literature review on border corruption is presented by enumerating five "meeting points," which means research streams where borders and corruption are studied together. Next, Poland's position is put into a broader perspective, and the main theoretical assumptions are presented in order to elucidate a global and domestic context of the studied case. It is followed by the section concerning research design. The main part of the study starts with a brief description of the nature of the corrupt scheme established in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, commonly known as the "cash for visa scandal." Then, the institutional and discursive conditions that contributed to the scandal are outlined. Finally, the analysis focuses on the eruption of the scandal in the midst of the October 15 parliamentary elections and how it was framed by the political opposition and perceived by the general public. The article is then concluded.

Literature review: Looking for "meeting points" between border studies and corruption studies

In the 1990s, we saw a fast-growing interest in studying and tackling corruption as an issue of significance for social, economic, and political development (Mauro 2005; Myrdal 2005; Sampson 2010; Rothstein & Varraich 2017). At the same time, the borders and borderlands were discovered anew by social scientists (Eva 1994; Newman & Paasi 1998) as the phenomena substantially reshaped by globalization, international migrations, integration/disintegration processes, and the revitalization of national and ethnic identities (Scott 2011; Newman 2011). It should be pointed out that both raising academic focus on corruption and shifting towards border studies were sparked off by similar structural changes. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the next wave of democratization, and accelerated globalization created new conditions not only for corrupt practices, but also for exposing, debating, and measuring this phenomenon (Miller 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi & Heywood 2020). The same set of changes contributed to the redrawing the borders by newly independent states, the revival of old border disputes, the revitalization of national/ethnic boundaries, and the intensification of border crossings and cross-border cooperation (Forsberg 1995; Eskelinen, Liikanen & Scott 2012; Scott 2018). Despite similar conditions behind the flourishing of research on corruption and borders, these two fields of study remain largely disconnected, with studies of corruption rarely approaching border realities and border scholars remaining indifferent to corrupt phenomena.

This does not mean, however, that the two fields do not occasionally overlap. We can identify some "meeting points," which are research streams within which corruption and borders are studied together. For the sake of basic systematization, we can distinguish five such threads:

1. Research focusing on corruption among border guards and customs officers and possible anti-corruption measures. Within this stream, attention is paid to factors behind corruption risks, types of corruption, methods of combating it, and cross-border forms of anti-corruption cooperation (Michael & Moore 2009; Aromaa 2009; Dzhekova & Bezlov 2012; Jancsics 2019).
2. Research focusing on relations between corruption and human smuggling/trafficking in which border corruption is a crucial instrument facilitating an irregular flow of migrants. Within this stream, attention is paid to intersections between corruption and criminal networks operating across borders under the protection of corrupt agents. In this perspective, a variety of actors might be engaged in corruption, facilitating illegal border crossings and unauthorized stays in a given country: embassy and consulate officials, immigration officers, border guards, police, tourism and employment agencies, and transportation companies (Richards 2004; Nikolic-Restanovic 2004; Holmes 2009; Rusev 2013).
3. Research on borderland culture, in which corruption is considered an important part of the social landscape and the survival economy of border communities. Within this stream, corruption is an institutionalized part of everyday life; it is an earning strategy among locals living along the state border and for whom the border is not only a barrier, but also a source of income. Through this lens, the formal institutions of border control clash with the culture of informal connections, while corruption is approached from the point of view of the local circles practicing it (like smugglers) and defined as an integral part of the border landscape (Wiegand 1993; Galemba 2012; Suber 2024).
4. Research focusing on corruption in cross-border/international business transactions, in which corruption becomes internationalized in the form of multinational corporations or organize crime networks bribing foreign officials. Within this stream, corruption is not viewed as an instrument for "softening" border control, but rather as a consequence of the disappearance of borders in the era of globalization. The economic and political expansion across the borders is accompanied by corruption, which expanding actors use to strengthen their position in the borderless world (Johnston 1998; Baughn et al. 2010; Bahoo, Alon & Paltrinieri 2020).
5. Research focusing on the experiences and strategies of irregular migrants who might use corruption as a method of negotiating with law enforce-

ment officials staying within the borders of a given state. Within this optic, strongly embedded in critical border studies, the state borders are not only tangible lines on the fringes of the state territory but might also be experienced as internal state borders embodied by law enforcement officials with powers of exclusion. Consequently, the state border might "move" and can be reshaped by irregular migrants offering (or being extorted for) bribes upon detection and when facing the threat of deportation, thereby negotiating their inclusion within the state borders. Here, corruption becomes an instrument of reconstructing internal state borders (Vigneswaran et al. 2010; Garcés-Mascareñas 2015; Franck 2018).

There are two highly important conclusions when one looks at the "meeting points" above. Firstly, there is a scarcity of research on how corruption undermining border security resonates in the political system in terms of its impact on public debate, political competition, and electoral dynamics. This is rather surprising, particularly when one considers that contemporary political discourse on borders and migratory movements is increasingly framed through the lens of securitization (Deleixhe, Dembinska & Danero Iglesias 2019). Secondly, the state border is not only reduced to a tangible, physical line demarcating two states, but it might also exist as an internal border in the country of origin and country of destination, represented by the officials controlling borders. We can call them border gatekeepers, meaning those with powers and resources that allow them to control (and thereby facilitate) border crossings at different stages of migration (in the country of origin, when crossing the physically demarcated border and in the country of destination). Such an understanding of a border implies that the processes of irregular migration and irregular border crossings might be facilitated by corruption already in the country of origin, involving border gatekeepers representing the country of destination, such as consuls or other employees of embassies. These corrupt practices aim to establish apparent eligibility, for example, by purchasing visas, speeding up their issuance, or obtaining other documents, such as confirmation of employment or school enrollment in the country of destination, that entitle one to apply for a visa and subsequently enter the country. From this perspective, visa-related corruption, as examined in this article, enables irregular migration and border crossing by undermining the border regime within which states nowadays externalize and internalize border control to encompass the entire migratory process (Menjívar 2014). The second conclusion makes the critical border studies perspective, which will be elaborated further, particularly useful as a theoretical background for the case under study. When borders are understood as flexible social constructions resulting from the bordering process (Parker & Vaughan-Williams 2009), the idea of border protection goes beyond territorial boundaries of the state and reveals its multidimensional meaning as

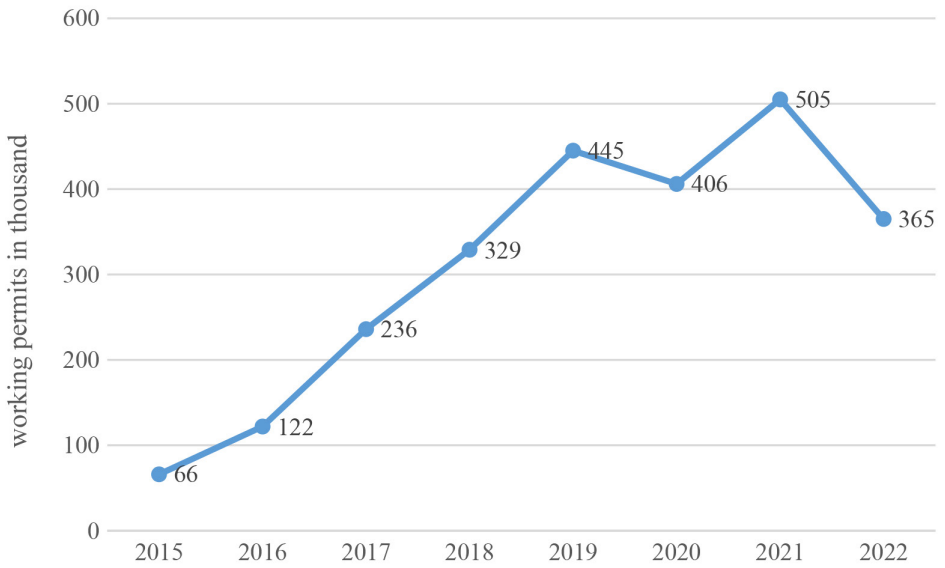
defense of various non-territorial boundaries, such as cultural, religious, and national ones. This offers a new interpretative frame for visa-related corruption.

Putting Poland into the wider context: Globalization, immigration, and protecting non-territorial borders

There is an ongoing academic debate on relations between globalization and state sovereignty, within which international migrations are treated as one of the main global processes affecting state sovereignty. It is argued that the internationalization of the economy accompanied by the growing mobility of people and the emergence of an international human rights regime puts pressure on nation-states to liberalize their border regimes (Sassen 1996; Castles 2002). The result is a decline of state sovereignty indicated by limiting the state's capacity to control its own borders (Guiraudon & Lahav 2000; Dauvergne 2004). However, scholars argue that despite the pressure of global forces, the nation-state still maintains its effective control over its borders and migratory flows and has even greater powers to control entrance into its territory (Freeman 1995; Joppke 1998; Mitsilegas 2012). This does not suggest that global economic pressures and international regimes are irrelevant or without constraint; rather, it highlights the importance of examining how individual nation-states interpret and respond to those pressures.

Poland, especially since its accession to the EU in 2004, might be an illustrative example of a country experiencing the tension between global pressures and historically grounded striving for sovereignty, with effective border control being its embodiment. On the one hand, the country needs to be open to the global flows of migration and normative expectations of the international community, but on the other, there are segments of the society becoming anxious about losing effective control over Polish territory, its borders, and migration inflow. This tension is reflected in the contradictory motives of border and migration management. The accession of Poland to the EU and its economic growth made it an attractive labor market (but also a transit country) for foreigners from around the world, who were ready to invest time and money to get to Poland. From the Polish perspective, population decline, an ageing population, and domestic labor shortages had to be compensated by inviting labor immigrants, which was clearly articulated in the two governmental documents concerning migration and development (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Poland 2012; Council of Ministers of Poland 2017). As a result, Poland, for years a country of emigration, has become a country of both emigration and immigration (see figure 1), with the influx of immigrants accelerating particularly in 2014 and 2022 because of economic and political immigration from Ukraine (Gul-Rechlewicz 2023). Although Ukrainians constituted the biggest share of this influx, Poland also opened its labor market to immigrants from Asia and Africa (Józefiak 2023).

Figure 1: Number of work permits issued in Poland for non-EU citizens between 2015 and 2022



Source: Author's own elaboration based on: (Ministry of Family and Social Policy 2023).

However, this opening was accompanied by the deliberate politicization of the immigration issue, when the so-called "immigration crisis" of 2015 in Europe overlapped with the October 2015 parliamentary elections. Before 2015, the immigration policy was not politicized, and we can speak of an "administrative-managerial" approach towards immigrants (Łoziński & Szonert 2023). However, the electoral success of the national-conservative United Right utilizing anti-immigrant rhetoric showed that framing those from the Middle East and Africa as a security threat might be an effective instrument of fear management and political mobilization (Cywiński, Katner & Ziółkowski 2019). Thus, immigration in Poland has undergone increasing securitization since 2015, going from an economic and social issue to be managed to a security threat to be dealt with (Buzan, Wæver & De Wilde 1998). This was further incentivized (and justified to many Poles) by the 2021 developments along the Polish-Belarusian border, when the Belarusian regime started weaponizing immigrants to destabilize Poland and the external border of the EU. Thus, Poland's border management in 2023 was characterized by contradictory motives. While global pressures and domestic labor needs resulted in opening its borders for immigrants, Poland simultaneously struggled for effective control of the eastern border and depicted immigrants from "culturally distant" countries as a security threat.

However, for better elucidation of how relations between border protection and securitizing immigrants resonated in the public discourse, we must go beyond the meaning of borders as the spatial edges of the state's territory. The view expressed by David Newman, that the agenda for border research should go "beyond its traditional territorial sense to include the many other notions of border which enclose groups and identities" (Newman 2003: 22), seems to be a promising approach to grasping these relations. In particular, the concept of bordering, understood as the "everyday construction of borders through ideology, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and agency" (Scott 2011: 134) corresponds well with developments in Poland between 2015 and 2023. Over that period, Polish society witnessed systematic actions that were steered from above and aimed at strengthening ethnic-based national unity, while articulated the significance of invisible cultural, religious, and economic boundaries (Krzyżanowski 2020). The rhetoric of border protection against unwanted immigrants simultaneously presented them as a threat to the moral and cultural order (Adamczyk 2019). In this context, the non-territorial meaning of borders shows its analytical usefulness, because it reveals that the protection of state borders might resonate in different ways within public discourse. Consequently, the border protection under the United Right government was characterized by the co-existence of the territorial and non-territorial meanings of the word, with effective protection of the territorial border being a primary guarantee for securing the non-territorial borders of the Polish nation.

From this perspective, the territorial state borders are protected not only to ensure territorial integrity and the physical safety of "our women and children," these borders must also be protected to safeguard Polish cultural borders and "our way of life," against the intrusion of strangers. Subsequently, the religious boundaries must also be preserved, mainly the dominant Roman-Catholic religion as a backbone of the Polish nationhood. The myth of Poland as a "bulwark of Christianity" allows one to expand this line of thinking further, when protection of the Polish state borders becomes a guarantee for preserving the religious boundaries of all of Western Europe. Lastly, the economic prosperity and welfare will be better protected if strangers do not enter the confines of the Polish welfare system. Through these lenses, we can see that a tangible, territorial border is very close to the intangible ones embedded in the group identities. Most importantly, however, we can interpret the United Right's rhetoric and actions aimed at border protection as a form of identity protection and building its political brand in this field.

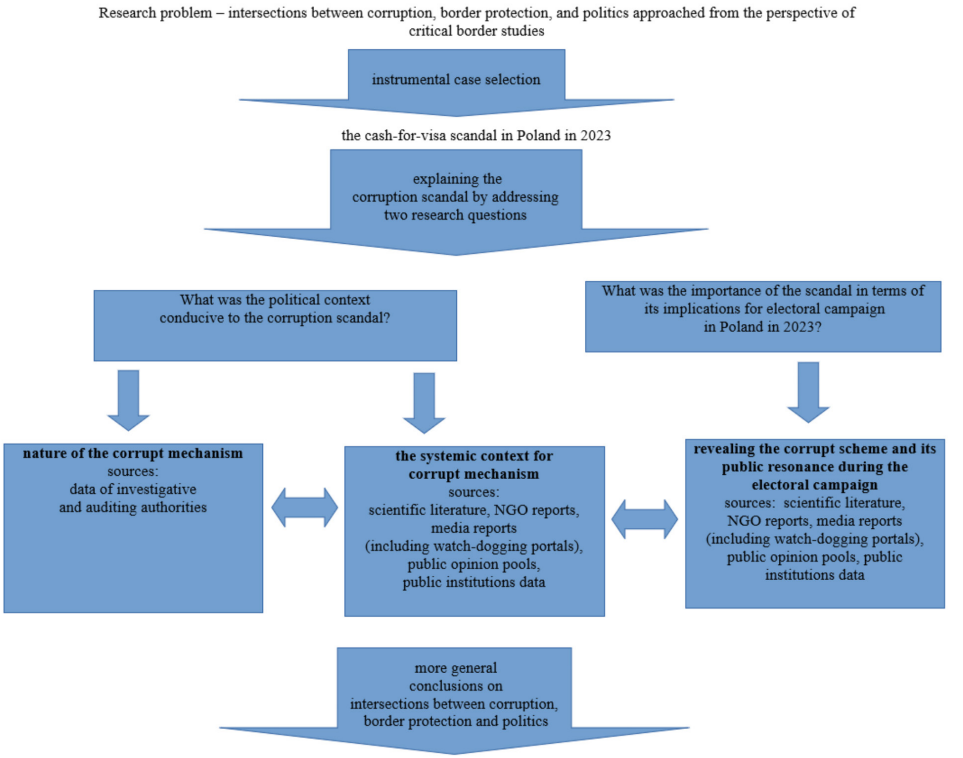
Research design

The presented research employs the case study method, which is generally acknowledged as a qualitative investigation relying on various sources that refer to a single case or multiple cases (Yin 2009). It is especially useful when the phenomenon of interest is developing in a complex, single setting, the research area is poorly explored, and a holistic picture is needed (Eisenhardt 1989; Ebneyamini & Moghadam 2018). Thus, it seems to be suitable for studying complicated relations between corruption and border protection as a highly relevant political issue. It must be noted that research on corruption is generally challenging because of the hidden nature of the phenomenon, which makes it difficult to access systematic data for specific sectors and creates difficulties with measurement compounded by contending definitions of corruption in public discourse (Mungiu-Pippidi & Fazekas 2020). Therefore, studying a single case where corruption has already been revealed to the general public provides an advantage of richer details and the ability to explore corrupt mechanisms in their cultural and institutional contexts (De Graaf & Huberts 2008). Among various types of case studies, this one corresponds with what Robert Stake called an instrumental case study, in which the case is selected and explored not only because of its intrinsic features, but because it might be useful (instrumental) "to understand something else" (1995: 3), meaning the more general problem of intersections between corruption, border protection, and politics. However, it is also close to the explanatory type, because it tries to explain why and how a specific phenomenon occurred, and only after that can a more general problem be tackled (Yin 2009).

