DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND POPULISM IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Comparative Analysis of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a rigorous examination of democratic backsliding and the surge of populism within Central European states, with particular focus on Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The research identifies and analyses the mechanisms through which populist actors systematically erode pillars of liberal democracy – most notably the independence of the judiciary, the plurality of the media, and the protection of civil liberties. The thesis used the Most Similar Systems Design to compare countries with similar institutional and historical backgrounds, but different dominant populist actors.

A key contribution of this work lies in its nuanced assessment of the heterogeneity of democratic backsliding across different national settings. The thesis demonstrates that, while populist strategies often share core characteristics – such as anti-establishment rhetoric and the instrumentalization of nationalist sentiment – their impact is shaped by country-specific historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and the resilience of civil society. The research advances the scholarly debate by demonstrating that democratic erosion is neither uniform nor inevitable, but contingent upon the complex interplay of these contextual variables.

Furthermore, the thesis highlights the implications of persistent populist governance for the long-term stability and integrity of democratic institutions in Central Europe. By documenting both the vulnerabilities and sources of resilience within these democracies, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers, academics, and civil society actors. The chapters of the text gradually discuss theoretical approaches to populism and democratic backsliding, research methodology, comparative analysis of the monitored countries, and a final summary that responds to the research question, highlights the key findings and proposes some directions for future research.

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Keywords: democratic backsliding, populism, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia

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Introduction

Since 2010, when the number of liberal democracies was at an all-time high, we have witnessed an erosion of the state of democracy in the world. This process concerns not only weak states or undemocratic regimes in the so-called Third World countries, but also the countries of Central Europe (Hungary Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia)[2], which underwent successful political, economic and social transformation in the early 1990s, and which were considered consolidated liberal democracies. Despite joining the European Union, these countries have seen declining quality of democracy, with Hungary cited as an example now viewed by some experts as an electoral authoritarianism. However, this trend – that is most often referred to as democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016) or autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) – can be observed also in other Central European countries. This process usually consists of attacks on judicial independence, weakening of the role of the media, centralization of executive power, and weakening of the role of civil society, among others.

One of the reasons for this undermining of (not only) European democracies is the rise of populist parties and leaders inspired by a broader ideological stance that can be described as illiberalism (compare Sajó 2021; Laruelle 2022 or Enyedi 2024).[3] These forces usually gain power by challenging liberal democratic institutions in the name of popular sovereignty, national renewal, and direct communication with citizens (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Once in power, many of these parties like Viktor Orbán's Fidesz or Jarosław

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[2] In this thesis, the term Central Europe countries mean only The Visegrád Group countries (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), even though it means some simplification of the term, which has got different meaning over time and space. The thesis also uses the name Czech Republic, not the newer name Czechia.

[3] Although this is a simplification, in agreement with Takis S. Pappas (2014), this thesis understands modern populist party as a party which display two antithetical characteristics - it must harbour an allegiance to democracy, and it also must endorse illiberal tactics. Moreover, these parties claim to be the only legitimate representatives of the people (Laclau 2005; Müller 2016) and at the same time undermine the key tenets of economic, political, and cultural liberalism (Czech and Kassnerb 2023). This definition also has the advantage of separating populists from the camps of anti-democrats and nativists (Pappas 2016).

Kaczyński's PiS focus authority on the executive branch, delegitimize opposition, and weaken democratic norms through gradual, legalistic measures rather than outright authoritarianism.

To put it simple, today's "democracies are dying" not because of mass protests or dissatisfaction with the democratic idea, but because of elected leaders who undermine established democratic norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). However, populism, often seen as a major factor in democratic backsliding, is usually treated as a uniform force and the main concern is about right-wing populism. This oversimplification overlooks the diverse ideologies and types within populism that affect democratic institutions differently.[4] For example, while right-wing populism favour majoritarianism with nationalist views and once in power attack on liberal rights, media and independence of the judiciary, left-wing populism focus more on redistribution and state intervention and technocratic variant depoliticizes politics by emphasizing expertise and efficiency, which disrupts ideological competition between political parties (Pappas 2019a; 2019b; Havlík 2019).

Therefore, this thesis identifies which populist strategies undermine democracy the most and which institutional safeguards protect Central European democracies against populist assaults. This thesis anticipates that the type of populism – characterised by its ideological orientation and strategic approach – interacts with the institutional context, resulting in varied outcomes regarding democratic backsliding. The analysis is theory-driven, using classic and recent scholarship to interpret empirical patterns – the goal is to understand not only *what* has happened in each country, but also *why* and *how*.

From methodological point of view, the thesis uses a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) to compare V4 countries, which share post-communist legacies, membership of the European Union, parliamentary systems, and similar economic conditions and type of capitalism. On the other hand, they differ in their dominant populist parties and actors, making it ideal for

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[4] However, Freeden (1996; 1998) argues that thin-centred ideologies like populism are inseparable from their host ideologies, whether nationalism, socialism, or neoliberalism, and warned from overgeneralization.

studying the effects of populist types. Following the Introduction, chapter 1 presents an overview of theoretical work on populism, its types and democratic backsliding. Chapter 2 presents the methodological foundations of the thesis. Chapter 3 focuses on the comparative analysis of all four countries studied and the final summary responds to the research question, highlights the key findings and proposes some directions for future research.

1 Literature Review

The link between populism and democratic backsliding has sparked much scholarly debate. Some argue that populism in power usually undermines liberal democratic norms, while others believe it depends on institutional setting, structural conditions, behaviour of actors, their ideology and our definition of democracy (Bíba 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Pappas 2019b). This review critically examines the evolution of thought on populism, its types and the evolution of the concept of the democratic backsliding.

1.1 Defining Populism

There are very few concepts in the social sciences that have had so many meanings, encompassed so many contradictions, different definitions, been part of a political struggle, and suffer from conceptual travelling and (over)stretching in Sartori's meaning, as populism. According to Caiani and Graziano (2019), the problem with the concept of populism is that it is applied to various movements, parties, regimes and individuals across several centuries, often with a pejorative connotation. It is clear that the main causes of this ambiguity are both the different methodological approaches of individual researchers and the multiplicity and variability of different phenomena for which this term is applied (Bíba 2013), that no one usually directly endorses it[5] and that there are repeated calls to abandon the entire concept due to its vagueness and problematic nature (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) or to clarify it better (Schedler 2024a).

Since generalizing this concept is challenging, populism remains a highly contested concept (Weyland 2001), which highlights the "common people" in opposition to an elite, often linked

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[5] Except for example former US President Jimmy Carter, who liked it and used it for himself in a positive sense.

to anti-establishment views. The roots of this concept can be found in the 19th century –
probably the first appearance of the word was in English in 1858 as an antonym for
"aristocratic" in translation. Later it was used for the Russian and American agrarian
movements, despite their differing ideologies and historical paths (Canovan 1981). Although
it was initially rejected by part of the academic community, it underwent several
transformations during the 20th century (when it was used mainly for the Latin American
area, where it was associated with the modernization process),[6] only to be reborn again at the
1980s in connection with the successes of the populist parties such as the Austrian Freedom
Party (FPÖ), the French National Front (FN), or the Dutch List of Pim Fortuyn (Mudde 2004)
and strengthened at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries through the study of ethno-
nationalist anti-immigrant parties, the election of Donald Trump as US president, and the
decision of Great Britain to leave the European Union. These transformations clearly
demonstrate that the effect of populism is influenced by host ideologies, researchers' different
methodological approaches and geographical foci (Hunger and Paxton 2022) – an overview of
these characteristics is provided in Table 1 below.

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[6] One of the first critical assessments can be found in the collection edited by Ionescu and Gellner (1969).

Table 1: Characteristics of the Three Approaches to Populism Research

	Definition of populism	Unit of analysis	Relevant methods	Exemplars
Political ideology	A set of inter-related ideas about the nature of politics and society	Parties and party leaders	Qualitative or automated texts analysis, mostly of partisan literature	Mudde (2004, 2007), Kaltwasser and Mudde (2012)
Political style	A way of making claims about politics; characteristics of discourse.	Texts, speeches, public discourse about politics	Interpretive textual analysis	Kazin (1995), Laclau (2005), Panizza (2005)
Political strategy	A form of mobilization and organization	Parties (with a focus on structures), social movements, leaders	Comparative historical analysis, case studies	Roberts (2006), Wayland (2001), Jansen (2011)

Source: Gidron and Bonikowski 2013.

Although there are challenges, it is possible to systematically understand populism by identifying its key features and comparing populist politics across different contexts. To achieve this, three main conceptual approaches from political science and sociology literature exist – to define populism as an ideology, a discursive style, and a form of political mobilization (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013), even though some scholars also use different approaches like mentality (Tarchi 2016) or divide style from discourse as two separate subcategories (Pappas 2014), but these approaches overlap with the original three.

1.1.1 Populism as an Ideology

The so-called "ideational approach" to populism, developed by Mudde (2004) for European right-wing parties, defines populism as a "thin-centred ideology" that divides society into two

homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' and promotes politics reflecting the *volonté générale* (general will). Moreover, it often rejects pluralism and intermediary institutions, even though the definition of the people and elite differ significantly, depends upon the socio-political context within which the populist actors mobilize (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

This approach has become dominant in the political science literature (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Hunger and Paxton 2022; Schedler 2024a), especially for studying European political parties and leaders, because it provides a framework to understand the diversity of populist actors across the continent – from radical right parties like France's National Rally to leftist movements such as Spain's Podemos to technocratic variant like Czech's ANO. Populism, being a "thin" ideology, does not provide a comprehensive worldview by itself but must be connected to "host ideologies," including nativism, socialism, nationalism, neoliberalism or even technocracy (Freeden 1998; Stanley 2008; Hunger and Paxton 2022)[7], which also allow for the possibility that different types of populism may exert divergent effects on democracy.

This group also includes the work of Paul Taggart (2004), who constructs the people using the *heartland*, i.e. as a homeland of good people that existed in the past, which is to be reconstructed and to whose values we should return – this idea can be applied especially to Hungary and to a lesser extent also to Poland, which lost many historical territories in the 20th century (Dvořáková, Buben and Němec 2012).

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[7] For an overview, Hunger and Paxton (2022) measured 17 host ideologies between articles, papers and books related to populism across a different disciplines and areas of the world: revolutionary, republicanism, socialism, coup, marxist, marginalized, autonomy, classes, agrarian, resistance, communities, nativism, islam, immigrants, rightist, prr and anti-immigrant.

1.1.2 Populism as a Political (Discoursive) Style

Populism can also be viewed as a discursive style rather than an ideology. Like Mudde's concept of populism as a thin-centred ideology, it revolves around the 'us' vs. 'them' divide, but populism is more a "Manichaean discourse" that assigns a binary moral dimension to political conflicts (Hawkins 2009). For example, analysing populist politics in US, Kazin (1998) describes American populism as a language representing the majority's voice. Like Mudde's concept of populism as a thin-centered ideology, Kazin sees it as a political style based on an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy. Kazin therefore sees populism not as a core ideology, but as a strategic political expression used by both sides of the spectrum.

Despite some similarities between the ideational and discursive approaches, populism, as a discursive style, should be seen as a spectrum in political expression rather than a fixed trait, because political actors can change their rhetoric more easily than their official ideology, allowing for variations in populist politics within and between them. In this sense, populism can be operationalized as a gradational aspect of political expression rather than a binary characteristic of political parties or leaders as a populist or non-populist, which is growing especially during campaign (Hawkins 2009). For Moffitt (2016), populism as a political style composed of rhetorical, visual, and performative traits and is not only about what is said but *how* it is said – its tone, gestures, communication mediums, and narrative frames.

On a more philosophical level, this approach is based on the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005), who also view populism not as an ideology but as a political logic or discursive strategy. This approach focuses less on policy content and more on the formation of political identities. As shown by Gidron and Bonikowski (2013), this perspective provides insight into the emotive and rhetorical aspects of populist movements; however, it presents challenges for empirical research, particularly when comparing different political regimes or policy outcomes. The symbolic distinction between 'us' and 'them' that constitutes populist discourse is an instance

of relational 'empty signifiers' that can take on varied content, depending on social context. Populism is therefore an anti-status-quo discourse: it is part of a struggle over hegemony and power.

1.1.3 Populism as a Political Strategy

A third perspective considers populism as a political strategy, highlighting the organizational and leadership approaches of populist figures. This approach is typical especially for sociologists and political scientists who specialize on Latin America's leaders (Weyland 2001). This approach often emphasizes charismatic leadership, direct engagement with the masses, and the circumvention of institutional constraints. Although it is less prevalent in European politics, this research school has been utilized to analyse leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, whose governing methods include personalized authority and media influence.

