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Table of Contents

RESEARCH PAPERS

MANUELA CAIANI, DANIEL PŁATEK & GRZEGORZ PIOTROWSKI Mobilization of radical right movements in Central and Eastern Europe between 2008 and 2016	1
ADRIEN BEAUDUIN The Czech parliamentary radical right and the West: Harnessing post-socialism to anti-liberalism	35
GHOLAMPOUR FARANAK & BORBÁLA SIMONOVITS The voice of irregular migrants: A mixed-method study exploring the migration process of Iranian asylum seekers to Europe	53
MARIA ANCA SANDU Memes as satire in Romanian political culture	80
UTKU BOZDAG Framing displaced persons: An analysis of Turkish media's use of migration metaphors on Twitter	117
ONUR ALP YILMAZ & MELEK AYLIN ÖZOFLU The construction of reconciliation and social cohesion by Turkey's Republican People's Party: A critical discourse analysis of Kılıçdaroğlu's Helalleşme call	137
O. SOLOVIOVA, V. SOMINA, O. GAVRYLIUK, M. KOVTUN & V. KOVTUN Legislation and practice of observing of human rights in Turkey in terms of European integration processes in the country	155
VERONIKA CZINA The effectiveness of the EU's rule of law conditionality mechanism: Theoretical observations based on the case of Hungary	171
ERZSÉBET CSATLÓS Hungarian administrative processes in the digital age: An attempt to a comprehensive examination	189

BOOK REVIEW

- Melegh, A. (2023). *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe: A Global Historical Sociological Analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan
Reviewed by Luis Escobedo 210
- Szűcs, Z. G. (2023). *Political Ethics in Illiberal Regimes: A Realist Interpretation*. Manchester University Press
Reviewed by Gábor Pál 216
- Shokhin, S. O. & Kudryashova, E. V. (2022). *The Legal Framework for Strategic Planning in contemporary Russia*. MGIMO
Reviewed by Vladislav V. Grib & Alessandro Cenerelli 223
-

MANUELA CAIANI, DANIEL PŁATEK
& GRZEGORZ PIOTROWSKI

Mobilization of radical right movements in Central and Eastern Europe between 2008 and 2016

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Abstract

The radical right is on the rise all over Europe and beyond, either in terms of electoral success or activities outside the institutional arena, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis. Central and Eastern European countries are no exception, although not yet closely studied for radical right social movements and protest. In this article we investigate the degree and characteristics of the mobilisation of different types of radical right organisations (political parties and social movements alike) in Central and Eastern Europe to capture a broader picture of the current developments in radical right politics beyond elections and electoral campaign periods. By focusing on four countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), and combining qualitative and quantitative data derived from a protest event analysis reported in newspaper articles between 2008 and 2016 (for a total of 1587 events coded), we analyse the radical right mobilisation (i.e. intensity and degree of radicalism), linking it to the political opportunities and the organisational features of the groups mobilising. We argue that the radical right is using a very broad repertoire of action, beyond violence and the electoral arena, including expressive and symbolic strategies, as well as the use of new technologies like the Internet. We also stress that for the radical right, as for the left-wing social movements, the analytical framework of political opportunities and a resource mobilisation approach can help in explaining their mobilisation.

Keywords: radical right; social movement approach; political opportunities; protest event analysis

1 Introduction

The increase in right-wing mobilisation has led to a growing interest in the phenomenon and its spread around the world. Do regional specificities define radical right mobilisations?¹ And if so, what factors facilitate or hinder these tendencies?

¹ Scholars use labels such as ‘extreme right’ (Arzheimer, 2009; Bale, 2003; Lubbers et al., 2002), ‘far right’ (Golder, 2016), and “populist radical right” (Mudde, 2007) interchangeably to refer to the same organisations, such as the French National Front (FN), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), and the Flemish Bloc/Flemish Interest (VB).

Our paper analyses right-wing radical mobilisations between 2008 and 2016 in four Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Drawing on social movement studies, we focus on several factors that explain the similarities and differences between the different mobilizations, and we take these factors to be ‘opportunities’ available to the movements (political opportunity structures, or POSs). First and foremost, we assess the political opportunities for the radical right, as in some of our cases there is a significant presence of parties with radical right agendas (i.e. promoting anti-immigrant narratives, homophobia, xenophobia, etc.) that have entered parliaments and allied themselves with grassroots groups. After the refugee crisis, and especially in the context of the EU resettlement programme, political elites began to make claims against immigrants and refugees. In the case of Poland, the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric also overlapped with election campaigns (both presidential and parliamentary).

We also examine the existence and enforcement of laws and regulations that prohibit or restrict right-wing extremist groups (but also strengthen them when relaxed). Finally, we analyse the popularity of these groups (in society), their potential for mobilisation, their preferred forms of organisation (e.g. formal or informal groups, subcultural associations, etc.) and their main types of activities (e.g. disruptive, confrontational, etc.), which may represent more contingent opportunities and resources for mobilisation.

Right-wing parties have grown alongside new forms of right-wing social movements (e.g. ‘movement parties’, Kitschelt, 2006), which act as laboratories for new political and organisational ideas (Minkenberg, 2010; Pankowski, 2010). Examples of sustained radical right mobilisation outside the electoral arena are increasing: The identitarian movement(s) spreading across several European countries; transnational xenophobic campaigns such as ‘Fortress Europe’ (Nissen, 2019); the anti-Islamic Pegida groups with their marches and street protests; as well as anti-immigrant vigilante groups such as the Soldiers of Odin, which are becoming increasingly popular (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2018), as well as similar initiatives in Central Europe (Gattinara, Froio & Pirro, 2021). However, while radical right political parties as well as social movements in Western Europe have received considerable scholarly attention even before the 2008 economic crisis (cf. Caiani et al., 2012), radical right protest activities, including more recent (anti ‘gender ideology’) activism against LGBT people (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020, Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) in Central Europe have been less studied (see, for some exceptions, Pirro, 2019; Vejvodová, 2016).

We aim to contribute to this literature by analysing the mobilisation and protest events of radical right groups in Central and Eastern Europe, drawing on comparative empirical material based on a protest event database. By examining the phenomenon in relation to contextual possibilities and against the backdrop of actors’ symbolic (i.e. identities) and organisational resources, we hope to broaden our understanding of contemporary

We define (after Minkenberg, 2000, pp. 174–175) radical right groups as ‘a political ideology, the core element of which is a myth of a homogeneous nation, a romantic and populist ultranationalism which is directed against the concept of liberal and pluralistic democracy and its underlying principles of individualism and universalism.’ The contemporary radical right does not call for returning to former, pre-democratic regimes such as monarchy or feudalism, but rather opts for government by the people, but in terms of ethnocracy instead of democracy.

political developments in Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. In short, we want to get a broader picture of trends in radical right politics in the CEE region, beyond elections and electoral campaigns. We also want to see if there are any regional characteristics of the four countries studied that would allow the creation of regional characteristics, in this case of right-wing activities.

We hypothesise that right-wing groups will be more active in countries where the political and cultural opportunities available to them are favourable (i.e. 'open'). Relevant variables include, for example, laws against racism and xenophobia, the degree of legal control of right-wing groups, electoral restrictions on small parties, and the degree of societal consensus regarding the Nazi past. Other important aspects that are generally considered to be opportunities for right-wing groups are: the presence of allies – such as centre-right parties – in power, an authoritarian past (Mudde, 2007, pp. 233–255), nostalgia for fascist or Nazi regimes, and socially accepted xenophobic ideologies (Rydgren, 2005). We expect more radical right-wing activity in countries with weaker legal regulation of extreme groups, lower electoral thresholds for small parties, and the like.

After we present our methods and sources, we investigate the intensity and trends of radical right mobilisation in our four cases. We evaluate how these groups use different strategies (including violence), organisational targets, issues, and their scope (i.e. national vs. supranational). We will relate the level and forms of mobilisation to the country and group-contexts in which they mobilise. In the final section, we conclude and summarise our findings.

2 Previous studies

Social movement scholars have historically focused on left-wing movements, overlooking the populist radical right (Hutter & Kriesi, 2013). Moreover, while Western European movements and collective action have received significant scholarly attention even before the European crises (economic in 2008, migration in 2015), protest activities in Central and Eastern Europe have remained understudied, especially regarding radical right organisations. More recently, research has focused on radical/extreme right collective actors and grassroots political activism in CEE (Čisář & Šetková, 2016; Čisář, 2017; Mudde, 2005; Minkenberg, 2011; 2013; Gerő et al., 2017; Kajta, 2017; Susánszky et al., 2017); some scholars have addressed media coverage of radical right politics (Kluknavská, 2015; Gattinara & Froio, 2019). Political and cultural cleavages in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are also supported by right-wing governments, which in turn are strengthened by conservative civil society (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020; Bluh & Varga, 2019; Bustikova, 2019; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019; Molnar, 2016). The role of regional legacies is often overlooked (for exceptions, see Minkenberg, 2010; Pirro, 2015).

Research on the populist radical right in Western Europe (e.g. the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party) has emphasised the role of specific structural and socio-cultural factors (Pirro, 2015). These prominent hypotheses regarding the emergence of radical right mobilisation are difficult to translate into the CEE context: the 'silent counterrevolution' (Ignazi, 1992) and the 'third wave' phase based on 'unemployment and xenophobia' (von Beyme, 1988) do not seem to apply to our cases. Some scholars argue that

‘the populist radical right in Central and Eastern Europe seems to retain features *sui generis*, introducing a juxtaposition of old and new politics; as a result, the historical legacies and idiosyncrasies of the post-communist context are likely to play a prominent role’ (Pirro, 2013, p. 600). There is also a large body of research published in local languages on this topic, but it is difficult for non-native speakers to access (cf. Platek, 2020; Platek & Płucienniczak, 2017). Therefore, we decided to add to the existing knowledge on the mobilisation of the radical right, especially regarding these specificities.

In the CEE region, studies looking at protest and the online sphere usually focus on progressive left-wing groups (Císař, 2017). Moreover, systematic empirical studies comparing different radical right-wing organisations are rare. Some have focused on the relationship between right-wing parties and civil society organisations politically and ideologically close to them, and their role in fostering cultural narratives for the radical right (Bill, 2020). Others (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; 2019; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019) have demonstrated the deep ties between the radicalised Catholic Church and right-wing groups (e.g. in Poland) or examined the discourses and collective memories that characterise these political forces (Kazharski, 2019; Korycki, 2019). Finally, empirical research on the radical right and the spread of its political mobilisation, identity and propaganda online remains rather fragmented and limited, focusing mainly on political parties (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Fofiu, 2015; Karl, 2016).

3 Case studies and context

The revitalisation of the European radical right grew after 2008, following the economic (and related political) crisis, both in terms of electoral successes and protest activities (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Benček & Strasheim, 2016). The groups behind these mobilisations form a single family with common features, including nationalism, chauvinism, xenophobia, the quest for a strong state, welfare chauvinism, revisionism and traditional ethics (Mudde, 2007, p. 21). Central and Eastern European parties are also following this trend (Mudde, 2013).

The electoral performance of Bulgaria’s Ataka, Hungary’s Jobbik, Slovakia’s National Party and Czechia’s Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), especially during the period under study (2008–2016), seems to confirm the pervasive appeal of the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe (Pirro, 2013; Pirro et al., 2021). The electoral victories of Fidesz in Hungary since 2002 and Law and Justice in Poland in 2005 and later in 2015 and 2019 mark this trend, but since these parties came to power they have become ‘cartel parties’ (Mair, 2012), distancing themselves from contact with social movements and grassroots support. When it comes to ‘movement parties’, the ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic Jobbik won 14.7 per cent of the vote in the 2014 European elections and secured 26 parliamentary seats in the 2018 national elections.² The anti-Roma, anti-immigrant and anti-NATO

² Jobbik cannot be considered a radical right party anymore. After 2013 Jobbik changed its strategy and moved towards moderate and conservative positions, losing its grassroots and ‘civic’ allies. A new real far-right party Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk) – founded by a former leader of Jobbik – replaced Jobbik in their previous role.

Kotleba People's Party Our Slovakia won 8.6 per cent of the vote in 2016 and 7.9 per cent in 2020 (securing 17 seats). In Czechia, the anti-immigration and Eurosceptic SPD won 10 per cent of the vote in the 2018 national elections.

Our four cases share a similar story of post-communist transformation and have all recently experienced a resurgence of right-wing activism (Mudde, 2010), but they also differ along dimensions that we consider relevant to the degree and forms of right-wing radicalism (on the political opportunities for the radical right in CEE, see Bustikova, 2009, and Pirro, 2015). The electoral strength of the radical right was measured by the electoral results of radical right parties in national and local elections in the countries studied. Values were assigned as follows: 0–5 per cent = 0; 5.1–10 per cent = 0.5; >10.1 per cent = 1 (for a similar construction of the indicator see Mudde, 2007, p. 246).

Some characteristics of the CEE countries could be conducive to the mobilisation of the radical right. For example, Mudde (2002) argues that the communist legacy could make these societies particularly vulnerable to right-wing anti-European populism due to the strong anti-political and anti-elitist sentiments nurtured under communism. Moreover, communist authoritarianism limited opportunities to openly reflect on the issue of human rights violations after the Second World War and hindered inclusive conceptions of the post-1989 polity, thereby giving the radical right more political legitimacy to mobilise against various cultural 'others' (i.e. ethnic minorities) (Kluknavska, 2015).

While these factors may provide fertile ground and symbolic resources for radical right mobilisation ('historically determined opportunities'), Mudde (2013) argues that three decades after the transition, we need to look beyond a direct link between communist legacies and radical right activity. Moreover, the radical right actively frames historical narratives, legacies (and thus opportunities) and collective identities for the purposes of political competition (Pirro, 2015).

Distrust of representative institutions is considered a hallmark of the CEE region (Howard, 2003, p. 78) and may be related to the successful mobilisation of the radical right. Trust in national parliaments is lower in CEE than in other EU countries (20 per cent in Czechia, 30 per cent in Hungary, 23 per cent in Poland and 29 per cent in Slovakia,³ compared to an EU average of 36 per cent). This mistrust also applies to other facets of institutionalised politics, resulting in low levels of unionisation and fewer civil society organisations in our four cases.

We also looked at the organisational characteristics of radical right organisations, focusing on the degree of formalisation of radical right organisations in each country, measured by a variable that assigns values ranging from 0 (0 per cent) to 1 (100 per cent) on the basis of the percentage of radical right organisations that have a 'membership form/formal subscription' for new members. This was measured with a variable that assigns values from 0 (0 per cent) to 1 (100 per cent) on the basis of the percentage of right-wing extremist organisations in each country that 'sell some kind of merchandise online for self-financing' (T-shirts, flags, war gadgets) or, more generally, 'provide instructions and facilities on their websites for receiving funds for the group' (transfer method, bank account, donation, etc.).

³ Based on Eurobarometer's poll of citizens' trust in national parliaments: <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index>

4 Theoretical framework

Institutional and protest politics can be antagonistic or mutually reinforcing (Hutter, 2014). Although scholars agree that the recent European economic and financial crises have emboldened radical social actors who capitalise on citizens' discontent, political scientists tend to focus on the electoral channel, while sociologists explore non-electoral political trends (Rydgren, 2007).

Discursive opportunities, which determine which ideas become acceptable in the public sphere, can be measured by the degree of social acceptance of political groups or their narratives (such as anti-immigration discourse). Historical opportunity structures refer to the existence of historical Nazi groups or parties to which contemporary groups might refer.

Although grievances (in the context of social movement studies as understood by della Porta, 2017) are important for any collective mobilisation, we emphasise the ability of collective actors to adapt to contextual resources and constraints, or to take advantage of available political and cultural opportunities (Rydgren, 2003, p. 49). These political-cultural and symbolic opportunities facilitate or hinder the emergence and repertoires of collective actions and actors (Tarrow, 1994; Kriesi, 2004; and Koopmans & Statham, 1999 on the discursive opportunity structures of the radical right). 'Open' political opportunity structures are expected to facilitate collective mobilisation, while 'closed' opportunity structures are expected to hinder protest but promote radicalisation (i.e. disruptive or violent action repertoires) should it occur. Scholars have operationalised political and cultural opportunities as 'allies in power', 'institutional access points to the system', elite stability/instability, elite culture towards challenges, elite discourse, and citizens' attitudes towards movements (cf. Gamson & Meyer, 1996).

Different types of right-wing organisations tend to exploit the opportunities and constraints of their respective countries in different ways. Actors' specific characteristics and resources (material and symbolic) should influence their strategic choices (della Porta, 1995). We also consider movements' material and symbolic resources (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996, p. 3) as they constrain how movements can respond to different opportunities (Koopmans et al., 2005, p. 21). More recently, social movement scholars have highlighted the importance of grievances (Kriesi, 2012; della Porta, 2015). In the shadow of the economic and financial crisis of 2008, popular grievances have fed into electoral and protest mobilisations (della Porta, 2015). We therefore expect radical right protest activities to focus on economic and immigration issues.

Finally, the radical right milieu is far from homogeneous, as it includes many different groups, from political parties to subcultural organisations, all of which have different strengths and resources (Table B in the appendix). Braun and Koopmans (2014) highlight that radical right and anti-refugee activists are more concerned with peer approval (as opposed to mainstream media), making online social media an important arena to study. Furthermore, the emergence of social media allows us to study the emergence and trajectory of discursive, social and cultural processes in new ways.