The instrumental dimension was the primary starting point behind selecting the case. There are two main reasons why the "cash for visa scandal" is suitable as an instrumental case. Firstly, it is rather unique among various corruption scandals that occurred in Poland, because it refers to the corruption of the border regime revealed to the general public in the heyday of parliamentary elections.[2] This creates an opportunity to study how corruption of the border regime resonates in electoral politics. Secondly, it is suitable to demonstrate challenging contradictions faced by contemporary states when the need for openness for global forces is confronted with the necessity to maintain effective control over their own borders, which might be undermined by the decline of governance standards.

2 This is not to say that there were no cases of border corruption before, including corruption of the visa issuance. In 2012, journalists reported about irregularities concerning visa issuance in the Polish consulate in Łuck, western Ukraine. Soon, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs started an audit, which confirmed irregularities and resulted in the dismissal of all those consuls responsible for visa issuance in Łuck. However, that case never reached public attention like the case from 2023 (Wierzchołowski & Misiak 2012).

Figure 2: The scheme describing the research design



Source: Author's own elaboration.

The analysis covers the years 2015–2023, with special attention paid to September/October 2023 when the scandal broke and unfolded. The study is based on secondary data referring to the three intertwined dimensions distinguished on the basis of the two research questions (see Figure 2). So the boundary of the case goes beyond the mechanism of corruption, also covering its systemic context and public resonance during the elections. Thus, the study relies on various types of secondary sources, which should ensure deeper within-case analysis and its three dimensions. It is assumed that the mechanism of corruption would be better described by using data from investigative and auditing authorities, while the systemic context and public resonance demand inclusion of differentiated sources touching upon institutional, discursive, and attitudinal aspects of the scandal.

A brief explanation must be provided on some of the sources used. Firstly, the most crucial source for describing the corrupt mechanism in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are public releases from the Prosecutor's Office, supplemented by the audit report from the Supreme Audit Office. As will be demonstrated

further, there were serious and well-founded concerns about the impartiality of the prosecutorial authorities during the United Right's time in power. When the scandal erupted, the Prosecutor's Office announced a few hundred cases of visa issuance under investigation (Prosecutor's Office 2023), briefly specifying the number on its official Twitter account as 268 cases (Łuniewska 2023). This number was treated with an open distrust by media and opposition; however, after the change of government in 2023 and appointing a new minister of justice/prosecutor general, the number of investigated cases turned out to be 358, taken from the list of 607 names delivered informally to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Prosecutor's Office 2024). This shows that the very essence of the corrupt mechanism and the number of visas that might have been issued corruptly were identified in quite a similar manner by prosecutors under both governments, allowing the author to use this data as a reliable source for reconstruction.

Secondly, a significant number of sources comes from the media. Several factors account for this. It was impossible to avoid referring to journalistic sources, as journalists had exposed the irregularities to the general public and subsequently reported on the issue, thereby shaping public discourse. Additionally, the media not only covered the developments concerning the corrupt scheme and reactions from the political class, but also commissioned public opinion polls regarding the "cash for visa scandal" and voters' political attitudes. Media reports were the only available source of information on that matter, as the polling centers did not make their results available. Last but not least, free media engaged in investigative journalism constitutes important and legitimate sources of information for those studying corruption, though it also obviously has its drawbacks. It must be noted that the selected media sources represent well-known, opinion-forming media outlets and watchdog portals. According to the Polish Institute of Media Monitoring in September 2023, media outlets like "Onet.PL," "Rzeczpospolita," and "WP.Pl"—quite frequently used in this study—belonged to the top five opinion-forming media outlets (Institute of Media Monitoring 2023), and are thus a legitimate source of information and insight into the public debate.

However, the study has its limitations. The first is the problem of generalizing findings, which is typical for case studies, as pointed out by Robert Stake, who noted that "the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization" (1995: 8). Although this analysis aims to make a theoretical contribution, we must remember that single-case studies (contrary to multiple case studies) have serious limitations in finding general patterns. The second is that it is based only on secondary data. The primary data, mainly interviews, could provide valuable insight into the studied case; however, it must be noted that recruiting respondents to inquire on such a sensitive issue might be challenging. Finally, the qualitative analysis is usually characterized by an emphasis on interpreta-

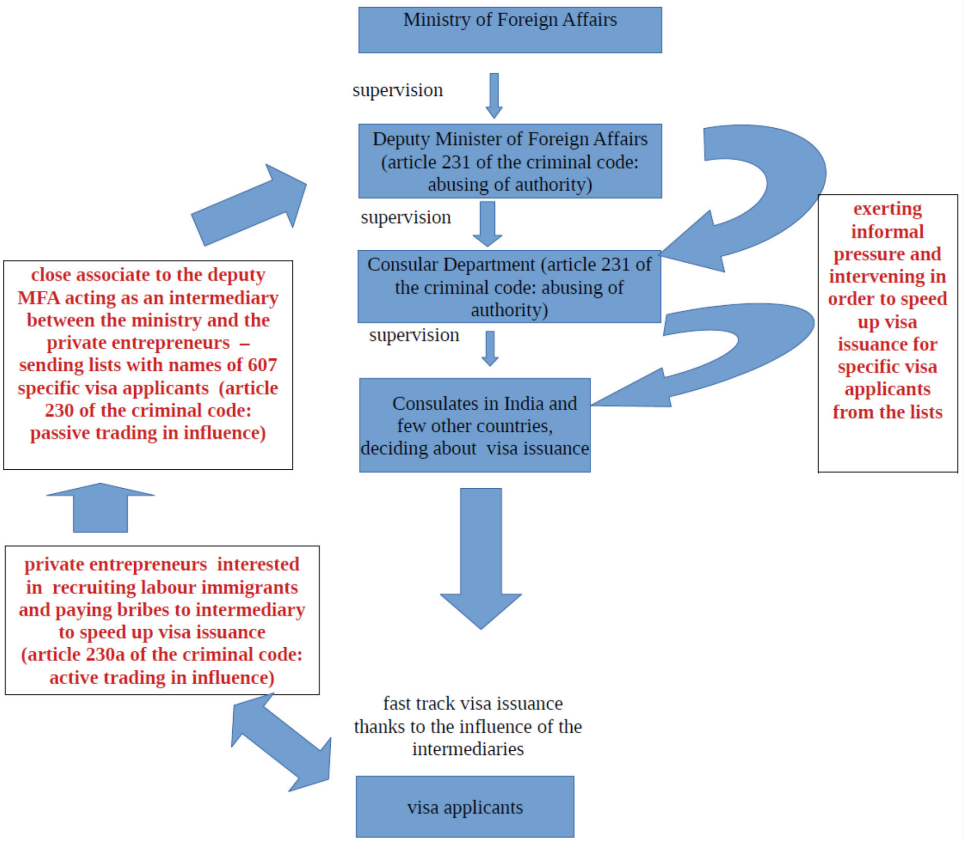
tion, which creates a risk of distortion in providing a full and comprehensive picture of the studied case. The author tried to reduce that by cross-checking various types of secondary sources and providing, when necessary, additional stipulations.

The nature of the corrupt mechanism in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The common term "cash for visa scandal" refers to the corrupt mechanism that was established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2022, which allowed for the favorable treatment of selected visa applicants waiting for the consulates to examine their applications. The prosecutor's office started an investigation on possible corruption as early as March 2023, and the deputy MFA responsible for the consular matters was dismissed on August 31, 2023, officially on the grounds of "unsatisfactory cooperation" with the prime minister. However, September 14 was when the main wrongdoings were exposed by investigative material published by the portal "Onet.Pl" (Stankiewicz 2023a). The unfolding of the scandal was accompanied by a growing body of information being revealed, which allows us to reconstruct the essence of a corrupt scheme that germinated within the MFA. As we are less interested in the corrupt mechanism itself and more in the environment conducive to the scandal, together with its political implications, this is the most rudimentary description of the corrupt mechanism (visualized in Figure 3). It must be stipulated that the final reports published by the Supreme Audit Office (Supreme Audit Office 2024) and the Parliamentary Investigative Commission (Sejm of the Republic of Poland 2024) reveal a much more complicated picture, which also includes additional strands of investigation like the special treatment of one of the private recruitment agencies, legislative works on visa policy, and fast track visa issuance within the "Poland. Business Harbour Programme."

The essence of the corrupt scheme depended on intermediation by third parties between visa applicants on the ground and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The central figure within the scheme was a close associate of the deputy MFA (not employed in the MFA), who used his connection with the deputy to send him lists with a total of 607 names of those whose visas should be issued faster. The deputy responsible for consular matters then exerted informal pressure on consuls through the Consular Department, prompting them to give special treatment to specific applicants. According to the prosecutor's office, the scheme operated between February 2022 and May 2023, resulting in the issuance of visas to 358 people from the lists. The intermediary (charged with passive trading in influence) received approximately PLN 500,000 (approximately EUR 120,000) in bribes from six private entrepreneurs and consultants interested in recruiting labor immigrants (charged with active trading in influence), from

Figure 3: Visualization of the corrupt scheme in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between February 2022 and May 2023



Source: Author's own elaboration based on: (Prosecutor's Office 2024; Prosecutor's Office 2025; Supreme Audit Office 2024).

countries like India, Taiwan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar (Prosecutor's Office 2024).[3] The deputy MFA was arrested by the Central Anti-corruption Bureau in January 2024 (on charges of abuse of authority), just after the new government was established, but he pleaded not guilty. In April 2025, the director of the Consular Department and her deputy heard similar charges pleading not guilty. Altogether, 11 people directly connected with the scheme were charged in the investigation, including three employees of the MFA (Prosecutor's Office 2025).

3 According to Polish law, a visa application might be submitted to the Polish consulate in the applicant's country of citizenship or legal stay. This means, for example, that an immigrant from Bangladesh staying legally in Qatar might apply there for the Polish visa.

Setting the scene: Institutional and discursive environment of the "cash-for- visa scandal"

After the coalition of three parties, known as the United Right, had formed a government in November 2015, a series of institutional and discursive transformations were introduced, which gradually created an environment that increased the risk of a corruption scandal. Use of the term "institutional environment" means formal and informal rules determining governance processes, while the discursive environment refers to the main issues articulated and communicated by the governing coalition before and during the electoral campaign of 2023, together with accompanying slogans/narratives.

The most important feature of institutional transformation which increased the risk of corruption was the systematic dismantling of the anti-corruption safeguards in the political system, accompanied by lowering professional standards and supervision in the MFA. The list of changes might be long here, but a few of them seem to be the most important. Since 2015, we have seen a concentration of legislative and executive power—the latter at both the presidential and governmental levels—in the hands of one governing coalition with the hegemonic position of the Law and Justice party. This later appeared to be detrimental to the separation of power, especially the controlling function of parliament, because the parliamentary majority changed the parliament's regulations and the Act on holding the positions of deputy and senator. As a result, stricter penalties could be imposed on opposition MPs, and their ability to ask the ministers questions or to submit formal motions was limited. Because of limited parliamentary control and lack of presidential veto, many controversial laws—some of them unconstitutional—could be enacted by the parliamentary majority (Makowski 2020). These laws further reshaped crucial institutions of the accountability system like the constitutional tribunal, the public prosecutor's office, juridical authorities, and the civil service.

As early as November 19, 2015, the new parliamentary majority amended the Act on Constitutional Tribunal. Together with other measures, this amendment facilitated the gradual replacement of Constitutional Tribunal judges with those appointed by the new governing coalition. These measures included the refusal to recognize five judges elected by the previous majority and the president's refusal to administer the oath of office to them, while instead administering the oath to five judges elected by the new majority (Kłos 2024). As a result, the constitutional review of the laws enacted and the check on arbitrary power were dismantled, paving the way for other unconstitutional acts (Sadurski 2018). On January 28, 2016, the new Act on the Public Prosecutor's office was adopted, which overhauled the architecture of prosecutorial authorities in Poland by combining the position of the minister of justice with the prosecutor general, thus undermining the political independence of the general prosecutor, who became

an active politician (and MP). This was accompanied by giving discretionary power to the organ to intervene in specific investigations conducted by rank-and-file prosecutors, giving orders regarding specific cases, transferring cases between prosecutors, and revoking decisions made by them. Subsequently, a series of reforms in the juridical system, introduced through three laws adopted in 2017 concerning the National Council of Judiciary, the Supreme Court, and Common Courts, gave the legislative and executive branches of power greater control over appointing judges and the everyday functioning of the common courts, thus undermining the principle of juridical independence (Ibid).

It is also worth adding that the December 15, 2015 amendment to the Act on Civil Service changed the criteria for recruitment to the top administrative positions in the civil service (i.e., general directors and departmental directors—approximately 1,500 positions). The new criteria replaced open, contest-based recruitment with discretionary appointment, opening the legal path for the spoils system (Kopińska 2018). The Central Anti-Corruption Bureau, which has been accused of partisanship since its inception in 2006, not only failed to initiate investigations into a variety of irregularities identified by the opposition and journalists, but also purchased the Pegasus spyware, later used to surveil journalists, lawyers, and monitor members of the political opposition (Makowski 2023). Last but not least, media freedom plummeted, with the public media becoming an instrument of pro-governmental propaganda and the governmental gaining control over the most important regional daily newspapers in 2021 through the state-owned energy company PKN Orlen (Media Freedom Rapid Response 2023). The result of all these changes was reflected in the 2023 assessment of the Polish state's resilience to abuse of power, which showed significant flaws in the five anti-corruption pillars under examination (Makowski, Materska-Sosnowska & Marczewski 2024).

At this point, it should be recalled that the prosecutorial authorities, together with the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau, began an investigation into corruption in the MFA as early as March 2023. However, at that time none of the officials from the ministry were charged, despite the arrest of a close associate of the deputy MFA, who was a central figure in the mechanism and whose mobile-phone data revealed that he had sent the lists of 607 visa applicants to the deputy (Sejm of the Republic of Poland 2024: 160). The deputy himself (also an MP protected by immunity at that time) was dismissed on August 31, on the grounds of "unsatisfactory cooperation" with the prime minister. Only after journalists revealed that the dismissal might be connected with corruption in the Consular Department (Wroński & Czuchnowski 2023) did the public learn about the irregularities. The opposition and journalists investigating the case interpreted that as an attempt to hush up the wrongdoings of the public officials and openly questioned the impartiality of the institutions involved in the investigation (Stankiewicz 2023a). The three officials from the MFA were

charged in 2024, only after the new government and the new minister of justice had been appointed. Thus, one of the justifications behind establishing the parliamentary investigative commission to scrutinize the case was the "passivity of the public organs and institutions accompanied by a lack of reactions to signals concerning the irregularities" (Sejm of the Republic of Poland 2024: 6). The commission concluded its proceedings in December 2024 and published a report from the investigation, which pointed out the negligence of duties and the irregularities in the investigation conducted by the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Prosecutor's Office (Ibid: 48–49; 158–195).

Aside from the accountability mechanisms at the state-wide level, we can point to further institutional changes that undermined professional standards and supervision in the MFA, thus increasing the risks of irregularities. In 2016, the government liquidated the Polish Institute of Diplomacy, which was a training center for future diplomats, despite positive recommendations for maintaining its operation from auditing bodies (Pankowska 2021a). In 2021, the new Act on Foreign Service was adopted, replacing the previous Act of 2001 and changing the model of Polish foreign service. The new act was criticized by the trade union of employees of the foreign service, who referred to the anonymous survey conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 among those working in the MFA. The survey showed that two-thirds of them had considered leaving their office due to discrimination, lack of respect from superiors, and low salaries (Pankowska 2021b). The act lowered the merit-based requirements for entry into the diplomatic service, officially on the grounds of opening it up to candidates from outside the diplomatic establishment. For example, the position of ambassador became a purely political appointment following the elimination of professional requirements for the job, such as a master's degree, command of two foreign languages, and passing the diplomatic-consular exams. Additionally, the new office of the Head of Foreign Service was established and equipped with broad responsibilities like human resources management, organization of training, and heading the Diplomatic Academy. However, it was enough to have three years of management experience in a "position connected with international relations" to meet the necessary requirements for this top office, responsible for the professional qualifications of the country's diplomats (Pankowska 2021a). The result was the transformation of the MFA into another source of the governing party's patronage and its instrument of power consolidation, instead of professional foreign policy-making (Kuźniar 2023). Former diplomats commenting on these changes pointed to building a system based on total loyalty towards the ministry's leadership equipped with discretionary power over appointments and dismissals, while expertise in foreign service was devalued (Pankowska 2021a). The parliamentary elections of 2023 worsened the situation, showing that the MFA was affected by the short-term cycle of electoral gains. Journalists, referring to the anonymous sources working in the

MFA, described its poor management. The head of the ministry rarely visited his workplace, partly because of health problems. More significantly, however, the minister and his deputies were candidates in the parliamentary elections, further diverting their attention from their ministerial duties. The supervision suffered because of the leadership's engagement in its own electoral campaigns. There was a general feeling of decay among officials of the ministry and an incapacity to make important decisions, like appointing ambassadors for important diplomatic posts (Gajcy 2023). This view was later confirmed by the Supreme Audit Office, which investigated the quality of the supervisory function over the consular activity between 2018 and 2023, including visa issuance. The audit found that the supervisory competences ceded to the deputy minister did not have proper legal grounds, and the consulates facing migration pressures were not sufficiently staffed, managed, and organized; meanwhile, the visa issuance process was improvised, inefficient, and protracted, with inadequate reporting. The audit report concluded that in the MFA there was a "non-transparent and corruption-prone mechanism for influencing certain Polish consuls to expedite the processing of visa applications and secure favorable visa procedure decisions" (Supreme Audit Office 2024: 8).