1.1.4 Populism and Democracy

This thesis mainly deals with the question of how populist actors contribute to the erosion of democracy, but to answer this question we first need to define the basic relationship between populism and democracy. To simplify things at the beginning, we can repeat Radek Buben's thesis that "the debate about populism is basically always a debate about the interpretation of democracy" (Dvořáková, Buben and Němec 2012, 149) or *what democracy still is…and what is not* (Schmitter and Karl 1991). Although there is a shared consensus that populism can erode democracy, and that the populism is a danger to democracy, the academic debate problematizes this relationship and there is no shared consensus in academic literature, because some authors do not understand populism as a threat to democracy, but rather as a

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necessary condition or corrective to democracy (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Bíba 2013), which

is reflected in their different views on the concepts of democracy and populism, their political

views, scientific (sub-)discipline and method of analysis and data collection.

Simply put, populism is democratic, but it is a different form of democracy than we usually

think of, because it is a specific concept of representation and representative democracy with

an emphasis on the revision of representation, towards of people. As Biba (2013, 95)

explained, representative democracy suffers from the fact that it is an asymmetrical

relationship with a problematic predominance of representatives, i.e. it is a mixed government

assuming an insurmountable gap between representatives and the represented, which

necessarily leads to oligarchy and representation as an asymmetrical relationship in which the

accountability of representatives is significantly limited. If the source of the

unrepresentativeness of representative democracy is the gap between the represented and the

representatives, then it is obvious that the populist concept of representation will be focused

primarily on overcoming this gap, e.g. through direct democracy or direct communication

with the represented. Moreover, as shown by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, 22), this

gap is also driven by demands for the political inclusion of groups that are considered

excluded or marginalized by existing forms of representative democracy, as seen with recent

political movements and left-wing populism in Latin America. In this sense, every democracy

is a tension between the sovereignty of the people mediated by the right of the majority to

decide on public affairs and the liberal sphere embodied by individual rights limiting this

majority principle (Dvořáková, Buben and Němec 2012).

Political theorist Nadia Urbinati (1998) argues in this sense that populism aims to

redistribute political power among social groups. She highlights the tension between liberal

democracy and populism, noting that populists view political institutions not as checks and

balances or protectors of civil rights, but as tools to enact the majority will into political

decisions. Similarly, Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) examines populism's relation to the definition of the people and self-government limits. According to him, populist leaders address these democratic dilemmas differently: European populists emphasize ethnicity and focus on the EU's impact on sovereignty, US populists focus on immigration plus anti-establishment issues and perceive government actions as constitutional violations, and Latin American populists unite diverse groups and critique outdated constitutions. Therefore, Rovira Kaltwasser (2014, 483-484) concludes that these differences indicate populism is not inherently antidemocratic but instead presents alternative approaches to ongoing challenges within democracy.

In a similar way, Phillippe C. Schmitter (2006; 2019), the godfather of comparative politics, looked at the concept of populism, according to which the impact of populism on democracy always depends on the context in which populism operates and its goals. Schmitter therefore established 7 virtues and 7 vices of populism, while he established 13 additional conditions for the positive effects of populism, including, for example, well-established democracy in law, tradition and, especially, citizen expectations, when actors play according to the existing constitutional rules, or when actors introduce acute but unfocused topics into politics (Schmitter 2006; 2019; Dvořáková, Buben and Němec 2012).

Table 2: Vices and Virtues of Populism by Phillipe C. Schmitter

Virtues	Vices
1. Populisms deconsolidate sclerotic partisan loyalties and dissolve collusive party systems opening them up for the entry of new political formations.	1. Populisms undermine existing party loyalties and stable choices between competing partisan programs without replacing with them with alternative ones.
2. Populisms recruit persons who were previously apathetic & passive citizens and mobilize them to participate in the electoral process.	2. Populisms recruit ill-informed persons who do not have consistent preferences and who seek 'emotional' rather than programmatic satisfactions from politics.
3. Populisms by raising and combining disparate and/or ignored political issues encourage the articulation of suppressed cleavages and expectations.	3. Populisms raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled and pursue policies that are incompatible, both of which produce negative externalities for everyone.
4. Populisms challenge "accepted" external constraints and call into question existing and often exploitive dependencies upon foreign powers.	4. Populisms use foreigners and foreign powers as scapegoats for their own failings and weaken external linkages necessary for national welfare and security.
5. Populisms replace out-moded and formulatic party programs and ideologies and replace them with appeal based on the personality of leaders	5. Populisms by shifting attention from issues and policies to persons and personalities introduce an erratic and opportunistic element into politics.
6. Populisms exercise 'decisionism' replacing policy immobilism and expand the range of 'politically possible' solutions to collective problems.	6. Populisms may be more decisive, but their decisions tend to be ill-conceived and disrespectful of long-term effects that are passed on the later generations.
7. Populisms need continuous popular ratification and are eventually defeated at the polls, leaving in their place a reinvigorated party system.	7. Populisms may be capable of altering the rules and/or of gaining the support of military and security forces such that they cannot be peacefully removed from power.

Sources: Schmitter 2006; 2019.

In the same vein as Schmitter, Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier (2025, 87-90), who proceed from the ideational approach of populism, argue that the resulting impact of populism on democracy is always moderated by the specific institutional setting of the country, the political context, and the host ideology of populism. Moreover, according to their findings, the impact of populism is also different on the different variants of democracy that they adopt from *V-Dem* (e.g. electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian democracy). They report mixed results on electoral democracy, where both right-wing and left-wing populism can have a positive effect on electoral participation and the effect is moderated by

the previous strength of electoral democracy. In their view, the impact on liberal democracy is almost always negative. In the European context the host ideology plays a particularly important role, and exclusionary populists have a significantly more negative impact. However, these more demanding models of democracy like participatory, deliberative and egalitarian, which are not seen as alternatives to electoral or liberal democracy but instead as a desirable extension of them, also show mixed results. Nevertheless, Ruth-Lovell and Wiesehomeier (2025, 87–90) conclude that populists seem to favour direct democratic mechanisms only if they feel significant popularity among citizens and that populist-led governments tend to undermine deliberation, albeit moderated by previous levels of deliberative democracy.

A different perspective was offered by Muller (2016), who explains populism not as rhetoric, strategy, or style, but as a political logic centred on moral exclusion and claims to exclusive representation. According to his view, populists argue that only they represent the "real people," opposing elites as corrupt and denying legitimate opposition. While populism can occur in democracies, it conflicts with liberal democracy's emphasis on minority rights, institutional limits, and pluralism – in this sense populists are anti-elitist and anti-pluralist, because they claim to have got a monopoly on representing the authentic nation or people. Therefore, Müller (2016) provides a warning: populism is not democracy's *cure but its shadow*, revealing weaknesses of representation but threatening liberal institutions.

To conclude, populism is usually stronger in countries in which the (actual or perceived) distance between elites and ordinary citizens deepens and where dissatisfaction with the functioning of political parties and representative democracy increases. Populism then becomes a tool for bringing the masses back into politics and returning to the will of the people at the expense of liberal rights, indirect representation, specific interests or strict constitutional rules (Dvořáková, Buben and Němec 2012). Populism is then a symptom (or

response or reaction) to the detachment of the masses from politics, which could not be prevented even by so-called democratic innovations (for their review, see Bozóki et al. 2004). Crouch (2004) uses for this detachment the term post-democracy, which describes a state where liberal democratic institutions like elections, parties, and representative government exist but are controlled by elites, technocratic decision-making, and market forces.

1.2 Types of Populism

Besides different approaches how to study populism another division is between different types of populism. Therefore, this study focusing on ideological divisions between different types of populism: right-wing, left-wing, and technocratic populism, which all affects democratic backsliding in Central Europe differently, focusing on ideological divisions between them. Each type uniquely defines the people-elite divide and uses different strategies when governing.

1.2.1 Right-wing Populism

Right-wing populism combines populist narratives with nativism, cultural traditionalism, ethno-nationalist discourse, (law-and-order) authoritarianism and often Euroscepticism. It often rejects multiculturalism and liberal universalism in favour of an ethno-cultural conception of national identity against threatening out-groups, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, or cosmopolitan liberal elites (Mudde 2007). The main representatives are the Rassemblement National in France, the Lega in Italy and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany. In Central Europe, the main parties are Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, which claim to protect national identity from foreign influence and liberal elites and reframe national histories to emphasize pride or deny past wrongs (Pappas

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2019a). This populism often involves weakening democratic checks and balances through legal reforms, judicial capture, and media control. In practice, right-wing populism is linked to democratic decline, notably in Poland and Hungary, where electoral laws, constitutional courts, and civil liberties face persistent threats (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

1.2.2 Left-wing Populism

Left-wing populism shares core features with right-wing populism like anti-elitism, mass appeal, and moralized conflict, but focuses on addressing socioeconomic grievances by opposing neoliberal elites and emphasizing social justice, redistribution, and anti-neoliberalism. It opposes financial elites, multinational corporations, and corrupt oligarchs, emphasizing economic lines (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018). It aims to re-democratize politics by mobilizing disenfranchised groups and challenging austerity, globalization, and elite-driven politics. This is especially relevant in contexts of economic inequality, neoliberal dominance, or democratic disillusionment. Typical cases include Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Bolivia under Evo Morales, Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain.

Although less common in Central Europe, parties such as SMER-SD in Slovakia and earlier versions of Czech Social Democrats have exhibited some elements of left-populist rhetoric. According to Grzymala-Busse (2007), rather than directly undermining democratic institutions, left-wing populists often employ clientelism and party patronage to consolidate power. Moreover, as shown above, scholars debate whether left-wing populism is a democratic corrective or a threat to liberal democracy. Some believe it revitalizes participation, gives voice to the marginalized, and challenges elite-driven policies (Mouffe 2018; Canovan 1999). Others caution that left populists can become majoritarian and suppress dissent, co-opting institutions and concentrating power (Weyland 2013). While left-populist parties may boost social welfare, they also politicize state administration and suppress dissent.

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The concern is more about corrosive governance than overt autocratization, with its impact varying by context (Urbinati 2019).

Table 3: Ways that Populists Frame the 'us-versus-them' Logic

	Left-wing populism	*Right-wing populism*
The 'people'	The working class, ordinary, decent people, welfare recipients, the "precariat"	'Native' citizens, patriots, often rural and religious, ordinary, hardworking people, taxpayers
The 'elite'	Neoliberals, right-wing media, right of center political parties, experts, capitalists, IMF, World Bank	Academics, experts, left-wing media, established parties, international organizations, EU, cosmopolitan elites
The 'others'	Big business, capital owners, foreign companies, actors on the global markets, US, EU	Migrants, non-natives, ethnic and religious minorities, Muslims, Jews
Key themes	Anti-capitalism, anti-globalization, neoliberalism, exploitation, protectionism, anti-Americanism, inequality, redistribution, restoring welfare systems	Nationalism, cultural identity, anti-immigration, traditionalism, law and order, anti-globalization, national sovereignty, protectionism, restoring welfare systems

Source: Karlson 2024.

These differences between right-wing and left-wing populism also exist in approaches in academic literature related to "populist studies" – one approach focuses on the Global South, employs a left-wing host ideology, and uses qualitative methods, and in contrast, another approach centres on Western countries, uses a radical-right host ideology, and employs quantitative methods (Hunger and Paxton 2022).

1.2.3 Varieties of Right-wing and Left-wing Populism

As Nils Karlson (2024) shows, populism can also be characterized simply as a specific kind of political strategy, a plan for how to gain power and stay in power, with a specific institutional orientation, namely, to seek polarization to promote autocratization. For example, Norris (2020) used a global expert survey to distinguish between the economic and social

values of various populist parties, offering a more nuanced perspective than the basic left-right dimension, which is summarized in Table 4 below. In this regard, Karlson (2024) noted that Poland's Law and Justice party, like many Eastern European populist parties, adopts left-wing economic and welfare policies while maintaining traditional social values concerning Christianity, homosexuality, and immigration.

Table 4: Varieties of Populism

	Left-wing economic values	*Right-wing economic values*
Conservative social values	Hungary's Fidesz, Polish Law and Justice party, Danish People's Party	Swiss People's Party, Israel's Likud, India's *Bharatiya Janata Party*, BJP, Greek Golden Dawn, US Republicans
Liberal social values	Spain's Podemos, Greece's Syrzia, Italy's Five Star Movement	Bangladesh Jatiya Party, Norway Progress Party

Sources: Karlson 2024; Norris 2020.