Thus, we expect radical right mobilisations and action repertoires to vary according to the type of actor. Specifically, we hypothesise that countries with stronger radical right milieus will experience more disruptive actions, whereas more moderate repertoires

will be found in cases where the radical right consists of institutionalised actors. We also consider the importance of situational characteristics, such as specific issues and targets.

5 Methods and data

We combined qualitative and quantitative data to analyse the intensity and characteristics of radical right mobilisation (both party and grassroots) in our four cases. We considered the political opportunities available in each country, the groups' organisational characteristics and contingent dynamics such as opponents (i.e. movement and counter-movement dynamics, della Porta & Diani, 2006), issues and grievances. Radical right organisations in CEE use a wide repertoire of actions, ranging from electoral strategies to violence, which varies across time and countries, depending on the relevant combination of grievances, opportunities, and organisational factors (Kriesi, 2012).

We conducted a protest event analysis (PEA) based on newspaper articles published between 2008 and 2016. Protest event analysis is a methodology used to study and understand protests, demonstrations, and other forms of collective action. It involves the systematic collection and analysis of data related to protest events, including their locations, participants, goals, tactics, and outcomes. The goal of protest event analysis is to examine patterns, trends, and dynamics within protests, as well as their broader social and political implications. To achieve this researchers gather data from various sources, such as news reports, social media, official records and eyewitness accounts. These data may include information about the date, time, and location of the protest, the organisations or individuals involved, the issues being protested, and the tactics used. The collected data is then coded and categorised to identify common themes, characteristics and variables. Protests may be classified based on their goals (e.g. political, social, economic), tactics (e.g. peaceful, violent), or the identity of the participants (e.g. students, workers, activists). Protest event analysis often involves quantitative techniques to analyse patterns and trends. Statistical methods may be applied to identify factors associated with the occurrence, scale or success of protests. Researchers may also use network analysis to examine the relationships between different protest events, organisations, or individuals.

The analysis of protest events aims to generate meaningful insights and conclusions. Researchers interpret the data and findings to understand the dynamics of protests, the factors that influence their outcomes, and their broader societal impact. Overall, protest event analysis provides a systematic framework for studying protests and understanding their role in social and political change. By examining the characteristics and dynamics of protest events, researchers can gain insights into the motivations, strategies and effects of collective action.

We recorded a total of 1040 events (302 in Czechia, 401 in Poland, 125 in Slovakia and 212 in Hungary) and coded them for strategies and levels and forms of mobilisation. Our data came from articles published in the main national newspaper in each country: the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* for Poland, the liberal-conservative *Mladá fronta Dnes* for Czechia, the liberal *Denník SME* for Slovakia, and the liberal and opposition *Népszabadság Online* for Hungary. In general, the use of multiple sources (e.g. several newspapers with different orientations in the same country) is preferable for the analysis of

protest events to reduce possible biases. However, biases are consistent over time, and most studies show that results tend to be stable, especially within individual newspapers and over longer periods of time (cf. McCarthy et al. 1996). To retrieve relevant articles, we conducted a keyword search of the Lexis Nexis database and the electronic editions of each newspaper. We used multiple keywords (e.g. 'extreme right', 'neo-Nazi', 'white supremacist*', 'far right', 'skinhead*', 'Nazi', etc.) in an iterative process and eliminated redundant articles. Inter-coder reliability tests ensured consistency in article selection and coding. Once articles were located, we stored them for reference during the qualitative assessment.

We build on the concept and techniques of protest event analysis (PEA), a method for systematically collecting large data sets on protest activities and their various components and dimensions. The main unit of analysis in PEA is a single protest event. To define a protest event, we use the concept of 'political claim' (Koopmans et al., 2005, p. 180). This means that we consider any intervention in the public sphere, verbal or non-verbal, that contains a political claim as a 'protest event'. With caveats and many weaknesses, newspaper-based analysis allows us to show, if not the actual number of protests, at least the associations between specific variables of protest event forms, as well as much more general trends (Franzosi, 1987; McCarthy et al., 1996). Despite some limitations (see McCarthy et al., 1996), PEA is a method of analysis that allows us to quantify many characteristics of protests, such as frequency, timing and duration, location, demands, size, forms, bearers and targets, as well as immediate consequences and reactions, such as police intervention, damage and counter-protests (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002). Because the datasets are based on published material, PEA can facilitate quantitative and qualitative assessments of protests over large geographical areas (Rucht et al., 1999).

We used a formalised codebook to conduct our PEA. Our unit of analysis was the protest event, each of which contained the following elements: the actor initiating the protest event, the form of action, the target of the action, an object actor whose interests are affected by the event and the substantive content of the event (the issue). In our study, a protest event consists of a political event initiated by a right-wing extremist actor (either collective or individual, even anonymous), regardless of the type of actor (we included: right-wing political party; right-wing political movement – also related to parties; youth subcultural group: a. Skinheads; b. Music bands or labels, c. Ultras / football fans / hooligans; nostalgic & revisionist organisations; neo-Nazi groups; radical right cultural, New Age and neo-mystical organisations (including integralist Catholic organisations), historical organisations (for the protection of culture, history, language); radical right commercial organisations and publishers. We also coded the form of the event (e.g. conventional actions, mild or severe violence, unconventional symbolic and expressive actions, etc.). We looked at the targets of the events: ethnic, religious and social minorities (e.g. homosexuals, homeless people); political opponents (e.g. anti-fascists, squatters, anarchists, communists, etc.); national institutions; political parties; other right-wing actors; non-national (i.e. other) state or supranational institutions (i.e. EU, NATO, WTO). We also focused our analysis on the goals of the protests, which included: social and economic issues; political issues; conservative values (e.g. religion, law and order, abortion and LGBT+ issues, family and gender regimes, etc.); globalisation and European integration; migration; nation and history as well as the past. Finally, we included in our dataset information on potential counter-events and the police response to the event. An event may last for several days (e.g. a protest campaign).

6 Analysis

The political and discursive opportunity structures for radical right mobilisation differ in our four cases. Institutionally (our proxy for ‘allies in power’, cf. Rucht, 2004), Poland has consistently strong radical right parties (before and after the 2008 economic crisis), Hungary and Czechia experience an increase in the electoral strength of the radical right after 2008, and Slovakia’s radical right is moderately strong, peaking briefly after 2008 (but its subsequent decline is accompanied by increasing unconventional activity; see Table A in the appendix). While the availability of sufficient ‘political space’ may predict a strong radical right party, it may also weaken radical right social movements (Hutter, 2014). Among the CEE countries in our study period, Hungary’s radical right had the strongest electoral results for the radical right, but its institutional gains hampered street mobilisation that sought to re-imagine the relationship between protest and conventional politics.

In terms of the radical right’s discursive opportunity structures (DOS), the situation has changed somewhat since Cisař (2013) noted that ‘in post-communist environments, [...] radical right-wing associations, especially racist and nationalist ones, seem to have greater resonance [than those on the left], although their demands usually fall outside what is generally considered socially acceptable’. Since then, radical right-wing attitudes have become more socially acceptable, especially in Poland and Hungary, possibly because of their state-controlled public media.⁴ In Czechia and Slovakia, opposition parties and civil society seem to be slowing down this trend.

Of our four cases, only Hungary has received a modest number of refugees, especially after the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, or experienced conflicts involving social minorities (especially Roma). However, ethnic prejudices are widespread in Polish and Hungarian societies, constituting a ‘social consensus’ towards the radical right. Radical right organisations use ‘welfare chauvinism’ to frame their propaganda, claiming that immigrants and minorities are ‘stealing jobs’ or ‘living on welfare’ (Piotrowski, 2017). The claims of political elites against migrants and refugees escalated in the context of the EU relocation programme, most visibly in Poland but spreading across the region (cf. Winiewski et al., 2016), opening space for increasing xenophobic rhetoric and mobilisation. The mainstreaming of radical right discourse has been more dramatic in Hungary and Poland, where the ruling Fidesz party (in Hungary) often uses xenophobic discourse (Loch & Norocel, 2015), but right-wing and populist candidates have also become major players on the political scene and in public discourse in Slovakia and Czechia.

Finally, our four cases offer different pictures of the resources of radical right-wing social movements: the sector is relatively weak in Czechia, moderate in Slovakia and strong in Poland, both before and after the 2008 European crisis. Resources include income from merchandise, such as CDs, memorabilia and patriotic clothing (Doległo, 2018) as well as concerts and events. Right-wing organisations benefit financially and materially (e.g. office space) from greater official acceptance and individual participation (e.g. via crowd-funding platforms).

⁴ Another possible explanation could be the radicalisation of the regime/governing party.

Institutional features, such as the functional and territorial distribution of power and shifts in party control configurations, have emerged as important independent variables in explaining social movement development (Caiani et. al. 2012, p. 11). Given the POS and DOS of the radical right in our cases, we argue that Poland and Hungary are more conducive ('open') contexts for radical right mobilisation, Slovakia is more constrained ('closed'), and Czechia lies somewhere between these two extremes.⁵

7 Radical right mobilisation: Where and when does it emerge?

Our analysis of protest events shows that right-wing mobilisation is a significant – and growing – phenomenon in Poland between 2008 and 2016 but remains stable (Czechia and Slovakia) or declines, as in Hungary. We find significant differences between the four countries (Figure 1).

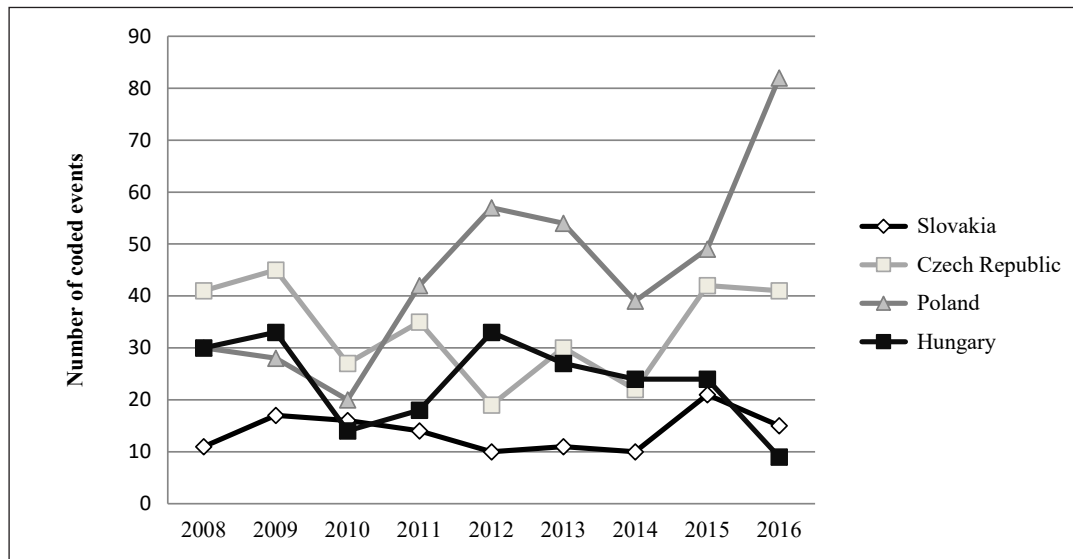


Figure 1 Trends in extreme right mobilization levels, by country (2008–2016) (absolute values)

Czechia is characterised by a high level of radical right mobilisation at the beginning of our timeframe (in 2008); Slovakia shows moderate levels of radical right activity in 2008; Hungary and Poland start at medium to high levels of mobilisation. The trends in mobilisation also diverge: in all countries except Poland, radical right mobilisation increases immediately after 2008 (the European financial crisis) but declines sharply from 2009 to 2010.

⁵ For additional qualitative details on the political and cultural opportunities and the radical right in these four countries, see Caiani (2019).

Despite the electoral results of the radical right and the prevalence of xenophobic discourse in Hungary, it is the only country where mobilisation decreases (from 33 events in 2008 to nine events in 2016). In Poland, on the other hand, radical right-wing mobilisations have become more frequent, especially after 2015 (from 20 events in 2010 to 82 events in 2016). In Czechia and Slovakia, the number of events fluctuates, but increases sharply from 2014 to 2015, possibly due to the electoral calendar and the use of the ‘refugee crisis’ by politicians.

In addition to the number of actions, we also considered the number of participants at each event. According to our data, the size of events organised by far-right groups in Central Europe varied considerably (Figure 2), from thousands of participants, such as at Poland’s national Independence Day celebrations after 2012 (Łukianow & Kocyba, 2020), to just a few. However, in all four cases, fewer people attended these events in 2016 than in 2015.

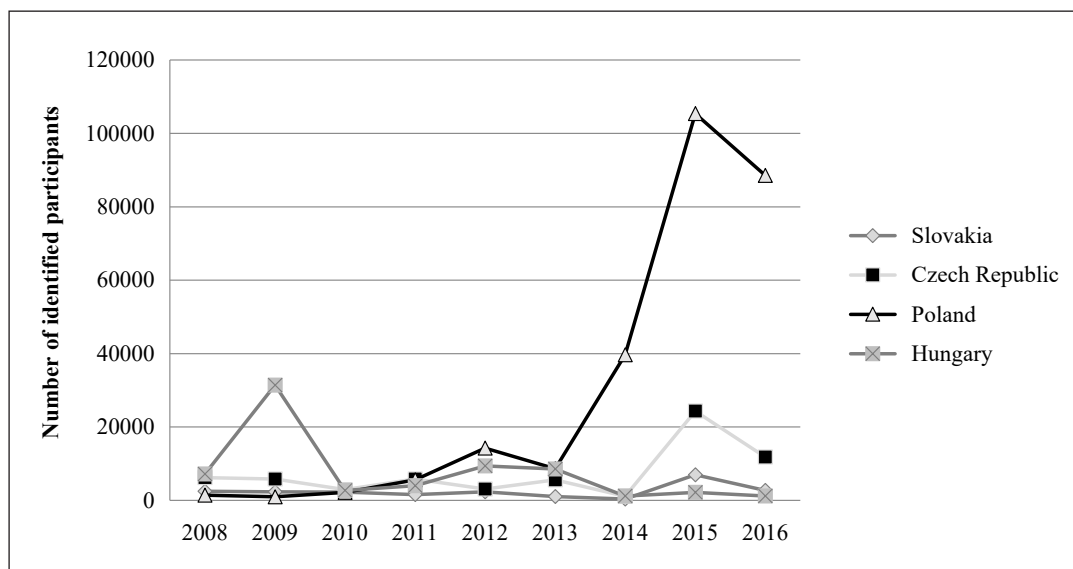


Figure 2 Number of identified participants, by country (2008–2016)
(absolute values)

In all cases, most events involve 10–30 people, but due to a few very large events, the average is 406. Violent actions are mainly carried out by small groups (five people) or individual activists.

In addition, the radical right’s ability to mobilise large numbers of people has increased in recent years, especially after the ‘refugee crisis’. Despite the lack of actual refugees (only a few dozen reached the borders of the countries we studied), the fear of ‘phantom refugees’ (Buchowski, 2018) seems to be prominent. This figure has entered mainstream discourse and corresponds to the shift within mainstream politics.

8 How do they protest?

Following Tarrow (1989), we distinguished six categories of protest event strategies: ‘conventional actions’, associated with conventional politics, such as press conferences, distribution of leaflets, election campaigns, etc.; ‘demonstrative actions’ – events aimed at mobilising large numbers of people, e.g. rallies, petitions, street demonstrations; ‘expressive actions’, aimed at members of the in-group to reinforce cohesion and identity, e.g. commemorations, music festivals; ‘confrontational actions’ – events that are nonviolent but usually illegal, aimed at disrupting official policies, e.g. demonstrations, petitions, street protests, etc, commemorative events, music festivals; ‘confrontational actions’ – non-violent but usually illegal events aimed at disrupting official policies or institutions; and ‘violent actions’, which range from less serious violence against people or property (e.g. insulting or threatening minorities and political opponents, graffiti, pro-fascist or pro-Nazi slogans, etc.) to more serious acts such as riots, street demonstrations.) to more serious acts such as physical assaults on homosexuals, ethnic minorities and political opponents, or bombing or setting fire to the offices of political opponents (e.g. trade unions, squatters’ social centres, left-wing party headquarters or newspapers). With the numbers of violent, and expressive events being close to negligible, biggest fluctuations of frequencies of protests over the years can be observed in conventional and demonstrative types of events, that – especially demonstrative – peaking in 2009 and 2015, which could be explained by occurrence of major crisis: economic (when austerity measures to combat the 2008 economic crisis were introduced) and ‘migration’ in 2015, as shown on Figure 10.