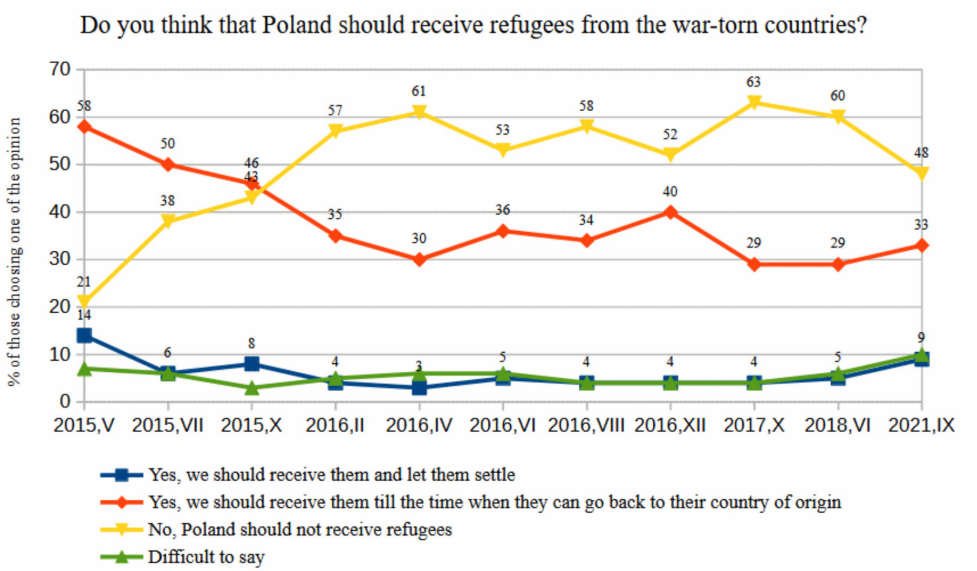
This picture of the institutional environment must also take into account the lack of a cohesive migration policy strategy capable of effectively and efficiently managing rapidly growing migration pressures (Sejm of the Republic of Poland 2024). In 2016, the government annulled the migration strategy inherited from the predecessors arguing that there was a need for reformulating migration policy in the context of new challenges. However, work over the new strategy failed, with some experts describing it as a "garbage policy," characterized by a lack of compromise on the main priorities, the absence of one leading institution, and a lack of clear rules of cooperation between governmental agencies involved in developing the program (Łoziński & Szonert 2023: 7). The transformation of the institutional environment was accompanied and reinforced by discursive conditions. Since 2015, the governing coalition has been injecting the importance of protecting the national border and territory against immigration threats into public discourse and collective awareness; at the same time it has been portraying itself as the only dependable defender of Polish borders, sovereignty, and national culture. The parliamentary elections of 2015 saw an immigration issue politicized as never before (Hutter & Kries 2022), leading to the victory of the United Right. Subsequently, a study published by the Stefan Batory Foundation concluded that the fear-management politics directed against the immigrants from the Middle East and Africa was strategically employed by the governing elite, harnessing highly partisan public media (Cywiński, Katner & Ziółkowski 2019). The United Right opposed the scheme of relocation adopted by the EU and rejected obligations of the pre-2015 government to receive approximately 7,000 refugees on the grounds of

protection against crime, terrorism, and threats to the domestic cultural order (Adamczyk 2019). One of the four pillars of the Polish National Security Strategy, adopted in 2020, was a strengthening of the national identity and protection of the national heritage, embedded in the "Christian legacy and universal values" (National Security Bureau 2020: 28).

The 2020–2021 migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border created further opportunities to reinforce that discourse. The study of the government-controlled media covering the crisis found that the immigrants were systematically framed as terrorists, criminals, and barbarians who are a threat to the Christian civilization (Jas-Koziarkiewicz 2023). One of the most indicative examples of this occurred at a press conference organized by the ministers of defense and internal affairs in September 2021. During the meeting, a photo depicting a zoophile act was presented as having been found on the mobile phone of a migrant detained on the border. The ministers insinuated that the owner of the mobile phone was the creator of the photo and a zoophile, while the government-controlled television claimed that the zoophile wanted to enter Poland. A fact-checking portal later found that the photo was a screenshot from an old video circulating online (Sitnicka 2021). In 2021, the government militarized the borderland area by introducing a state of emergency and building the 180-kilometer-long fence on the Polish-Belarusian border, with 57% of surveyed Poles supporting the fencing (Rzeczpospolita 2021). The importance of protecting Polish territory against immigrants was once again articulated in the referendum, held on the day of the parliamentary election in 2023, with two out of the four questions referring to the border fence and acceptance of "illegal immigrants" from the Middle East and Africa. The questions were biased and corresponded with the main election slogans of the governing parties (Musiał-Karg & Casal Bértoa 2023).[4] These narratives and actions had a profound influence on social attitudes, as demonstrated by Figure 4. Between 2015 and 2016, the proportion of those against accepting refugees increased from 21% to 61%. When asked specifically about refugees from the Middle East and Africa, Poles expressed even more negative attitudes, with the level of opposition varying according to party affiliation. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that opposition was highest among supporters of the governing parties (see Figure 5), indicating their sensitivity to the issue.

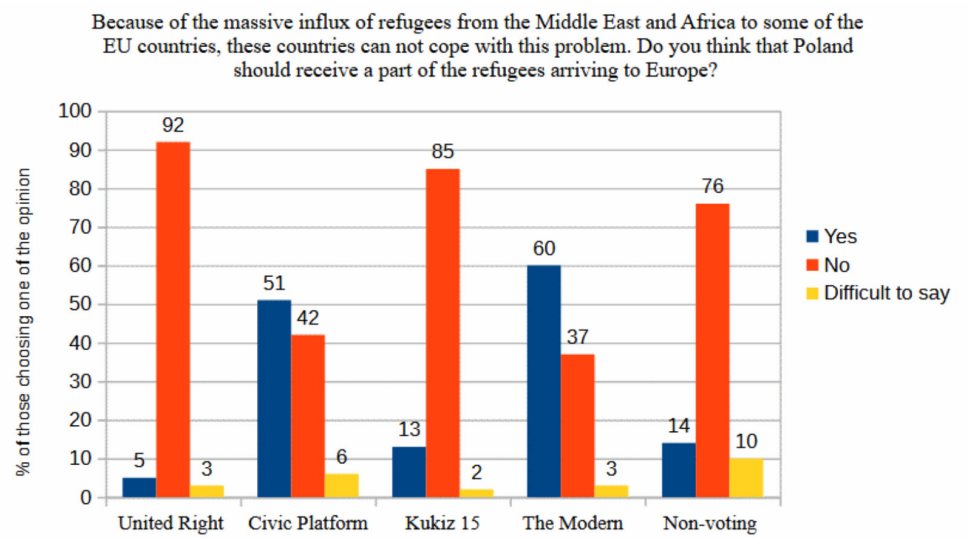
4 The two questions were as followed: Do you support the liquidation of the barrier on the border between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus? Do you support the reception of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, in accordance with the compulsory relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy?

Figure 4: Changes of attitudes towards receiving refugees among Poles between 2015 and 2021



Source: Author's own elaboration based on: (CBOS 2021).

Figure 5: Acceptance of refugees from the Middle East and Africa as for June 2018 according to different electorates



Source: Author's own elaboration based on (CBOS 2018).

The institutional and discursive environment outlined above was conducive to the cash-for-visa scandal not only because of the systematic dismantling of anti-corruption safeguards and the absence of well-designed migration governance, but also owing to the elevation of border protection into one of the top values and issues on the public agenda. The protection of borders against unwanted immigrants was framed in wider terms of protecting the cultural and religious identity of Poles, thus becoming an issue of national survival monopolized and exploited by the national-conservative government, with growing (and facilitated) support of broader sections of Polish society. Since 2015, this has become a brand and an integral part of the political identity of the United Right, professing ideas of national homogeneity embedded in Catholicism (Folvarčny & Kopeček 2020), while at the same time portraying the opposition as those who succumbed to the EU "dictate" by agreeing to the relocation of Syrian immigrants before 2015. Thus, the weakening of anti-corruption safeguards overlapped with a growing political sensitivity of border/migration management; both environments were engineered by the government and unexpectedly backfired in September 2023.

Cash-for-visa scandal in the context of the October 15, 2023 parliamentary elections

If we trace interest in the phrase *afera wizowa* (visa scandal) in Poland as measured by Google Trends, we see that the scandal attracted the biggest attention in the four weeks preceding election day (see the timeline in the appendix). The corrupt scheme in the MFA had been making headlines since September 14 thanks to investigative journalists;[5] however, it was the political opposition that quickly harnessed it into its election campaign as proof of the government's lack of credibility in the field of border protection. The corrupt mechanism occurred in the field of high political sensitivity, undermining values and promises that were central to the ruling coalition's identity: protection of Polishness by effective control over immigration. This gave the political opposition very handy "ammunition" to aim towards the governing party on its own battlefield, traditionally reserved and politically viable for national-conservative parties. A study of 202 electoral ads posted by the main political parties on YouTube channels showed that 54 of the ads related to different forms of threats faced by Poland, with the immigration threat featuring as the central topic in 34 ads. The Law and Justice Party posted 17 such ads, while the main opposition party, the Civic Coalition, posted 11, predominantly referring to the visa scandal (Sobera 2024). As early as September 14, the then leader of the opposition, Donald Tusk, held

5 The media reported on possible irregularities in the MFA already after the dismissal of the deputy of the MFA on August 31, but the critical juncture was the September 14 investigative report.

a press conference at which he commented on the media report, referring to the issuance of about 250,000 visas to citizens of Africa and Asia over a period of 30 months as "the biggest scandal in Poland in the 21st century." He also challenged the top five public officials responsible for the "security of borders, our territory, citizens, and foreign policy" with five questions regarding the corrupt scheme (Wieczorek 2023). The corruption was framed as something wrong not because public officials misused power, but because it allegedly allowed for the uncontrolled entrance of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Africa and Asia, now portrayed by the opposition leader as a security concern. Thus, the securitization of immigration was followed by securitization of corruption. At the same time, the governing coalition sought to dismiss the accusations by downplaying the scale of corruption and portraying the scheme as one devised by private individuals without connections to the governing party. The fact that the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Prosecutor's Office started an investigation over the case as early as March was presented as proof that the state apparatus had reacted correctly (Stelmach 2023). However, as already described, the credibility of these institutions was commonly questioned, thus the opposition disputed the reliability and the impartiality of the investigation.

One of the most prominent examples of challenging the government was a 4.5-minute televised address to the nation by the Speaker of Senate, who on September 15 devoted his entire speech to the scandal. It is meaningful because it combines the most important narratives circulating among the opposition seeking to undermine the government's credibility. It was also broadcast via government-controlled TV, which at that time lacked any content exposing the wrongdoings of the ruling coalition. As the opposition had a narrow majority in the Senate, they appointed its Speaker, who by law had a right to address the nation during the parliamentary elections. He informed the audience that "Polish visas, the documents entitling one to enter the territory of our country, were sold on the market stalls in the countries of Africa and Asia" (Senate of Poland 2023). The main point he made connected the whole government with the corrupt scheme by repeating the five questions previously asked by the opposition's leader and the number of visas issued:

> The top state officials organized a transfer of people to Poland on a massive scale. As reported by media, over 250 thousand working visas were issued to the citizens of African and Asian countries, including Muslim countries, in the last 30 months. The visas for which proper people had to be bribed. (Ibid)[6]

6 The number is based on the data from the MFA. According to the MFA in the period of 2.5 years (2021, 2022, and the first half of 2023), there were 1.95 million visas issued, including 250,000 for citizens of African and Asian countries. However, there was no proof that all these visas were issued in exchange for bribes. The journalists who exposed the scheme wrote about a few

The security threats, including terrorism, were also clearly articulated to indicate that the risks might affect the whole EU area: "The transfer of people occurred with virtually no oversight, raising the risk that hundreds of individuals recognised as terrorists could have entered EU territory, posing a threat to our security" (Ibid). As the corruption scheme also affected the external borders of the EU, the scandal was debated later in the European Parliament under the title "Corrupt large-scale sale of Schengen visas," which further elevated its magnitude and public visibility (European Parliament 2023).

In order to get deeper into the political salience of the scandal, we can trace various public opinion polls, which at that time heavily covered the issue. The survey from September 21 showed that 76% of respondents had heard about the corruption scandal. This percentage was highest among voters of the Civic Coalition (89%), but it was also quite high among voters of the Law and Justice Party (79%) (Onet.Pl 2023b). However, the perceived influence of the scandal on the electoral score of Law and Justice, which was measured by two very similar surveys conducted just after the scandal erupted, presented a more nuanced picture (Table 1).

Table 1: Perceived impact of the scandal on the future electoral result of the ruling party as for September 15–17, 2023 (questions from the two public opinion pools compared)

Will the visa scandal have or have not an influence on the electoral score of the Law and Justice? (September 15–17, 2023 by the United Surveys).		**In your opinion do you think that the so-called visa scandal will be harmful for the Law and Justice in the upcoming elections? (September 15–16, 2023 by IBRIS)**	
Yes, it will lower the score	30.4 %	Definitely yes + Rather yes	10.8 % + 20.2 % (31%)
No, it will not have any influence on the score	37.7%	Rather no + Definitely no	16.1% +23.6 (39,7%)
I have not heard about the case	24.1%	I have not heard about the case	21.4 %
Do not know/Hard to say	7.7%	Do not know/Hard to say	7.9%

Source: Author's own elaboration based on: (Nycz 2023; Rzeczpospolita 2023).

The majority of respondents (average 39%) did not believe that the governing party would suffer, but there was still a significant share of those believed its impact would be harmful (approx. average 30 %). On September 26, respondents were asked "who takes the main burden of responsibility for the visa scandal?" with 48.6% placing the responsibility on the whole governing coalition. The responsibility attribution looked different among voters of the governing

hundred cases and the prosecutor's office, under the new government formed by the previous opposition, reports about 358 cases (Słowik 2023).

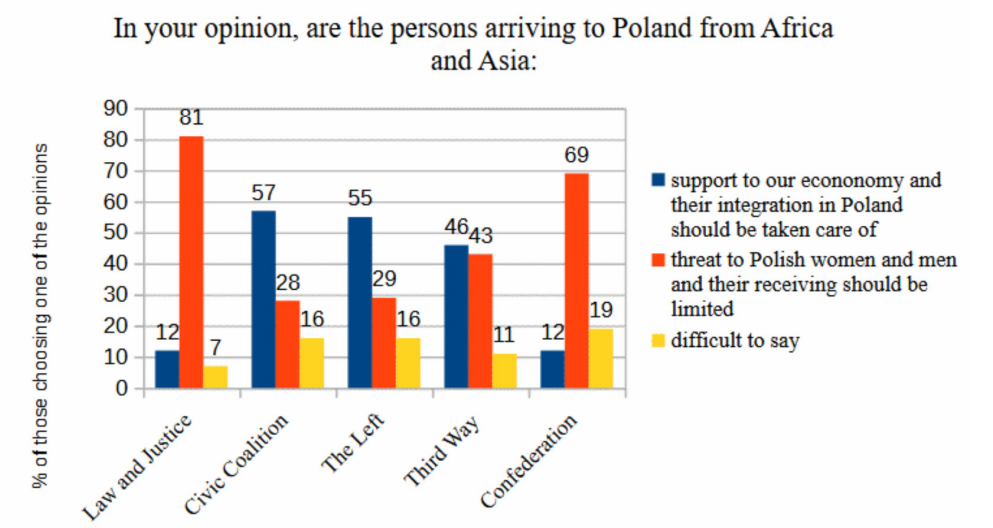
coalition, with only 23% placing the blame on the whole governing coalition (Dąbrowska 2023). But when we consider the "distribution of fear" of immigrants from Africa and Asia, this was the most sensitive group, compared to supporters of other parties (see Figures 5 and 6). Suddenly, 79% of this group were informed about the corruption scheme created in the MFA, which allowed for the uncontrolled entrance of those they considered, in an overwhelming majority, a threat.