1.2.4 Technocratic Populism

Technocratic populism, a recent hybrid category, belongs to the group of types of populism which is not as well established in academic literature as right-wing (or left-wing) populism, and which describe leaders and parties offering solutions beyond the ideological positions or right-left division of politics. Other concepts, which belong to this group, are techno-populism (Bickerton and Accetti 2017; 2018; 2021)[8], centrist populism (Učeň 2004; Císař 2017; Stanley 2017; Saxonberg and Heinisch 2024), or valence populism (Zulianello and Larsen 2021; Michal 2024)[9]. Usually, technocratic populism combines populist claims of representing "the

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[8] Even though techno-populism and technocratic populism has got almost similar meaning, there are small differences. Techno-populism (see Bickerton and Accetti 2017; 2021) is a broad political logic (mostly discussed in Western Europe), technocratic populism (see Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019) is a regional type of populism in CEE, where leaders combine anti-politics populism with managerial/technocratic legitimacy.
[9] For differences between central, technocratic and valence populism see Michal 2024.

people" with technocratic claims of having expert-driven solutions to societal issues. Examples of these practises include Rafael Correa's Ecuador (de la Torre 2013), Andrej Babiš's ANO party in the Czech Republic (Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019), Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche! in France (Perottino and Guasti 2020), Silvio Berlusconi's Italy (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020) or Bidzina Ivanishvili, the de facto ruler of Georgia (Aprasidze and Siroky 2020). Technocratic populists criticize political elites as incompetent or corrupt and claim to represent rational interests through technocratic solutions with the appeal to the "silent majority" or "common sense citizens" by claiming to transcend left-right divides (Caramani 2017). This approach seeks to depoliticize issues by presenting governance as problem-solving rather than debate. However, it can weaken representative institutions and diminish democratic deliberation, leading to soft democratic decay (Urbinati 2014). Even though technocratic populism lacks a host ideology, it often borrows selectively from host ideologies depending on national context such as environmentalism, economic nationalism, or anti-corruption liberalism, but only in a limited way. Moreover, some scholars have also connected the rise of technocratic populism to changes in communication dynamics, the increasing role of (social) media and the media-owning oligarchs who are involved in politics like Silvio Berlusconi, Andrej Babiš, or Elon Musk in the USA (Fukuyama 2025).

Table 5: Typology of Populism for Analytical Comparisons

Type of Populism	Host Ideology	People-Elite Narrative
Right-Wing Populism	Nationalism	Ethnic/national vs. foreign/liberal elites
Left-Wing Populism	Socialism	Workers/common people vs. neoliberal elite
Technocratic Populism	Do not exist at all, mainly hybrid political logic or style that blends populism and technocracy	Rational people vs. corrupt politicians

Source: The authors compilation based on the above-mentioned authors.

1.3 Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding has become one of the central concerns in contemporary comparative politics, particularly in the wake of observed declines in liberal democratic quality in both consolidated and emerging democracies. While the term "backsliding" is relatively recent, its conceptual lineage draws from earlier analyses of democratic breakdowns (Linz 1978), waves of democratization (Huntington 1991) or debate about the so-called "hybrid regimes" (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002; Schedler 2002 among many others) as well as more recent studies of gradual regime transformation (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Cassani and Tomini 2019; Diamond 2021; Schedler 2024b).

1.3.1 From Democratic Breakdown to Backsliding

The classical understanding of democratic failure involved sudden events like military coups, revolutions, or authoritarian takeovers. In *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, Juan Linz et al. (1978) examined the internal issues within democratic systems, focusing on polarization, legitimacy crises, and the weakening of institutional constraints as causes of democratic collapse. His work pointed out the role of anti-system actors who reject democratic rules and use crises to gain power, sometimes with popular support. In the post–Cold War era, some regimes mixed characteristics of democracy with signs of autocracy (Levitsky and Way 2002; Schedler 2002) and democratic decline has become more gradual. Rather than completely removing democratic institutions, elected leaders are increasingly using incremental methods that undermine democracy from within (Bermeo 2016). Therefore, this change calls for new concepts to differentiate backsliding from traditional regime changes.

1.3.2 Defining the Concept of Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding can be characterized as a process of regime change toward autocracy in which the exercise of political power becomes more arbitrary and repressive. Unlike coups or authoritarian takeovers, it occurs incrementally through legal reforms, increased executive power, judicial control, and media or civil society restrictions (Bermeo 2016). The process often limits opportunities for public discussion and participation in selecting a government, limiting free and fair elections, or the infringement of individual rights that support democracies, particularly freedom of expression. Backsliding may not change the regime but reduces the quality of democracy, potentially leading to regime change from liberal democracy to electoral democracy or to electoral authoritarianism, but this is far from the rule, as this change is gradual and can also lead to a reversal (Levitsky and Way 2010; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

1.3.3 Measuring and Typologizing Backsliding

The fall of communist regimes, Huntington's famous book *Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991), and Fukuyama's (1992) belief in the democratic progress of the world contributed to the world believing in the possibility of a new world order based on the spread of democracy and human rights in the early 1990s. Almost 30 years later, we are witnessing the opposite process, which is commonly known as democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016), even though this phenomenon is also referred as autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), democratic regression (Diamond 2021), breakdown of democracy (Linz 1987) or democratic subversion (Schedler 2024b), which has got similar or related meanings. Although there is no clear consensus on the causes of democratization or the opposite process (Lipset 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996; Przeworski 2000), this trend has been observed since at

least 2010, when the number of liberal democracies in the world was at an all-time high and when these newly formed democracies, often weakly institutionalized, have been most susceptible.

Unlike Nancy Bermeo, Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) prefer using the term autocratization over democratic backsliding, because it refers to any shift away from full democracy including both sudden breakdowns of democracy á la Linz and gradual declines within or outside democratic regimes, leading to more autocratic situations (see Figure 1). *V-Dem* data shows that since 2010, autocratization has become a global trend, with more democracies experiencing institutional decay, especially in electoral and liberal areas. Moreover, Larry Diamond's (2021) highlights that this decline affects not just the Global South but also advanced democracies like the United States, India, and Hungary.

Figure 1: Autocratization as Democratization in Reverse.
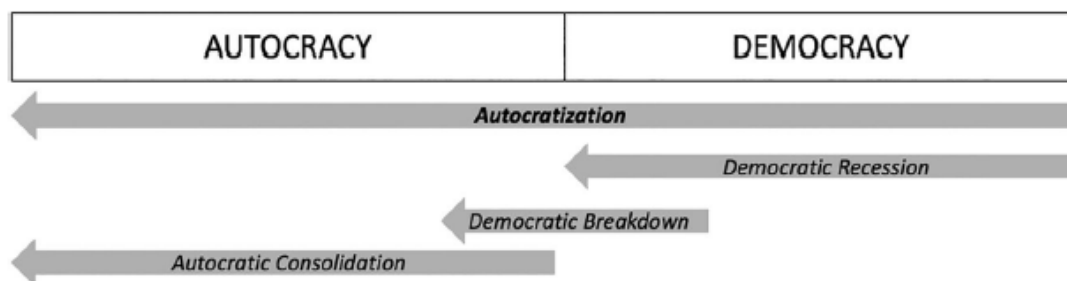
Source: Lührmann and Lindberg 2019.

Similarly, Cassani and Tomini (2019) present a framework for analysing democratic backsliding, dividing it into three domains: electoral democracy (free, fair elections with universal suffrage), liberal democracy (rule of law and civil liberties) and participatory democracy (citizen engagement and inclusive deliberation), in which backsliding can affect any of these domains, often harming the liberal sphere by eroding constraints on executive power and minority rights protections. This typology helps researchers identify where and how backsliding occurs within democracy's institutional structure.

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Figure 2: The Stages of Autocratization
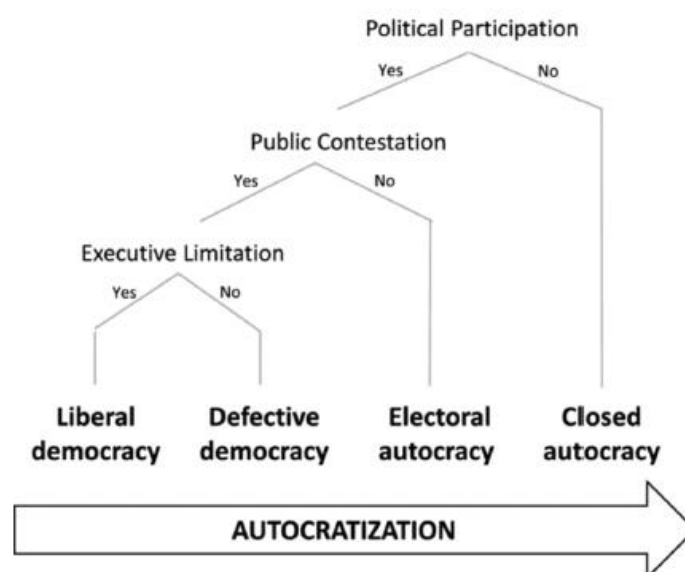
1.3.4 Populism and Democratic Backsliding

Populism in power, though not inherently related to democratic backsliding, often weakens democratic institutions. Bermeo (2016) notes that leaders consolidate power legally through *executive aggrandizement*. This is seen in Central Europe with Hungary's Orbán and Poland's Kaczyński, where judicial reforms and media takeovers have led to these nations being labelled as electoral autocracies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). However, the impact of populism varies by context. All forms of populism exhibit majoritarian tendencies and have varying approaches to institutional pluralism, but their mechanisms of democratic erosion differ.

Based on Linz and Stepan (1996) and updated theories by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), this study understands democratic backsliding as the weakening of institutional checks and balances, rule of law, and political pluralism. Populist governments may undermine horizontal accountability through various means such as influencing courts, electoral commissions, and

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media (Vachudova 2020). Moreover, some may achieve similar outcomes through administrative influence and informal patronage networks.

Technocratic populists, on the other hand, might reduce political contestation and weaken democratic culture without necessarily breaking formal rules. Grzymala-Busse (2019) therefore highlights party organization, historical legacies, and civil society and their influence on central European politics outcomes. In the Czech Republic, Babiš has undermined political pluralism via conflicts of interest and media ownership, yet core institutions remain relatively intact (Hanley and Vachudova 2018). Similarly in Slovakia, SMER-SD's left-wing populism hybrid involved clientelism but did not fully erode democratic institutions.

1.3.5 Analytical Frameworks of Populism and Democratic Subversion

To understand how populism contributes to democratic backsliding, it is imperative to achieve conceptual clarity and employ analytical frameworks that elucidate the mechanisms through which democratic norms and institutions are weakened. This section presents three influential frameworks that shed light on the dynamics of populism-driven erosion: Pappas's model of democratic illiberalism, Levitsky and Ziblatt's norm-based theory of institutional guardrails, and Schedler's Menu of Manipulation. Although these frameworks were not created solely for democratic backsliding or the role of populist leaders, collectively they provide complementary insights into how elected populist leaders undermine democratic institutions from within. While Pappas's *model of democratic illiberalism* was created for studying populism, Levitsky and Ziblatt's *norm-based theory* is useful for understanding the mechanisms by which populists destabilize democratic institutions and Schedler's *menu of manipulation* shows how leaders can use media control, voter suppression, legal engineering, gerrymandering or vote buying for undermining democracy).

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1.3.5.1 *Pappas' Framework*

Takis Pappas (2014) conceptualizes populism as a form of democratic illiberalism. He suggested that populist regimes arise within democratic contexts and modify the liberal principles that support constitutional governance. The rise of populist democracies follows a three-stage process, which is based on few mechanisms and actions of key actors: the emergence of a strong populist opposition party, populism's ascent to power, and its spread to other major parties. Each stage involves specific mechanisms, including agency, new symbols, electoral strategies, and structural constraints. Notably, there is always the possibility of returning to liberalism at any stage. Figure 3 outlines this analysis.