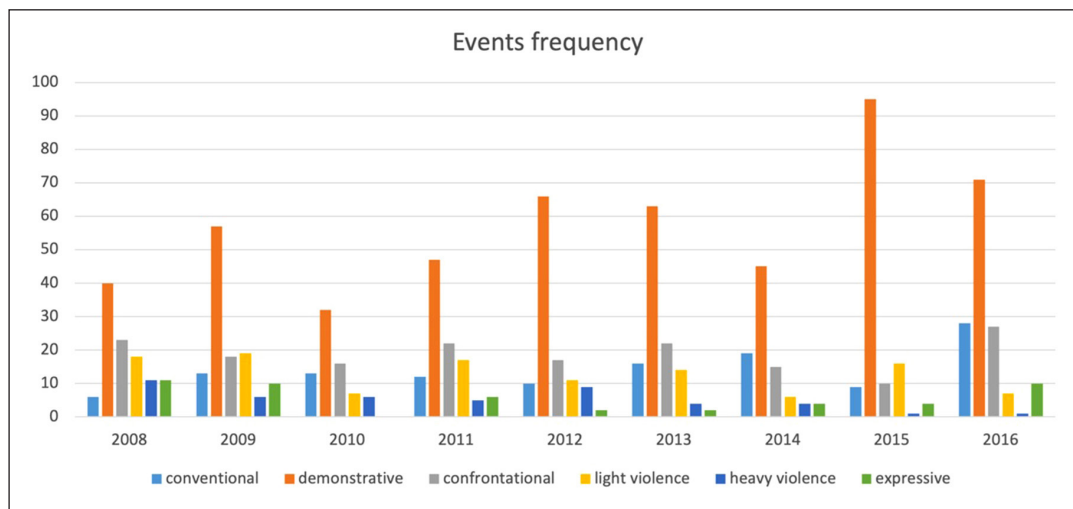


Figure 10 Frequency of events by type of action

Our data show a significant but fluctuating level of right-wing violence, which is on the decline overall. On average, around 15 per cent of right-wing extremist actions between 2008 and 2016 were violent, but the level of violence varies from country to country. Poland

shows the most marked decrease in the level of violence (since 2008), from 40 per cent of all actions to 8.5 per cent in 2016, despite an increase in the total number of right-wing extremist events. This result shows that the number of violent events initiated by the far right is rather stable. Hungary seems to follow a similar pattern from 2011 to 2014, with an increase in violence in 2015, before decreasing again in 2016. Again, the arrival of refugees in Hungary could be an explanation, together with changes in the legal environment (the outlawing of the paramilitary group Magyar Gárda and similar militias). In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the share of violent events seems to have generally declined since 2013, suggesting a continuing institutionalisation of the radical right sector (cf. Płatek & Płucienniczak, 2017).

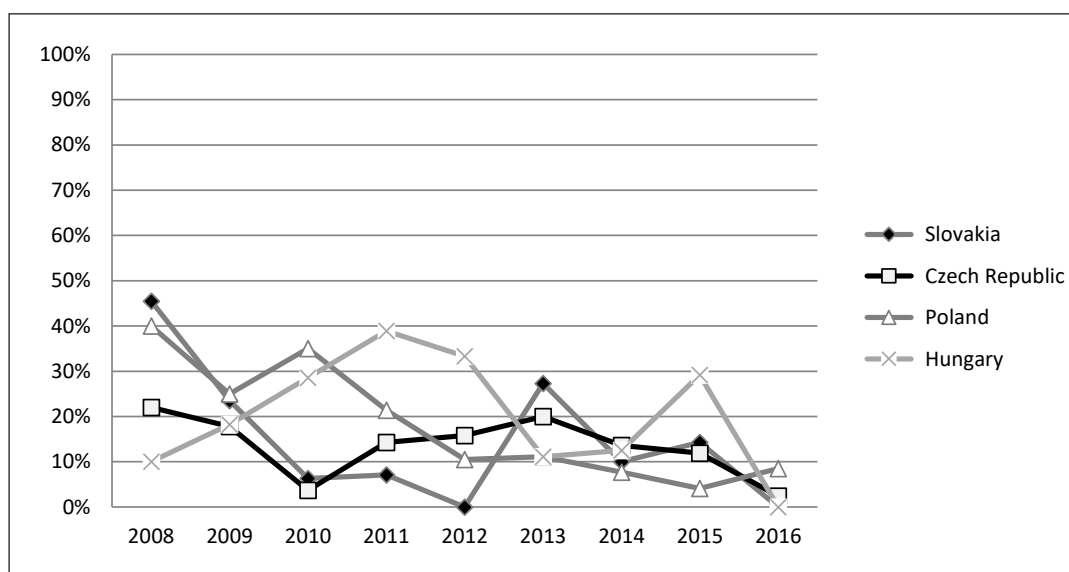


Figure 3 Violent actions, by country (2008–2016) (%)

Regarding other strategies of action of the radical right beyond violence, we find that these groups have a diverse repertoire, which differs from country to country.⁶ Confrontational protests organised by the radical right are prominent in Hungary and Poland (accounting for 20–21 per cent of the total number of actions studied in both countries), contradicting the assumption of an inverse relationship between institutionalisation and moderation. In our view, the institutionalisation of some aspects of the radical right (i. e. xenophobic discourses) provides opportunities for non-institutional right-wing actors, who also benefit from the relaxation of legal constraints (e.g. states withdrawing cases against right-wing activists or imposing lighter sentences). On the other hand, Slovak

⁶ This is also confirmed by the low but significant Cramer's V coefficient between 'action form' and 'country' (0.28**).

right-wing organisations rely much more on the least radical forms of action, namely conventional actions (accounting for more than 18 per cent of all actions), than in the other countries analysed. In Hungary, this type of intervention is the rarest (4.7 per cent), and demonstrative actions are the most common type of right-wing extremist activism in CEE as a whole (46–56 per cent in all countries analysed). In countries with strong right-wing (or even far-right) parties in the parliaments (Hungary and Poland), the number of violent and confrontational actions is higher than in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where, on the contrary, more than 50 per cent of the recorded events are expressive or demonstrative. In general, we were surprised by the low number of online events, between 1 per cent and 2.6 per cent of recorded events – at least according to those reported in newspapers.

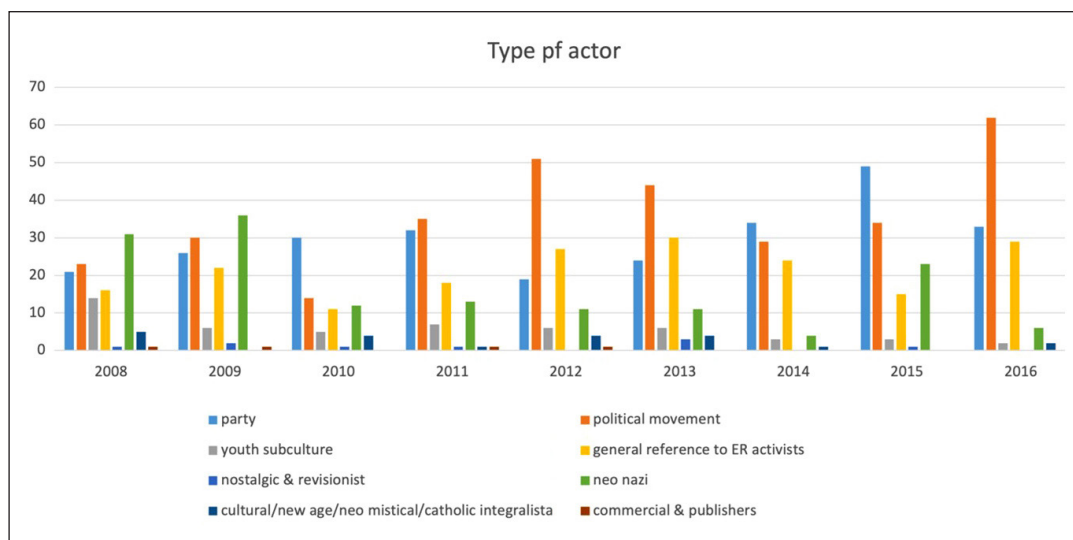


Figure 11 Type of actor by years

9 Who protests? Organizational features and radical right mobilization

For radical right groups, as for any collective actor, the development and forms of mobilisation are linked to organisational characteristics. Which types of right-wing organisations are most likely to mobilise? And which are more associated with violence?

In all our cases, the most active right-wing actors are individuals belonging to political movements (31 per cent of all protest events) and political parties (25.8 per cent) (Figure 4). This finding suggests that some traditional segments of the radical right, such as skin-heads, revisionists and youth groups, are less mobilised, suggesting that these are not the milieus in which radical right groups mobilise. When looking at the distribution of types

of actors over the years (Figure 11), we can observe the declining importance of neo-Nazi and youth subcultural groups, which can be explained by the decline of the skinheads subculture and perhaps with the growing self-consciousness of journalists that started to differentiate protesters better. What can be seen is the growing presence of political movements and political parties (with other types of actors, such as 'nostalgic & revisionist' or 'commercial' virtually absent from our dataset). The two most often occurring groups have actually begun to merge from one to another in the process of institutionalisation of the far right in Central Europe. Movements, such as for example Ruch Narodowy in Poland, began their strictly political activities, transforming into fully-fledged political parties with their own MPs. These 'movement parties' seem to be in line with political and party developments over the world.

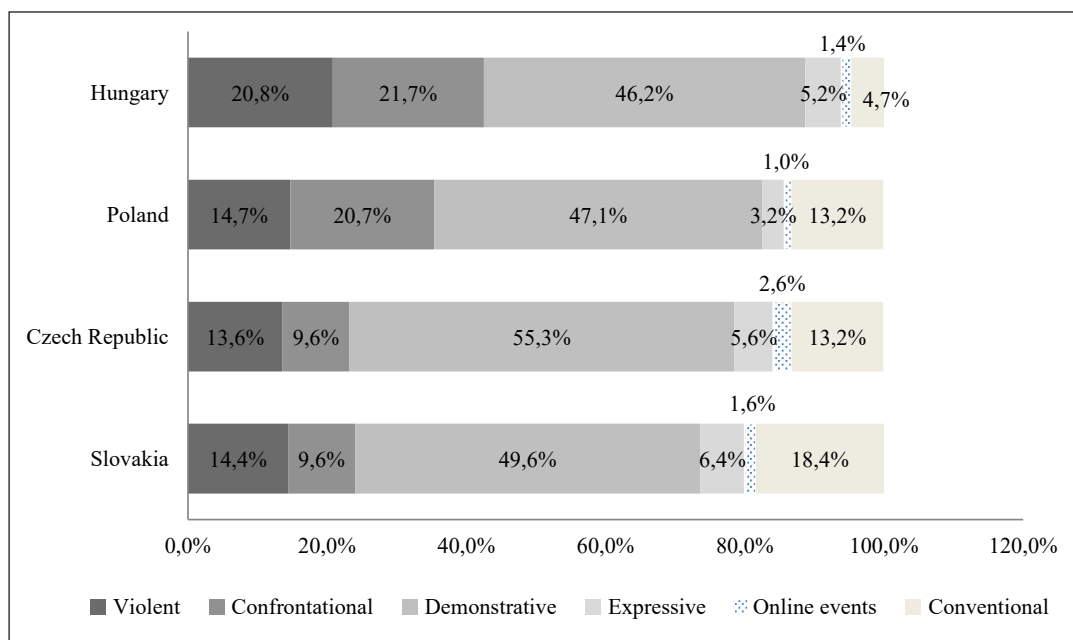


Figure 4 Figure not showed, data available upon request. Forms of actions of the radical right, by countries (%)

Importantly, we find that the degree of radicalism of far-right mobilisation varies according to the type of group (Figure 5). Youth and skinhead groups – the least hierarchical or structured – are the most likely to use violence (59.6 per cent of violent incidents). Neo-Nazi and general right-wing extremist groups are the next most violent, and cultural groups are the least violent.

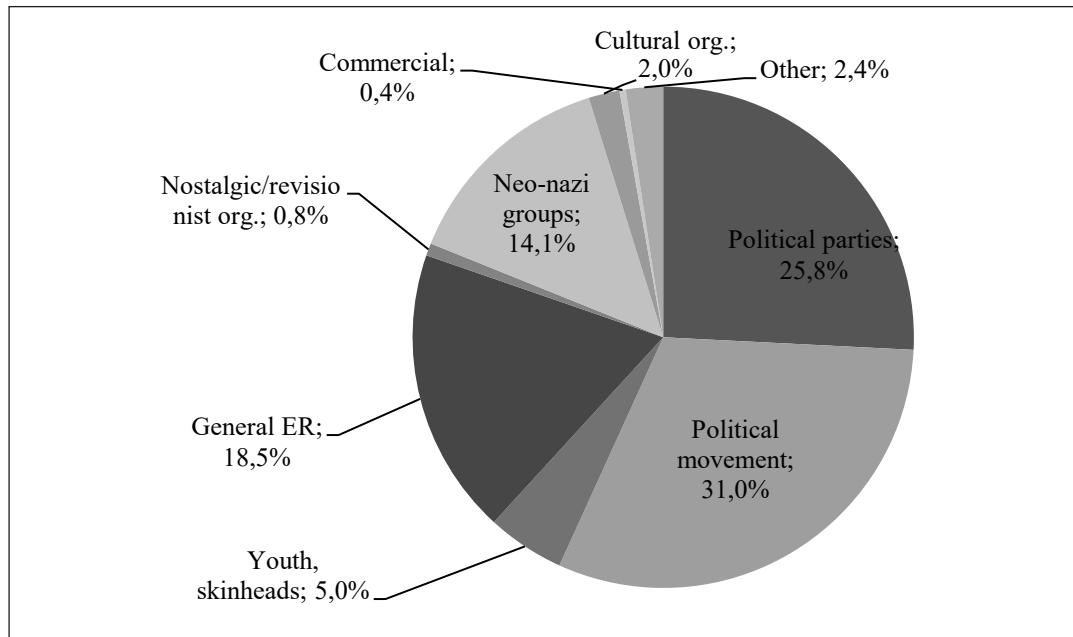


Figure 5 Radical right protest events, by type of actor (2008–2016, all countries) (%)

10 Issues and targets of radical right mobilization

We also seek to understand collective action as the product of its ‘organisational field’, or the strategies and tactics that emerge from the interaction of ‘networks within and between movements, and internal conflict and competition’ (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2008, p. 210). In particular, the radical right is seen as responding to counter-movements from the left and institutional political opponents.

We observe that right-wing mobilisations most often target ethnic minorities (32 per cent of all events), political opponents (12.9 per cent of all events) and political parties (12.7 per cent) (Figure 6). Right-wing events targeting political opponents tend to focus on national authorities or the police, who are accused of ‘arbitrariness’ or violent behaviour and repression. Many of the events targeting political opponents are also violent and take place during confrontations between right-wing extremist organisations and counter-movements.

When right-wing groups target minorities, the events are largely demonstrative (55 per cent) or violent (23 per cent). The targets vary according to the ethnic composition of each country and the relevant xenophobic framework. Other targets (3.5 per cent of all events) of radical right mobilisation are religious minorities – mainly Muslims and Jews – (Figure 6), including firebombing of gatherings at Islamic centres, protests against Islamic fundamentalism and anti-Islamic or anti-Semitic statements.

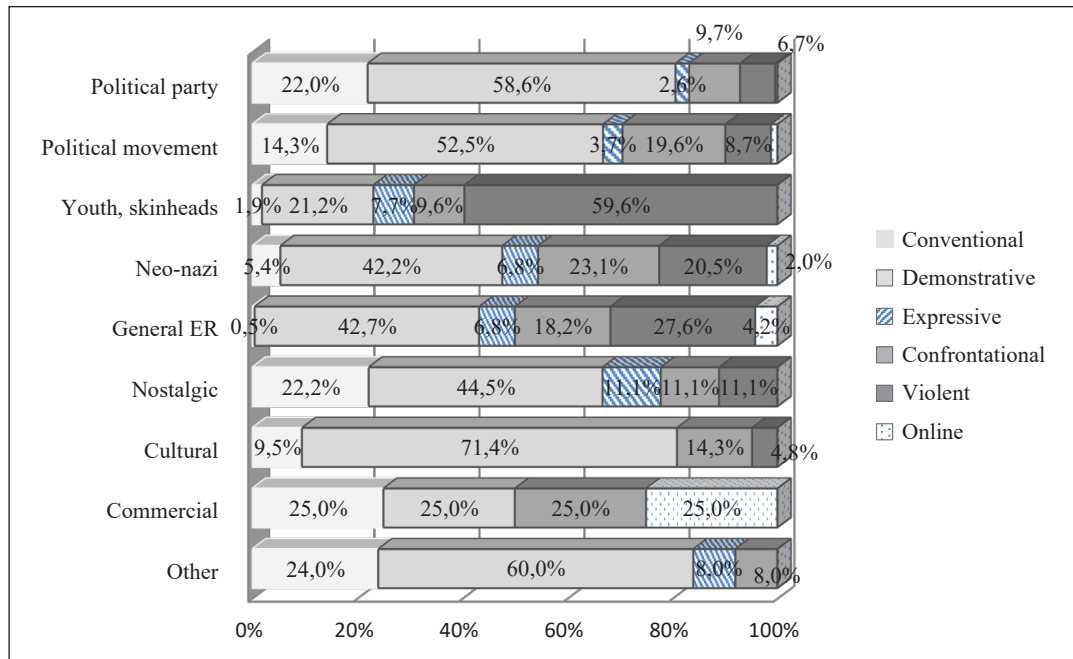


Figure 6 Action forms, by type of radical right organization (%)

Our data confirm the observation that the radical right tends to mobilise around national or sub-national issues (Figure 7). Actions targeting supranational or international institutions (e.g. the EU) are very rare. This finding suggests that local conflicts and grievances are more salient for right-wing actors.