When interpreting these data, one stipulation must be made clear. The author is not trying to argue that the scandal eroded electoral support for the governing coalition, because the polls on the perceived electoral consequences (notwithstanding the estimate of the party's leader) do not allow for conclusions on the actual impact of the scandal on electoral behavior. Actually, the scholarship on the influence of corruption scandals, or the perception of corruption, on the electoral outcomes provides mixed results showing that politicians might be punished for corruption with a minor loss of votes, but may sometimes even get reelected (Chang, Golden & Hill 2010; Bågenholm 2013; De Vries & Solaz 2017). Scholars point to various factors influencing how corruption might eventually affect electoral outcomes—e.g., the type of political system and degree of democratic consolidation (Krause & Fabio 2009), the level of corruption and salience of the issue in the political system (Ecker, Glinitzer & Meyer 2016), the delivery of welfare provisions (Breitenstein & Hernández 2025), information available to voters and blame attribution (De Vries & Solaz 2017), or the shielding effect of partisan bias (Anduiza, Gallego & Muñoz 2013; Chelidonopoulos 2026).

Therefore, there is no simple link between exposed corruption and the withdrawal of electoral support for incumbents. The main point of this section is that the scandal was a significant flaw in the systematically built identity of the Law and Justice Party. The public visibility of the issue was high as indicated by the ranking of the most opinion-forming media in September 2023—the top two most-cited media outlets were those which published a series of articles covering the irregularities in the MFA (Institute of Media Monitoring 2023). The survey of the biggest image crisis in the public sector, conducted among the panel of 107 public relations professionals, put the scandal at the top of the 2023 ranking (Alert Media Communication 2024). Thus, the governing party was put into a defensive position amid a serious communication burden undermining its monopoly on controlling the discourse over border protection.

After the elections, in December 2023, a new government established a parliamentary investigative commission to examine the wrongdoings. During its 42 sessions, the investigative commission interrogated 37 witnesses, providing the general public with 110 hours of recordings. However, the "cash-for-visa scandal" lost its earlier prominence, returning to public attention only when the most important officials were interrogated. The commission ended its proceedings in December 2024 having submitted 11 notifications of suspected

Figure 6: A "distribution of fear" towards immigrants from Africa and Asia according to the main electorates (as for September 25–27, 2023)



Source: Author's own elaboration based on (Pacewicz 2023).

criminal offences to the prosecutor general (Gądek 2024). The suspicions of abuse of authority or negligence of duties concerned top public figures, including the former prime minister, the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of internal affairs, and the head of the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau. However, the high profiles of those suspected might be an obstacle to criminal accountability, encumbering further investigation with the burden and bias of partisan struggle. Nevertheless, reminding people about the scandal has become a handy rhetorical tactic for the subsequent government to discredit politicians of the Law and Justice Party whenever they touch upon the issue of border protection against unwanted immigrants.

Discussion and conclusions

So far, the scholarship focusing on borders and corruption rarely investigated a political dimension of interconnections between the two phenomena. Corruption of borders was approached in various ways—as an institutional dysfunction undermining border control, an instrument facilitating irregular migration or cross-border business transactions, an integral element of borderland cultures, or a method used to reshape internal borders in confrontation with the border gatekeepers. These research threads seem to overlook the growing political significance of the problem in an era when border protection has become one

of the central issues and public concerns. The studied case demonstrates how border corruption might develop and resonate within the political systems characterized by contradictions between openness to global migratory flows, the securitization of migration, and the decline of governance standards. If we go beyond the physical understanding of state borders, approaching them as invisible lines produced by the bordering practices of politicians, we can grasp how corruption of border gatekeepers might turn into another multidimensional security threat. In such a perspective, the "cash for visa scandal" was not just another corruption scandal during United Right rule. It was exceptional because it occurred in a highly sensitive political field undermining essential elements of the ruling party's image, anchored in the protection of territorial and non-territorial national boundaries. The corruption was scandalous not because a few people made illicit gains and misused their authority, but because it was defined as a threat to the physical, cultural, and religious security of Poles. Such securitization of corruption found fertile ground after years of the securitization of immigration. Opposition politicians used a strategy of securitizing immigrants, to some degree reproducing the language and assumptions of the ruling coalition, but they combined it with securitizing corruption.

It must be stipulated that the securitization of corruption is not a new phenomenon. After defining it as a hindrance to development by the global anti-corruption industry (Sampson 2010), its potential for undermining various dimensions of global security has also been discerned by international organizations, experts, and governments (Rotberg 2009). Corruption has been reframed from an economic, criminal, and governance issue into a broader issue of national and international security. The list of security threats facilitated by corruption is long. Above all, it includes the distortion of defense procurement, abuses of human rights, political destabilization, insurgency and social unrest, the undermining peacekeeping efforts and post-war reconstruction, international terrorism and organized crime, as well as the weaponization of corruption in hybrid warfare (Chayes 2014; White et al. 2025; Lang, Alvarez & Hogic 2026). However, the studied case demonstrates that it was the migrants themselves who constituted a security threat facilitated by corruption, because the two strategies of securitization overlapped during a highly competitive and polarising electoral campaign. The primary one, targeting migrants from Africa and Asia, fueled the secondary one targeting the corruption of the border regime. The regime's gatekeeping function surrounded by symbolic images of uncontrolled migratory pressures, made the border regime's corruption especially vulnerable to securitizing rhetoric, as the regime appeared to be porous and fragile.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study concerning the intersections between corruption, border protection, and politics. The processes of revitalizing state borders accompanied by actions and the discourse of border protection might put border corruption into a new interpretative frame,

transforming the problem into a multidimensional security threat. If nation-state borders are defined not only as tangible, geographic lines, but also as intangible cultural and religious boundaries, then the phenomenon of border corruption gains a new significance in public discourse, because it might be framed as a threat to these intangible boundaries. The elevation of border protection—designed to defend the ethnically based and culturally homogeneous nationhood—to one of the central issues on the public agenda makes border corruption an "identity threat." Thus, this type of corruption might be especially detrimental to the image of political parties professing the idea of a culturally homogeneous nation that must be defended against the "invasion" of outsiders.

Furthermore, border corruption might happen at different phases of migration covered by the externalized and internalized border regime. The corrupt border gatekeepers might operate in the country of origin, along the territorial state border, and in the country of destination. Moreover, those in the country of destination (e.g., officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their private associates) might instruct those operating in the country of origin (e.g., consuls) to facilitate migration. In an era of easy global communication, such arrangements between border-gate keepers scattered around the world are more plausible, making the border-crossing corruption a complex, network-based phenomenon.

Last but not least, the populist government that uses anti-immigration actions as an instrument of political mobilization can, somewhat unwittingly, create an environment that increases the risk of corrupt entrance of "unwanted" immigrants. Democratic backsliding, usually intertwined with the decline of governance standards, constitutes fertile ground for corrupt networks in different sectors of the state apparatus, including institutions responsible for border and migration management. This might result in a loss of firm control over the entry process and undermining the government's image as an identity protector.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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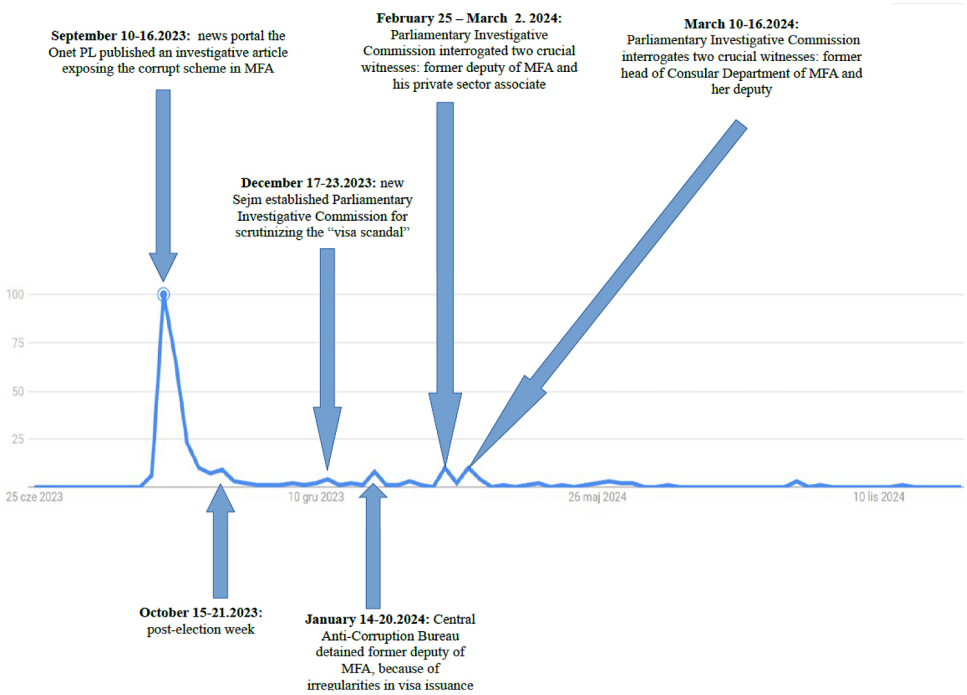
Appendix

A street vendor "selling" Polish visas "cheaply"—a caricature of the "cash-for-visa scandal" on the streets of Warsaw during the opposition march held on October 1st 2023



Source: Author's own photograph.

Timeline: Interest in the phrase *afera wizowa* (visa scandal) in Poland between 01.07.2023-01.01.2025 (1,5 year) according to the Google Trends



Source: Author's own elaboration by using Google Trends.

Liberal and Authoritarian Notions of Democracy among University Students in Slovakia: The Role of Family Socialisation and Cultural Capital

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Politics in Central Europe
(ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 22, No. 3
DOI: 10.51870/pce-2026-0016

Abstract: *This article examines understandings of democracy among university students in Slovakia and analyses the role of family socialisation, cultural capital and socio-economic background in shaping democratic orientations. The study is based on a representative survey of 1,017 university students conducted in 2020. Rather than measuring support for democracy as a political regime, it focuses on how students define its essential characteristics. Principal Component Analysis identified two latent dimensions: a Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND) and an Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND). A subsequent cluster analysis revealed three distinct democratic profiles: Liberal Democrats, Ambivalent Democrats and Sceptical/Reserved Democrats. The findings show that liberal democratic orientations are the most prevalent among students, but a substantial proportion simultaneously endorse both liberal and authoritarian/substantive principles. The analysis further indicates that democratic profiles are associated with differences in family educational background and cultural resources. The results support theories of political socialisation and cultural reproduction while highlighting the diversity and complexity of democratic understandings among young people. The study suggests that democracy is frequently interpreted not only through political rights and procedures but also through expectations regarding social protection, redistribution, authority and state responsibility.*

Keywords: ***democracy, political socialisation, university students, cultural capital, democratic values, Slovakia***

Introduction

The analysis of attitudes towards democracy has been an important topic in Slovak sociology since the political and economic transformation of post-socialist societies (Stena 1991; 1992; Roško 1993, 1995; Plávková 1993; Macháček 1994; Roško, Macháček, & Čambáliková 1997). During this period, scholarly attention focused on whether Slovak citizens' political orientations would facilitate the successful implementation of political and economic reforms. At the turn of the twenty-first century, growing attention was also devoted to young people's political attitudes and participation. Researchers examined processes of youth individualisation, particularly the retreat from the public sphere into private life and the perceived decline of political engagement among younger generations (Ondrejkovič 1997, 2002; Macháček 1998, 2001). More recently, interest in democracy and its functioning has intensified not only in Slovakia but across Europe. Contemporary social and political developments have renewed concerns about the resilience of democratic systems, including the growing electoral success of protest and anti-system political parties.

Previous research has produced mixed findings regarding citizens' understandings of democracy. While some studies suggest that support for democracy often coexists with approval of illiberal or non-democratic practices (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007), others identify more stable distinctions between liberal and authoritarian conceptions of democracy (Kirsch & Welzel 2019). Research conducted in Slovakia further points to the existence of heterogeneous democratic profiles and varying interpretations of democratic principles among citizens (Gyárfášová 2015; Baboš & Dolný 2021). Taken together, these findings suggest that support for democracy cannot be assumed to represent a single, coherent orientation and that citizens frequently attach different meanings and expectations to democracy.

In this article, we examine different understandings of democracy among university students in Slovakia. University students represent a distinctive subgroup of young people, characterised by comparatively high levels of political participation (Kovačeva 2002) and relatively low levels of support for far-right political movements (see, for example, Gallová Kriglerová et al. 2022; Gregor 2015). The decision to focus on university students is motivated not only by their comparatively high levels of political participation and educational attainment but also by the changing nature of the student population itself. The expansion and massification of higher education over the past two decades have increased the social heterogeneity of the student population. Universities have become accessible to students from increasingly diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, which may contribute to greater variation in democratic orientations and understandings of democracy. At the same time, the growing emphasis on professionally oriented study programmes has contributed to increasing diversity of university students.

University students are also a particularly interesting group from the perspective of political socialisation. They occupy a transitional position between family socialisation and independent adulthood. For many students, the process of gradual distancing from family environments and inherited political beliefs coincides with exposure to new institutional contexts, peer networks and intellectual influences associated with higher education. Universities may therefore serve as important spaces of political learning, directly through educational content and indirectly through broader academic cultures, professional identities and social interactions. The influence of these processes may differ across fields of study, although the present research design does not allow us to examine these mechanisms directly. For this reason, studying democratic understandings among university students offers an opportunity not only to map their democratic orientations but also to contribute to a broader discussion concerning the relative importance of family background and higher education in the formation of democratic attitudes.

Consequently, a closer examination of university students' democratic attitudes represents an important research question. By combining Principal Component Analysis and cluster analysis, this study moves beyond measuring support for democracy as a political regime and focuses instead on how students conceptualise democracy itself. This approach makes it possible to identify distinct interpretive patterns of democratic understanding and to estimate their prevalence within the student population.

The article pursues two main objectives. First, it seeks to identify and interpret the principal understandings of democracy among Slovak university students. Second, it analyses the extent to which these democratic orientations are associated with students' socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds, with particular attention paid to family socialisation, educational capital and cultural resources.

Previous research has shown that students often enter higher education with relatively stable values and political orientations already in place (Fischer 2017). Their political attitudes are therefore not formed exclusively within the university environment but are shaped by prior socialisation experiences. This highlights the importance of family socialisation as a key context in the formation of political orientations and behavioural predispositions. One important outcome of political socialisation is the development of beliefs about what constitutes democratic and undemocratic governance.

The first part of this article reviews the concept of democracy and political socialisation and discusses relevant theoretical and empirical findings. The second part presents the data and analytical procedures used to identify patterns of democratic understanding among university students. To this end, Principal Component Analysis and cluster analysis were employed to identify latent democratic profiles. At the same time, multinomial logistic regression

was used to examine the socio-economic and socio-cultural factors associated with cluster membership. The third section presents and interprets empirical findings, followed by a discussion of their theoretical implications and the study's main conclusions.

Democratic understandings as an object of empirical inquiry

There is no universally accepted definition of what democracy means. Political theory has traditionally defined democracy through institutional and procedural characteristics such as free elections, political competition, civil liberties and the rule of law. In this perspective, democracy is primarily understood as a set of procedures regulating the relationship between citizens and political power (Dahl 1971; Held 2006). Recent scholarship has emphasised the need to distinguish between citizens' meanings of democracy and their understandings of democracy. While meanings of democracy refer to broader intuitive associations and socially embedded interpretations, understandings of democracy involve more explicitly articulated conceptions of democratic governance (Osterberg-Kaufmann, Stark, and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2020).

At the same time, a growing body of research suggests that ordinary citizens do not necessarily conceptualise democracy through the same analytical categories employed by political scientists. According to David Beetham, democracy should not be understood solely as a set of institutional procedures but also in terms of the extent to which citizens are able to exercise their rights and participate effectively in public life. Similarly, T. H. Marshall's (1950) concept of social citizenship highlights the importance of social rights and material conditions as prerequisites for meaningful participation in a democratic society.

From this perspective, expectations regarding social protection, economic equality and redistribution need not be interpreted as external to democracy but may constitute an integral part of how democracy is understood and evaluated. More critical traditions of democratic thought have gone even further, arguing that political equality cannot be fully separated from social and economic inequalities. Authors such as Macpherson (1977) and Nancy Fraser (2003) have questioned the tendency of liberal democratic theory to focus primarily on formal political procedures while treating socio-economic inequalities as secondary concerns.

Consequently, citizens may associate democracy with social justice, economic equality, public order, effective governance or the protection of collective interests. As a result, democracy represents not merely an institutional arrangement but also a broader normative ideal onto which individuals project their expectations concerning the functioning of society and the state.

For this reason, recent scholarship has increasingly distinguished between support for democracy and understandings of democracy. Whereas studies

of democratic support typically examine whether citizens prefer democracy to alternative political regimes, research on democratic understandings focuses on the meanings people attach to democracy and on the characteristics they consider essential for a democratic political system. In this perspective, citizens may support democracy while simultaneously holding very different views regarding what democracy ought to provide (Schedler & Sarsfield 2007; Kirsch & Welzel 2019).

Particularly influential is the distinction proposed by Kirsch and Welzel (2019) between a Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND) and an Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND). The liberal notion emphasises individual rights, political participation and civic freedoms, whereas the authoritarian notion values obedience, authority and strong leadership. Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that citizens do not always perceive these principles as mutually exclusive. Instead, democratic attitudes often combine elements derived from different normative traditions and reflect broader expectations regarding social protection, redistribution, political order and state authority.