Figure 3: The Stages and Mechanisms of the Emergence of Populist Democracy
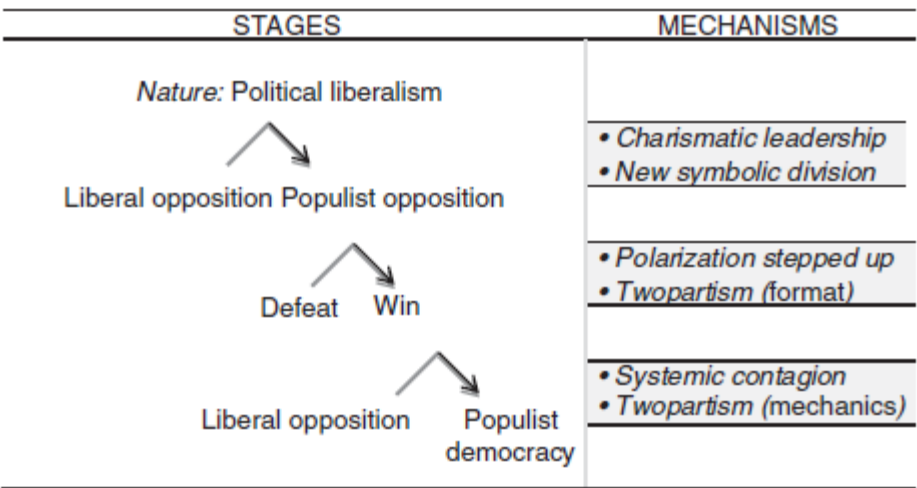
Source: Pappas 2013.

1.3.5.2 *How Democracies Die Framework*

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) in the book *How Democracies Die* emphasize the importance of informal norms for democratic governance. They identify two crucial unwritten rules: *Mutual toleration*, recognizing opponents as legitimate rivals, and *Institutional forbearance*, showing self-restraint in using legal powers. Populists often undermine these norms, increasing polarization and exploiting institutions for partisan purposes through democratic processes

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like elections and legislative procedures. Levitsky and Ziblatt also highlight the danger when mainstream parties fail to block illiberal outsiders from gaining power, a critical issue in Europe where centrist parties sometimes support populist leaders for convenience. They suggest watching for these behaviours in political leaders:

Table 6: Donald Trump and the Four Key Indicators of Authoritarian Behaviour

1. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game	Do they reject the Constitution or express a willingness to violate it?
	Do they suggest a need for antidemocratic measures, such as canceling elections, violating or suspending the Constitution, banning certain organizations, or restricting basic civil or political rights?
	Do they seek to use (or endorse the use of) extraconstitutional means to change the government, such as military coups, violent insurrections, or mass protests aimed at forcing a change in the government?
	Do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?
2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents	Do they describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order?
	Do they claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life?
	Do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals, whose supposed violation of the law (or potential to do so) disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena?
	Do they baselessly suggest that their rivals are foreign agents, in that they are secretly working in alliance with (or the employ of) a foreign government—usually an enemy one?
3. Toleration or encouragement of violence	Do they have any ties to armed gangs, paramilitary forces, militias, guerrillas, or other organizations that engage in illicit violence?
	Have they or their partisan allies sponsored or encouraged mob attacks on opponents?
	Have they tacitly endorsed violence by their supporters by refusing to unambiguously condemn it and punish it?
	Have they praised (or refused to condemn) other significant acts of political violence, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?
4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media	**Have they supported laws or policies that restrict civil liberties, such as expanded libel or defamation laws or laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or certain civic or political organizations?**
	Have they threatened to take legal or other punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media?
	Have they praised repressive measures taken by other governments, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?

Source: Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018.

1.3.5.3   Schedler's Chain of Democratic Choice

Andreas Schedler (2002; modified version also in 2013) details how incumbents manipulate democratic institutions to maintain power while appearing legitimate. In *The Menu of Manipulation*, he explains tactics used by authoritarian leaders to undermine democracy without cancelling elections. Schedler's model is useful for analysing electoral authoritarian regimes, showing that manipulation often occurs legally through subtle changes rather than overt repression. The chain of democratic choice helps identify mechanisms of electoral subversion in empirical studies. It also explains how populist leaders retain support while restricting real competition and oversight.

Table 7: The Chain of Democratic Choice

	DIMENSIONS OF CHOICE	NORMATIVE PREMISES OF DEMOCRATIC CHOICE	STRATEGIES OF NORM VIOLATION
1	The object of choice	*Empowerment:* Democratic elections involve the delegation of decision-making authority.	• *Reserved positions:* limiting the scope of elective offices • *Reserved domains:* limiting the jurisdiction of elective offices
2	The range of choice	*Freedom of supply:* Citizens must be free to form, join, and support conflicting parties, candidates, and policies.	• *Exclusion of opposition forces:* restricting access to the electoral arena • *Fragmentation of opposition forces:* disorganizing electoral dissidence
3	The formation of preferences	*Freedom of demand:* Citizens must be able to learn about available alternatives through access to alternative sources of information.	• *Repression:* restricting political and civil liberties • *Unfairness:* restricting access to media and money
4	The agents of choice	*Inclusion:* Democracy assigns equal rights of participation to all full members of the political community.	• *Formal disenfranchisement:* legal suffrage restrictions • *Informal disenfranchisement:* practical suffrage restrictions
5	The expression of preferences	*Insulation:* Citizens must be free to express their electoral preferences.	• *Coercion:* voter intimidation • *Corruption:* vote buying
6	The aggregation of preferences	*Integrity:* One person, one vote. The democratic ideal of equality demands weighting votes equally.	• *Electoral fraud:* "redistributive" election management • *Institutional bias:* "redistributive" electoral rules
7	The consequences of choice	*Irreversibility:* Elections without consequences do not qualify as democratic.	• *Tutelage:* preventing elected officers from exercising their constitutional powers • *Reversal:* preventing victors from taking office, or elected officers from concluding their constitutional terms

Source: Schedler 2002.

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In the context of Central Europe, these frameworks are particularly powerful when used together: Pappas offers a lens for understanding the ideological content of populist projects and the related mechanism, Levitsky and Ziblatt shed light on elite dynamics and informal norm decay, and Schedler identifies the tools populists and other actors use to manipulate competition and electoral process.

1.4 Research Question

Drawing from the literature review, the thesis specifies how different types of populism correspond to various mechanisms of democratic backsliding and how institutions may influence these outcomes. Based on Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a "thin-centred ideology" opposing "the pure people" to "the corrupt elite", it is anticipated that right-wing, ethnonational populism is more likely to direct anti-pluralist claims toward state capture, while centrist, technocratic, or left-wing populisms are generally associated with selective or bounded forms of illiberalism. Schedler's (2002) *menu of manipulation* specify how backsliding occurs – via judicial politicization, media capture, and electoral engineering – while Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) emphasize the erosion of informal *guardrails* and Pappas specific mechanism and stages. Tsebelis's (2002) veto-players logic, together with Bakke and Sitter's (2020) comparative evidence, underpins the moderating role of institutional resilience and external constraints.

The research design integrates qualitative and quantitative methods. The thesis will use democracy indices (such as Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* scores, V-Dem liberal democracy index, and others) to track institutional changes during populist rule, identifying where erosion or stability occurred. Qualitative analysis will focus on the *mechanism* – legislative and constitutional shifts, judicial independence, media ownership, and political contestation (like opposition responses or protests) – to uncover how populists impact

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democratic institutions or how resilience occurs. Using a comparative approach is decisive: it helps control for regional variables and shows how leadership styles and institutional structures shape different democratic outcomes. By tracing these processes, we can see how populist leaders may undermine democracy, or how institutions and society resist.

In summary, the literature review defined populism and its variants, showing that populists in power often contribute to democratic backsliding, though this varies. As next step, comparative analysis will identify which populist tactics are most harmful to democracy and which institutional safeguards are most effective in Central Europe. This will address the research question by identifying *how the type of populism affects the extent and means of democratic backsliding*, and by examining the mechanisms and moderating factors that influence democratic outcomes under populist governments in Central Europe. Consistent with scholars like Mudde and Pappas, we expect that without strong checks, populist rule erodes liberal democracy – but the degree depends on leaders' styles and institutional strength. Connecting our findings to existing theory, the thesis aims to deepen understanding of populism's diversity and its effects on Central European democracies.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This thesis employs a comparative qualitative research design based on a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). The aim is to examine how various forms of populism – right-wing, left-wing, and technocratic – affect patterns of democratic backsliding in Central European countries (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia). The MSSD is utilized to isolate the independent variable – the type of populism – while controlling for structural similarities among cases, including post-communist legacy, EU membership, transition experiences, and socio-economic conditions (Przeworski and Teune 1970; Lijphart 1971). By concentrating on similar contexts with differing regime trajectories and populist orientations, this research seeks to identify causal mechanisms rather than merely correlations.

2.2 Case Selection

The selected countries are Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These nations exhibit essential systemic parallels – geographical location, EU membership, post-socialist transitions of politics, market and society, and historical legacies – though they vary in the predominant form of populism and the extent of decline in the quality of democracy.

Table 8: Basic Characteristics of Central European Countries

Country	Type of Populism	Regime Trajectory	Current Regime (According to V-Dem)
Czech Republic	Technocratic (ANO, Babiš) - *earlier*	Descent followed by Ascent	Liberal Democracy
Slovakia	Left-wing (SMER-SD, Fico)	Fluctuation	Electoral Democracy
Poland	Right-wing (PiS, Kaczyński) - *earlier*	Radical Descent followed by Ascent	Electoral Democracy
Hungary	Right-wing (Fidesz, Orbán)	Permanent Decline	Electoral Autocracy

Source: The authors compilation based on the above-mentioned authors and data from V-Dem.

This purposive selection enables a structured, focused comparison (George and Bennett 2005), which is sometimes also called as a systematic and contextualized comparison, enabling both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis.

2.3 The Analytical Value of Central Europe

Central Europe serves as a regional laboratory for examining the effects of populism on democratic institutions for several reasons:

1. **Similar Initial Conditions:** Most countries in the region experienced democratization after 1989, post-communist values and political culture, EU accession plus Europeanisation of political parties and public administration, neoliberal reforms and similar socioeconomic structures based on Foreign direct investment (FDI) economy, weakening of the welfare state. This provides a consistent basis for comparative analysis using the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD).

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2. **Influence of EU Conditionality and Constraints:** As members of the European Union, these states are subject to supranational regulations. However, populist leaders have demonstrated that adherence to EU norms can be resisted, bypassed, or reinterpreted, offering insights into the limitations of external democratic anchoring (Sedelmeier 2014).

3. **Ideological Diversity:** The region features right-wing populists in Hungary and Poland, technocratic populists in the Czech Republic, and left-wing populists in Slovakia. This diversity allows for the examination of how different forms of populism correlate with various modes and rates of democratic backsliding.

4. **Diverse Outcomes:** Although these nations share common initial conditions, their democratic trajectories have varied significantly. Hungary has seen extensive democratic erosion, even Poland has followed a similar path for a long time, whereas the Czech Republic and Slovakia remain hybrid cases where populism has not fully undermined democratic procedures.

3 Comparative Analysis

This chapter synthesizes findings from Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to examine the link between types of populism and democratic backsliding. This analysis uses major theoretical frameworks – Schedler's electoral manipulation, Levitsky and Ziblatt's analysis of how democracies die via norm erosion, and Pappas's work on populist democracy and polarization – to compare country trajectories and identify similarities and differences. The analysis is theory-driven, using classic and recent scholarship to interpret empirical patterns - the goal is to understand not only what has happened in each country, but also why and how. First section examines varieties of populism in central Europe, the second measuring illiberal practises and discourses and the third one is about institutional changes and erosion of checks and balances (judiciary and rule of law, electoral process and veto players, media control and information pluralism).

3.1 Varieties of Populism in Central Europe

Populism in the Visegrád Four varies but is unified by its illiberal, anti-establishment rhetoric that sets "the people" against corrupt elites and outsiders. Drawing on Cas Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a "thin-centered" ideology dividing "pure people" from "corrupt elite," V4 populists claim to have got exclusive moral authority over their people (Müller 2016). Takis Pappas (2019) goes even further when he defines modern populism as *democratic illiberalism* – according to him, when populists win elections, they govern in illiberal ways. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán even used the term "illiberal democracy" [10] to describe his model in 2014 during his speech at Băile Tușnad in Romania, in

which he argued that Hungary would build an illiberal state rooted in national sovereignty, Christian values, and economic nationalism. According to Havlík and Hloušek (2021), Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) represent right-wing populism with strong illiberal agendas, whereas the Czech Republic's ANO 2011 and Slovakia's SMER–SD exemplify more centrist or left-wing populism that is pragmatic and less ideologically illiberal (see Table 9 below).