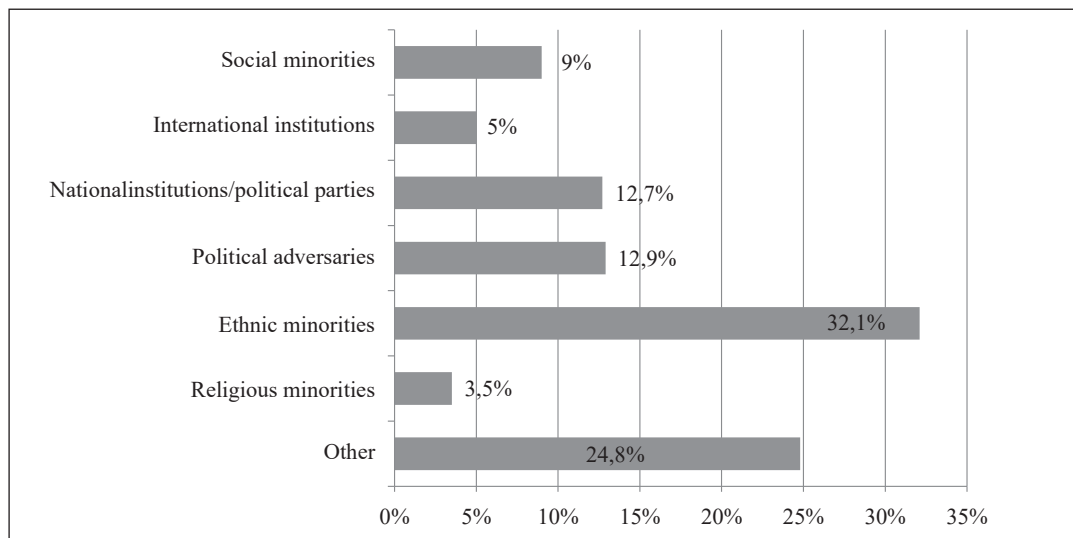


Figure 7 Radical right targets (2008–2016, all countries) (%)

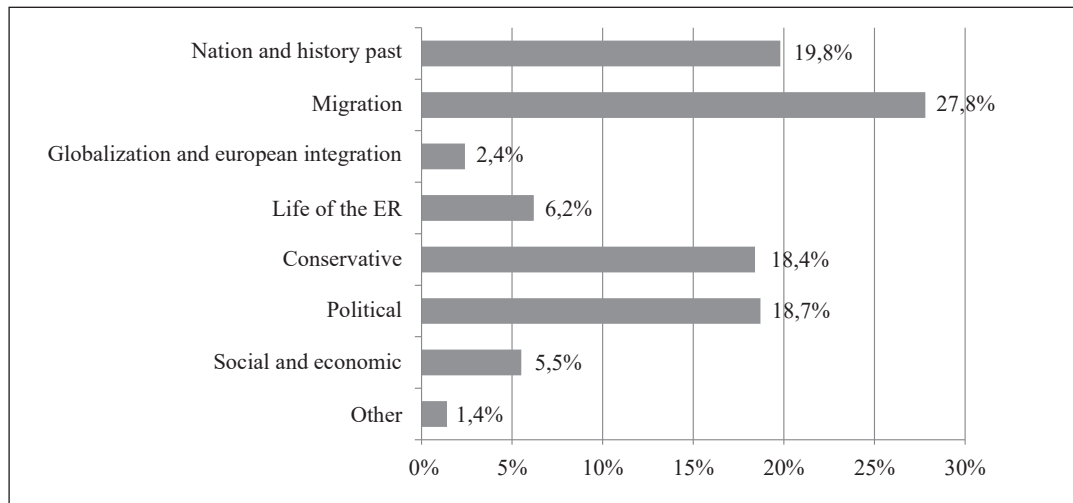


Figure 8 Radical right issues (2008–2016, all countries) (%)

Furthermore, immigration-related issues seem to be the most important source of far-right mobilisation (27.8 per cent of protest events). Figure 8 illustrates the prevalence of these issues in each country and shows the disproportionate role of immigration in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Radical right-wing organisations also mobilise around political issues and conservative values (18.7 and 18.4 per cent, respectively). Contrary to our expectations, economic issues were less frequent (only 5.5 per cent of actions, all Figure 8) and seemed to be of some relevance only in Hungary and Poland (Figure 9). The moderate frequency of events related to the internal life of the radical right suggests the existence of a certain participatory internal environment that allows members to strengthen social and organisational ties (Figure 9).

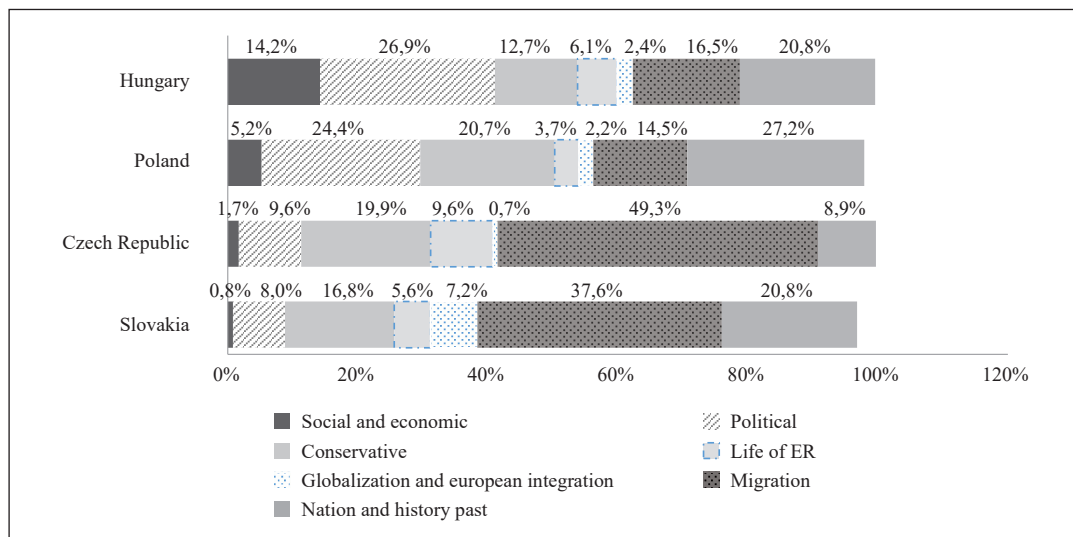


Figure 9 Radical right issue field by country (2008–2016) (%)

11 Discussion: Opportunities, resources, and radical right mobilization

How can we explain the tendency of different right-wing groups in different countries to use different repertoires of action? Our cases differ in terms of their institutional structures and political cultures and the resulting opportunities and constraints for radical right groups. Nominally, radical right parties and groups in our four cases face laws against racism and xenophobia, some degree of legal control over neo-Nazi/fascist groups, and electoral constraints on smaller parties. In reality, however, implementation is uneven between (and within, especially in the case of Poland and Hungary) these countries.

Furthermore, the organisations and actors relevant to our PEA differ both in terms of ideology (as the radical right is not homogeneous even within a single country) and resources, including levels of professionalisation and financial assets (Table 1). How do these contextual and organisational factors influence the mobilisation of right-wing groups?

The index of radicalism (dependent variable) was constructed by summing and weighting types of action with increasing values. The values related to the 6 action strategies presented above (conventional, expressive, demonstrative, confrontational, light and heavy violence) range from 1 (minimum degree of radicalism) to 6 (maximum).

As we expected, the more formalised an organisation (e.g. political parties or other registered organisations), the more moderate (less violent) its actions. Surprisingly, however, better funded organisations tend to be more radical. The number of radical right organisations does not seem to be related to the level of radicalisation.

Table 1 Contextual opportunities, organizational characteristics and radical right mobilization (Correlations, Pearson)

		Degree of radicalism of radical right mobilization (index)
POS	Radical right electoral strength	.091**
	Anti-immigrant appeals of political elites	-.008 (not significant)
	Population mistrust in representative institutions	.017 (not significant)
COS	Cos	.146**
	Degree of acceptance of the far right as a legitimate political actor	0.51 (not significant)
	Anti-immigrant and/or nationalistic attitudes of the population	.008 (not significant)
	Antifa civil society orgs.	-.146**
Organizational characteristics	Formalization	-.113**
	Number of identified extreme right organizations in the country	.50 (not significant)
	Financial resources	.162**

N= 1587 Note: * = Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); ** = Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); n.s. = Correlation is not significant.

We find that specific, external political and cultural opportunities have an impact on right-wing political activism at the country level. Countries in which the political and social culture is more accepting of the radical right (i.e. open or favourable contexts) tend to experience more violent right-wing events. Contrary to the expectations of some scholars (Hutter, 2014), the electoral strength of the radical right is weakly but positively associated with more radical repertoires. On the other hand, strict legal restrictions against right-wing extremism and the degree of acceptance of the radical right as a legitimate political actor are not statistically significant. Instead, the presence of a network of watchdog and anti-fascist associations (albeit relatively weak in our cases) seems to hinder the use of more radical actions by right-wing groups. Mistrust of representative institutions does not seem sufficient to explain the political activism of the radical right, despite expectations to the contrary. In sum, both exogenous, contextual factors and endogenous resources influence the strategic choices of radical right organisations.

12 Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed the intensity and characteristics of radical right mobilisation in four countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on the repertoires of action and the types of groups involved. By analysing institutional features, group resources and the events themselves, we sought to better understand the contexts and opportunities that facilitated specific actors' strategies. We hoped to contribute to overcoming the 'strict division of labour' between political science-oriented analyses of radical right parties and sociological studies of social movements (Rydgren, 2007, p. 257).

Academics and journalists often cite globalisation, EU austerity and enlargement programmes, economic crises, immigration and multiculturalism, and disillusionment with mainstream politics and representative democracy as reasons for the growing popularity of radical right groups across Europe (Caiani, 2011). Our findings support some of these expectations. According to our expectations, the countries that offer more open opportunities for the radical right (such as Poland and Hungary) are also those where the intensity of radical right protest activities is higher. After 2008, radical right activism on the streets increased in all countries (with the exception of Poland). The mobilisation of the radical right grew out of a growing fatigue with post-transition neoliberal reforms and a low level of trust in the left (Piotrowski, 2017).

The total number of radical right protest events and participants increased between 2008 and 2016, in line with the electoral fortunes of these groups (Rooduijn et al., 2014). However, far-right groups have a repertoire of actions beyond elections and violence, and political and discursive opportunities also contribute to mobilisation. Many mainstream politicians in CEE adopted xenophobic discourses in the wake of the 2015 'refugee crisis' (especially around election campaigns, see Postelnicescu, 2016), which gave radical right-wing actors more attention and created favourable conditions for their mobilisation. As expected, right-wing mobilisation (and violence) is more common where social acceptance of more extreme right-wing values is widespread.

Overall, radical right parties are quite weak in our four cases, rarely exceeding 7 per cent of the popular vote; however, Slovakia's radical right party is the most successful and

(although in decline) durable.⁷ The Catholic Church serves as a vector and potential ally of the radical right in all of these countries, although this is particularly true in Poland; to a lesser extent in Slovakia (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; 2019; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019). Moreover, the legacy of the past differs from country to country and is particularly pronounced in Slovakia and Hungary. And although right-wing populism has become part of the region's political arenas (especially in Hungary and Poland), we cannot ignore the specificities of these populisms: one tends towards Russian-inspired national populism based on surveillance capitalism, and the other seeks to preserve the remnants of a liberal democratic order (Szabó, 2020).

Moreover, despite the typical Euroscepticism of the radical right and the discursive opportunities for mobilisation against Europe provided by the economic crisis, there is no visible - at least according to the protest events reported in the newspapers - direct radical right mobilisation against the EU in any of the countries we have analysed. However, differences between the forms of radical right activism in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia can be attributed to specific contextual opportunities, such as dynamics between political parties and movements (as in Poland). In this context, it is worth highlighting the process of pillarisation of Polish civil society observed by Ekiert, which is also reflected in the mobilisation of protests (Ekiert, 2020). The consequence of pillarisation was the re-etatisation of civil society, i.e. the strengthening of ties between conservative political parties and the sector of organisations they support. According to the author, this process deepened after 2015, when the parliamentary coalition of the United Right (*Zjednoczona Prawica*), led by the Law and Justice party, implemented the 'good change' (*dobra zmiana*) political programme. The ruling coalition made personnel changes in many public institutions, including the civil service, state enterprises, the judiciary and cultural institutions. As a result, the radical right was strengthened. locally salient issues or grievances (such as those generated by the immigration or financial crises). In a different trajectory, in Hungary the government has assumed the mantle of the radical right thus changing the trajectory of the far-right dynamics.

Beyond the commonalities, we also found some country (and organisational) specificities. If the refugee crisis similarly provided a unique opportunity to '[Westernise] the Eastern European radical right in its opposition to Islam and migrants with non-European backgrounds' (Bustikova, 2018), and can therefore be interpreted as a 'critical juncture' that spurred radical right mobilisation, as our data showed, radical right groups in the four countries differed not only in the intensity of mobilisation (and violence), but also in their preferred issues and targets. They may be partly related to the particularly favourable 'political opportunities' (including discursive ones, Caiani et al., 2012) for radical right mobilisation in Poland and Slovakia, to the explicit links with the Church here, but also to the country specific salience of different issues of mobilisation.

⁷ Here a note on PiS and Fidesz – as they are radical right wing populist parties in the region and well-studied examples, our study focused on political parties that took part in elections but never held a position of power, that would move them from 'movement parties' towards 'cartel parties', more focused on securing their power and relaxing their ties with grassroots groups that we wanted to analyze.

The differences found may also be related to country differences in terms of ethnic heterogeneity, economic performance and cultural heritage (Bustikova, 2018). Slovakia, for example, is more ethnically heterogeneous and these cleavages can structure radical right politics. In the other three more homogeneous countries analysed, radical right mobilisation tends to focus mainly on Roma or social and religious issues, as our data also highlights (Bustikova, 2018).

While most Central European democracies share some characteristics that are generally considered conducive to radical right mobilisation – declining trust in institutions, emboldened uncivil society, populists as political leaders, civic apathy and nationalist contestation (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017) – not all CEE countries are the same. The illiberal turns of some countries, such as Hungary and Poland (Piotrowski, 2020), are different from the ‘swerves’ of others: Czechia and Slovakia.

Inspired by Minkenberg and Kossack (2015), we assessed the strength of radical right movements in our cases (see Table B in the appendix). In Poland, the radical right remained moderately strong; in Hungary, it grew from moderate to strong; in Czechia, it grew from weak to strong; and Slovakia was the only case of decline, with the radical right shrinking from strong to moderate. Only in Czechia did radical right movements dominate political parties. We found a moderate to strong relationship between the strength of the radical right sector in the country and the intensity of protests, but the relationship between movement actors and political parties does not seem to play an important role. This seems to be a vicious circle, because on the one hand, radical right groups can serve as laboratories of contention (Peyers, 2010) for mainstream political groups, especially those in power (as is the case in Hungary and to some extent in Poland). On the other hand, radical right groups can become major challengers to mainstream right-wing parties, pushing the agenda and radicalising discourse and repertoires of action.

Although right-wing violence has emerged as a widespread phenomenon (Císař, 2013), we find that strategic choices (such as whether or not to use violence) are related to the characteristics of the actors. Specifically, political parties tend to use conventional repertoires, while individual activists and small groups are more likely to engage in direct, violent confrontations. This finding may indicate a degree of organisational weakness or a strategic division of labour between political parties, which operate in the institutional arena, and movements or activists who engage in unconventional political action. Similarly, we confirm the findings of a previous study on the Polish case (Płatek & Płucienniczak, 2017), which shows that as the radical right becomes more institutionalised, the level of political violence decreases. However – counter-intuitively – better-funded radical right organisations tend to engage in more violent actions than their less well-funded counterparts. The increase in hate crimes, particularly against ethnic and religious minorities, can be explained by rising levels of xenophobia among individuals who may not be associated with any particular far-right organisation.⁸

⁸ See, for instance, Freedom House’s report on xenophobia in Central and Eastern European countries: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/central-europe-s-faceless-strangers-rise-xenophobia-region>

Our preliminary analysis underlines the difficulty of describing broad regional characteristics. For example, Hungary and Slovakia both experienced Nazi-aligned regimes in the 1940s (the Arrow Cross government in Hungary and the Tiso Republic in Slovakia), a similarity that could potentially facilitate the emergence of related historical revisionist groups. However, the radical right groups in these two countries are quite different. We challenge the academic tendency to portray geographically close social movements as sharing the same roots, motives or values. In fact, we argue that radical right-wing mobilisation in our cases is so different from country to country that it cannot be considered a 'regional CEE characteristic'.

The most far-reaching conclusion we can draw is that contextual features and opportunities are crucial in explaining the political behaviour of right-wing groups, just as they are for left-wing and Western groups (Caiani, 2023). Applying POS and resource mobilisation approaches to the analysis of radical right mobilisation can broaden our understanding of these increasingly successful political forces. By focusing on both exogenous and endogenous factors, we can emphasise the agency of these actors and treat them as 'key actors in the narrative of their success or failure' (Wilson & Hainsworth, 2012, p. 15), rather than seeing them as mere cogs in the relative deprivation theory or as automatic, anomic responses to times of crisis.