Consequently, examining democratic understandings requires an exploratory rather than purely deductive approach. Rather than assuming that citizens interpret democracy according to theoretically predefined models, it is necessary to investigate how democratic principles are actually structured within people's belief systems. Such an approach is particularly relevant when studying younger generations, whose political attitudes are shaped by specific experiences of political socialisation, educational trajectories and socio-economic conditions.

The present study therefore does not seek merely to assess the level of support for democracy among university students. Instead, it examines how students conceptualise democracy, which democratic principles they consider essential, and whether distinct patterns of democratic understanding can be identified within the student population. By focusing on these interpretative patterns, the study contributes to a growing literature that views democracy not only as a political regime but also as a socially constructed and culturally embedded set of meanings.

An additional challenge concerns the fact that democratic understandings are not formed solely through normative reflection on democratic principles. The meaning of democracy is also shaped by historical experience, political socialisation and contemporary political discourse. In post-communist societies, including Slovakia, the concept of democracy remains strongly connected to the regime transformation after 1989. For some citizens, especially older generations, evaluations of democracy may be influenced less by abstract democratic principles than by their assessments of the social, economic and political consequences of the post-communist transition. Consequently, scepticism towards democracy may not necessarily indicate opposition to democratic institutions as such, but rather dissatisfaction with the outcomes associated with the democratic transformation.

Furthermore, democracy is a highly contested concept in contemporary political communication. In public discourse, political actors frequently invoke democracy not only as a descriptive category but also as a normative label through which political opponents are evaluated and delegitimised. As a result, support for or criticism of democracy may reflect broader political identities and symbolic associations rather than carefully articulated conceptions of democratic governance. This may be particularly relevant for younger generations, whose understandings of democracy are often formed in an environment where political actors regularly frame certain policies, parties or ideological positions as either 'democratic' or 'undemocratic'.

For this reason, democratic understandings should not be treated as direct expressions of coherent political theory. Rather, they represent socially embedded interpretations of democracy that combine normative principles, historical experiences, political identities and everyday perceptions of how political systems operate. Examining these interpretations is therefore not a matter of assessing students' theoretical knowledge of democracy, but of understanding the meanings they attach to democracy as a political and social ideal.

Political socialisation in the family and the transmission of cultural capital

It is reasonable to assume that at least some of the predispositions underlying later political orientations originate in childhood and within the family environment. However, identifying the specific mechanisms through which family socialisation contributes to democratic understandings is far from straightforward. Some influences may be explicitly political, such as parental political discussions, partisan preferences, democratic norms or political prejudices transmitted across generations. Other influences are less overtly political but may nevertheless be equally consequential. Everyday family interactions, patterns of authority and obedience, styles of conflict resolution, levels of trust, and gender relations within the household may all contribute to broader dispositions that later shape individuals' understandings of politics, authority, equality and democracy.

Although the concept of socialisation is generally accepted among sociologists and research on it is quite continuous, the history of research on political socialisation is more complicated. According to Sapiro (2004: 5), the fundamental problem in the field of political socialisation is that its basic questions, theories and conclusions about how people become part of the fabric of their political communities and how they develop their political orientations and practices are framed by observations of an excessively limited range of political contexts. Niemi and Hepburn (1995) note that research on political socialisation began in the late 1950s and died a premature death in the 1970s. The field

atrophied because it was based on exaggerated premises and because of misinterpreted and misunderstood research findings (and lack of findings).

In a family environment, it is often unclear what is involved in the formation of political beliefs. Several studies have shown that the influence of the mother is more important than the influence of the father (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Harding, Morris & Hughes, 2015; Jeong, Kim, & Subramanian, 2018), although mothers generally pay less attention to politics. A possible explanation is that the formation of political beliefs may be influenced by ways of education, impressed values, and norms that are not directly political (e.g. trust, cooperation, authoritarianism, etc.). Some studies focused on indirect aspects, such as family climate or congruence among parents (Abendchön 2013). To prove the connection of these attributes to the results of political socialisation, however, turned out to be very problematic.[1]

Questions concerning the formation of political orientations remain central to contemporary research. As Sapiro (2004) notes, understanding how people acquire political skills, orientations and practices is as important today as it was several decades ago. At the same time, political socialisation takes place under changing social and political conditions. Contemporary democracies are characterised by declining partisanship, greater electoral volatility, changing patterns of political participation, and increasing reliance on digital sources of political information (Putnam 2002; Hooghe 2004). Younger generations are particularly important in this respect because they have been socialised entirely within these contemporary political environments and do not share the historical experiences that often inform older generations' evaluations of political developments.

Recent research on youth political participation further suggests that younger generations should not be viewed as politically homogeneous or universally disengaged. While some studies point to declining electoral participation and weakening attachment to traditional political organisations, others show that young people increasingly engage through alternative forms of political participation and civic action (Weiss 2020). These findings indicate that political socialisation in contemporary societies takes place under conditions that differ substantially from those experienced by previous generations, making it necessary to examine how political values and democratic understandings are formed among young people today.

One of the most influential explanations of political socialisation is based on social learning processes. According to this perspective, political orientations are acquired through interaction with significant others and the internalisation

1 The problem is also connected with the interdisciplinary character of the problem and the unclear division of the research and knowledge between sociology, psychology, pedagogy and political science in this area.

of values, norms and behavioural patterns. Parents function as important role models whose beliefs and practices are transmitted through imitation, identification and reinforcement mechanisms. Such processes are particularly relevant for the formation of political ideology, political trust, party identification and broader political orientations (Jennings et al. 2009). The outcomes of political socialisation are, however, far from predetermined. As noted by Preiser (2002, in Štefančík 2010), political socialisation may lead to political engagement, adaptation to dominant political norms, unreflective acceptance of inherited political views, political apathy or even rejection of the existing political system.

Although the concept of political socialisation is widely accepted, research in this field has undergone significant shifts. Earlier approaches often viewed political socialisation primarily as a mechanism reproducing political stability and transmitting support for existing political institutions. Subsequent research revealed that political attitudes are more flexible and context-dependent than originally assumed and that patterns of political behaviour differ across generations (Niemi & Hepburn 1995; Sapiro 2004). As a result, contemporary research focuses less on political stability and more on understanding how political orientations emerge, develop and change under different social circumstances.

Political socialisation is closely connected to the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. Numerous studies have demonstrated that social position, measured through education, occupation or income, tends to be reproduced across generations. Cultural resources inherited through the family environment play an important role in this process (Bourdieu 1984; Kraaykamp & Van Eijck 2010). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in embodied, objectified and institutionalised forms and contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities by shaping systems of perception, classification and evaluation.

The family therefore transmits not only political orientations but also broader cultural dispositions through which individuals interpret social and political reality. Ownership of books, which is used in the present study as an indicator of objectified cultural capital, reflects more than the mere presence of educational resources within the household. It also signals placement within particular social and cultural milieus associated with specific values, tastes and forms of cultural participation. Several studies have shown that cultural participation and cultural preferences remain strongly associated with educational attainment, socio-economic status and broader social stratification processes (Bukodi 2007; Katz-Gerro 2011; Van Hek & Kraaykamp 2013).

From this perspective, democratic understandings can be viewed not only as political attitudes but also as products of broader processes of social and cultural reproduction. Individuals occupying different positions within the social structure are likely to develop different ways of perceiving, evaluating and interpreting political reality. Political conflicts and competing understandings of

democracy cannot therefore be reduced to differences in information or education alone. Rather, they are rooted in broader social experiences and positions that shape how citizens make sense of the political world and of democracy itself.

Methods, data collection and sample

Data were collected by the research agency FOCUS between 15 August and 15 September 2020 using the Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method. The survey was conducted on a sample of 1,017 respondents, with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of ±3.06 percentage points. The target population consisted of students enrolled in higher education, including students entering their first year of study in September 2020. The final sample included students from 34 higher education institutions and 120 faculties, ensuring broad institutional and disciplinary coverage. The sample was constructed to be representative with respect to respondents' gender, year of study and field of study. The following fields were taken into account in the sampling design: social sciences; humanities and arts; economic sciences; law; technical sciences; natural sciences and mathematics; agriculture and forestry; teacher education; and health sciences. The questionnaire comprised a total of 182 questions covering a wide range of topics related to students' social background, values, attitudes and perceptions, including their understanding of democracy.

The identification of latent types of democratic understandings was based on items q16a–q16i (Table 1), which capture various normative conceptions of democracy. These items have also been employed in previous European research to distinguish between liberal and authoritarian (or substantive) understandings of democracy.[2]

The selected items reflect different traditions of democratic thought. Some correspond closely to liberal-procedural conceptions of democracy, emphasising free elections, civil rights and equality before the law. Others are associated with substantive understandings of democracy, emphasising social protection, redistribution and economic equality. Still others reflect order-oriented and authority-based expectations regarding political governance. Rather than assigning these dimensions a priori, the present study examines how respondents themselves structure these democratic principles and whether distinct patterns of democratic understanding can be identified empirically. Instead of assigning individual questionnaire items to predefined dimensions, the underlying

2 Before classifying respondents, several analytical steps were undertaken. First, the q16 items were cleaned by removing technical codes representing missing responses (77 and 99). Subsequently, all cases containing missing values on any of the q16a–q16i items were excluded from the analysis to ensure the reliability of the latent structure identification. Although all q16 items were measured on identical scales, they exhibited different variances. Therefore, all variables were standardised using z-scores before further analysis. This procedure ensured that no individual item exerted disproportionate influence on the subsequent analyses.

Table 1: Q16 Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as characteristic of democracy.

Item	Statement	N	Mean	SD
q16a	Governments tax the rich and support the poor.	997	3.09	1.40
q16b	Religious authorities have the final say in interpreting laws.	972	2.19	1.29
q16c	People choose their representatives through free elections.	1012	4.33	1.18
q16d	People receive state support when they become unemployed.	1006	3.79	1.20
q16e	If the government is incompetent, the military takes over the governance of the country.	944	2.31	1.34
q16f	Civil rights protect people from state oppression.	1000	4.00	1.26
q16g	The state ensures equality of income.	995	3.07	1.35
q16h	People obey those who govern them.	970	2.71	1.34
q16i	Women have the same rights as men.	1015	4.22	1.22

Source: The author's own creation.

structure of respondents' democratic orientations was empirically examined using Principal Component Analysis (PCA).[3]

These dimensions are consistent with theoretical interpretations commonly found in the literature on democratic values and political orientations among young people. But they highlight the fact that basic features of the welfare state have been integrated into the notion of liberal democracy.

Principal Component Analysis identified two dominant latent dimensions of democratic understanding. The first dimension was associated primarily with free elections, civil rights, gender equality and, to a lesser extent, support for unemployment protection. Following the literature on democratic values and democratic citizenship, this dimension was interpreted as an Inclusive-Liberal Democracy (LND) dimension. As shown in Table 2, the strongest loadings were observed for free elections (q16c), equal rights for women and men (q16i), and civil rights protecting citizens from state oppression (q16f).

The second dimension combined support for authority, obedience, military intervention and religious influence in politics with support for redistribution, welfare provision and economic equality. In line with the conceptual framework proposed by Kirsch and Welzel (2019), this factor was labelled Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND). However, the empirical content of the factor appears broader than a purely authoritarian orientation, as it also incorporates substantive expectations regarding social protection and redistribution. For this reason, the factor may be interpreted more precisely as a substantive-authoritarian understanding of democracy.

3 Only two components exceeded the conventional eigenvalue threshold of 1 (2.717 and 2.017, respectively), while the third component reached an eigenvalue of 0.853. These two components jointly explained 52.53% of the total variance and therefore supported the retention of a two-factor solution.

The PCA results suggest that students do not necessarily distinguish between democratic procedures, authority and welfare-state functions in the same manner as democratic theory does. While political theory often separates liberal, authoritarian and socio-economic dimensions of democracy, the empirical structure identified in this study indicates that these elements may coexist within broader interpretative frameworks through which students understand democracy.

As shown in Table 2, the first dimension was primarily associated with free elections, civil rights, gender equality and, to a lesser extent, social protection. Consistent with previous literature, this dimension was interpreted as a Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND). The second dimension was associated with religious authority, military intervention, obedience to rulers and, simultaneously, with redistributive and welfare-oriented expectations directed at the state. While labelled as an Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND) in accordance with previous research, the empirical content of this factor appears broader than a purely authoritarian orientation, combining elements of authority, social protection and redistributive expectations.

Table 2: Principal Component Analysis of Democratic Understandings

Item	Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND)	Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND)
q16a	0.250	0.366
q16b	-0.155	0.483
q16c	0.481	-0.160
q16d	0.426	0.207
q16e	-0.102	0.467
q16f	0.471	-0.015
q16g	0.208	0.383
q16h	-0.031	0.440
q16i	0.473	-0.082

Source: The author's own creation.

To identify the latent types, K-Means Clustering was applied. Factor scores derived from the PCA were subsequently used as input for a k-means cluster analysis (k = 3). The decision to retain three clusters was based on the theoretical assumption that at least three distinct value orientations could be expected (liberal, authoritarian and ambivalent); visual inspection of respondent distributions within the two-factor space. The decision to retain three clusters was therefore informed not only by statistical considerations but also by theoretical interpretability. The resulting solution distinguished between respondents predominantly endorsing liberal-democratic principles, respondents simultaneously supporting liberal and authoritarian/substantive understandings of democracy, and respondents exhibiting relatively weak endorsement of both

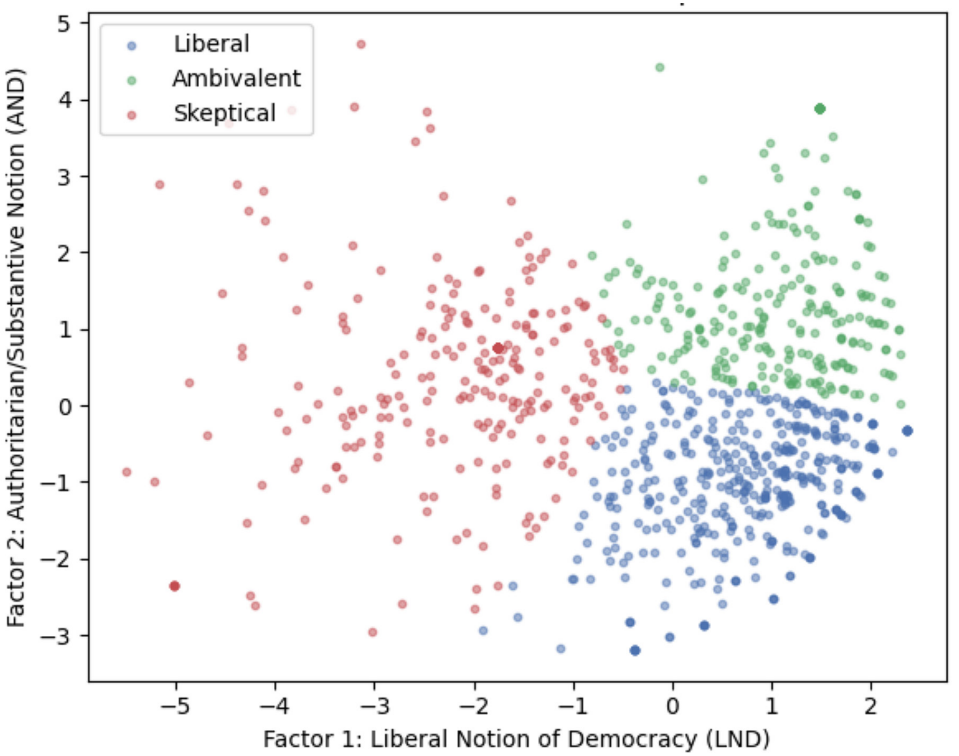
dimensions.[4] The clustering procedure identified three interpretable latent types of democrats (Figure 1):

Liberal Democrats – characterised by high scores on the liberal dimension and low scores on the authoritarian dimension.

Ambivalent Democrats – characterised by relatively high scores on both dimensions, reflecting a mixed or hybrid understanding of democracy.

Sceptical/Reserved Democrats – characterised by low scores on the liberal dimension and low or only moderately positive scores on the authoritarian dimension.

Figure 1: Cluster distribution in PCA space



Source: The author's own creation.

4 Alternative two- and four-cluster solutions were also examined. However, the three-cluster model offered the clearest substantive interpretation and was therefore selected for further analysis.

These clusters represent distinct latent patterns through which university students interpret and evaluate democracy. Liberal democrats represent a relatively coherent type. Their profile is characterised by strong endorsement of liberal-democratic principles and comparatively low support for authoritarian features of democracy. For this group, democracy is primarily associated with free elections, civil rights and equality.

Ambivalent democrats constitute a more complex and theoretically intriguing group. They score highly on both the liberal and authoritarian dimensions of democracy. Although these orientations may appear contradictory from the perspective of democratic theory, the empirical evidence suggests that a substantial group of students does not perceive them as mutually exclusive. Rather, these respondents simultaneously endorse liberal-democratic principles while also supporting stronger state authority, social protection and other substantive expectations associated with democracy. Their understanding of democracy, therefore, appears to combine elements that are often treated as distinct or even competing in normative political theory. Ambivalent democrats appear to hold broader and more demanding expectations of both democratic governance and state intervention than the other identified groups.