Table 9: Varieties of Populism in the Visegrád Countries

Country	Populist Leader/Party (tenure in government)	Basic Populist Orientation	Key Illiberal Themes
Hungary	Viktor Orbán (Fidesz, Prime Minister 1998–2002; 2010–present)	Right-wing (nationalist) populism	Ethno-nationalism, anti-migrant/anti-Soros conspiracy, Christian conservative values
Poland	Jarosław Kaczyński (de facto leader of PiS; PiS in government 2005–07, 2015–2023)	Right-wing (national-conservative) populism	Catholic traditionalism, Eurosceptic sovereignty, anti-German/EU rhetoric
Czech Republic	Andrej Babiš (ANO, Prime Minister 2017–2021)	(Centrist) technocratic populism	Anti-corruption/anti-party elite, business-like governance, nationalist tone on immigration (2015+)
Slovakia	Robert Fico (SMER-SD, Prime Minister 2006–2010, 2012–2018, 2023–present)	Left-wing (nationalist) populism	Welfare chauvinism, law-and-order statism, anti-Western NGOs/Soros, nationalist anti-EU appeals

Sources: Author using data from Freedom House 2025; Mohseni 2025.

3.1.1 Fidesz's Populism in Hungary: Right-Wing, Ethnopopulist, Illiberal

Populist movements in Hungary and Poland are typified by right-wing national-conservative parties. Hungary's *Fidesz (the Alliance of Young Democrats – Hungarian Civic Alliance)*, led by prime minister Viktor Orbán, originated as a liberal youth party in 1988; however, by the late 1990s, it shifted from conservatism to a national-conservative entity, advocating for Christian democracy and nativist nationalism (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). This party shifted to ethno-nationalist populism, mixing nativist policies, anti-immigration, and anti-George Soros conspiracies with Christian themes. Orbán openly opposes liberalism, endorsing a strong Hungarian nation and calling the "Western liberal model" obsolete. Fidesz leveraged backlash politics, with Orbán using the 2008 financial crisis and a domestic corruption scandal to secure victory in 2010. Fidesz's populism is firmly right-wing, blending social conservatism with ethnonationalist and anti-globalist themes (Bozóki and Fleck 2024). Orbán often frames Hungarian identity as threatened by figures like George Soros or migrants, using rhetoric that merges traditional anti-Semitic tropes with current anti-globalism (Havlík and Hloušek 2021).

Scholars generally accept the thesis that Fidesz under Orbán represents a form of right-wing populism marked by nationalist and nativist rhetoric, as well as an authoritarian, anti-liberal approach (Mudde 2007; Bátory 2016). Moreover, specialists sometimes even speak of ethnopopulism, combining populist anti-elitism with ethnonationalism and cultural exclusivism (Jenne 2018; Vachudová 2020). Others highlight the role of a populist government that systematically undermines liberal-democratic norms and institutions while claiming to represent the will of the people (Buštíková and Guasti 2017), the extreme variant of which is the so-called illiberal populism typical for (post-communist) populist parties that are exclusionary with strong nativist appeal and which use conspiratory explanations of liberal democracy in combination with strong economic control (Kubát and Mejstřík 2020).

In Conclusion, since 2010, the Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbán has combined several populist approaches: right-wing populism in its ideology, ethnopopulism in its definition and mobilization of "the people," and illiberal populism in its governing methods. In Hungary, these aspects reinforce each other rather than being separate categories. The party's nationalist and anti-immigration policies have been accompanied by rhetoric that emphasizes the Hungarian ethnic majority. Upon taking office, this political approach was implemented through governance practices that replaced elements of liberal democracy with policies reflecting the stated will of the people and the nation.

Table 10: Populism Types for both Fidesz's and PiS's Populisms

Populism Type	Key scholars	Key Characteristics (Scholarly Definition)
Right-wing Populism *(Populist Radical Right)*	Mudde 2007; Bátory 2016	– Nativism – Authoritarianism – Populist anti-elitism
Ethnopopulism	Jenne 2018; Vachudova 2020	– Populism fused with ethnonationalism – Majority exclusivism – External & internal enemies
Illiberal Populism	Kubát and Mejstřík 2020	Populist parties are exclusionary with strong nativist appeal and use conspiratory explanations of liberal democracy.

Sources: Mudde 2007; Bátory 2016; Jenne 2018; Vachudova 2020; Kubát and Mejstřík 2020.

3.1.2 PiS's Populism in Poland: Right-Wing, Ethnopopulist, Illiberal

In Poland, *the Law and Justice party (PiS)* also exemplifies right-wing populism - like Fidesz in Hungary – but shaped by national-conservatism and religious values. Led by Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS equates "the people" with ethnically Polish Catholics and opposed liberal elites, social liberalism, communism, and some aspects of globalization, which are supposed to stand in opposition to Polish national interests. The party promoted a paternalistic

welfare state designed for ordinary Poles (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). Culturally, it supported

Catholic traditions and national sovereignty; economically, it combined market scepticism

with social benefits to protect ordinary citizens from liberal elites. PiS showed illiberal

tendencies in government, albeit to a lesser extent than Fidesz (Havlík and Hloušek 2021).

Between 2015 and 2023, Poland's Law and Justice party demonstrated a populism often

described as right-wing, ethnopopulist, and illiberal. PiS mixed anti-elite messages with

nationalism and traditional values, equating the "true people" with ethnic Poles and

marginalizing outsiders. In power, it challenged democratic institutions, justifying actions as

the people's will. As Stanley (2017) shows, these forms of populism reinforced one another,

with nationalist rhetoric supporting institutional changes and right-wing stances defining

opposition groups like migrants, LGBT communities, and EU officials.

Moreover, as Bill and Stanley (2025) showed, since 2015, PiS-led governments politicized

the judiciary, controlled public media, and weakened independent institutions, actions widely

viewed as undermining Poland's liberal democracy. The party justified these measures with

populist arguments favouring majority sovereignty over checks from courts or media. While

facing resistance from the EU and domestic protests, PiS has notably eroded checks and

balances. Distinct from Orbán's pragmatism, PiS grounds its approach in Polish Catholic-

national ideology, representing a right-wing, nationalist populism with strong but constrained

illiberal ambitions (Kubát and Mejstřík 2020; Fomina and Kucharczyk 2016). Over time, PiS

shifted from a populist opposition party to a ruling regime using majoritarian ethnopopulism

to win elections and democratic backsliding to hold power (Vachudova 2020). This mirrors

other regional movements, like Hungary's Fidesz, where populism draws on identity fears and

distrust of liberal elites. However, Poland's experience is shaped by unique factors, such as the

influence of the Catholic Church and historical memory, demonstrating how populism adapts

to local contexts (Stanley 2017; Vachudová 2020).

3.1.3 ANO's Populism in Czech Republic: Centrist, Technocratic, Valence?

ANO 2011 (literally "YES" and an acronym for *Action of Dissatisfied Citizens*), led by billionaire Andrej Babiš, is a political movement in the Czech Republic that distinguishes itself from the ideologically driven parties in Hungary and Poland. ANO differs from Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's PiS by eschewing fixed ideology for flexible, broadly appealing themes like anti-corruption and effective governance (Zulianello and Larsen 2021). Established in 2011 by Andrej Babiš, ANO initially was a civic association, then changed into a political movement.[11] ANO started by presenting itself as a non-ideological movement of competent managers, leveraging Babiš's economic capital from his company *Agrofert*. Identified as centrist populism (Stanley 2017; Císař 2017; Saxonberg and Heinisch 2024), technocratic populism (Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019), valence populism (Zulianello and Larsen 2021; 2024) or exceptionally as anti-establishment populism (Kubát and Mejstřík 2020), the party combined managerialism with anti-establishment rhetoric.

Unlike traditional parties, ANO focuses on competence and prosperity rather than divisive cultural issues, with slogans such as "fight corruption", "run the state like a business" and "It will be better" (Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019). Babiš constantly presented himself as a non-politician and successful businessman and pledged to manage the state with business-like efficiency. Babiš's discourse focused on output performance, emphasizing achievements such as higher pensions, tax cuts, and record low unemployment, while presenting parliament and journalists as corrupted elites, who fights under the umbrella of "Anti-Babiš". As Havlík and Hloušek (2021) pointed out, Babiš's campaign stressed

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[11] In the Czech Republic, the law allows you to register as either a political party or a political movement.

depoliticization, anti-elite populism and direct citizen appeal; ANO successfully adapted its positions to attract the median voter, shifting leftward in 2017 as public sentiment changed.

In this sense, Babiš advocated running the government like a corporation by streamlining procedures and weakening certain institutional checks in favour of majoritarianism. There is a consensus amongst the most prominent scholars (Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Havlík and Hloušek 2021) that this method creates tension with liberal democratic norms but falls short of overt illiberalism, as most radical proposals were blocked by coalition partners and institutional resistance, albeit similar tactics and forms of concentrating power like in Hungary and Poland can be identified, but with more limited electoral support and lack of a powerful nationalist narrative or ideological commitment.

Table 11: Populism Types for ANO's Populism

Populism Type	Key scholars	Key Characteristics (Scholarly Definition)
Centrist Populism	Stanley 2017; Císař 2017; Saxonberg and Heinisch 2024	- Beyond left/right, "common sense centre," rejection of ideological extremes, anti-party cartel - Flexible, ideologically thin; embraces pragmatism - Ordinary citizens betrayed by corrupt party elites and self-serving politicians.
Technocratic Populism	Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019	- Blend of populist anti-elitism with technocratic competence claims - Incompetent politicians, corrupt bureaucrats - Post-ideological; legitimized via efficiency, evidence, business logic.
Valence Populism	Zulianello and Larsen 2021; Zulianello and Larsen 2024	- Focus on valence issues: integrity, competence, delivery rather than ideology - Corrupt incumbents, rent-seeking elites - Post-ideological; avoids positional divides; focuses on honesty, competence.
Anti-establishment Populism	Kubát and Mejstřík 2020	Non-authoritarian with weak nativist appeal and tend to have radical democratic appeal (exclusionary variable is rather inconclusive due to their lack of ideology).

Sources: Compilation based on Stanley 2017; Císař 2017; Saxonberg and Heinisch 2024; Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019; Zulianello and Larsen 2021; 2024; Kubát and Mejstřík 2020.

3.1.4 SMER–SD's Populism in Slovakia: Centrist, Left-Wing, Hybrid

Slovakia's *SMER–SD (Direction – Social Democracy)*, led by Robert Fico, is a left-wing populist party with nationalist and illiberal tendencies. Formed in the late 1990s from the post-communist left, SMER-SD blends social democratic policies like welfare support with anti-establishment and nationalist rhetoric, appealing to economically disadvantaged voters and opposing neoliberal reforms (Deegan-Krause 2012). Peter Učeň (2004) called new Slovak parties like SMER-SD centrist populists as they avoided ideological labels, criticised elites, and proposed simple solutions. Early on, SMER-SD resembled other Central European

centrist or technocratic populists, focusing on anti-establishment messages and promises of efficient expert-led governance. SMER-SD's populism is twofold: Fico promoted himself as an advocate for ordinary people against elites and foreign capital, while also embracing nationalist and culturally conservative themes, particularly in alliance with Slovakia's far-right. His first government (2006–2010), a coalition with nationalist parties, was marked by strong nationalism and illiberal policies, and has been described as "national-populist" and largely illiberal (Deegan-Krause 2012; Smetanková 2013; Havlík and Hloušek 2021). Fico's government enacted the State Language Law, which prioritised Slovak over Hungarian, and introduced a Press Act that limited media freedom – policies reflecting nationalist-populist trends, typical for ethnopopulism. As a result, SMER-SD's EU party membership was suspended by the Party of European Socialists for alliances with extremists and breaches of liberal values (Havlík and Hloušek 2021).

SMER-SD's populism became more moderate over time, particularly after 2012 when Fico led a single-party government and distanced himself from overt ethnonationalist rhetoric. He shifted focus from attacks on the Hungarian minority to targeting Brussels and migrants during the 2015 refugee crisis, presenting himself as Slovakia's defender against EU refugee quotas but quietly complying to avoid penalties. SMER-SD's approach is pragmatic rather than strictly ideological, using populist messaging that resonates with voters without resulting in major democratic backsliding as seen in Hungary or Poland (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). This demonstrates the SMER-SD's shift from populism to social democracy, emphasizing social welfare and national interests with an anti-elite framing (Spáč and Havlík 2015).