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Appendix

Table A Radical Right Election Results in Selected National Parliamentary Elections in Eastern Europe and Western Europe, from 1990

	Results for chambers of deputies (% average for 5 years)				
Eastern Europe	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014
Bulgaria	—	—	—	8.7	7.3
Czech Republic	6.8	6.0	1.1	—	1.1
Hungary	0.8	5.5	4.5	2.2	16.7
Latvia	—	—	—	1.5	10.8
Poland	14.1	8.0	18.1	10.4	0.0
Romania	5.8	9.2	20.9	3.1	1.2
Slovak Republic	6.7	9.1	7.0	11.7	4.5
<i>Average</i>	4.9	5.4	7.4	5.4	5.9
Western Europe					
<i>Average</i>	8.3	11.2	9.9	11.2	11.6

Table B Strength of Radical Right-Wing Movements in Central and Eastern Europe, pre-2004 and 2014

	pre-2004	2014
Countries with strong RR movement sector	Poland Romania Slovakia	<i>Czech Republic</i> Hungary Latvia Poland <i>Romania</i> Ukraine
Countries with moderately strong RR movement sector	Hungary	Bulgaria Lithuania Slovakia
Countries with weak RR movement sector	Bulgaria Czech Republic Estonia Latvia Lithuania Ukraine	Estonia

Note: Countries in italics are those where radical right movements have been dominant vis-à-vis political parties or replaced them.

Source: Minkenberg / Kossack 2015

Table C Operationalization of variables for the Table 1.

	Extreme right electoral strength	<p>The electoral strength of the extreme right has been measured on the basis of the electoral results obtained in national and local elections, by extreme right parties in the countries studied. Values have been assigned in the following: 0-5 % = 0; 5.1 %-10 % = 0.5; >10.1 =1. For a similar construction of the indicator, see Mudde 2007: 246.</p> <p>Bíró Nagy, A.; Boros, T.; Vasali, Z. 2013: Hungary in: Right-Wing extremism in Europe edited by Ralf Melzer, Sebastian Serafin, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 229-254</p> <p>Mareš, M., & Vejvodová, P. (2010). Dělnická strana: profil české pravicově extremistické strany. <i>Rexter</i>, 8(2), 42–74.</p> <p>Čákl, O. –Wollmann, R. 2005. Czech Republic. In: <i>Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe</i> edited by Mudde, C. Routledge: New York, 28–53.</p>
POS	Legal and policy constraints against the extreme right	<p>This dimension of the POS has been operationalized by looking at the restrictiveness of the legal and policy constraints against racist and extreme right activities in a country. Sources were secondary data from official reports and specific literature on the topic (Mudde, C. 2005. <i>Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe</i>. <i>East European Politics and Societies</i>, 19(2), 161–184.</p> <p>Kluknavská, A., 2015. <i>Enemies at the Gates: Framing Strategies of Extreme Right Parties in the Czech Republic and Slovakia</i>. Dissertation. Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava</p> <p>Milo, D. 2005. <i>Rasistický extrémizmus v Slovenskej republike: neonacisti, ich hnutia a ciele</i>. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.</p> <p>European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). 2014. Report on Slovakia, 2014. [Online]. Available at: https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Slovakia/SVK-CbC-V-2014-037-ENG.pdf. [accessed April 27, 2017].</p> <p>European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). 2015a. Report on Hungary, 2015. [Online]. Available at: http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/country-by-country/hungary/HUN-CbC-V-2015-19-ENG.pdf. [accessed April 27, 2017].</p> <p>European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). 2015b. Report on Poland, 2015. [Online]. Available at: https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Poland/POL-CbC-V-2015-20-ENG.pdf. [accessed April 27, 2017].</p> <p>Čákl, O. –Wollmann, R. 2005. Czech Republic. In: <i>Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe</i> edited by Mudde, C. Routledge: New York, 28-53.</p> <p>). The countries have been classified according to the following values: 0 ('weak legislation and policies'); 0.5 ('moderate'); and 1 ('strict').</p>
	Anti-immigrant appeals of political elites	<p>This indicator looks at the extent to which anti-immigrant appeals are frequent in the discourse of the country elites. Political elites have started making claims against immigrants and refugees after the refugee crisis and in particular in the context of the EU re-location programme. Also, in the case of Poland, the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric overlapped with electoral campaigns (presidential and parliamentary) during which some politicians (Kaczyński) were projecting health claims with the increase numbers of refugees.</p>

	Anti-immigrant appeals of political elites	<p>Values were assigned on the basis of secondary sources (e.g. Dempsey, J. (2015). Understanding Central Europe's Opposition to Refugees. Retrieved November 3, 2015, from http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=61404</p> <p>Polyakova, A., & Shekhovtsov, A. 2016. On The Rise: Europe's Fringe Right. <i>World Affairs</i>, 179(1), 70-80.</p> <p>Winiewski, M., Hansen K., Bilewicz M, Soral, W., Świdowska A., Bulska D.: <i>Mowa nienawiści, mowa pogardy. Raport z badania przemocy werbalnej wobec grup mniejszościowych</i> retrieved from: http://www.ngofund.org.pl/). Value '1' was assigned to those countries where anti-immigrant or racist appeals from the elites are particularly frequent; '0.5' to those countries where they are moderately frequent, and '0' when absent or rare.</p>
COS	Cultural Opportunity Structure (COS)	Is there a societal consensus toward extreme right actors? Is the extreme right accepted in society in terms of values or is it stigmatized? This aspect has been measured with a number of variables.
	Population mistrust in representative institutions	In the European countries the percentage of people who 'tend to trust' in the national Parliament was considered (source: Eurobarometer spring 2017, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index ; Ádám, Z. and Bozóki, A., 2016. State and Faith. <i>Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics</i> , 2(1), pp.98-122. Kovács, A. 2010. <i>The stranger at hand: Antisemitic prejudices in post-communist Hungary</i> (Vol. 15). Brill.).
	Anti-immigrant and/or nationalistic attitudes of the population	<p>This indicator looks at the extent to which racist and/or nationalistic attitudes are diffused within the population in a country. Sources have been data from reports of international monitoring organizations, opinion polls and secondary literature.</p> <p>We assigned a value of '1', when racist/nationalistic attitudes are widely diffused in the country; 0.5, when they are moderately diffused; and 0, when they are absent or very weak. Dempsey, J. (2015). Understanding Central Europe's Opposition to Refugees. Retrieved November 3, 2015, from http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=61404</p> <p>Simonovits, B. and Bernát, A. 2016: <i>The Social Aspects of the 2015 Migration Crisis in Hungary</i>, TÁRKI, Budapest</p>
	Degree of acceptance of the far right as a legitimate political actor	This indicator was constructed looking at the extent to which extreme right organizations are accepted as legitimate political actors within the political system (e.g., persistence of relevant far right actors within the country's political systems) or marginalized (e.g., poor electoral results and absence of relevant far right actors). On the basis of information from scientific literature and official country reports we assigned the value '1' ('strong') to those countries where the far right is widely accepted as a legitimate political actor; '0.5' ('moderately' accepted) and '0' where the society is highly hostile to the far right political forces. Caiani, M. and Kluknavská, A. (forthcoming). <i>Extreme Right, the Internet and European Politics in CEE countries: the cases of Slovakia and the Czech Republic</i> . In Michailidou, A. and Barisione, M. (eds.) <i>Social media and European politics: Rethinking power and legitimacy in the digital era</i> . Palgrave Macmillan

	Antifascist civil society orgs.	<p>This dimension measures the presence (varying from 0, weak, to 0.5 to 1, strong) in a country of watchdog civil society organizations, a network of organizations whose aim is to counter radical right, and racism by monitoring and denouncing expressions of racial hatred and anti-democratic attitudes. This is considered affecting both the chances of success and the strategies of mobilization of extreme right actors (della Porta and Diani 2006: 211). Although there are antifascist and antiracist groups in all of the countries, in Poland they seem to be weaker and have less impact on policies and politics.</p> <p>Fella, Stefano & Ruzza, Carlo (eds.) (2012). <i>Anti-Racist Movements in the EU: Between Europeanisation and National Trajectories</i>. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.</p> <p>Flam, Helena & Lloyd, Catherine (2008). 'Contextualizing Recent European Racist, Antiracist, and Migrant Mobilizing'. <i>International journal of sociology</i> 38(2): 3-16</p> <p>Ruzza, Carlo (2013). 'Antiracist movements in Europe'. In Snow, David A., della Porta, Donatella, Klandermans, Bert & McAdam, Doug (eds.) <i>The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements</i>. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.</p>
	Fascist past	<p>This dichotomic indicator (0-1) refers to the presence (1) or absence (0) of a fascist/nazi regime (or the one that is considered as such) in the country's history.</p> <p>Ádám, Z. and Bozóki, A., 2016. State and Faith. <i>Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics</i>, 2(1), pp.98-122.</p> <p>Kovács, A. 2010. <i>The stranger at hand: Antisemitic prejudices in post-communist Hungary</i> (Vol. 15). Brill.</p> <p>Blašćák, F., Gyárfášová, O., Hlavinka, J., Vrzgulová, M. (2013). <i>Slovenský vojnový štát a holokaust v kolektívnej pamäti slovenskej spoločnosti</i>. Retrieved from http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/</p>
Organizational characteristics	Formalization	the degree of formalization of extreme right organizations in each country and has been measured with a variable that assigns values ranging from 0 (0 %) to 1 (100 %) on the basis of the percentage of ER organizations which have a 'membership form/formal subscription' to the group for new members.
	Cohesiveness of the extreme right milieu	characteristics and shape of the extreme right milieu in each country (fragmented vs. cohesive and homogeneous), which according to social movement scholars can predict the emergence of collective action (more likely within dense social networks). Values are assigned according to the density of the network. Proxy = number of organizations
	Financial resources	degree of financial resources of extreme right organizations in each country and has been measured with a variable that assigns values ranging from 0 (0 %) to 1 (100 %) on the basis of the percentage of extreme right organizations in each country that 'sell some merchandise for auto-financing online' (e.g., T-shirt, flags, war-gadget) or in general, 'offer instructions and facilities on their websites to receive funds for the group' (e.g., fund transfer method, bank account, donation, etc.).

Codebook PEA

1. Country
2. Date
3. Title (of the article)
4. Type of actor organizing the event
 - Right-wing political party
 - Right-wing political movement (here also right wing newspapers and magazines and youth political movements related to parties)
 - Youth subcultural group (es. a. Skinheads; b. Right-wing Music Bands or Labels , c. Utras / Soccer fans / Hooligans)
 - General reference to extreme right activists of organizations/anonymous actor/ unknown actor
 - Nostalgic & Revisionist extreme right organizations
 - Neo-Nazi groups
 - Extreme right Cultural, new age and neo-mystical organizations (here also integrist catholic organizations) and historical organizations (organizations for the protection of culture, history, language)
 - Radical right commerical organizations and publishers
 - other _____
5. Scope of the event
 - a. Local
 - b. Regional
 - c. National
 - d. Sovranational/international/crossnational (es. European; international; etc)
6. Action
 - a. Conventional
 - b. Demonstrative
 - c. Expressive
 - d. Confrontational
 - e. Light violence
 - f. Heavy violence
 - g. Online action
7. Form of action
8. Number of participants
9. Number of wounded (or 'Dead', or arrested/ blocked/denounced people during the event)
10. Target type
 - a. social minorities (e.g. homosexuals, homeless),
 - b. religious minorities
 - c. ethnic minorities
 - d. political adversaries (social groups eg. antifascists, squatted centers, anarchists, the left, communists, etc)
 - e. national institutions / political parties
 - f. extreme right actors
 - g. non national (i.e. other) government or supra-national institutions (i.e. EU, NATO, WTO)
 - h. other

11. Aims
 - a. social and economic issues
 - b. political issues
 - c. conservative values issues (e.g. religion, law and order, abortion and gay issues, family and role of the women in the society, etc.)
 - d. life of the extreme right
 - e. Globalization and European integration
 - f. Migration
 - g. Nation and history, past
12. Potential counter-event (e.g. left wing movements, or citizens which organize a counter demonstration against /in response of the event initiated by the right? Or police's reaction against the event of the right?)

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The Czech parliamentary radical right and the West: Harnessing post-socialism to anti-liberalism

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Abstract

The present article explores the dynamics behind Czech radical-right leader Tomio Okamura and his Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party's frequent criticism of the West. It argues that their attacks on the West should be seen as not only a critique of liberal democracy but also a denunciation of the post-socialist socio-economic and political order in Central and Eastern Europe. The transition from socialism to liberal democracy in this region has closely tied the concept of liberal democracy to 'the Western model', turning discussions about the West into debates about the post-1989 transition. Using a qualitative analysis of social media communication and drawing on the insights of critical discourse analysis, the article shows how Okamura and his party use their denunciation of the West to fight against both the Western liberal democratic model and the Czech post-socialist regime. By doing so, they tap into post-socialist tropes and challenge the West–East hierarchy of knowledge. The Czech case sheds light on the regional specificity of radical right movements in Central and Eastern Europe and how their anti-Western, anti-liberal stance is influenced by issues related to the post-1989 transition.

Keywords: Czech politics; Tomio Okamura; Freedom and Direct Democracy; anti-Westernism; anti-liberalism; post-socialism

1 Introduction

Scrolling through Czech radical-right leader Tomio Okamura's Facebook page, the amount of material on the West truly amazes. Barely one day passes without a post about asylum seekers in Greece, demonstrations in France, street gangs in Sweden, or anti-racist struggles in the United States. Why would a radical right politician and their party devote so much attention to other countries' internal socio-political affairs? Why do they constantly criticise the West? I argue that Okamura's and his Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, hereafter SPD) party's attacks against the West should be understood not only as a criticism of liberal democracy but also as a denunciation of the post-socialist

socio-economic and political order. Because of the dynamics of the post-socialist transition, liberal democracy is closely tied to 'the Western model' in Central and Eastern Europe, and discussions about 'the West' are thus closely intertwined with views about the post-1989 transition.¹ Through its denunciation of the West, the SPD is not only fighting against a – real or imagined – Western liberal democratic model with minority protection, tolerant mores, mass migration, globalising tendencies and a highly institutionalised democracy with checks and balances but also against the Czech post-socialist regime, its geopolitical orientation and local elites.

Tomio Okamura's and the SPD's obsession with the West deserves more attention as it reveals a particular aspect of radical right and national-conservative politics in Central and Eastern Europe: the use of post-socialist tropes that draw on the State socialist past, the post-89 transition and the region's peripheral position in relation to the Western core. In their attacks on the West, Okamura and the SPD are not only expressing their opposition to many features of contemporary liberal democracy, something that is also expressed by many political actors across the world, but they are also harnessing a criticism of the post-socialist transition to their assault on certain aspects of the liberal democratic project. Interestingly, the party's communication on the West also subverts the West-East hierarchy of knowledge, turning Western voices of authority against the Western model and showcasing critical 'Eastern' voices, such as those of Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and even Vladimir Putin. I suggest that the Czech case can help with understanding the regional specificity and appeal of radical right and national-conservative movements and discourses in the wider Central and Eastern European region. Ultimately, I suggest that the strong anti-Westernism promoted by the radical right for its domestic struggles feeds on problems linked to the post-1989 transition and also helps explain geopolitical standpoints critical of Euro-Atlantic institutions, from Euroscepticism and anti-Americanism all the way to sympathy for the Russian and Chinese regimes.

2 Liberal democracy as a Western geopolitical project in Central and Eastern Europe

Despite the active participation of Central and East European intellectuals, politicians and citizens in the history of liberalism, and despite the presence of liberal currents in the region in the past, such as in the Czechoslovak First Republic (1918–1938), the establishment of liberal democratic regimes in the region following the fall of state socialism came under the strong influence of external, Western actors. This is not to say that the new socio-political elites, and even the local populations, did not want to build liberal democratic regimes after 1989, but rather that the process quickly took the form of compliance with conditions for Euro-Atlantic institutional membership.

¹ I use the terms 'Western Europe' and 'Eastern Europe' in line with the Cold War division of Europe after 1945, a division deeply anchored in European imaginaries and beyond. According to the same logic, 'the West' is also meant to include overseas countries with a majority Anglo-Saxon population.

The new governments built on the idea that their region had been a ‘kidnapped West’ during the Cold War (Kundera, 1983) and framed their post-1989 project as ‘catching up with the West’ and ‘returning to Europe’, with Europe embodied by Euro-Atlantic institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Vachudova, 2005, p. 84). However, considering the high socio-economic, political and symbolic stakes for Central and Eastern Europe, there was a strong ‘asymmetrical interdependence’ (Moravcsik, 2009, p. 5) between the East and the West during adhesion processes, with the West mainly defining the conditions, assessing results and, eventually, granting membership (Vachudova, 2005). These mechanisms led to a particular hierarchy between Western Europe and so-called ‘Eastern Europe’, whereby the former would teach and reprimand the latter. It rested on the assumption of a superior, modern West helping its inferior, backward neighbours in the framework of a logic that was baptised ‘Western leveraged pedagogy’ (Kulpa, 2014). Arguably, this asymmetrical relationship dates back several centuries (Wolff, 1994).