Sceptical/Reserved democrats display low levels of support for the liberal dimension and only moderate support for the authoritarian dimension. In contrast to ambivalent democrats, they appear to express a weaker overall attachment to the normative characteristics of democracy. Rather than strongly endorsing either liberal-democratic or authoritarian/substantive expectations, this group may be interpreted as exhibiting a more reserved, less consolidated or less clearly articulated understanding of democracy. While the present data do not allow direct conclusions regarding political interest or political engagement, the pattern suggests comparatively lower normative expectations regarding the role and functioning of democratic institutions.

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, democratic understandings are assumed to be shaped not only by individual political preferences but also by broader processes of family socialisation and the transmission of cultural and socio-economic resources. If democratic understandings represent socially embedded interpretations of politics rather than merely abstract political beliefs, differences between democratic profiles should also be reflected in respondents' family backgrounds and cultural resources.

That's why we aimed to analyse the relationship between democratic types and social, economic and cultural factors. Following the identification of the three latent democratic types, cluster membership was used as the dependent variable in subsequent exploratory analyses. For each cluster, the distributions of selected socio-demographic, cultural and economic variables were examined separately. The following indicators were included:

Size of municipality (q29) – representing the respondents' urbanisation context;
Household cultural capital (q30) – measured through the number of books in the household;
Mother' s education (q36) – representing formal educational capital;
Father' s education (q35);
Household income (q52) – representing economic capital;
Additional supplementary indicators.

For each variable, frequency distributions were compared across clusters with particular attention to the magnitude of differences between groups and the consistency of observed patterns. In a final step, a multinomial logistic regression model was estimated to identify the factors associated with membership in the different democratic clusters. Cluster membership served as the dependent variable, while socio-demographic, cultural and economic characteristics were included as predictors. This approach enabled an assessment of the relative importance of individual factors in explaining variations in democratic understandings among university students.

Typology of democratic orientations

The empirical findings of this study closely align with theoretical expectations stemming from classical and contemporary research on political socialisation, cultural capital and democratic orientations. Prior scholarship has emphasised that young people's understanding of democracy is not only shaped by formal education but is profoundly rooted in the family environment, particularly in parents' educational and cultural resources. This study provides strong evidence for this claim.

Using PCA on items q16a–q16i followed by k-means clustering, we identified three latent types of democratic orientations among university students: 1) liberal democrats, 2) ambivalent democrats and 3) sceptical democrats. These clusters reflect the well-established distinction between liberal/procedural and authoritarian/substantive understandings of democracy, with an additional ambivalent type that combines elements of both. The proportion of each type in the analysed sample (N=912) was:

- Liberal Democrats: 45.5%
- Ambivalent Democrats: 26.9%
- Sceptical Democrats: 27.6%

These proportions are based on the cluster counts computed via Python. The nearly equal distribution between ambivalent and sceptical types suggests that approximately half of the student population does not fully internalise

liberal democratic norms, consistent with research on value heterogeneity in post-transition contexts.

To assess which socio-demographic, cultural and economic characteristics were associated with membership in the identified democratic profiles, a multinomial logistic regression model was estimated (Table 3). Social and Spatial Characteristics, such as the size of municipality (q29), showed only modest differences, with liberal democrats more common in medium-sized municipalities, but sceptical democrats being evenly distributed across settlement types. This suggests that urbanisation level alone does not strongly structure democratic orientations once family-level variables are taken into account.

Table 3: Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Democratic Profiles

Predictor	Ambivalent Democrats vs. Liberal Democrats (B)	p	Sceptical Democrats vs. Liberal Democrats (B)	p
Gender	-0.419	.078	-0.229	.360
Year of study	-0.034	.565	0.019	.749
Field of study	0.029	.337	0.028	.367
Municipality size	0.013	.834	-0.002	.973
Cultural capital	0.003	.933	**0.080**	**.047**
Father's education	-0.068	.149	-0.091	.059
Mother's education	-0.003	.956	**-0.105**	**.034**

Source: The author's own creation.

Household cultural capital (measured by number of books: q30) revealed more substantial variation: Liberal democrats show the highest cultural capital, while ambivalent democrats cluster around mid-levels. What is very interesting is that sceptical democrats display a polarised profile – some from highly book-rich households, others from book-poor households. This pattern confirms that cultural capital is important, but its effect is non-linear: without corresponding parental education, cultural capital alone does not guarantee a liberal democratic orientation. A significant indication is also the sceptical democrats' profile. The scepticism about democracy does not inevitably need to be a result of lack of knowledge, maybe a lack of confidence, but it is interesting that a lack of confidence is not reserved for low cultural capital surroundings.

Maternal education emerged as the only statistically significant predictor in the multinomial regression model. Although paternal education displayed a similar negative association with membership in the sceptical democratic profile, the difference between the two effects cannot be interpreted as statistically significant. Cluster comparisons and multinomial regression both demonstrated that higher maternal education significantly decreases the likelihood of belong-

ing to the sceptical type (p =.034). Father's education (q35) shows a similar but slightly weaker trend (p =.059). These results mirror long-standing findings in the political socialisation literature: parental education, particularly maternal, is a powerful predictor of democratic value internalisation.

Household income (q52) did differentiate the clusters descriptively, with liberal democrats coming from households with the highest income levels, and sceptical democrats from lower-income categories. After controlling for parental education in regression models, however, income loses its independent effect, suggesting that economic resources influence democratic orientations indirectly through educational and cultural conditions in the family.

Ambivalent democrats show a specific value profile. The absence of significant socio-demographic predictors in the regression model further indicates that this profile cannot be easily explained by differences in family background, economic resources or educational capital. Instead, it may reflect a broader understanding of democracy that integrates multiple and potentially competing normative expectations regarding political and social order. Future research should examine whether this democratic profile is associated with distinct levels of political interest, political efficacy or civic engagement, as the present data do not allow firm conclusions regarding these relationships.

The findings thus demonstrate that family educational capital is the dominant structuring mechanism behind the formation of democratic orientations among students. University-level factors (field of study, year of study) and even individual attributes (gender) do not significantly shape these orientations when parental background is taken into account. Democratic value formation thus appears to be tied not to contemporary educational experiences, but to long-term cultural and educational socialisation within the household.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examined understandings of democracy among Slovak university students, with particular attention to the role of family socialisation, cultural capital and socio-economic background. Building on previous research distinguishing between liberal and authoritarian notions of democracy, an exploratory approach was adopted to uncover the latent structure of democratic orientations among students. The analysis identified three distinct democratic profiles: liberal democrats, ambivalent democrats and sceptical/reserved democrats.

The findings suggest that democratic understandings are not distributed randomly among university students. Rather, they are associated with broader processes of family socialisation and the transmission of educational and cultural resources. This indicates that universities may encounter already established democratic predispositions rather than forming these orientations from scratch. Democratic education therefore remains important, but its effects

should be viewed in interaction with earlier socialisation processes taking place within the family environment.

The findings provide substantial support for the socialisation perspective developed in the literature on political learning and intergenerational transmission of values. Most notably, parental educational background, especially maternal education, emerged as the most consistent predictor of democratic orientations. Students whose mothers had attained higher levels of education were significantly less likely to belong to the sceptical democratic type and more likely to endorse liberal democratic principles. This finding corresponds with previous research emphasising the enduring role of the family environment in shaping political values and democratic attitudes, even under conditions of societal change and educational expansion.

The results also support the relevance of cultural capital. Liberal democrats tended to originate from households characterised by higher levels of cultural resources, measured through the number of books in the household. However, the relationship was not entirely linear. The presence of culturally rich households among sceptical democrats suggests that cultural capital alone does not automatically translate into support for liberal democratic values. Rather, cultural resources appear to operate in conjunction with family educational background and broader processes of political socialisation.

One of the most interesting findings concerns the group of ambivalent democrats. These respondents simultaneously endorsed liberal democratic principles and authoritarian/substantive expectations associated with democracy. From the perspective of democratic theory, such a combination may appear contradictory. However, the empirical evidence suggests that many students do not perceive liberal rights, social protection, state intervention, authority and order as mutually exclusive principles. Recent research has also demonstrated that support for democracy may coexist with support for illiberal majoritarian forms of governance. Citizens often define democracy through electoral legitimacy while simultaneously accepting the weakening of institutional constraints on executive power (Cordova and de Freitas 2026). In this sense, the ambivalent type should not necessarily be interpreted as politically inconsistent. Rather, it may reflect a broader and more demanding understanding of democracy that combines expectations of individual freedoms with expectations of a protective and interventionist state. Recent work suggests that citizens frequently evaluate democracy not only through procedures but also through distributive outcomes such as social protection, redistribution and economic well-being (Mortenson 2026).

One possible interpretation is that ambivalent democrats do not reject liberal-democratic principles. Rather, these principles may be perceived as self-evident and broadly accepted characteristics of democracy. At the same time,

they attach importance to additional substantive and authoritarian elements, resulting in high scores on both dimensions.

The study further contributes to the literature by highlighting the gap between theoretical concepts of democracy and citizens' everyday understandings of democracy. While political theory often distinguishes sharply between liberal, substantive and authoritarian conceptions of democratic governance, respondents may combine these elements in ways that are theoretically unexpected. The empirical structure identified in this study suggests that democratic attitudes are often organised less according to abstract theoretical categories and more according to broader normative expectations concerning how society and the state should function. The fact that empirical understandings of democracy do not always fit neatly into existing theoretical classifications should not necessarily be viewed as evidence of conceptual confusion among respondents. Rather, it may indicate that citizens combine political, social and economic expectations in ways that challenge conventional distinctions between procedural and substantive conceptions of democracy.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. First, the study relies on a battery of survey items that captures respondents' evaluations of democratic characteristics rather than their participation in democratic processes or their actual political behaviour. Consequently, the identified profiles represent patterns of democratic understanding rather than levels of democratic commitment. Respondents may endorse democratic principles in theory while behaving differently in political practice.

Second, the measurement of democracy itself presents substantial conceptual challenges. Democracy is a multidimensional and contested concept. Some survey items reflect procedural dimensions of democracy, such as free elections and civil rights, while others capture substantive expectations associated with welfare provision, redistribution and social equality. Still others refer to authority, obedience, religion or military intervention. As the analysis demonstrated, respondents do not necessarily differentiate between these dimensions in the same way political theorists do. Moreover, acceptance of liberal principles may be somehow trained and repeated as a phrase rather than a conscious internalisation of these principles. The same, nevertheless, could be said about authoritarian principles that can be learned from parents, social media or elsewhere. Although the existing literature often treats predispositions towards liberal or authoritarian understandings of democracy as relatively stable orientations, the present study focuses on young people whose political attitudes and values may still be evolving. Consequently, changes in these orientations over time cannot be excluded. Moreover, the data do not allow us to predict the extent to which these democratic understandings will translate into future political behaviour or exert a tangible impact on political processes. To conclude, the latent dimensions identified through PCA should not be understood as direct equivalents

of established theoretical models, but rather as empirically derived patterns of meaning attached to democracy by the respondents themselves.

Third, the exploratory nature of the analysis requires caution regarding the interpretation of the identified dimensions. Although the concepts of Liberal Notion of Democracy (LND) and Authoritarian Notion of Democracy (AND) are grounded in previous research, the empirical content of the authoritarian dimension in this study extends beyond conventional authoritarian attitudes and incorporates substantive expectations regarding redistribution and welfare provision. Future research could examine whether a more differentiated measurement strategy would reveal additional dimensions of democratic understanding.

Fourth, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow causal conclusions regarding political socialisation. While parental education and cultural capital are associated with particular democratic orientations, the precise mechanisms through which these influences operate remain beyond the scope of the present study. Longitudinal and mixed-method research would be necessary to explore how democratic understandings develop over time and how family influences interact with educational institutions, peer networks and media environments.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that democratic orientations among Slovak university students are far from homogeneous. While almost half of the students can be classified as liberal democrats, a substantial proportion fall into either ambivalent or sceptical categories, indicating considerable variation in how democracy is understood and evaluated. This diversity is particularly noteworthy given the specific position of university students within the broader process of political socialisation. Although students are often treated as a relatively privileged and politically engaged segment of the younger generation, the expansion and massification of higher education have substantially increased the social heterogeneity of the student population. Contemporary university students originate from increasingly diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and therefore enter higher education with different socialisation experiences, values and expectations.

University students may also be viewed as a group situated at a transitional stage of political socialisation. On the one hand, many continue to be influenced by family environments and the value systems acquired during childhood. On the other hand, they are simultaneously exposed to new intellectual, social and institutional influences associated with higher education. Universities provide opportunities for encounters with alternative worldviews, professional identities and forms of civic engagement, which may reinforce, modify or challenge earlier political orientations. The extent and character of these influences may differ across fields of study and institutional environments, although such processes fall beyond the scope of the present analysis.

The findings also suggest that perceptions of democracy cannot be separated from evaluations of economic conditions (see also Grassi, Portos & Felicetti 2023). The economic dimension emerged as an important factor differentiating the identified clusters, indicating that respondents' understandings of democracy are shaped not only by political values and institutional preferences but also by their assessments of socio-economic realities. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of university students, many of whom have not yet achieved full economic independence and continue to rely, at least partially, on family resources. Nevertheless, economic security, redistribution and welfare provision appear to constitute important components of their democratic expectations, suggesting that evaluations of democracy are closely connected to perceptions of present and future socio-economic opportunities.

This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence showing that young people in Slovakia express particularly high levels of dissatisfaction with the economic situation. According to the NDI Youth Attitudes on Politics and Democracy in Central Europe survey, approximately 80% of Slovak young people reported dissatisfaction with the country's economic situation in 2024, compared to 63% in Poland (National Democratic Institute, 2025: 8), suggesting that economic evaluations may constitute an important context through which democratic performance is assessed.

Acknowledgements

This article draws on research conducted within the project APVV-18-0122, *The Position of Social Sciences and Humanities in Society: Their Opportunities and Limitations*, funded by the Slovak Research and Development Agency (APVV). The author would also like to thank Mgr. Roman Hofreiter, PhD. for his methodological insights and valuable inspiration during the development of the original research idea on which this article is based.

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Are Democratic Innovations a Cure for Populism? A Systematic Literature Review

SAMO SMOLE

Politics in Central Europe
(ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 22, No. 3
DOI: 10.51870/pce-2026-0017

Abstract: *Research on populism and democratic innovations has flourished in recent years. Democratic innovations aim to increase citizens' involvement in political decision-making processes. Scholars have written about the effects of democratic innovations on political participation and the political attitudes of participants. However, notwithstanding the growing body of research in this area, there is no overview of the effects of democratic innovations in the context of populism. The present literature review focuses on the link between democratic innovations and populism. The aim is to identify key policymaking aspects of democratic innovations, how they address the various challenges of populism, and which threats populism can pose for their successful implementation. In the review, various examples of this phenomenon are shown, indicating the complex nature of this new and important area of research. We find that although democratic innovations can be misused as instruments of populism, recent literature reveals ever stronger interest in their potential to improve the inclusiveness and legitimacy of democratic policymaking.*

Keywords: ***populism, democratic innovations, policymaking, political participation, populist citizens***

Introduction

The rise of populist movements, dwindling trust in political representatives and institutions, declining voter turnout in recent decades, among other developments, are some of the most pressing challenges for liberal democracy today (Inglehart & Norris 2019; Olivas Osuna & Rama 2022; Kriesi et al.

2008). The crisis of democracy can be understood in different ways, e.g.: 1) post-democracy (Crouch 2004) as the decline of participation, representation and legitimacy in representative democracies ever since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s; 2) technocratic tendencies of governance, where decisions are made by a technocratic elite (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti 2017); and 3) the 'populist moment' (Mouffe 2018), following the 2008 economic crisis caused by the crisis of neoliberal hegemony, in which democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty have been under attack. Most research on populism has focused on its definition, causes and rise and, more recently, its impact on governance and public policymaking (Mudde 2004; Moffitt 2016; Dussauge-Laguna 2022).

In the last decade, research into the participatory behaviour of 'populist citizens', i.e. citizens holding strong populist views, has become particularly important with the emergence of several populist parties and politicians in Europe and beyond that appeal to such citizens. Even though these citizens generally support democratic principles, they are dissatisfied with the democracy being practised in their countries. Recent studies in Western democracies show that politically marginalised citizens and those holding populist views are more likely to support and participate in direct and participatory forms of decision-making, which they also see as a means of improving the political system's responsiveness and influencing policymaking processes on the national and local levels (Bos, Van Spanje & Wichgers 2023: 852; Heinisch & Wegscheider 2020).