Under Robert Fico, SMER–SD has evolved from centrist anti-establishment party to include left-wing economic program and later incorporated nationalist and illiberal elements typical more for right-wing populism. As Stanley (2017) argues, SMER-SD is better described as a centrist populist party with leftward tendencies rather than a radical left-wing populist group,

because the party combines left-wing economic policies, occasional nationalist rhetoric, and adapts its stance and level of illiberalism based on context, remaining more moderate than similar parties in Hungary or Poland. This hybrid form of populism transcends the narrow boundaries of centrist or left-wing populism, illustrating how populist parties can shift ideologically while maintaining a core focus on opposing elites in favour of "the people."

Table 12: Populism Types for SMER-SD's Populism

Populism Type	Key scholars	Key Characteristics (Scholarly Definition)
Centrist Populism	Učeň 2004	- Early SMER-SD presented itself as a "centrist" protest party. - Anti-establishment, attacking political elites. - Ideologically eclectic, catch-all rhetoric. - Mobilized voters disappointed with traditional post-communist left.
Left-wing Populism	Deegan-Krause 2012	- Combines social-democratic welfare promises with populist anti-elite discourse. - Appeals to voters left behind by neoliberal reforms. - Defends redistributive policies and the welfare state. - Uses populism to counteract decline of mainstream social democracy.
Ethnopopulism / National populism	Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2008	- SMER-SD embedded in the tradition of "national populism" in Slovakia. - Links social promises to national identity and sovereignty. - Portrays Slovaks as threatened by external/global forces. - Blends nationalism with populist anti-elite discourse.
Hybrid/Combination	Stanley 2017	SMER-SD as the only durable left-wing populist party in the region. - Hybrid strategy: mixes social-democratic, nationalist, and populist appeals. - Pragmatic, opportunistic use of populist rhetoric in government. - Functions both as a mainstream party and as a populist challenger.

Source: Učeň 2004; Deegan-Krause 2012; Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2008; Stanley 2017.

3.1.5 Conclusion

Despite differing flavours – right-wing populism in Hungary and Poland, technocratic populism in Czech Republic, and left-wing hybrid in Slovakia – all four countries demonstrate how populist leaders use public concerns to gain power and govern against liberal constraints. These leaders deepen polarization by contrasting "virtuous" citizens with a demonized "other," personalize authority, and challenge independent institutions, as seen with Orbán's opposition to EU values, Kaczyński's dismissal of political opponents, Babiš's merging of business with state, and Fico's targeting of media and NGOs. The thesis further explores how each country's institutions responded to these pressures.

3.2 Measuring Illiberal Practises and Discourses

Populist governments in the Visegrád countries, particularly Hungary and Poland, have been linked to democratic backsliding, as shown by both quantitative indices and qualitative studies. Observers assess *illiberal practices* through institutional changes (in law, governance, or rights) and democracy indices (such as *Freedom House*, *Varieties of Democracy – V-Dem* or *Bertelsmann Transformation Index*). *Illiberal discourse* is measured by analysing leaders' speeches or party manifestos for anti-elite and exclusionary themes.

3.2.1 Measuring Illiberal Practices

In general, *Illiberalism* (compare approaches of Sajó 2021; Laruelle 2022 or Enyedi 2024) means moving away from liberal-democratic norms like minority rights, rule of law, or media freedom, often under claims of representing the majority of the people towards majoritarian principles (Pappas 2013). Researchers usually compare illiberal trends, democratic backsliding and quality of democracy in central Europe using quantitative tools – these

democracy indices led by institutions such as *Freedom House*, *Economist Intelligence Unit*, *V-Dem Institute* or *Bertelsmann Stiftung* (among others) show significant decline or illiberal "turn" especially in Hungary and to a lesser extent in Poland, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia exhibited instances of "swerves" or were involved in corruption-related incidents (Bustikova and Guasti 2017). This trend is shown in Figure 4 based on *V-Dem* data below.

Figure 4: Liberal Democracy Index for CE Countries, Europe and World, 1990-2024
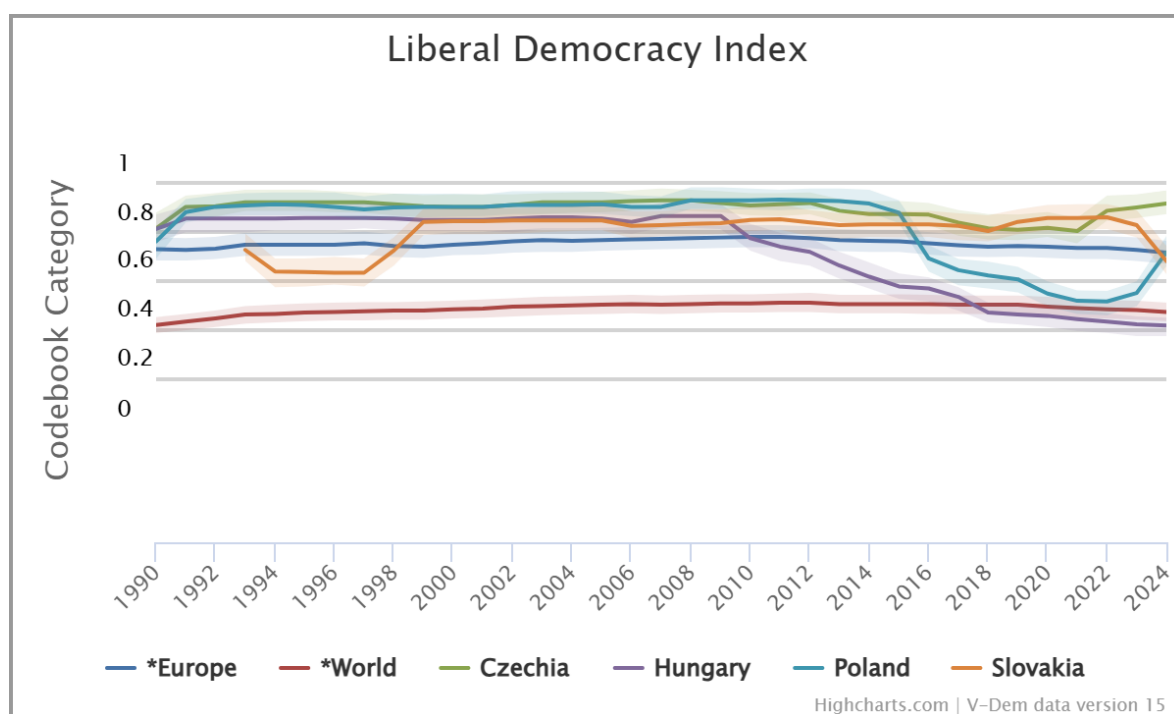
Source: V-Dem (2025).

Therefore, Bakke and Sitter (2020, 2) advise careful consideration to avoid conceptual stretching; according to their criteria (electoral mandate and the motivation, opportunity and absence of effective constraints to dismantle democracy etc.), by 2020 only Fidesz's Hungary and PiS's Poland met the definition of democratic backsliding. On the other side, the Czech Republic and Slovakia lacked one or more of these ingredients in 2010–2020, so indices and case studies treat them as comparatively resilient.

However, Bakke and Sitter (2020, 2) define democratic backsliding as the "deliberate, intended action" by incumbents to undermine formal rules on rights, elections and the rule of law. In this sense, illiberal policy measures – such as executive aggrandizement (concerted expansion of executive power) or politicization of courts and media – constitute measurable departures from constitutional democracy (Hanley and Vachudova 2018). As a result, Hungary is not classified as democracy according to *Freedom House* and *V-Dem*, whereas Czech Republic is usually classified as full, liberal or consolidated democracy (see table 13).

Table 13: Regime Types by Democracy Indices

Country/Indices	Freedom House	EUI	BTI	V-Dem
Hungary	Transitional or Hybrid Regime	Flawed Democracy	Defective Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
Poland	Semi-Consolidated Democracy	Flawed Democracy	Defective Democracy	Electoral Democracy
Czech Republic	Consolidated Democracy	Full Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Liberal Democracy
Slovakia	Consolidated Democracy	Flawed Democracy	Democracy in Consolidation	Electoral Democracy

Sources: Freedom House, EUI, BTI, V-Dem.

3.2.2 Measuring Illiberal Discourses

Scholars assess illiberalism not just through institutional measures but also by analysing populist rhetoric, especially in Central Europe. Populist leaders often contrast "the people" with elites, delegitimize opposition and media, and use anti-pluralist discourse that undermines liberal norms (Müller 2016). Leaders like Kaczyński and Orbán target minorities and NGOs, employ nativist conspiracy theories, and frame dissent as foreign interference. As Havlík and Hloušek (2021) noted, studies using content analysis show that Orbán ranks

among Europe's most populist leaders in his rhetoric, while others, such as Babiš, use more moderate language.

Table 14: Key Slogans and Mottoes of Illiberal Leaders

Leader/Country	Slogan/Motto	Slogan/Motto	Slogan/Motto	Slogan/Motto
Viktor Orbán (Hungary)	Illiberal state	"Make Hungary great again"	"Don't let Soros have the last laugh!"	Christian liberty
Jarosław Kaczyński (Poland)	Safe future for Poles	God, Honor, Fatherland	Free Poland	We Poles are convinced Europeans; Europe is a community of diverse nations, not a mishmashazquotes.com
Andrej Babiš (Czech Republic)	"Make the Czech Republic great again"	Strong Czechia	"We will protect Czechia. Strong and uncompromising."	"I won't drag Czechia into war; I am a diplomat, not a soldier."
Robert Fico (Slovakia)	Stability, order and social security	Slovakia first	Slovak sovereignty and national interest	Traditional family and national values

Source: Author.

Havlík and Hloušek (2021) assess illiberal practices through three dimensions: (1) media control, (2) restrictions on opposition and civil society, and (3) executive power expansion. Hungary ranks highly illiberal across all indicators (see table 15 below), capturing media, limiting NGOs and opponents, and centralising executive authority. Poland under PiS exhibits media dominance and weakened checks, though opposition and civil society remain more active than in Hungary. The Czech Republic shows minimal illiberal measures even in the

discourse, retaining independent institutions. Slovakia falls in between, with some politicisation but sustained pluralism. According to Marc Plattner (2019, 7) – at least in the case of Orbán – the reality suggest that persistent illiberal rhetoric often precedes illiberal actions from populist leaders towards press freedom, judiciary or checks on executive power.

Table 15: Illiberal practices of governing parties in East Central Europe

Indicators	Fidesz	PiS	Smer	ANO
State control or political regulation of public service broadcasters	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Politically motivated regulation of journalism generally	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Political or economic concentration of mass media ownership, threatening pluralism	Yes	No	No	Yes
Legal provisions affecting the activities of opposition parties or civil society	Yes	No	No	No
Economic regulation impacting the activities of civil society	Yes	Yes	No	No
Regulation of other autonomous spheres, such as universities and academic liberties	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Politically motivated interference with private property and the autonomy of proprietors' actions in the economy	No	No	No	No
Strengthening the executive to the detriment of the judiciary or the legislature	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Regulations limiting or obstructing the opposition's checking of government via parliament or other institutions, typically in the form of amendments to the rules of procedure	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Limitations on the independence of the judiciary	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Source: Havlík and Hloušek 2021.

3.2.3 Conclusion

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses identify Hungary – and to a lesser extent Poland – as prominent cases of democratic backsliding, while Czech Republic and Slovakia uphold liberal-democratic standards. Data also suggest that frequent illiberal rhetoric by leaders often precedes actions to weaken liberal institutions. In this regard, we hope that the current verbal

attacks and proposals against public and some private media by ANO and SMER-SD are just part of the pre-election campaign.

3.3 Institutional Changes and Erosion of Checks and Balances

This section examines institutional developments in the Visegrád Four between 2010 and 2025, drawing on the approach of Bakke and Sitter (2020) but brings up-to-date insights and expansions by other scholars. It first considers changes to the *judiciary and rule-of-law structures*, including court-packing, disciplinary chambers, and prosecution practices, with attention to their effects on legal accountability and judicial independence. Next, it discusses *electoral modifications and the role of veto players*, focusing on adjustments to district boundaries, electoral systems, and parliamentary procedures and how these influence incumbency and opposition oversight. Finally, it reviews *media ownership and information pluralism*, describing the impact of state advertising, ownership patterns, and regulatory frameworks on the public sphere. Combined, these sections provide an overview of shifts in checks and balances relevant to the study of democratic trends in Central Europe.