The West-East relationship has been increasingly interrogated in academia in recent years, and some scholars have drawn from postcolonial studies, seeing the effects of Orientalism (Said, 1978) towards Eastern Europe (Owczarzak, 2009) and within Eastern Europe (Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Kuus, 2004). Drawing on critical race theory’s concept of Whiteness, some authors have also argued that some of the West-East dynamics at play in Europe are triggered by Central and Eastern European populations and political elites claiming – and often being denied – ‘Europeanness’ or ‘Westernness’ (Böröcz & Sarkar, 2017; Kalmar, 2022; Sayyid, 2018). As for Krastev and Holmes (2018), they rather see the rise of national-conservative anti-liberalism as a backlash against the post-89 dynamics of imitation. While those analyses tend to overly rely on simplistic psycho-social mechanisms to explain complex geo-political and socio-political developments, they do accurately show how central West-East relationships have been for contemporary developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

3 Does Czechia belong in the West?

In Czechia, the symbolic potency of the idea of ‘the West’ can clearly be seen in contemporary political and cultural debates. In addition to the aforementioned essay by Kundera, Ladislav Holy’s influential anthropological study on Czech national identity remarks that Czechs see themselves as not ‘Eastern’, like their other post-socialist neighbours, but rather as modern, universalist, Western citizens (1996). He also notes that socio-political discourses opposing state socialism discarded the system as an Eastern, Asian import, and that the break-up with Slovakia in 1993 was welcomed by some in Czechia as getting rid of a part of the country that was not enough ‘Western-oriented’ (Holy, 1996, pp. 106–107).

In the latest decade, and especially since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015–2016, the saliency of this debate has increased in the Czech public space and arguably also in the wider Central European space. The debate on refugee quotas for EU countries quickly took on civilisational aspects as some framed it as a struggle between a tolerant, post-nationalistic West and an intolerant, nationalistic East (Kalmar, 2018). In Czechia, as a consensus formed against refugees, the mostly positive image of the West was ‘re-

placed during that time by a stereotypical negative image of the West – migrant crimes in the streets, crazy Western universities, almost failed states within the EU’ (Slačálek, 2021, p. 180). While it is not the only political force to exploit this image, the radical right has been aggressively pushing this narrative, as I will explain further.

Debates about ‘Westernness’ also reemerged in the context of domestic political struggles in the late 2010s, as self-appointed ‘democratic’ forces from the centre-left to the right mobilised against what they saw as democratic backsliding engineered by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and President Miloš Zeman. In addition to criticism about non-transparent governing, corruption and state capture, opponents drew from post-socialist memory politics to link Babiš and Zeman to the former regime. At times, opponents also framed their struggle as a pro-Western vs. pro-Eastern dilemma, with Babiš and Zeman depicted as anti-EU, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese forces.

In the 2021 parliamentary electoral campaign, the question of the country’s geopolitical belonging was best exploited by the right-wing coalition SPOLU (‘Together’). It put out posters throughout the country claiming, ‘We belong in the West’ (*Patříme na Západ*) and ended up beating Andrej Babiš’s ANO party. While the irony of such a claim by a rather conservative political grouping with Eurosceptic tendencies was pointed out by some liberals and leftists, it nevertheless showed how belonging to the West is still a potent – albeit rather empty – signifier and an important point of contention in Czechia.

Thus, the centrality of the Western model as a key reference point in post-89 socio-political imaginaries is obvious in Czechia, and I suggest that it is the same for the wider region. What is important to add is that those political imaginaries surrounding the Western model are deeply interlinked with ideas of liberal democracy. As a sort of empty signifier, ‘the West’, understood as the liberal system in the West, does not have a completely fixed meaning, though, which explains why different political forces can claim it, as in the case of the conservative SPOLU. Nevertheless, it does signify some kind of belonging to a political system, and not just to Euro-Atlantic institutions.

This liberal democratic system might be interpreted by some according to a minimalist definition, i.e. as a representative democracy with free elections, a market economy, civil rights, the rule of law and the division of power, while others might also embrace other aspects such as more open migration regimes, specific minority rights or freer socio-cultural mores. As I show in this article, the equation between the West and liberalism explains why the SPD devotes such attention to the West in its communication. Its anti-Westernism buttresses its anti-liberalism and also supports its critique of postsocialism. Ultimately, this criticism of the West serves as a criticism of the Czech system and its elites since they are identified as being submissive to the West and imitating it.

4 The SPD as a radical right-wing populist challenger

After a brief success in the 1990s, the Czech parliamentary radical right vanished from the scene until 2013, when it came back into parliament under the banner of *Úsvit přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury* (Dawn of Direct Democracy of Tomio Okamura, hereafter *Úsvit*) led by the charismatic Czech-Japanese entrepreneur Tomio Okamura, who has often used

his foreign background to fend off accusations of racism (*Nejsem rasista, vždyť jsem napůl*, 2014). The party mixed a critique of the political system and elites with nativism but fell apart amidst internal strife over finances in 2015 (Císař & Navrátil, 2019). Its leader, Tomio Okamura, left and founded the SPD in 2015, which played an important role in anti-refugee mobilisation and attracted most of the anti-refugee vote in 2017, finishing fourth with 10.6 per cent of votes.

The SPD can be considered a populist radical-right party according to the conceptual work of Cas Mudde: it professes right-wing views that present inequalities as natural, a nativist ideology that considers the state as exclusively for members of the ethnic nation, with foreign elements seen as threatening, authoritarian tendencies that advocate for swift, repressive policies, and a populist rhetoric that divides the country into corrupt elites and a pure people (Mudde, 2007). Tomio Okamura and his SPD became the main anti-EU political force, calling for a referendum to exit the EU, and it built the Identity and Democracy political group with other radical-right parties on the EU level. During the pandemic, the SPD became a leading voice against anti-COVID-19 measures, but it was also challenged by more radical groupings, and this explains its slight decrease in the 2021 elections when it won 9.6 per cent of votes. Following the renewal of Russian military operations against Ukraine in February 2022, it denounced military help for Ukraine, criticised policies for Ukrainian refugees and called for dialogue with Moscow.

5 Methods and methodology

The present paper is based on the analysis of a large sample of textual and audio-visual material from traditional and social media using the insights of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as developed by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and other scholars (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 1997). While this approach does not claim that the whole social world exists only through discourse, it does insist on its importance in the (re)production of society (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2). Although a discourse can be understood as a simple social interaction, like an interview, I use it in the sense of a more or less coherent set of ideas expressed through texts, written or oral (Wodak, 1997, p. 5). Looking at discourses of belonging as a part of wider social practices, CDA insists on the way texts are anchored into a context (Wodak, 1997, p. 6) and are part of an “order of discourse”, the relatively durable social structuring of language which is itself one element of the relatively durable structuring and networking of social practices’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3). Drawing from these theoretical insights, I analyse the ways in which SPD discourses interact with West-East power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge.

The core of this empirical research consisted of a close qualitative analysis of 644 posts published on the SPD’s official Facebook page between September 13, 2019, and February 23, 2020. This timeframe indicates the beginning of my data scraping and stops shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic came to dominate the agenda, bringing up new topics and positions. I then searched for more content on the party and party leader’s official Facebook pages based on keywords to explore some themes in greater detail, regardless of the time frame.

6 The West: Islamists, globalists and neo-Marxists

The image of the West conveyed by the SPD is one of a dominating yet declining power. According to the SPD, Western decay is caused by three interrelated problems: mass migration, corrupt political elites, and socio-cultural excesses. These messages are often glued together in virulent denunciations of the West and its institutions, particularly the EU, which are accused of favouring and even organising mass migration from other continents because of their ideological fanaticism. The SPD's communication constantly picks up pieces of news from the West to highlight negative aspects and aliment a gloomy picture of the model that Czechia is supposed to be imitating. The SPD then uses this information to directly or indirectly accuse Czech political, economic and socio-cultural elites of imitating the West and dragging the country into the abyss while it promises citizens a radical break with this politics.

6.1 Islamists

Its central criticism of the West is the issue of extra-European migration and Islam. Even before the so-called refugee crisis in Europe, Tomio Okamura and his party *Úsvit* were some of the first political actors to bring up the topic of migration on the Czech political scene. When *Úsvit* crumbled because of infighting just as pan-European debates and mobilisation on refugees became heated in 2015, Okamura sought to keep his position as leader of the radical right, and his newly born SPD made anti-migration and anti-Islam positions central to its political identity. The party took the most radical position possible on the issue by advocating for a total ban on Islam in the country (Okamura, 2017a). The party made these positions the second point of its programme under the heading 'No to Islam, no to terrorists – a safe country for everyone', a slogan that then appeared on billboards and promotional material ahead of the 2017 legislative elections (Okamura, 2017b).

Following the 2017 elections, the party kept the issue high on its agenda and brought it up repeatedly on its social media pages. In my analysis of the 644 posts published on the SPD's official Facebook page between September 2019 and February 2020, more than a quarter (175) referred to migration and Islam (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie – SPD*, n.d.). Most of its social media messages on the topic hammered home the same warning inspired by Western Europe:

The SPD movement doesn't want us to end up like Islamised Western Europe, where many people are afraid to go out in the streets so that immigrants don't stab or kill them. We refuse mass immigration and request the possibility to control our borders so that illegal immigrants and terrorists don't get here. We have already proposed a law outlawing the Islamic veil in public and outlawing the propagation of hateful Islamic ideology. We protect our fatherland, we protect Czech citizens, we protect your families, your children, your households, your friends and your property.

This exact same message can be found more than 200 times on the party's Facebook pages and that of its leader, Tomio Okamura. As this message shows, the party describes the West as already Islamised. While it is too late for Westerners, Czechs can avoid meeting the same fate by supporting the SPD.

The simplest way in which Okamura and the SPD spread their knowledge of the West is through the constant diffusing of and commenting on selected events on Facebook, usually using the profile of leader Tomio Okamura, which are then systematically reposted on the party's official Facebook page. The SPD constantly shares negative news about the West, especially when Muslims or extra-European migrants and their descendants are involved. In addition to acts of terrorism involving Islamist radicals, the party often reports on crime, highlighting or suggesting a link to migration. When the discursive trope of migrant crime and Islamist terrorism in Western Europe does not come up in Czech media, the SPD produces its own analyses of the situation, often drawing from mainstream Western sources.

6.2 Globalists

The second main trope of Western decline is one that portrays the West as led by evil or out-of-touch elites, be these the European Union (EU), Western governments, the United States or less clearly defined international elites, which are often demonised as 'globalists', a term frequently used by the SPD after May 2017. A lot of the criticism accuses these elites of allowing mass extra-European migration and 'Islamisation' to continue unhindered and even of organising it. For example, in a Facebook post, Tomio Okamura claimed that the EU and states like Germany are trying once more to introduce relocation quotas for refugees, and he concludes his message with the following words: 'Germany, the EU and globalists want to flood Europe with immigrants and destroy the native European nations. We refuse that the EU decides about who gets to live in our country! Support us and we will resist together [...] the dictate of Brussels and Berlin' (Okamura, 2020f). Sometimes, U.S. American billionaire George Soros, who funds many liberal initiatives helping migrants, is presented as one of the leaders of the so-called globalists, and his collaborators and projects in Czechia are also denounced (Okamura, 2020d). These claims are an outright endorsement of radical-right conspiracy theories such as the 'Great Replacement Theory', which denounces an alleged plot to replace Europe's native inhabitants with non-European migrants (Zúquete, 2018).

The SPD presents itself as the only anti-EU political party and has advocated holding a referendum to exit the EU since its foundation. Thus, it relentlessly attacks the Union. The organisation is not only presented as a tool of globalists that favours migration but also as a non-democratic, authoritarian, bureaucratic and destructive union, 'a dictatorship of unelected bureaucrats', as Okamura repeatedly writes on social media (Okamura, 2019a). Another angle of attack against the EU is environmental measures taken by the organisation, which are denounced by the SPD as ideologically motivated and economically destructive. 'More bullying from Brussels', many of those posts start, such as in a post about the removal of old cars from the road (Okamura, 2020h) or one on new farming rules (Okamura, 2021c). Sometimes, such measures are portrayed as proof that multinational corporations are ruling the EU. In any case, the results of EU measures are announced in catastrophic terms, such as the 'destruction of the economy' or the 'destruction of agriculture'.

The Western geopolitical order is also attacked by the SPD in its communication, which reiterates long-term criticism of Euro-Atlantic foreign policy, and especially U.S.

American wars. Denunciations of Western military assaults on other countries are often set in contrast to anti-Russian discourses, which are more dominant in Czechia and are being challenged by the SPD, whose leading figures often diffuse ideas in accordance with the official Kremlin line. This kind of discursive mechanism is obvious in an interview Okamura published on his Facebook page, in which he warns that he is ‘not an admirer of Putin nor a fan of Russia’ and claims that he is ‘neither pro-Russian nor anti-American’ but then goes on to accuse NATO and the USA of provoking Russia, presents Russia’s military intervention in Syria as directed against Islamist terrorists, and says the following:

Millions of Muslim migrants have been sent to Europe not by Russian propaganda, but by the policies of Brussels and Washington. [...] And, as we all know, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda or Daesh were not created by Russian propaganda, but by American money and American advisers and the American government. The Maidan was not financed by the Russians but by the American government. (Okamura, 2016)

Since the renewal of Russian military operations in Ukraine in February 2022, the SPD has tuned down its sympathy for Russia but has doubled down on its criticism of NATO, the United States and the strongly pro-NATO Czech government, all accused of provoking or worsening the situation. While the SPD is less actively promoting an exit from NATO than it is the EU, it nevertheless advocates for an alternative foreign policy centred on Central Europe. Indeed, it promotes the idea of turning the Visegrád Group, an international organisation uniting Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, into a real political, economic and military union, but without delegating national sovereignty (Okamura, 2021b).

6.3 Neo-Marxists

Finally, the third main vector of criticism highlights socio-cultural changes in the West, which the party started to label as neo-Marxist starting in 2018. Multi-culturalism, anti-racism, feminism, LGBT+ rights and environmentalism are all denounced as drawing on neo-Marxism. The term ‘neo-Marxist’ is also actively used in combination with ‘globalist’ and the Czech neologism ‘*sluníčkář*’ (literally ‘sunny person’), which was used as a derogatory term to mock the naivety of Czech supporters of multiculturalism after 2013 and used in widespread fashion to attack proponents of welcoming refugees in 2015–2016 (Trachtová, 2015), and is perhaps best translated in English as ‘do-gooder’ (Slačálek & Svobodová, 2018, p. 489). The terms ‘globalist’, ‘neo-Marxist’, and ‘*sluníčkář*’ are ubiquitous in SPD communication and are used against both local and Western opponents.

Despite the frequent mixing of terms, the term ‘neo-Marxist’ more often touches on socio-cultural issues, such as in a video where Okamura calls gender studies a ‘neo-Marxist pseudo-science’ (Okamura, 2018) or a post in which he denounces ‘the perverted neo-Marxist gender theory that breaks up natural families and the normal world’ (Okamura, 2020i). The terms ‘globalist’ and ‘neo-Marxist’ seem to be used interchangeably in SPD communication, and the EU is alternatively said to be in the hands of neo-Marxists, sunny-people or globalists, or all of them. In one paragraph, Okamura uses almost all these terms to attack the ‘globalists and totalitarian elitists’ and the ‘globalist neoliberal and

neo-Marxist financial-political octopus' and to call on people to support 'the SPD in its struggle against the new totalitarianism and defend Europe, your motherland and your families against the disgusting poisonous sunny-people totalitarian multi-cultural gender cocktail that the elites have prepared for us' (Okamura, 2019b). In a way, these terms serve as empty signifiers that represent many aspects of the Western liberal system and its Czech version that are under attack by the SPD.

The picture of the West that the SPD diffuses is one of a declining yet threatening power. While it is in full decay because of mass migration, globalist elites and neo-Marxist ideology, it is also controlling countries like Czechia and dragging them into the abyss with the complicity of local elites. These discourses correspond to the idea of *declinism* identified by Slačálek and Svobodová in their study of the Czech anti-refugee movement, which serves as a powerful argument for radical and even brutal measures (2018, p. 494). Thus, attached to this idea of decline is the SPD's own radical project to overhaul the political system, detach Czechia from Euro-Atlantic institutions, and restore its national sovereignty.

7 Harnessing post-socialism to anti-liberalism

The SPD's anti-liberal discourses about the West are hardly surprising to anyone remotely interested in contemporary politics. After all, this criticism of liberalism as a Western system abounds in movements around the world, regardless of their credos, be they anti-colonialism or conservative reactionism (Aydin, 2007). Even in some European countries, anti-liberal, anti-Western movements may exist, such as in Vladimir Putin's Russia, where this has become a defining feature of state ideology (Umland, 2012), and in Greece, where parts of the Orthodox Church represent this trend (Makrides, 2009). A lot of criticism against the West as overly liberal is also embraced by various Western political and socio-cultural actors.

What makes the SPD's use of anti-Westernism in its anti-liberal communication particularly interesting is its integration of elements of post-socialism. Post-socialism here is understood in broader terms than 'the time after state socialism' as a critical standpoint in several senses: critical of the socialist past and of possible socialist futures; critical of the present as neoliberal verities about transition, markets, and democracy were being imposed upon former socialist spaces; and critical of the possibilities for knowledge as shaped by Cold War institutions (Chari & Verdery, 2009, p. 11). I argue that the Czech parliamentary radical right is harnessing aspects of this post-socialism to its anti-liberalism to adapt its discourse to the local context and draw on widespread discontent with post-1989 affairs. The SPD uses post-socialism to critically draw comparisons with the state's socialist past, denounce aspects of the transformation, and question the country's geopolitical orientation.