However, not much attention has been paid to understanding the mechanisms that could protect and strengthen democracy from populist challenges. The literature includes considerable discussion of democratic innovations as mechanisms that seek to allow citizens to become more engaged in political decision-making and in the design and implementation of public policies, empower local communities, and add to the legitimacy of existing institutions. The gradual introduction of such innovations may be seen as a shift in understanding the role of citizens as passive recipients of public services to a more active and concrete role (Löfgren & Agger 2021: 87). Apart from the growing number of quantitative and qualitative studies investigating the effects of democratic innovations on political participation and the political attitudes of participants (Van der Does & Kantorowicz 2021; Michels 2011; Jacobs 2024; Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014; Trüdinger & Bächtiger 2023), a relevant area of recent research deals with the challenges populism brings to policymaking processes (Dussauge-Laguna 2022).

One can find literature reviews on both populism and democratic innovations. Still, their focus is on either the effects of democratic innovations on participants' attitudes without considering populism (Theuwis, Van Ham & Jacobs 2025) or purely on populist attitudes without considering democratic inno-

vations (Marcos-Marne, De Zuniga & Borah 2023). In any case, systematic reviews linking these two phenomena are scarce. Therefore, the contribution of this systematic review to the research is in addressing the mentioned gap by focusing on the possible link between populism and the policymaking aspects of democratic innovations.

The present study provides an overview following an analysis of the literature to date, but without quantitatively examining the data reported in the published literature (Borah 2017). All 22 publications on populism and democratic innovations indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases, published in English between 2017 and 2024, were analysed. This ensures the relevance of the publications, whose selection is described in greater detail in the section on analytical approach.

The results of our analysis allow us to answer two research questions:

(1) How thoroughly has the populism-democratic innovations nexus been investigated?

(2) More importantly, what significance does this link hold in the context of policymaking?

The review shows clusters of literature around three recurring themes. First, a growing number of studies consider how participation in democratic innovations may affect citizens' populist attitudes. Second, another group of contributions focuses on the deliberative and policymaking dimensions of democratic innovations, including their democratic potential and vulnerability to becoming instrumentalised. The third part of the literature explores the role of social movements and movement-based forms of participation in processes of democratic renewal and institutional contestation. The structure of the article reflects these three themes emerging from the reviewed material, which together capture the main ways in which the populism–democratic innovations nexus has been studied.

Accordingly, the article commences with an overview of recent literature examining the relationship between populism and democratic innovations, concentrating on how participation in democratic innovations can influence citizens' populist sentiments. Second, the deliberative aspects of democratic innovations in relation to policymaking are discussed together with the possibility that democratic innovations can be abused by authoritarian and/or populist governments. The third section then demonstrates how some social movements can take advantage of democratic innovations to reform or challenge political institutions and empower communities. Finally, in the conclusion, the findings are reflected upon and suggestions are made for future research so as to close pertinent research gaps that remain within this topic.

The effects of democratic innovations on populism

Populism is a complex, elusive and controversial term, but has no standard definition. In recent years, the ideational approach has prevailed, defining populism as a set of political ideas about the structure of power in society. The decisive factor is the antagonism within society between two homogeneous groups – the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' – as well as politics as an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004). The ideational approach is associated with three other important political ideas: 1) anti-elitism; 2) a preference for unrestricted popular sovereignty; and 3) a belief in the homogeneity and greatness of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Schulz et al. 2018). In the literature, these 'pillars' of populism are often linked with some of the biggest challenges to democracy today, such as declining trust in political institutions, poor quality of government, disregard for expert-recommended policy measures, etc. (De Cleen 2018; Keefer, Scartascini & Vlaicu 2019). The ideational approach considers populism neither a homogeneous construct nor a uniform ideology, but rather a thin-centred ideology since it only offers a basic lens for interpreting public life rather than a comprehensive vision of how the public sphere should be organised (Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 2; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). It accordingly permits the consideration of different political ideas identified as distinct, albeit interrelated, aspects of populist ideology (Schulz et al. 2018; Hameleers & De Vreese 2020). The approach is thus suitable for observing citizens' populist positions and attitudes, along with their preferences and patterns of political participation (Marcos-Marne, De Zuniga & Borah 2023).

For conceptual clarity, it is important to explain that Mudde's ideational approach to populism implies a constructivist view of populism in which categories like 'the people' and 'the elite' are not pre-given social entities, but are politically constructed and ideologically variable. Seen from this perspective, the central analytical question is not which social groups 'the people' supposedly represents, but the way 'the people is discursively constructed and filled with meaning' (Kim & Mondon 2024: 988). Here, Mudde's ideational approach shares an important affinity with Laclau's (2005) discursive theory, which understands populism as a political logic that constructs 'the people' through antagonism with a dominant power bloc. Laclau (2005) makes this constructivist point even more explicitly, arguing that 'the people' does not merely reflect a pre-existing popular identity and instead actively brings that identity into being (Kim & Mondon 2024: 988). In the section on democracy-strengthening social movements, we draw conceptually on the Laclauian perspective on populism.

As noted in the introduction, recent research has looked at populist tendencies or attitudes held by citizens and how they impact policymaking processes. Democratic innovations bring a spotlight to this nexus. They are 'processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance,

and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence' (Elstub & Escobar 2019: 14). They can offer citizens the opportunity to participate directly in decision-making processes and influence policy outcomes. Democratic innovations thereby address the lack of inclusivity, popular control, transparency and political trust that often fuel populism (Theuwis 2024; Smith 2009; Abrial et al. 2022).

However, there is not a single set of democratic innovations since they vary with respect to how much actual influence they give citizens over decision-making and policy outcomes. Mechanisms of direct democracy, such as referendums, allow citizens to decide directly on concrete policy questions (Altman 2010). The literature chiefly concentrates on binding forms of referendums rather than consultative referendums, in which governments have no obligation to follow/implement the decisions expressed by voters (Smith 2009). Participatory instruments like participatory budgeting can also give citizens a meaningful influence, especially when they are able to debate on and determine the use of public funds. Still, this depends on the extent to which citizens' policy proposals are respected and implemented afterwards, as shown in more detail in the section on democratic innovations and populist attitudes of citizens (Smith 2009; Wampler 2012). Finally, with deliberative mechanisms, like mini-publics, citizens provide in-depth recommendations to policymakers that typically are not binding, with their role being more to provide citizens an opportunity to make considered decisions. Deliberative democracy thus reinforces the dimension of reasoned judgement (Smith 2009).

Analytical approach

For the literature review, we selected all articles published in English from the Web of Science and the Scopus core collections that contain 'populism' and 'democratic innovations' in the title, abstract, keywords or Keywords Plus (all search fields are available on the website). We collected the data in January 2025 using the search function of Web of Science and Scopus without any time restriction. This search yielded an initial sample of 28 results in Web of Science and 45 results in Scopus. All articles were then checked to see if they actually deal with populism and democratic innovations. We excluded 51 results that merely mention populism and/or democratic innovations without further theoretical/empirical explanations, as well as those from other disciplines which are thus not relevant for our study (e.g. media or film studies, criminology, technology, etc.). We further excluded results that contain book introductions irrelevant to our study or those to which we did not have access. A few theoretical articles from disciplines other than pure political science (e.g. law and religion), but which make a valuable contribution to the conceptual articulation and

elaboration of populism and democratic innovations, were also included in the sample (Landau 2020; Stanley 2020). The final sample comprised 22 relevant publications; 11 of these were duplicates that appeared in both Scopus and Web of Science, a further six in Scopus and five in Web of Science. We collected information about the subject area, type of journal, year of publication, and origin of the corresponding author. Finally, we carefully read all the articles and noted the methods used, the empirical or theoretical focus, and the main results. Seventeen results were journal articles, two were book chapters, one was a book, one was a printed article and one was a review article.

The reviewed research should be understood not only in terms of publication types, but also in terms of where it appeared. A large share of the literature was published in journals such as *Politics and Governance*, *Political Studies*, *European Political Science Review*, *Contemporary Politics*, etc., suggesting that the topic has been developed primarily within political science (12 publications), along with publications from the fields of sociology (1), government (1), geography (1), politics and international relations (1), administrative sciences (1), law (1) and religion (1). In addition, the geographical focus of the reviewed studies is uneven. Of the results where the latter was evident, 14 analysed European cases and four discussed international cases. Furthermore, nine results analysed national cases, six dealt with local cases, and one with a provincial case. The literature most frequently discusses cases from Europe, with a noticeable focus on Western European countries such as the Netherlands (4 cases),[1] France[2] and Spain,[3] while other European contexts, particularly those from Eastern Europe, remain less visible. Highlighting both publication venues and country cases helps clarify the disciplinary profile and geographical concentration of the field. Most (17) authors of the articles come from Europe, followed by three from Australia, one from the USA, one from Latin America, and some articles have international co-authorship. Most articles (6) on populism and democratic innovations were published in 2024, two articles were published in 2023, three in 2022, three in 2021, three in 2020, one in 2019, two in 2018 and one in 2017. These results reveal a Eurocentric focus on the topic and a small, yet growing, interest in it in recent years.

Methodologically, 12 articles had an empirical focus and eight were theoretical in nature. We found six quantitative analyses (four journal articles, one

1 Power to the People? How Participatory Budgets Affect Citizens' Populist Attitudes (Theuwis 2024); Through the looking glass: the effect of participation in a participatory budget on citizens' populist attitudes (Theuwis & Kindt 2024); Have a little faith in deliberation? Examining the effect of participation in a citizens' assembly on populist attitudes (Jacobs 2024); Populists and citizens' assemblies: Caught between strategy and principles (Jacobs 2023).

2 Control or participate? The Yellow Vests' democratic aspirations through mixed methods analysis (Abrial et al. 2022).

3 Questioning European Democracy? Versions of Representation in the 15M Movement and Podemos (Eklundh 2022).

book chapter, one printed article). Cross-sectional surveys were used in three articles; experiments were used in one article, and mixed methods in two articles. Five of the qualitative articles were case studies and one article presented a thematic analysis. The others were theoretical. All three units (two articles, one book chapter), which were based on survey data, dealt with populist attitudes, in particular how participation in democratic innovations affects citizens' attitudes, and explained the concept of 'populist citizens'. They relied on the scale developed by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014) to measure populist attitudes, which is unidimensional, made up of three interdependent dimensions (populism, pluralism, elitism), has high internal coherence, and is recognised as capturing the concept of populism well (Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014; Theuwis 2024). Most case studies observe the emergence of (populist) social movements on the local, national and international levels and their link to democratic innovations (Antonopoulos 2017; Wanvik & Haarstad 2021; Mercea & Mosca 2021). Some focus more on distinguishing 'thin' from 'thick' varieties of populism and how 'thick' forms can actually foster democratic innovations (Dzur & Hendriks 2018), while others examine exclusionary vs. inclusive forms of populism and further expose the link between populism and citizens' influence on policymaking (Peters & Pierre 2020). One article is based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews to show how political actors can undermine deliberative practices (Oross & Tap 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates the data collection and selection process through a PRISMA flow diagram, a visualisation also used in a meta-analysis conducted by Theuwis, Van Ham and Jacobs (2025).

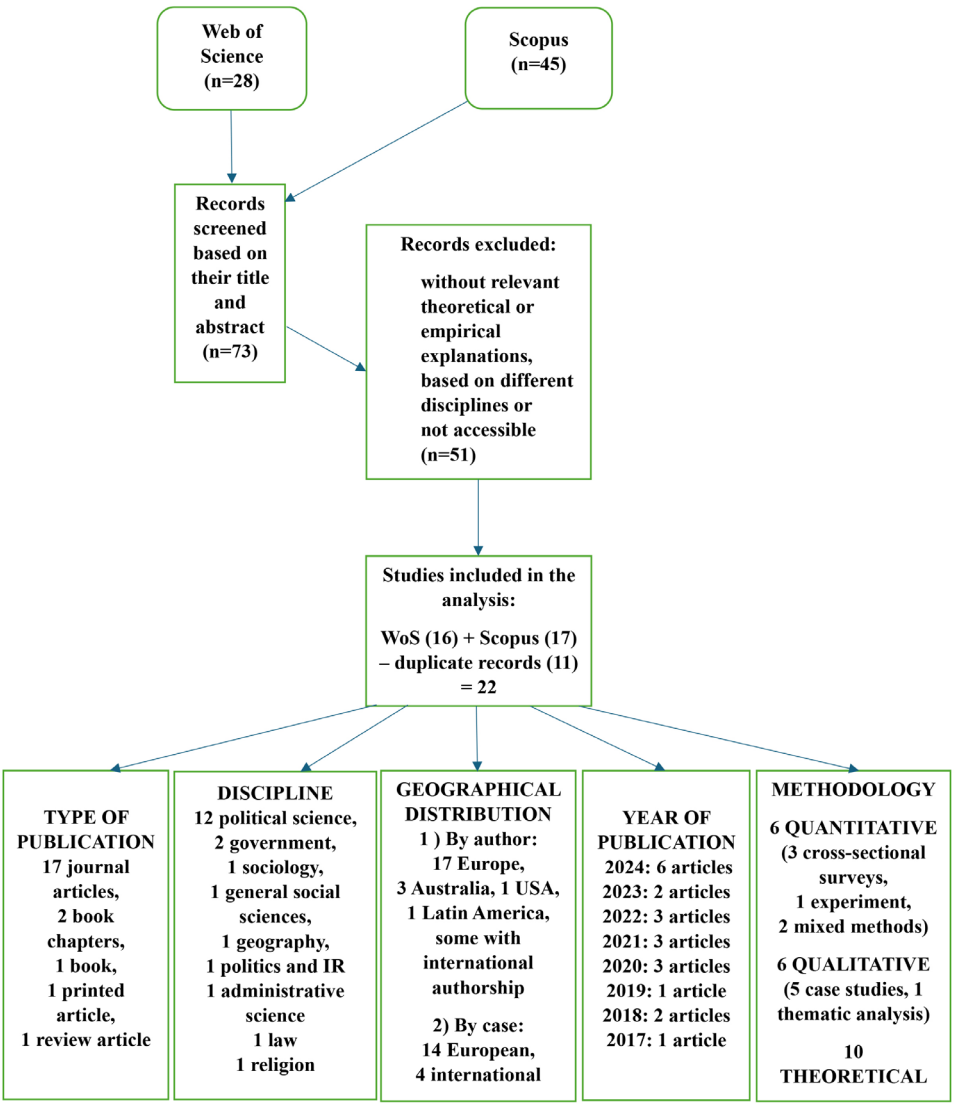
Results

Our reading of all the texts in the sample showed that they could be broadly placed in four categories (or approaches) concerning the link between the democratic innovations and populism. These categories are: 1) a group of articles examining the effects of citizen participation in democratic innovations on populist attitudes; 2) articles focused specifically on deliberative contexts of the issue; 3) articles discussing the role of social movements in the context of populism and democratic innovations; and 4) articles on the institutional aspects of the issue. These categories overlap, and a few articles could be placed in more than one category.

Democratic innovations and populist attitudes of citizens

A number of recent articles attempt to link the fields of populism and democratic innovations by concentrating on how participation in democratic innovations influences citizens' populist attitudes. They conceptualise populism as a phe-

Figure 1: Data collection and selection process presented by way of a PRISMA flow diagram



Source: Author's own elaboration.

nomenon which thrives 'where the gap experienced between the ideal and practice of democracy becomes too wide' and see it as 'a major contemporary expression of the democratic malaise' (Theuwis 2024: 1–2). The authors draw on the ideational approach to populism – already explained as a thin-centred ideology in the section on the effects of democratic innovations on populism –

and stress that from its perspective representative democracy is seen as being controlled by corrupt elites who silence the will of ordinary people. In this view, citizens are largely excluded from decision-making, whereas illegitimate elites make key political choices and undermine popular control (Theuwis 2024: 2; Mudde 2004). Building on the premise that greater citizen participation in political decision-making could bring the democratic ideal and democratic practice closer together, democratic innovations can thus increase inclusivity and popular control and strengthen democracy (Theuwis 2024; Theuwis & Kindt 2024).

Democratic innovations are based on a direct democratic (referendum, initiative, recall, etc.), deliberative (citizens' jury, deliberative survey, consensus conferences, etc.), or participatory (participatory budgeting) approach, as was explained in the section on the effects of democratic innovations on populism. The first two aim to increase the number of decision-makers (Budge 1996; Fung & Wright 2003), while the latter aims to deepen the quality of decisions by opening up more space for discussion (Gutmann & Thompson 1996). Although instruments of direct and deliberative democracy (such as democratic innovations) are not usually discussed in the context of populism, various authors stress their inherently populist character and aspects. The most obvious populist feature of these democratic instruments is that they 'allow the public to legislate without having to involve the formal institutions of government, the public bureaucracy, and democratic representative institutions' and thus can be characterised as the 'ultimate populist weapon' (Peters & Pierre 2020: 933).

At the same time, participation in deliberative processes can give citizens a voice and the feeling that they are heard by other citizens and by politicians to whom they address their ideas and proposals. Deliberation refers to any process 'through which individuals engage in discussions motivated by the desire to find proper solutions for specific issues' and is characterised by 'balanced, comprehensive, inclusive, conscientious, informative and substantive discussions' (Oross & Tap 2021: 805). In this way, it can help alleviate the sense of unresponsiveness that is often seen as a cause of populism. Giving citizens a voice and the opportunity to influence policy also improves the legitimacy of the local political process (Jacobs 2024; Theuwis & Kindt 2024). Even though the articles in our sample are largely concerned with deliberative types of democratic innovations, direct democracy is also briefly discussed (see Peters & Pierre 2020: 933).