3.3.1 Judiciary and Rule of Law

Democratic backsliding usually starts with a slow weakening of checks and balances rather than overt coups or a quick ban on political parties. Leaders, often populist, may claim to support democracy but undermine its liberal foundations by politicising courts and eroding judicial independence (Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Pappas 2019a). These actions reflect tactics generally described by Schedler's "*Menu of manipulation*" (2002), where competitive elections coexist with manipulated rules and stacked institutions.

3.3.1.1 Hungary's Institutional Erosion

Hungary exemplifies programmatic backsliding in the V4. After Fidesz's electoral victory in 2010 and gaining supermajority, the party overhauled the constitution, centralized judicial administration, restricted oversight, and replaced many judges – effectively reshaping power structures and entrenching loyalists under the guise of reform (Schedler 2002; Bakke and Sitter 2022; Havlík and Hloušek 2021). As Bozóki and Hegedűs (2018) noted, the Constitutional Court, once a key check on power, was packed with Fidesz loyalists and saw its jurisdiction reduced. The government forced many senior judges into early retirement and replaced them with allies, changing the judiciary's makeup - despite EU courts later ruling this illegal. Orbán's administration consolidated control through a party-led National Judicial Office, and politicized other institutions like the prosecutor general's office, budget council, media authority, and presidency. These actions systematically weakened oversight of the executive, leading scholars to describe Hungary's shift as "autocratic legalism" – using legal means to undermine democracy (Scheppele 2018). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) describe these actions as legalistic erosion: altering rules to maintain a democratic appearance while weakening checks on power. Pappas (2014; 2019a) notes that this approach reframes independent institutions as illegitimate elites. Similar strategies included placing loyalists in prosecutorial roles, capturing media regulation, consolidating media ownership, and pressuring NGOs and universities, all of which diminished horizontal and societal accountability (Bakke and Sitter 2022; Havlík and Hloušek 2021; Kubát and Mejstřík 2020). Hungary thus employed rule changes, control over referees, and information management to reshape the rule-of-law environment – so by the late 2010s, Hungary was no longer viewed as a liberal democracy.

3.3.1.2   Poland's Institutional Erosion

Poland enacted changes through regular legislation and administrative practices rather than constitutional amendments (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Bakke and Sitter 2022). Poland's PiS government undermined judicial independence after gaining power in 2015. It blocked legally appointed judges from the Constitutional Tribunal, installed its own choices for a majority by 2016, and created a disciplinary chamber in the Supreme Court to oversee and control judges. Actions included not seating certain judges to the Constitutional Tribunal, modifying procedures, and appointing new members (Pech and Scheppele 2017). Later statutory adjustments altered the composition of the National Council of the Judiciary, making parliamentary majorities responsible for selecting judge-members. The retirement age for Supreme Court justices was also lowered, allowing for new appointments, and a disciplinary system affecting judicial independence was introduced (Sadurski 2019). By merging the roles of justice minister and prosecutor general, implementing public broadcasting reforms, and restricting judges' speech, authorities expanded control over law enforcement and public discourse (Bakke and Sitter 2022). PiS justified these moves as restoring popular sovereignty by replacing the "post-1989 elite," though EU legal checks and domestic opposition created more resistance than seen in Hungary (Pappas 2014, 2019a; Havlík and Hloušek 2021; Bakke and Sitter 2022). Poland's courts became highly politicized after 1989, culminating in a Constitutional Tribunal packed with government loyalists that stalled EU treaty compliance in 2021. Scholars like Wojciech Sadurski (2019) describe this as a "constitutional breakdown," with democratic checks nearly paralyzed under PiS. Together, these measures have significantly weakened judicial independence and checks and balances, albeit with more contestation and occasional reversals compared to Budapest.

3.3.1.3 Czech Republic's Institutional Erosion

During Andrej Babiš's premiership in Czech Republic (2017–2021), there were no major assaults on the judiciary or constitution. The Czech National Bank, courts, and Supreme Audit Office remained independent (Havlík and Hloušek 2021; Bakke and Sitter 2022). Despite ANO's populism, Czech Republic retained its judicial framework without constitutional overhaul. Coalition governments and an active Senate blocked major changes, particularly at the Constitutional Court, ensuring pluralistic appointments and continued constitutional review. Attempts to influence the prosecution service during prominent investigations involving the prime minister met strong institutional resistance and sparked widespread protests (Bakke and Sitter 2022). Concerns about conflicts of interest from concentrated media ownership were mitigated by ongoing competition and civil society efforts, preventing full informational control (Havlík and Hloušek 2021; Bakke and Sitter 2022). Babiš faced fraud investigations during his tenure ("Stork's Nest" subsidy case) and was accused of interfering with prosecutions – most notably when the Chief Prosecutor who charged him was replaced in 2019 (Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Guasti 2021). Moreover, president Zeman, a Babiš's ally, delayed or denied judicial appointments and exerted influence in high-profile cases, suggesting subtle pressure on the judiciary rather than overt changes, plus influencing appointments to the Czech National Bank or oversight bodies. On the other side, the Constitutional Court maintained its review authority, overturning parts of the electoral law in 2021 that favoured major parties like Babiš's ANO. Despite criticizing the decision, Babiš complied, resulting in fairer elections that contributed to his defeat (Hanley and Vachudova 2018). The opposition-led Senate acted as a check by blocking or delaying legislation. ANO also sought to influence institutions by appointing loyalists to public media boards, prompting concerns about politicization, the law enforcement of Babiš for conflict of interest and fraud demonstrated institutional autonomy despite inconclusive results – this investigation and

lawsuits with his home company Agrofert regarding European subsidies continue in 2025 (Pehe 2018; Buben and Kouba 2023). According to Pappas's framework (2019a), ANO's performance-based populism did not entail a majoritarian overhaul of liberal checks, resulting in only partial or limited democratic erosion.

3.3.1.4 Slovakia's Institutional Erosion

Robert Fico's terms as Slovak prime minister (2006–2010, 2012–2018, 2023-until now) saw some illiberal tendencies, such as a 2009 press law that threatened media freedom and corruption scandals involving high-level officials (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). Despite these issues, Fico did not change Slovakia's constitutional framework or compromise judicial independence, though prolonged vacancies on the Constitutional Court weakened its effectiveness (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). After mass protests in 2018 following the murders of a journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, an investigation revealed connections between oligarch Marián Kočner and Slovak officials, leading to protests and the resignation of Prime Minister Fico in 2018 (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018). A reformist government restored focus on anti-corruption and rule of law by establishing a Special Prosecutor's Office to address corruption, but after Fico's return in 2023, the office was dissolved, sparking concerns about the reversal of anti-corruption efforts and rapid institutional decline. While some corrupt judges and police were prosecuted, impunity persists – Kočner was acquitted in 2023 amid claims of intimidation and evidence tampering. SMER–SD did not overhaul judicial governance but oversaw informal capture and episodic disruptions of constitutional review. Political deadlock created vacancies that weakened the Constitutional Court indirectly (Chin 2025). Investigations revealed collusive links among law enforcement, prosecutors, and oligarchs, suggesting pressured prosecutorial autonomy, but not statutory changes as seen in Poland (Bakke and Sitter 2022). Political pressure on media and NGOs was intermittent, and

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changes in leadership allowed for corrective reforms, indicating that informal or personnel-based capture is often reversible (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). SMER-SD's social-populist approach and coalition dynamics limited a majoritarian agenda, with selective rather than comprehensive use of influence tactics.

3.3.2 Electoral Process and Veto Players

Populists in power often try to change electoral rules and weaken "veto players" – those whose approval is needed for policy changes, such as second chambers, presidents, courts or coalition partners – to strengthen their control (Tsebelis 2002). Andreas Schedler's (2002) concept of the *Menu of manipulation* is also relevant here: instead of cancelling elections, various methods may be used to influence the electoral process and outcomes.

3.3.2.1 Hungary's Electoral Process

Between 2011 and 2013, the government significantly revised election laws, including the introduction of a new electoral law in 2012 that increased the majoritarian component of the mixed member system. The reforms reduced the number of parliamentary representatives and replaced the previous two-round system for single-member districts with a single round plurality system, thereby conferring advantages to the leading party (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). Moreover, electoral districts were redrawn to favour rural areas where Fidesz is strong, diluting opposition votes in urban centres. Mechanisms like winner compensation and changes to expatriate voting further increased Fidesz's seat share, allowing it to secure supermajorities with less than half the vote (Scheppele 2022).

In addition, Fidesz supervised the redrawing of constituency boundaries, which critics and independent analysts suggested resulted in gerrymandering that favoured Fidesz by consolidating opposition voters in fewer urban districts and increasing representation for rural

areas where Fidesz received greater support (Krekó and Enyedi 2018). The administration further extended voting rights to ethnic Hungarians residing abroad, particularly Hungarian dual citizens in neighbouring countries who predominantly support Fidesz, enabling them to vote by mail for party lists. These procedures contributed to a significant advantage for Fidesz in subsequent elections. Moreover, media and state resources are used to blur lines between party and government, raising concerns about free and fair elections (Krekó and Enyedi 2018; Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018). Consequently, Fidesz maintained its parliamentary supermajority in the 2014, 2018 and 2022 elections – these results attributable to both the new electoral framework and a fragmented opposition.

As a result, Orbán has locked in power through legal means, with only international actors left as potential checks. The presidency, typically a potential veto point, was rendered ineffective as Fidesz's parliamentary majority enabled the appointment of supportive presidents who consistently ratified legislation. In conclusion, the government under Prime Minister Orbán systematically removed or co-opted institutional veto players, thus governing without substantial constraints and making electoral defeat of the incumbent challenging (Scheppele 2022).

3.3.2.2 Poland´s Electoral Process

In Poland, PiS did not secure a supermajority and encountered early challenges with the Constitutional Tribunal. After losing control of the Senate in 2019, the upper house served as a significant veto player and blocked ordinary legislation (Bakke and Sitter 2020). In response, PiS made changes to the judiciary and adjusted the Senate's procedures and timing, but its inability to control all veto points at times slowed the legislative process. According to Bakke and Sitter (2020), the absence of a constitution-altering majority meant PiS's reforms often encountered opposition from the constitutional court, and losing the Senate made

passing ordinary legislation more difficult, and President Duda occasionally vetoed radical bills despite PiS support.

Coalition tensions with smaller parties further slowed PiS's agenda. Additionally, the government proposed introducing two new chambers in the Supreme Court, one of which – the extraordinary review chamber – would have the authority to overturn election results, raising concerns about the impact on the integrity and finality of the electoral process (Sadurski 2019).

In summary, while Poland's populists weakened some checks on power – particularly in relation to the Constitutional Tribunal and judicial oversight of elections – they did not attain the comprehensive dominance observed in Hungary under Fidesz. As Havlík and Hloušek (2021) noted, key democratic safeguards, including a pluralistic Senate, partially independent judiciary, and active opposition, continue to provide constraints, and the absence of constitutional reform limited the extent of PiS's alterations to electoral rules.

3.3.2.3   Czech Republic᾽s Electoral Process

In Czech Republic, the presence of multiple veto players and the absence of overwhelming single-party power prevented the kind of sweeping electoral manipulations seen in Hungary. Andrej Babiš's ANO led a coalition government and never commanded a parliamentary majority alone; therefore, constitutional changes or election law overhauls were not politically feasible. The proportional representation system in Czech elections remained intact (in fact, in 2021 the Czech Constitutional Court struck down a slight disproportionality mechanism in the electoral law that had favoured large parties, a decision that went against the interests of Babiš and demonstrated judicial independence). Babiš did leverage his position as Prime Minister and media owner to influence the electoral arena – for example, by receiving friendly coverage in media he owned and by using populist messaging against "establishment" parties

– but he could not systematically alter the rules of the game. Babiš did not make major changes to the rules, and courts and an active civil society kept his power in check.

On the other hand, Guasti (2020) reports that Czech "technocratic populism" affects vertical, horizontal, and diagonal accountability. According to the study, institutional veto points – particularly the judiciary, the Constitutional Court, the Senate, and a pluralistic media – have been key in maintaining checks and balances. These institutions have so far limited significant changes: for example, proposals such as ANO's preference for a majoritarian lower house were not implemented, and courts upheld election results and blocked measures deemed unconstitutional (Bakke and Sitter 2020).

To conclude, elections in Czech Republic remain competitive, and while there is political polarization, there has been no substantial decline in electoral processes. The president, Constitutional Court, and Senate (often led by opposition parties) continue to play influential roles and have addressed attempts at expanding executive power (Hanley and Vachudová 2018; Havlík and Hloušek 2021). Moreover, in 2021 the ruling ANO was defeated in the elections, and a new centre-right government led by a right-wing coalition was formed.