While the SPD cannot be considered nostalgic for state socialism since it is a radical right-wing party with anti-communist accents, it nevertheless exploits widespread criticism of the post-1989 transition. It uses those elements to attack current national and international political and socio-economic elites and to feed the anti-liberal, anti-Western discourses sketched in the previous section. Reflecting on the 1989 revolution, SPD deputy

Jan Hrnčír stated in an interview shared by Okamura: 'Despite many positive aspects [...] I cannot rejoice at seeing how our republic, which used to be an autonomous power in industry and agriculture, has become a colony of the EU' (Okamura, 2019e). The SPD often portrays Czechia as a country that was plundered by Western companies and whose economic autonomy has been dismantled by the European Union. It frequently appears in posts about agriculture, where the SPD underlines that the country used to be self-sufficient in food production until 1989: 'Now we have nothing. With our entry into the EU we voluntarily agreed to liquidate our agriculture and we enabled the arrival of foreign predators on our market' (Okamura, 2020g). In its communication, the SPD rarely fails to clarify that 'foreign predators' or other foreign opponents such as the EU are Western. Thus, while the party does not celebrate the socialist character of the past, it critically reflects on it and presents it as better in some particular aspects, especially regarding Czechia's position towards the West.

This accusation is further detailed in a post on capital transfers between Czechia and Western Europe. In a message posted about twelve times in the last three years by Tomio Okamura, the SPD leader uses the picture and findings of French economist Thomas Piketty to back claims of Western exploitation. The picture bears the heading: 'Where is money from Czechia flowing out? – We are feeding Western Europe – Czechs are a vanquished nation. They are losing the most from membership in the EU' (Okamura, 2021a). The text under the images compares the outflows of capital compared to EU subventions to prove this point. The text accompanying the image varies from post to post but inevitably resorts to a denunciation of the West with anti-colonial rhetoric and propositions of measures such as taxing more international Western corporations and eventually exiting the EU. Such criticism of neoliberal globalisation and core-periphery relations that draws on one of the most renowned left-wing economists might sound unusual from a radical right-wing party, but it exploits well the idea of unequal West-East relations associated with post-socialism. Obviously, the SPD does not go as far as to question capitalist relations in general, keeping its denunciation to the surface level of declared national interests.

In these discourses, the European Union is not presented as a pan-European union of which Czechia is a member but rather as a tool of the West. In addition to the vaguely defined globalist neo-Marxist elites, the SPD often denounces the EU as controlled by Western powers, especially France and Germany. Making a reference to the 1938 Munich Agreement by which France and the United Kingdom ceded parts of Czechoslovakia to Hitler's Germany, Okamura writes: 'As in 1938, we cannot rely on the now degenerate neo-Marxist so-called West represented by Germany and France, which have evil intentions towards us. To them, we are just a colony in which they see an outlet for their trash, cheap labour and a place from which they can siphon profits' (Okamura, 2020e). In the same post, he denounces Germany's alleged effort to control the EU as a new totalitarian project following Nazism and Communism. According to these views, the West not only dominates Czechia politically but also exploits it economically.

Negative aspects of the post-socialist transition leading to the transformation of Czechia into a Western colony come to support the idea of a stolen revolution in 1989 and the need to reverse the current course. In addition to peddling conspiracy theories about November 1989 and alleged collusion between the Communist regime and opponents, the

SPD uses the Velvet Revolution's imaginary to question post-89 developments. This idea is best put together by Tomio Okamura at a speech held in Brno in 2016 and posted on Facebook:

The profits of the Czech branches [of multinational corporations] are used to increase wages for employees in Western Europe. That, my friends, is called economic colonialism. In 1989, people clinked their keys for 'freedom and independence'. After more than twenty years of Czech pseudo-democracy, we have neither freedom nor independence, but a plundered and indebted republic! (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie* – SPD, 2016).

The speech refers to the 1989 demonstrations in Czechoslovakia, at which protesters clinked their keys to tell the regime that the bell was tolling for it. The idea of the betrayed ideals of 1989 also comes up in a meme posted by Okamura to denounce 'gender madness'. The meme is a picture of an androgynous-looking fashion model with flamboyant and revealing attire, and the text asks the rhetorical question: 'This is the gender "progress" from the West. Did we clink our keys in November for that?' (Okamura, 2020c). This is a telling example of the way post-socialism is harnessed to anti-liberal ideas, whereby unconventional gender performances are denounced not only as a foreign import from the West but also as a betrayal of the Velvet Revolution's popular ideals.

Drawing on the changes that followed 1989, Okamura and his SPD criticise and exploit particular aspects of the transformation that are unpopular, at least among some population groups. These aspects relate to certain elements of liberal democracy, but they are often framed in the language of post-socialism by making reference to the pre-1989 past, problematising the neoliberal transition and denouncing its underlying logic of unequal West-East relations. Of course, the SPD articulates its discourses with its radical right-wing lens, which means that its post-socialism is subordinated to an anti-Western discourse entrenched in anti-liberal ideas such as nativism and conservatism.

8 Subverting West–East hierarchies of knowledge and authority

In addition to critical assessments of the socialist past and subsequent developments, the SPD targets another aspect of post-socialism by subverting West–East hierarchies of knowledge and authority according to which the East must learn from the West (Krastev & Holmes, 2018; Kulpa, 2014). In its challenge of the Western model, the SPD subverts this hierarchy in two ways. On the one hand, it uses it to buttress its anti-Western, anti-liberal message by showcasing mainstream Western sources, alternative Western institutions of knowledge and alternative Western political actors, and on the other hand, it inverts the West-East hierarchy by championing non-Western figures of authority who are challenging the West. Through its communication, the SPD is thus both exploiting and undermining the intellectual authority of the West. In some way, this comes close to one of the aspects included in Chari and Verdery's definition of post-socialism, i.e. the critique of 'the possibilities for knowledge as shaped by Cold War institutions' (2009, p. 11).

What is truly interesting about SPD's social media communication is the level of detail and the explicit use of sources like foreign mainstream media and experts. Contrarily

to what some academic works that adopt a denunciatory tone claim (Charvát et al., 2022; Filipec & Charvátová, 2022), and notwithstanding some cases of outright manipulation, the SPD tends to work cleverly with information and back it with numerous sources, arguably making a rather convincing impression. Many of the posts about Muslims and extra-European migrants and their descendants in the West contain detailed information citing mainstream Western media or established experts. For example, in an approximately 200-word long post on the 'Islamisation of Europe' Okamura cites one mainstream German tabloid, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, one mainstream Swiss daily, one well-known German professor, a study by the University of Freiburg, the mainstream think-tank Pew Forum and one German mainstream daily (Okamura, 2022). Whether this use of sources is deliberate or not, these messages about Western Europe that use details and renowned sources do produce a convincing impression and certainly benefit from the idea that Western sources of knowledge are to be trusted.

Another strategy used by the party in its communication is the use of alternative Western sources. Radical-right think tanks promoting racist, anti-Muslim and anti-migrant theses like the Great Replacement conspiracy theory are thus widely used by the party in its communication. In a post about extra-European migration to Italy, Okamura quotes the Italian think tank named *FareFuturo* (MakeFuture), which claimed that half of the Italian population could be Muslim by 2100 (Okamura, 2019c). In another post, Okamura writes a long text about how 'Safe and idyllic Sweden is becoming a war zone because of immigrant gangs', and he quotes a Swedish think tank called *Det Goda Samhället* ('The Good Society') to prove that Swedes with migration backgrounds have committed most crimes (Okamura, 2019d). In this post and about twenty others, the Great Replacement theory serves as the main analytical lens through which to look at all these events. The facts are provided by local think tanks and the US American Gatestone Institute. All those think tanks have in common that they are closely or loosely related to the local and international radical right, with Gatestone being well integrated in the United States as one of the main anti-migrant lobbies. While they are not well-known, especially not in Czechia, their scientific outlook and Westernness lend credibility to the facts and numbers provided by the SPD and Okamura in their analyses. Being presented solely as think tanks, without any mention of their ideological orientation, they serve as objective, scientific sources that have insider knowledge because they are based in the West.

In addition to using seemingly objective Western sources, the SPD also profiles 'dissent' Western voices. In doing so, the SPD engages with another 'West', a Western world opposed to multiculturalism and liberal modernity, far from the image which inspired the transitions to democracy during the 1990s. This alternative West that is resisting multiculturalism and the liberal democratic hegemony is best represented by the Western politicians allied with the SPD on the European level. Amongst them, Matteo Salvini of the Italian *Lega*, Marine Le Pen of the French *Rassemblement National*, and Geert Wilders of the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* figure prominently as authoritative figures of knowledge. As such, they are often featured in social media posts, where Tomio Okamura and the SPD highlight their friendship ties with them and report on their local struggles and successes. In April 2019, ahead of the EU parliamentary elections, the SPD invited its Euro-

pean allies for an electoral meeting in Prague's central square, and the leaders addressed the crowd. Geert Wilders said the following in English with Czech subtitles on a big screen:

Let me tell you something about my home country, the Netherlands. [...] In three of the largest cities in Holland, the majority of the people under the age of 25 are now already non-Western immigrants, mostly Islamic. Our own people are already strangers in their own town and later in their own country. The Netherlands is given away by the elites on a silver plate. (Chmel, 2019)

European leaders of the radical right, like Geert Wilders, serve as alternative sources of knowledge for a party like the SPD. In addition to repeating what the party has been saying for years, they add the weight of their own experience and authority. They are presented as insiders who know the truth about the West, who are resisting local and international elites, and who are not afraid of telling the truth. In a similar way, Donald Trump has been featured in SPD communication as a positive example of political resistance to the Western hegemonic model.

Last but not least, the SPD has also been more openly challenging the West–East knowledge hierarchy by championing non-Western leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and even Vladimir Putin. This is especially true of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, who became the European radical right's (and other parts of the right's) darling during the so-called refugee crisis when he hardened his rhetoric and took radical steps to stop extra-European migrants. In SPD's communication, Orbán is presented as an exemplary leader who is standing up for his country's interests against migration and the EU. In one of the countless posts featuring Orbán, his endorsement of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory is cited: 'It is forbidden to say that Europe is threatened by the migration of peoples, that migration brings [to] the continent criminality and terror, and it is forbidden to say that "it's not a coincidence", but rather a "planned, organised action"' (Okamura, 2020a). Polish vice-premier and de facto leader Jarosław Kaczyński also serves as an example of a non-Western leader standing up to the West, and it is mostly his fight against the EU that is celebrated by Okamura and the SPD. Worthy of mention is also Vladimir Putin, whose criticism of the West is featured in several posts, like one from January 2020, in which his words on migration are cited: 'We see that the majority of Euro-Atlantic countries have in fact taken the road of rejection of their roots, including the Christian values that have made up the fundamentals of Western civilisation' (Okamura, 2020b). His words comparing same-sex marriage with Satanism are also cited. All the Putin memes were discretely deleted after Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The diffusion of the words of these non-Western leaders is telling in the way that they serve as alternative sources of knowledge and authority about the West, as well as embodying examples of rulers apparently resisting the Western hegemony. The SPD can draw on their legitimacy to back its own arguments and prove the realism of its political project. Finally, the widespread use of foreign references by the SPD can also be seen as yet another example of the radical right's internationalisation, not only through organisational bridges but also through borrowing from each other's playbooks and discourses (Caiani, 2018).

9 Concluding remarks

The goal of this article has been to use the Czech example to suggest some key explanations of the Czech radical right in particular and, more generally, anti-liberal, national-conservative political movements in Central and Eastern Europe. As I have shown, the centrality of the Western liberal democratic model – as an actual model or symbol – in post-1989 developments in the region has turned ‘the West’ into an important point of contention. Radical-right parties like the SPD, and national-conservative forces in general, have thus increasingly engaged in discourses about the West as a way to question and challenge post-1989 developments. As I have argued, the SPD harnesses post-socialism to its anti-liberal critique of the West by skilfully exploiting critical discourses about the transition in terms of uneven West-East power relations. This has allowed them to shape a compelling narrative about their country as a victim of the liberal West and pro-Western elites in socio-economic, political and cultural terms and to present themselves as resistance fighters fighting for their people. Subverting the existing West-East hierarchy of knowledge, the party exploits the authority of mainstream and alternative Western sources and also champions non-Western figures of authority challenging the West. Ultimately, I suggest that these tendencies explain other aspects of the anti-liberal challenge in Central and Eastern Europe, such as geopolitical sympathies for the Russian and Chinese regimes.

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The voice of irregular migrants:
A mixed-method study exploring the migration process
of Iranian asylum seekers to Europe

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Abstract

After nearly four decades of irregular movement of Iranian nationals worldwide, we have much to learn about their motivations for leaving Iran and choosing their destination countries. This paper investigates the main factors that influenced Iranian asylum seekers to leave Iran in an irregular way. Our quantitative survey was conducted online, relying on a convenience sample of Iranian asylum seekers (n=241) who filled out the survey, which was spread on social media applications. We found that the main factors pushing people to leave Iran were related to the lack of social freedom (81 per cent), economic issues (76 per cent), and the lack of job security (71 per cent). Likewise, secure economic conditions (81 per cent), social freedom (76 per cent), and the availability of job opportunities (70 per cent) were the main factors that pulled people to their destination countries. We found that participants have effectively adapted to the healthcare system, language, and weather of destination countries, and they expect to have freedom in Europe and improve the quality of life of their loved ones, including their offspring.

Keywords: Iran; irregular migration; freedom; job security; economic reasons

1 Introduction

Migration has been inevitable in human history and civilization. At the heart of human history, this movement supports cultural, scientific, and knowledge exchange. However, in recent years, the massive movement of people has been portrayed as a problem in many societies (Dekki, 2018). Wars, conflicts, human rights violations, persecution, repression, and natural disasters have forced millions of people to leave their homes and seek asylum in an irregular way all over the world (ECHO, 2017; Esses et al., 2017). Irregular migration has become the main topic of ongoing public debate in European countries in recent years (Morehouse & Blomfield, 2011). First of all, in order to illuminate the background to the

‘problem’ of irregular migration, we should define the phenomenon. In general, the dominant portrait of irregular migrants is of people who try to enter a country by hiding themselves on boats, lorries, or other vehicles. However, they are not the only groups that are classified as irregular migrants. Irregular migrants are individuals who lack legal permission to reside in a country other than their country of origin or are in breach of the terms of their visa. This definition of irregular migrations covers different categories of individuals, including those who have arrived in the destination country illegally, have not conformed to visa requirements, are without any documents, or whose claim for asylum has been refused (Chappell et al., 2011).

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Refugee Agency, in its annual Global Trends Report (2019), stated that 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2019, of which 26 million are refugees and 4.2 million are asylum seekers. Middle Eastern nationals make up 18 per cent of all first-time asylum applicants in Europe, and among them, Iranian citizens are one of the top ten nationalities of first-time asylum applicants (Eurostat, 2019). However, there is a lack of empirical research on Iranian asylum seekers and refugees in migration literature, especially about their motivation for leaving Iran and their integration into the host societies. For this reason, the current study investigated their main motivations for leaving Iran, the image of Europe in their minds before leaving Iran, the routes from Iran to Europe, their expectations of life in the host societies, and their adjustment in the destination countries in Europe.

2 Conceptual background: Motivation for migration through a critical lens

Individuals changing their physical location and moving due to the structure of populations, natural disasters, climatic change, and economic issues have always been a part of human history. Invasions, war, and the formation of nations, states, and empires have all encouraged migration, either voluntary or forced (Cohen, 1995). The ‘push and pull factor’ is one of the most important theories in the investigation of population movements and immigrants. It claims that the reasons for migration can be found in the desire individuals have to change their living conditions and improve them through migration (Pan, 2019). These approaches are known as ‘push-pull’ theories because they understand the reasons for migration as a combination of push factors that force individuals to leave their country of origin and pull factors that attract people to receiving countries. Push factors include population growth, low standards of living, a lack of economic opportunities, political suppression, and a lack of freedom of speech, while pull factors are demand for labor, availability of land, job and economic opportunities, and political freedoms (Castles & Miller, 1998). Despite receiving criticism and being acknowledged as having some limitations by scholars such as Amaral (2020) and de Haas (2021), push and pull factors persist as essential components in migration studies. They continue to provide a crucial framework for comprehending the intricate motivations that drive migration.

3 Historical context

In the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, a significant number of Iranian citizens migrated, primarily choosing to relocate to Western countries (Hakimzadeh, 2006). Since then, a multitude of Iranian asylum seekers have either sought refuge in Turkey (Frantz, 2003) or utilized it as a transit point to reach other nations (Fozi, 2018). In 2009, the Green Wave of Iran deeply impacted Iran's hopeful reformists, leading many to reconsider their aspirations for social change and contemplate leaving their homeland. In response to escalating social constraints and the upheaval of the 2009 uprising, Iranians increasingly sought opportunities for immigration as an alternative path forward (Yeon Koo, 2023). The last wave happened from 2017 to autumn 2018 when Serbia witnessed a notable increase in migration from Iran, corresponding with the visa waiver for Iranians and the commencement of direct flights from Tehran to Belgrade. However, post-October 2018, Serbia reimposed visa requirements for Iranian nationals (Galijaš, 2019).