The authors of articles examining the populism–democratic innovations relationship are especially interested in the practices of participatory budgeting in which citizens have decision-making power over allocation of part of the local budget (Theuwis 2024: 9). They emphasise that participatory budgeting is 'particularly suited to meeting populist demands because it is designed to give citizens real influence over policymaking' (Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 1). Participatory budgeting processes are platforms that enable better communication

between citizens, civil servants and local politicians. This communication allows citizens to come into direct contact with local authorities, which increases the sense of accessibility and limits the role of elites (Theuwis 2024: 7; Jacobs 2023: 358). Research has shown (Theuwis & Kindt 2024) that when interaction between political actors and citizens is respectful it exerts a positive effect on how citizens view the authorities because it increases trust in local political actors.

Theuwis and Kindt (2024: 5) refer to the example of participatory budgeting in New York where participation saw respect grow for local council members. In addition, citizens with strong populist attitudes, 'populist citizens', can experience a sense of control by the people through (successfully implemented) participatory budgeting processes, which lowers their populist attitudes. However, this only happens if citizens' policy proposals are respected and implemented. The authorities not implementing citizens' proposals in an adequate manner could exacerbate the existing mistrust and populist sentiments could even increase (Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 5).

The lack of a direct impact, transparency, inclusivity and clarity during participatory budgeting processes are mentioned in the literature as important factors in the rise of populist attitudes. Leaving participants' expectations unmet can cause feelings of disappointment and frustration with the authorities' actions during the process. One of the biggest mistakes while conducting participatory budgeting is not giving all citizens equal opportunities to participate. Inefficient political decisions can ensue if the participating citizens are not representative. Further, imposing barriers on the participation of marginalised groups could reinforce their firm belief in the insurmountable antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' (Theuwis 2024: 15; Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 5).

There are also a few studies investigating whether populist citizens are genuinely more supportive of referenda, whether they participate in them more frequently than less populist citizens, what motivates them to participate in them, and how they then vote (Jacobs, Akkerman & Zaslove 2018; Werner & Jacobs 2022). Referendums are viewed as a mechanism for returning power to the people. They offer a more immediate way of expressing the popular will and can serve as an instrument for challenging political elites perceived to be corrupt. In this sense, referendums align closely with the three core dimensions of populism: they are centred on the people; they limit elite power; and they provide a tool for holding corrupt elites accountable, at least to some degree (Jacobs, Akkerman & Zaslove 2018: 520; Mudde 2007: 152).

As mentioned in the introduction, a range of survey-based studies conducted across Western democracies indicate that citizens who feel politically excluded are actually more likely to favour direct and participatory forms of decision-making (Bos, Van Spanje & Wichgers 2023; Heinisch & Wegscheider 2020). Van der Does and Kantorowicz (2021) suggest two main logics to explain this phenomenon. According to the 'anti-establishment' logic, the higher support

for democratic innovations among citizens who feel they are excluded is unconditional as citizens who are typically politically excluded would likely choose anything other than the mechanisms of established representative democracy. Second, the 'instrumental' logic suggests that politically excluded citizens will express greater support for democratic innovations than other citizens only when these innovations benefit them, enable them to control the process, or guarantee outcomes favourable for them. Nevertheless, their analysis of Dutch citizens' preferences for participatory budgeting found no support for the anti-establishment logic and partial support for the instrumental logic (Van der Does & Kantorowicz 2021). Further, after studying data on the 2018 Dutch referendum on the Intelligence and Security Services Act 2017, Werner and Jacobs (2022: 1415) established that citizens with populist attitudes expressed less instrumental and more principle-driven support for referendums. They were also more willing to accept the outcome, even if it was not in their favour (ibid.).

Articles in this category examine populism on the level of individual citizens and measure citizens' populist attitudes using the scale developed by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014). The scale is recognised and well established as it encompasses the sub-dimensions of populism and their interrelationships and 'is most consistent with the theoretical holistic notion of populism as a lens through which (populist) citizens perceive reality' (Jacobs 2024: 8; Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 3).

Deliberative aspects of democratic innovations and populism

Recent research shows that deliberation could lead to more transparent and inclusive representative institutions given the challenges posed by post-materialist societies with political agendas in place that require greater citizen participation in the political process (Oross & Tap 2021). Deliberative democracy offers both an attractive normative ideal and an evaluative framework able to 'help guide and assess our attempts to reconcile the republican promises of democracy – autonomy, equality and rationality – with liberalism; the rule of law and necessary representation' (Landwehr & Schäfer 2023). The essential assumption of the deliberative approach to policymaking is 'that the people, given the opportunity to discuss policy, will produce good or at least popular answers', which corresponds to the general populist rhetoric of the 'virtuous' and 'rational' people (Peters & Pierre 2020: 935).

The mechanisms of democratic innovations 'are designed to allow the public to control policymaking and even implementation, bypassing the institutions that are assumed to be controlled by a less virtuous elite' (Peters & Pierre 2020: 935). Although the decisions made via such mechanisms do not necessarily result in wise or effective policy, they do reflect the unmediated will of the electorate (ibid.). According to Smith's framework in his book *Democratic*

Innovations (2009), 'all democratic innovations aim to realise the following democratic goods: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, and transparency' (Flinders, Wood & Corbett 2019: 150).

Democratic innovations often aim to boost the participation of citizens who are absent from traditional political arenas and do not otherwise participate in politics or belong to a marginalised group. Such innovations should involve 'citizens who are dissatisfied with the current political system (and traditional channels of participation) in order to get critical input into the policymaking process and to increase political equality' (Karlsson, Johannessen & Sønderskov 2022: 67). The authors of a Swedish survey on how young people viewed local democratic innovations found that these innovations' legitimacy depends on the representativeness of participants with respect to the demos overall, and on the level of support for democratic innovations among non-participants (Karlsson, Johannessen & Sønderskov 2022: 72).

The literature contains frequent mentions of the possibility that democratic innovations/deliberative practices have been used to the advantage of certain political actors in countries that have experienced democratic backsliding in the last decade (Oross & Tap 2021). Deliberative, yet also participatory or direct-democratic practices employed by authoritarian governments to establish a form of consultation with the public in an attempt to legitimise their actions and appear more democratic are referred to by scholars as 'consultative authoritarianism' (Peters & Pierre 2020: 936). With such practices, although citizens and officials formally participate in substantive discussions, those in power exercise considerable control over these processes, and deliberation proceeds within the strict limits set by political authorities (Oross & Tap 2021: 806). However, using the term authoritarian in the context of democratic innovations rooted in deliberative practice is problematic, since such innovations require the conditions mentioned in the section on deliberative aspects of democratic innovations and populism: inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, and transparency (Flinders, Wood & Corbett 2019: 150). As noted above, these conditions are missing from the consultation processes in question. Hence, even though Peters and Pierre (2020: 936) acknowledge that 'consultative authoritarianism may appear just [sic] window-dressing on an authoritarian regime', they emphasise that certain elements of populist ideology can still be seen in them. If these elements were absent, there would be little reason for the regime to engage in such consultations at all. Public participation in these processes can serve several purposes: measuring public opinion on policies, collecting useful information, and reinforcing the regime's legitimacy. It may also give the illusion that ordinary people have a role in ensuring the success of the programme, even if that role is largely one of co-optation. In this sense, it may represent a form of top-down populism, albeit it can still be understood as populist (Peters & Pierre 2020: 936).

Examples of hijacking direct and deliberative democracy practices include evidence from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia (Oross & Tap 2021). In recent literature, Hungary is especially in the spotlight. In 2005, the radical populist party Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) developed the National Consultation as a deliberative practice to strengthen the party's embeddedness in society and introduced it following its election victory in 2010. As part of the National Consultation, the government posts questionnaires about political issues to citizens at home. Even though the National Consultations can be seen as a deliberative practice because they meet several characteristics of a deliberation (i.e. they are informative in nature, community-based in sentiment and provide valuable contributions) and give citizens the opportunity to participate in discussions on issues that they determine, they are instrumentalised and manipulated by Fidesz. The National Consultations became a tool of Fidesz to legitimise the anti-European positions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and to reinforce xenophobic attitudes and a fear of migrants (Oross & Tap 2021: 811).

Another phenomenon complicating the legitimacy of deliberative innovations is technocratic governance since it 'eliminates the need for innovations to be democratic' (Flinders, Wood & Corbett 2019: 155). Some scholars have suggested that technocracy can be understood as 'policy without politics', whereby depoliticisation is problematic because it 'violates the democratic good of "inclusivity", which envisages the need "for presence and voice" in large parts of society in order to achieve equality' (ibid.). Yet, populism can also be understood as 'politics without policy' (Yerramsetti 2021). Populism and technocracy are in a complementary relationship as they advance a 'unitary, non-pluralistic, unmediated and unaccountable vision of the general interest of society' (Yerramsetti 2021: 917). The European Union (EU) has been portrayed as 'the ultimate technocratic project' because it encompasses numerous technocratic institutions, including the European Central Bank, the European Court of Justice and various other independent regulatory agencies (Reiser & Hebenstreit 2020: 569). Nevertheless, recent literature highlights the EU's efforts to engage ordinary citizens via participatory mechanisms such as online petitions, policy consultations, the European Citizens' Initiative, the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022) and the European Citizens' Panels (which were initially part of the Conference on the Future of Europe before becoming a broader tool on their own). From this perspective, the EU can only become truly democratic if it develops participatory mechanisms which involve a critical mass of citizens and allow them to shape EU policies. This view supports the use of democratic innovations as effective tools for improving representation and deliberation (García-Guitián & Bouza Garcia 2024: 4).

Despite the above-mentioned potential dangers and obstacles to the successful implementation of democratic innovations, their deliberative contribution to the deepening of democratic processes is acknowledged in recent literature.

Such deliberative mechanisms promote respectful interaction between citizens, civil servants and local politicians as well as access to influence by bringing more voices and interests into decision-making processes, potentially changing the way citizens interact with the political system (Stanley 2020; Theuwis & Kindt 2024: 5). In the literature, democratic innovations were described by Jacobs (2024: 12) as 'cures for the ills of democracy'.

Democracy-strengthening social movements

Populist politicians and populist movements have usually been associated with the undermining of deliberative and inclusive principles of representative government, exclusionary prejudice, or racism ('thin' varieties of populism). Still, recent literature suggests that some forms of populism may offer opportunities for democratic renewal (Dzur & Hendriks 2018).

'Thick' populism 'encourages popular participation through the organising strategies of citizen movements that work to circumvent, challenge and reform political institutions' (Dzur & Hendriks 2018: 335). Thick populist movements offer democracy-enhancing and trust-building forms of organisation and political practices with the intention of modifying or changing the practices and conventions of representative government. Some scholars suggest that successful, citizen-led, democratic innovations may possess certain 'thick populist' dimensions, 'such as community organising, empowering everyday people, building civic capacity and collectively solving problems (sometimes in collaboration with state and market actors)' (Dzur & Hendriks 2018: 335, 340). The authors discuss examples of thick populist organisations, institutions, campaigns and thick populist efforts by everyday citizens (ibid.). While discussing progressive social movements and grassroots initiatives, some authors mentioned above shift conceptually from the ideational approach toward Laclau and Mouffe's perspective on populism (Eklundh 2022). With this approach, populism is understood as a mode of articulating political identities that are not inherently tied to either left- or right-wing ideologies. Rather than preceding such identities, ideologies emerge through their articulation (Eklundh 2022: 336). In her influential book *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe (2018: 16) points to political movements Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain as examples of actors 'implementing a form of populism aimed at the recovery and deepening of democracy'. These examples are examined in greater detail below in relation to the more recent literature.

It is vital that social movements use deliberative and participatory practices not only for internal purposes, 'but also as a means to engage with society at large' (della Porta & Felicetti 2022). Democratic innovations and the mobilisation of movements 'can be depicted as efforts to run counter the crisis of legitimacy in Western democracy and the disappointment of a large number of citizens with the representative model' (Abrial et al. 2022: 481–82).

Social movements occasionally develop into movement parties that bridge the concepts of 'party' and 'movement'. Movement parties are political parties with the goal of competing in elections and have a clear hierarchical structure, yet they also retain the characteristics of social movements. They use non-electoral means, such as bottom-up decision-making through assemblies and grassroots initiatives (progressive movement parties) or plebiscitary forms of engagement (radical-right parties), to promote or oppose specific social and policy changes (Santos & Mercea 2025: 169; Eklundh 2022). Movement parties hold varying ideological orientations: green/left-libertarian, far-right, eclectic and centrist. Eklundh (2022: 336) discusses the case of the Podemos movement party in Spain, noting that 'Podemos could be seen as the transition of the 15M movement to a more hierarchical and leadership-oriented organisation' because it 'has increasingly adopted the characteristics of the mainstream European political party with a centralised decision-making body and hierarchical structure'. Similarly, other left-wing movement parties in Europe, for example Syriza in Greece and Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, have 'channelled the large street mobilisations against austerity policies in these countries into electoral support' (Santos & Mercea 2025: 171). The latter authors also note that radical right-wing movement parties in Western Europe, such as the German Alternative for Germany and the UK Independence Party, 'capitalised on the growing resentment against migration in some sectors of the population for the institutional gain' and that 'eclectic' movement parties such as the Italian Five Star Movement are focusing on both social policies and anti-immigration discourses (Santos & Mercea 2025: 172).

Previous research observed the use of 'populist communication' by many movement parties, which resonates with voters who tend towards populist attitudes. Supporters of far-right movement parties are primarily nativist and anti-immigration, whereas voters of green/left-liberal parties mainly express environmental concerns (Santos & Mercea 2025: 174). However, these issues can be politicised from several different positions – both left-wing and right-wing populist movements, which 'leads to questioning the legitimacy of both the process and substance of mainstream policymaking' (Wanvik & Haarstad 2021: 2096). Consequently, populism questions both the *content* of policies and the *form* of politics (Wanvik & Haarstad 2021: 2101).

Conclusion and suggestions for future research

In the presented systematic literature review, we analysed 22 relevant English-language publications indexed in Web of Science and Scopus that address the populism-democratic innovations relationship. By searching in all available fields, we aimed to capture all relevant aspects of that relationship. Our sample

proved to be quite exhaustive as we managed to identify several key thematic strands within the literature.

The systematic literature review shows that the relationship between democratic innovations and populism is complex and ambivalent. Rather than functioning as a general cure for populism, democratic innovations can both challenge and reinforce populist politics, subject to their design, implementation and political context. The main contribution of this article lies in showing that the existing literature systematically distinguishes at least three different dynamics that link democratic innovations and populism. The findings challenge the commonly held assumption that democratic innovations constitute a straightforward corrective to populism.

The review suggests that participatory and deliberative democratic innovations are most likely to counter populist politics when they provide citizens with meaningful opportunities for voice, inclusion and influence over policymaking. Under such conditions, they may reduce the perceptions of exclusion and unresponsiveness that often underpin populist attitudes. This, however, represents only one side of the relationship. At the same time, the literature shows that direct-democratic instruments like referendums may resonate strongly with populist demands for unmediated popular sovereignty, which helps explain why some democratic innovations may unintentionally reinforce, rather than counter, populist dynamics. Participatory and deliberative practices can also be instrumentalised by populist or authoritarian actors. Democratic innovations should therefore be understood not as inherently democratic remedies, but instead as institutional mechanisms whose effects remain conditional and politically contested.

Overall, the reviewed research indicates that democratic innovations can challenge certain dimensions of populist politics, particularly those related to political exclusion, mistrust and weak responsiveness, albeit only to a limited extent and in specific institutional conditions. Taken together, these findings should be interpreted with some caution: that is, several limitations to this review should be noted. First, the study does not offer a quantitative synthesis of the literature, but a qualitative overview of the main analytical patterns in the field. Second, the review includes only English-language publications, which may have excluded relevant scholarship in other languages and thereby introduced a language bias. The described limitation is especially relevant given that both democratic innovations and populist politics are highly context-dependent and very important in a field shaped by national and regional political contexts, where non-English research may offer different empirical cases and conceptual perspectives. Similarly, the strong concentration of reviewed studies on European cases further limits the broader generalisability of the findings. A more linguistically and geographically diverse corpus might yield a broader variety of cases, research traditions and interpretations of both populism and demo-

cratic innovations. Finally, the review may also be affected by publication bias since studies with null or weak findings may be less likely to appear in indexed outlets. As the review is not quantitative, this potential bias cannot be assessed statistically, yet remains relevant while interpreting the findings.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Future work should therefore pay greater attention to the long-term effects of participation, more clearly differentiate between types of democratic innovations, and address the current geographical imbalance of the literature. Comparative work across regions would be especially valuable for assessing whether the patterns identified in predominantly European scholarship also appear in other political and institutional contexts.

Acknowledgements

The article was written as part of the doctoral training of the author, who is included in the 'Young Researchers' programme as part of the P5-0136 research programme and is part of stable funding from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

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