3.3.2.4   Slovakia´s Electoral Process

In Slovakia, the SMER-SD led by Robert Fico achieved majorities in 2006, 2012, 2016 and 2023. However, SMER-SD did not obtain a two-thirds majority in parliament and was therefore unable to override veto players independently. The period from 2018 to 2020, marked by protests and a coalition government, demonstrated that political parties can face limitations due to opposition vetoes and public opinion. Moreover, opposition-aligned presidents, like Andrej Kiska (2014–2019), frequently criticized the government, and membership in the EU and eurozone further discouraged extreme actions. Although Fico's administration passed some partisan laws, such as restricting independent campaign

advertising, it did not overhaul electoral rules – elections remained free, allowing the opposition to win in 2020.

SMER-SD's return to power in 2023 may challenge existing checks, but proportional voting system resulting in coalition politics, limited populist-driven institutional changes and maintained liberal democratic norms helped to maintain a system of checks and balances (Havlík and Hloušek 2021). On the other hand, the 2025 proposals could fundamentally change the electoral system, but must overcome institutional obstacles.

3.3.3 Media Control and Information Pluralism

As Schedler (2002) or Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), populist leaders usually weaken media freedom to undermine opponents and shape public narratives. Independent media offers oversight and diverse viewpoints, but leaders in the V4 countries have passed laws, changed ownership, and targeted journalists to restrict media. The degree of influence varies across the region; the extreme example of so-called *Media Capture*, which happens when authorities co-opt or silence outlets to promote government agendas and which is often working through limited funding and advertising strategies, is present only in Hungary (Dragomir 2018).

3.3.3.1   Hungary's Media Control

As shown by Dragomir (2018), Hungary under Viktor Orbán offers a clear example of aggressive media capture. Since winning power in 2010, Fidesz has transformed Hungary's media landscape. The government and its allies pressured independent outlets by withdrawing state advertising and squeezing advertising markets, while flooding the market with pro-government outlets. As one analysis notes, Fidesz turned most previously independent media outlets into propaganda instruments funded with public money, and now government-controlled outlets ensure that Fidesz dominates political space (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020).

Analysts note that Hungary now has an unbalanced media landscape shaped by Orbán's strategy of capturing institutions and fostering loyal media networks. Independent outlets face persistent challenges, such as license disputes and limited resources due to state-controlled advertising, while government-aligned media receive most funding and support. This has resulted in near-total government control over the sector, marginalising independent journalism and reducing critical coverage (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018).

3.3.3.2 Poland's Media Control

Since 2015, Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party has used legal and economic measures to increase political control over media. PiS reshaped media law, enabling government appointment of public broadcaster heads and replacing independent oversight bodies with officials aligned to the party. State media began promoting pro-government views, while budget cuts pressured outlets to comply (Bill and Stanley 2025). The government also pursued "repolonization," including a state-run company's acquisition of Polska Press, raising concerns about self-censorship. Attempts to force sales of foreign-owned broadcasters and strategic regulatory fines furthered political influence. Pro-PiS media have benefited from favourable placement and state advertising. Despite ongoing independent voices, PiS's actions have eroded media pluralism, damaging Poland's press freedom ranking. On the other hand, the current media ownership in Poland, which involves U.S., German, and Swiss companies, ensures some pluralism which does not exist in Hungary (Przybylski 2018, 63).

3.3.3.3 Czech Republic's Media Control

The Czech Republic generally demonstrates strong media pluralism and limited government control. Still, issues arise when politicians own media businesses, such as Andrej Babiš, who controlled major outlets through *Agrofert* (Buštíková and Guasti 2019). This led to concerns

over potential media influence. Despite this, independent voices persist, and research showed that most Czech media did not promote populist agendas permanently, with critical commentary on elites being more common. Overall, market forces and editorial decisions have shaped Czech media rather than direct political control. As Hanley and Vachudová (2018) observed, unlike Hungary or Poland, the Czech Republic's illiberal shift did not involve dismantling media institutions. Instead, political groups have developed supportive media connections, though media power in the Czech Republic is more dispersed. To conclude, despite some challenges, most analysts (e.g. Buben and Kouba 2023) agree that media capture in the Czech Republic remains weaker than in neighbouring states, with media pluralism and critical reporting largely intact, and the efforts to control and attack on public media was not successful.

3.3.3.4   Slovakia's Media Control

Media capture in Slovakia has been evident, with major radio and print outlets now controlled by politically connected businesses like the *Penta investment group*. How Cross-Kovoor (2021) showed, journalists at leading publishers, including *SME* and *Petit Press*, resigned over these developments in 2017. Studies show Slovakia faces media capture through owner concentration and ties to politicians, leading to preferential treatment for government-linked advertisers and biased regulatory decisions, though direct censorship remains uncommon. The 2018 murder of journalist Ján Kuciak exposed collusion among Slovak politicians, businesses, and criminal groups, highlighting concerns about media capture (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018). While public awareness has increased and media freedom has improved, a few conglomerates still control major outlets, and the state applies subtle pressure. Slovakia's media landscape is more open than some, but concentrated

ownership and political-business ties remain threats to true independence (Surowiec and Štětka 2020).

3.3.4 Conclusion

Across Central European countries, similar patterns of changes to democratic processes can be observed. Elected officials have exercised their mandates to consolidate authority and alter systems of accountability through various means. One such approach is *executive aggrandizement*, where control is increased by central government relative to other branches. In Hungary, the administration implemented a new constitution and several major laws that restructured institutions such as the Constitutional Court and the civil service. In Poland, reforms were introduced by PiS that changed the judiciary, including the establishment of disciplinary bodies and noncompliance with some court decisions. Both administrations made changes affecting institutional checks: Hungary's constitutional court saw its jurisdiction reduced and its composition changed, while Poland's Constitutional Tribunal was restructured through appointments and procedural changes introduced by the governing party.

Another mechanism involves changes to the *electoral process* that can strengthen the position of the ruling party. After 2010, Hungary revised its electoral system by redrawing districts and switching to a single-round format, making it more challenging for opposition parties to secure victory. Reports from election monitors have noted an "uneven playing field" favouring Fidesz, and the use of state resources for campaigning has been documented. In Poland, while the electoral framework has generally remained unchanged, the government did propose a postal-voting scheme for the 2020 presidential election, which was later withdrawn following public concern.

PiS and Fidesz also used public media and state companies to strengthen their political position, blurring party and state boundaries. *Media capture and reduced information*

pluralism, especially in Hungary with the consolidation of outlets under KESMA, have marginalized independent journalists through harassment and regulatory pressure. Poland has seen similar developments, such as TVP's transformation into a government-aligned broadcaster and PKN Orlen's takeover of regional newspapers. These measures allow populist governments to control public narratives and suppress dissenting voices.

However, Czech Republic's institutions remained resilient due to coalition politics, independent courts, and civil society. Slovakia experienced some backsliding under Fico, eroding governance and facing corruption scandals, but lacked entrenched authoritarian changes and showed resistance through public protests. Therefore, according to Bakke and Sitter (2020), this comparative institutional resilience suggests that the challenges faced by the Czech Republic and Slovakia are more accurately characterized as "hollowing out" rather than explicit "democratic backsliding". To conclude, when populists had strong mandates, like Hungary's constitutional majority, they quickly rewrote election laws and removed checks on their authority. Where their power was limited, other actors could block major changes, resulting in more moderate governance, like in the Czech republic and Slovakia.

Moreover, many illiberal policies are introduced as legal reforms or democratization efforts. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 6) note, "elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance." Constitutions and elections remain, but the process is manipulated to limit freedoms through seemingly legal actions. In Hungary and Poland, ruling parties have cited anti-corruption, efficiency, or national culture to justify control over the judiciary and media, undermining pluralism and the rule of law. This gradual, legalistic approach blurs resistance and enables a steady erosion of liberal democracy, as outlined in Table 16, which details how populist leaders in Central Europe weaken checks and balances.

Table 16: Mechanisms of Democratic Backsliding

Mechanism/Country	Hungary	Poland	Czech Republic	Slovakia
Judicial capture	Systematic, consolidated	Systematic, ongoing	Limited (politicization risk)	Partial (appointments influence)
Media control	Captured, oligarchic networks	Captured public media, private pressure	Soft capture via ownership	Limited, but pressure on critical outlets
Civil society repression	NGO restrictions, academic clampdown	Funding cuts, cultural repression	Weakening, but not systematically attacked	Nationalist framing, selective targeting
Electoral manipulation	Gerrymandering, tilted rules	Advantageous state resources, media bias	Electoral fairness intact	Electoral volatility, but fair competition

Source: Based on Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and previous chapters.

Conclusion

This thesis has addressed to answer the question *how does the type of populism affect the extent and means of democratic backsliding in Central European countries with comparable political and institutional contexts*? Using comparative analysis of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the thesis finds that the ideological type of populism in power influences both the extent and means of democratic backsliding in Central Europe. Right-wing populist governments, particularly Hungary under Fidesz and Poland under PiS (until 2023), have generally implemented more rapid and extensive illiberal changes. In contrast, centrist, technocratic or left-wing populists produce varied outcomes, typically implementing more selective or limited institutional changes, use anti-elite and anti-corruption rhetoric and may bypass pluralist norms but often do not dismantle core institutions thanks to pressure from veto players, independent courts and civil society.

On the contrary, this thesis confirms the claim that populist leaders, regardless of ideology, consistently expand executive power and undermine checks and balances, supporting the proposition that populism inherently contains illiberal traits (Pappas 2014; 2019a; 2019b). Populist governments in Central Europe, regardless of left, centre or right, use formal and informal means – such as legal reforms, patronage, and manipulation of norms – to entrench their rule and weaken rivals. These actions also reinforce the trend of increased political dominance over institutions like the media and civil service, supporting the idea that populism leads to greater executive control and reduced horizontal accountability, as shown by Bustikova and Guasti (2017).

Moreover, As Bakke and Sitter (2020) emphasize, democratic backsliding occurs through both formal and informal erosion of rights, elections, and the rule of law (generally known as state capture). The extent of democratic backsliding depends on both domestic institutions and external factors. Coalition politics and constitutional checks have curbed illiberal moves in

countries like Slovakia and the Czech Republic, forcing leaders to compromise and preventing the concentration of power. As noted by Bustikova and Guasti (2017) and Bakke and Sitter (2020), institutional resilience and EU oversight, as seen in Poland's legal conflicts with the EU, or mass protest like in the Czech Republic or Slovakia help contain or delay autocratization. However, even domestic veto players (Tsebelis 2002) are significant, as Czech Republic's bicameralism, Slovakia's fragmented party system, and lack of power to change the constitution in both countries that have mitigated erosion compared to Hungary's supermajority rule. In short, the findings support the proposition that strong constitutions, dispersed power structures and EU oversight can delay the worst effects of populism.

In summary, several other key insights emerge across the region. First, populism, driven by democratically elected leaders, has fuelled democratic backsliding rather than military coups or foreign interventions, confirming core thesis by Levitsky and Ziblatt, Schedler, and Pappas. Second, strong institutions can limit norm-violators, but their effectiveness also depends on leaders committed to upholding norms. Third, EU influence and international reactions have shaped outcomes, supported domestic opposition and sometimes curbed authoritarian actions.

On the contrary, the findings and limitations of this research suggest several avenues for future inquiry that build upon our work: First, broader comparative studies can expand the comparative scope to test whether our typology and conclusions hold beyond Central Europe. Second, another fruitful path would be to follow populist cases over a longer term to observe ultimate outcomes and potential reversals. Third, mechanisms of democratic resilience under populist governments or longitudinal study of post-populist transitions (e. g. Poland after 2023 from recovery perspective) can help our understanding. And finally, future research on populism should also give more attention to comparative analysis of the reaction to the rise of populist forces from mainstream political parties.

In conclusion, populism's effect on democracy is complex and need further verification. In the Central Europe, core democratic mechanisms persist – sometimes strengthened by opposition from civil society, core institutions and international actors. Nevertheless, the government of populists in power are not permanent – as developments in Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland demonstrate, civic participation, unified opposition, and sustained efforts – both internally and externally – can restore democratic governance. Overall, democratic change in Central Europe presents varied outcomes shaped by leadership choices, strategic decisions, and societal responses. This highlights that both *institutional structures* and *individual actors* play important roles in determining national trajectories, contributing to broader insights into the development and resilience of democracies. Therefore, the future resilience of Central European democracies will depend on the robustness of institutional checks and balances and the active participation of citizens and external partners.

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