4 Political context: Freedom in Iran

Freedom is an essential factor in migration. A significant form of freedom is political freedom, which is based on protection for people. Such protection is related to civil liberties, including freedom of religion, freedom of gathering and demonstration, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and the right to self-government. All forms of freedom, such as freedom of expression, religious freedom, and political freedom, are limited in Iran. The Iranian government controls all press and television broadcasting, and the Press Court has enormous power to prosecute journalists and publishers for publishing anything perceived as against the Islamic regime (Freedom House, 2004; Ashby, 2010). Media control is used as a tool to suppress opposition voices. The Iranian government seeks to silence dissenting opinions, restrict the activities of opposition groups, and prevent the promotion of alternative political ideologies. Currently governed by the religious leader of Iran, the nation's media landscape is intricately linked to the dynamics of this ruling regime (Biddle & Hussain, 2022). According to a survey-based report by the Gamaan Foundation (2020) on Iranians' attitudes toward religion, only 32 per cent of the Iranian population considers themselves to be Shi'ite Muslims, and the rest of the respondents identify themselves as atheist, Zoroastrian, spiritual, agnostic, Sunni Muslim or other religions and about 22 per cent identify with none of the above.

Freedom can also be connected with economic opportunities for migrants. This means that a higher salary gives people the freedom to enjoy more services that may increase their life satisfaction (Ashby, 2010).

5 Economic reasons

According to the economic theory of migration, individuals leave their country of origin because it is financially beneficial for them. They make decisions by considering the values of the different alternatives, and they choose the option that best financially suits them

(Borjas, 1989). The neoclassical model is a widely employed framework for analyzing migration patterns. The emphasis of this model lies in examining the labor market aspects of migration, underscoring the significance of evaluating wage levels and employment conditions in both the origin and destination countries (Mitze & Reinkowski, 2010). Economic indicators in migration are labor and living standards, living costs, unemployment rate, wages, and the overall economic situation in origin and destination countries (Simpson, 2017). A study about macroeconomic determinants of regular and irregular migration to the UK showed that the differences between GDP per capita in the UK and country of origin, as well as the UK employment rate differential with the country of origin, influenced many people to leave their country and move to the UK (Forte & Portes, 2017). Another study showed that unemployment rates in the origin country, differences in living standards, income gap, and GDP per capita between the countries of origin and destination drive migration flow to Europe (Czaika, 2015).

However, economic factors are not the only ones that play a major role in migration. Other factors, such as cultural, social, and political elements, are also significant. One of the most important factors is migrant networks (Jennissen, 2003).

6 Migrant networks

The migrant's social network can directly impact their ability to leave the origin country and choose a destination country, find a career and housing, open a business, participate in the development of their home country, and access health care systems in the host society (Poros, 2011). A set of interpersonal ties that connect potential and former migrants, and even non-migrants, to each other through the links of relatives, friends, and shared countries of origin make migrant networks. The probability of international migration will be enhanced through these network connections because they decrease the expense and risk of movement and increase the expected net returns of migration. Social capital will be provided by having ties to someone who has already migrated. Through this connection, people gain access to an important kind of financial capital – a high income and, following that, the possibility of accumulating savings abroad and sending remittances back home (Massey & Espana, 1987; Massey, 1988; Palloni et al., 2001). The relationships that immigrants have with their own communities of origin, not only in terms of what pushes them to leave their home but also in terms of choosing their destination country, are described by migrant networks. Migrant networks highlight connections with residents in the receiving societies; residents who might be family members and friends, or simply former immigrants. These networks act as buffers for the many transitions of the immigrant and increase the chance of success for potential migrants. Immigrants are collected into these networks, which increase the possibility of finding jobs and housing and, generally, suggest a mediated explanation of the new culture in the host country (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 2014). A qualitative study by Gholampour and Simonovits (2021) showed that all Iranian asylum seekers who were in transit countries knew at least one person, friend or family, who lived in one of the European countries, and they consulted them before leaving Iran.

7 After arriving in Europe

It is crucial to measure several factors associated with refugees after their arrival in host countries, including their attitude towards their national identity, their ability to adapt to their new surroundings, and their everyday experiences in the host country.

7.1 National identity

National identity, a part of social identity, refers to the sense of belonging and connection that individuals have to a particular nation or country. This can include factors such as shared culture, history, language, and values. National identity can be formed through a variety of means, such as education, socialization, and shared experiences (Tajfel, 1981; Tolia-Kelly, 2009). National identity can be important in the adaptation and integration of migrants because it can help to provide a sense of belonging and connection to the host country. When individuals feel a sense of belonging to a country, they may be more likely to participate in society, culture, and politics (Matafora et al., 2021).

However, it is essential to recognize that national identity is far from static; it undergoes transformations, especially in the context of migration. Therefore, considerations of parallel identities and multidirectional integration become paramount. Individuals may develop and maintain identities that align with both their original or ancestral culture and the culture of the host or receiving society. These identities exist in parallel, creating a sense of duality. This duality represents a complex and evolving picture that defies an oversimplified understanding. Individuals can actively participate in the social, cultural, and economic life of the host society while simultaneously preserving and celebrating aspects of their original identity (Taylor, 1992; Edensor, 2002).

7.2 Social integration

Social integration is an interactive process that occurs between immigrants and their destination country. For an immigrant, integration means the process of learning a new culture, including language, tradition, and the like, obtaining rights and commitments, achieving access to positions including career opportunities and social status, making personal relationships with native or other members of the host country and shaping a sense of belonging to, and identification with the society they want to live in. On the other hand, for the host society, integration means opening up institutions and granting equal rights and opportunities to all immigrants. In this two-way interaction, the host society has more power, authority, and prestige (Boswell, 2003; Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006).

Naghdi (2010) researched the social issues faced by Iranian immigrants in Sweden, such as employment, marriage, education post-migration, reasons for and timing of migration, life satisfaction (including family, income, and job), attitudes toward locals, adaptation, feeling like an outsider, and willingness to return to Iran. Using mixed methods, which included questionnaires and narrative interviews with 102 and 52 Iranian immigrants, respectively, alongside observations, he found that Iranian immigrants exhibited

high levels of adaptation and satisfaction with the host country. The study also indicated a willingness among Iranian immigrants to engage in cross-national marriages, particularly with locals. Successes were noted in education, employment, and housing provision.

Adaptation and life conditions are crucial elements in the process of social integration for migrants. The adaptation of migrants refers to the process by which individuals or groups of people adjust to the social, cultural, and economic environment of a new country (Berry, 1997). Adaptation indicators for migrants refer to measurable characteristics that can be used to assess how well a migrant has adjusted to life in a new country. These indicators can include things like the health system, language, environment, and overall well-being (Selmer & Luring, 2015; Cormos, 2022).

7.3 Sleeping difficulties

Since migration is a universal phenomenon and is increasing day by day, the adjustment processes of immigrants, such as social and psychological adjustments in the host society, need to be identified and understood (Markovizky & Samid, 2008). Migration means change and requires adjustment involving social, cultural, or identity integration. All these changes can involve challenges to migrants' social or psychological well-being (Sonn, 2002). One of the low wellbeing indicators is sleeping difficulties (Markovizky & Samid, 2008). A review of sleep disorders in migrants and refugees showed that stress related to adjustment into the host society is connected to a higher risk of sleeping difficulties (Richter et al., 2020).

7.4 Discrimination/racism

Discrimination against migrants refers to unequal treatment or prejudice based on a person's status as a migrant. This can take many forms, such as unequal access to housing, employment, education, and healthcare and social and political discrimination (Ayon, 2015; SCOA, 2019). The EU Racial Equality Directive (Directive 2000/43/EC) emphasizes the significance of safeguarding natural individuals against discriminatory practices based on their racial or ethnic origin across various domains, such as employment, social welfare, education, and access to public goods and services (Council of the European Union, 2000).

8 Data and methods

Our study relies on a convenience sample: A total of 250 respondents filled out the consent form,¹ of which 241 participants completed the survey fully with an average age of (M=36.89). The survey participants were Iranian nationals living in the EU and the UK re-

¹ For ethical considerations, the data that was collected was strictly confidential and anonymous. We submitted an ethical application to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at ELTE University and received permission with the ethical code 2021/63.

cruited via Facebook and Twitter applications. Participants were asked how they discovered the online survey for this study. The answer categories most often chosen were as follows: From a group on Facebook (40 per cent), a text or email from a friend or family member (13 per cent), Twitter (10 per cent), and a friend who posted it on Facebook (0.5 per cent). The recruitment phase of the study started in April 2021 and ended in September 2022. Inclusion criteria were Iranian nationality (with the ability to speak Persian), over 18 years old, currently living in one of the EU countries or the UK as a refugee or asylum seeker, having lived for at least one year in those countries, and arrival to the country after 2015. Basic demographic questions were included to thoroughly understand the participants' socio-cultural backgrounds. The questions included information related to the participants' age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, education, and employment. The socio-demographic data of the participants is shown in Table 1.

In this study, 241 Iranian asylum seekers aged between 20 and 61 ($M=36.89$) filled out the online survey, with the majority from the Persian ethnic group ($n=92$) and the rest belonging to Turkish/Azeri ($n=32$), Kurdish ($n=31$), Mazani ($n=28$), Lor ($n=19$), Arabic ($n=18$), and other Iranian ethnic groups ($n=21$) including Baluch, Bakhtiari, and Gilak. Iran is a multiethnic country, and the Persian ethnic group makes up over 50 per cent of the population, followed by Turkish/Azeri as the second and Kurdish as the third-largest ethnicities in Iran (Worldatlas, 2019). Iran has a population of 86 million, including 43 million males and 42 million females (Countrymeters, 2022). In the present study, 111 participants identified themselves as male, 119 as female, a further 10 participants considered themselves non-binary or third gender, and one preferred not to reveal their sex. The majority of respondents were married ($n=120$), and the rest were either single, widowed, divorced, or separated. One of the most noticeable factors regarding socio-demographic data was the education level of these respondents. Most of them had a bachelor's degree ($n=76$), master's degree ($n=68$), or other type of education, including a high school diploma, associate degree, or doctorate. According to UNESCO (2016), the literacy rate among the Iranian population between the ages of 15 and 24 years is 98.1 per cent, and 15 years and older is 85.5 per cent. Finally, the majority of respondents were self-employed when they were living in Iran ($n=63$), and the rest were employed for wages ($n=60$), unemployed ($n=49$), students ($n=36$), or retired ($n=11$). Sixteen participants considered themselves housewives, three claimed they had been dismissed from their employment at a government office, and three others wrote that they were retrenched from their jobs. According to World Economic Outlook (2022), the total unemployment rate in Iran is 10.2 per cent, and GDP growth (annual percentage) in 2020 was 1.76 (The World Bank, 2020).

A question about the destination country, where they live now, was asked from participants. Most answers referred to the UK (37 per cent), Germany (28 per cent), and the Netherlands (14 per cent), followed by France, Sweden, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Italy, Belgium, and Finland. One participant from Serbia and one from Turkey were excluded from the study as these countries are not a part of the EU. All participants arrived in the destination country from 2015 to 2020.

We also asked if participants had a refugee identity certificate issued by the UNHCR or the state of asylum to show they had been accepted as refugees. 238 participants responded by choosing 'Yes' (37.2 per cent), with 58.0 per cent choosing 'No.' The rest (1.2 per

cent) either chose 'Other' or did not answer, meaning most participants are still waiting for a decision on their application. One participant stated, 'I have a camp identity card, but my asylum request has not been processed.'

Table 1 Socio-demographic information on respondents

	N	Range	M	SD	%
Participant's age	241	20–61	36.89	8.372	
Sex	241				
Male	111		44.4		
Female	119		47.6		
Non-binary/third gender	10		4.0		
Prefer not to say	1		0.4		
Ethnicity	241				
Persian (Farsi)	92		36.8		
Turkish/Azeri	32		12.8		
Kurdish	31		12.4		
Mazani	28		11.2		
Lor	19	7.6			
Arabic	18	7.2			
Other ethnic groups	21	8.4			
Education	241				
No schooling completed	0	0			
Some high school, no diploma	5	2.0			
High school diploma or equivalent	44	17.6			
Associate degree	34	13.6			
Bachelor's degree	76	30.4			
Master's degree	68	27.2			
Doctorate	14	5.6			
Marital status	241				
Single	57		22.8		
Married	120		48.0		
Widowed	5		2.0		
Divorced	23		9.2		
Separated	35		14.0		
Other	1	0.4			
Employment	241				
Employed for wages	60	24.0			
Self-employed	63	25.2			
Unemployed and looking for work	49	19.6			
Student	36	14.4			
Retired	11	4.4			
Other	22	8.8			

9 Results and analysis of data

9.1 Motivations for migration

9.1.1 Push factors

Participants were asked about the main factors that made them leave Iran, and, as shown in Chart 1, the most frequently chosen answers (those who either selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree') were related to lack of social freedom (81 per cent), economic issues (76 per cent), and lack of job security (71 per cent), followed by political issues (60 per cent), human rights violations (44 per cent), religious persecution (39 per cent), racial and ethnic persecution (23 per cent), family-related reasons (18 per cent), education reasons (18 per cent), reasons of sexual orientation (14 per cent), and natural disasters (6 per cent) respectively.

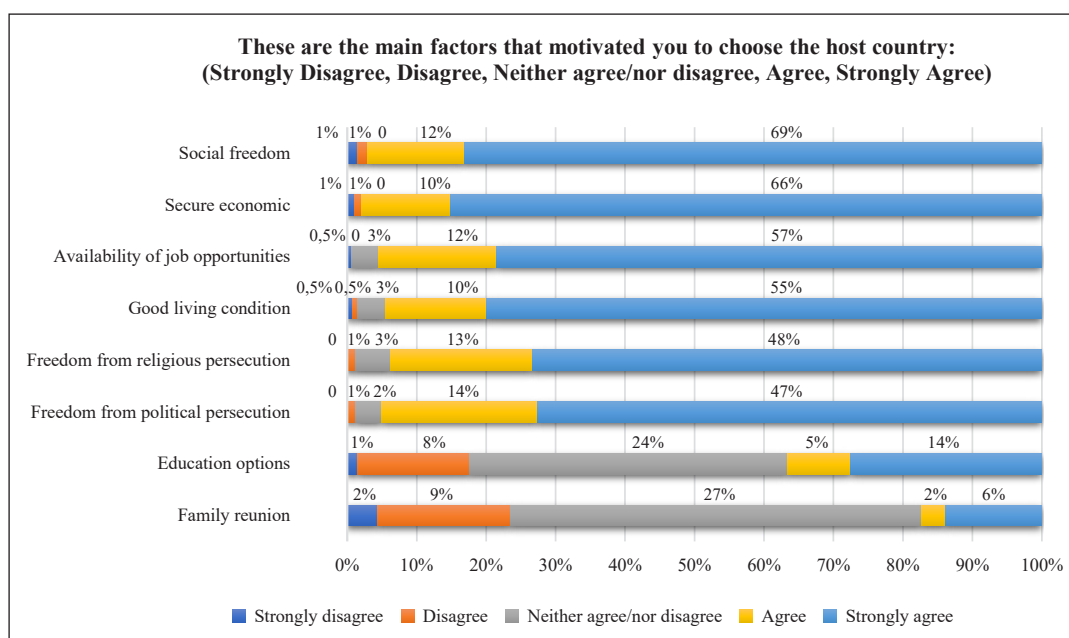


Chart 1 Push factor items assessed using a Likert scale²

² This question was asked in multiple response ways.

9.1.2 Main types of push factors (factor analysis)

Eleven questions relating to the motivation for leaving Iran were factor analyzed using maximum likelihood analysis with varimax rotation.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy was 0.77, above the commonly recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(105) = 417.48, p < .001$).

Using both scree plots and eigenvalues > 1 to determine the underlying components, the analysis yielded three factors explaining 66.67 per cent of the variance in the data.

Factor 1 was labeled 'suppression' because of the high loadings on the following items: political issues, family issues, religious persecution, racial and ethnic persecution, sexual or gender orientation, and human rights violations. This first factor explained 25.56 per cent of the variance after rotation.

Factor 2 was labeled 'freedom and economic related' because of the high loadings of the following items: lack of job security, economic issues, and social freedom. This factor explained 15.50 per cent of the variance after rotation.

Factor 3 was labeled 'other personal reasons' because of the high loadings by the following items: education reasons and natural disasters. This factor explained 13.05 per cent of the variance after rotation.

9.1.3 Pull factors

Participants were asked about the main factors that motivated them to choose the host country. As shown in Chart 2, the most frequently chosen answers (those who either selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree') were associated with a secure economy (81 per cent), social freedom (76 per cent), and availability of job opportunities (70 per cent), followed by good living conditions (65 per cent), freedom from political persecution (61 per cent), freedom from religious persecution (61 per cent), education options (19 per cent), and family reunion (8 per cent), respectively.

Participants specified other reasons as pull factors that motivated them to choose the host country. Some participants ($n=4$) mentioned the rights of sexual minorities. One participant wrote that they chose the host country because of 'freedom and equal rights for the sexual minority communities,' whereas another participant stated, 'freedom and free life as a sexual minority.' Furthermore, one participant wrote about human rights in the host country by citing 'Compliance with human rights standards.'

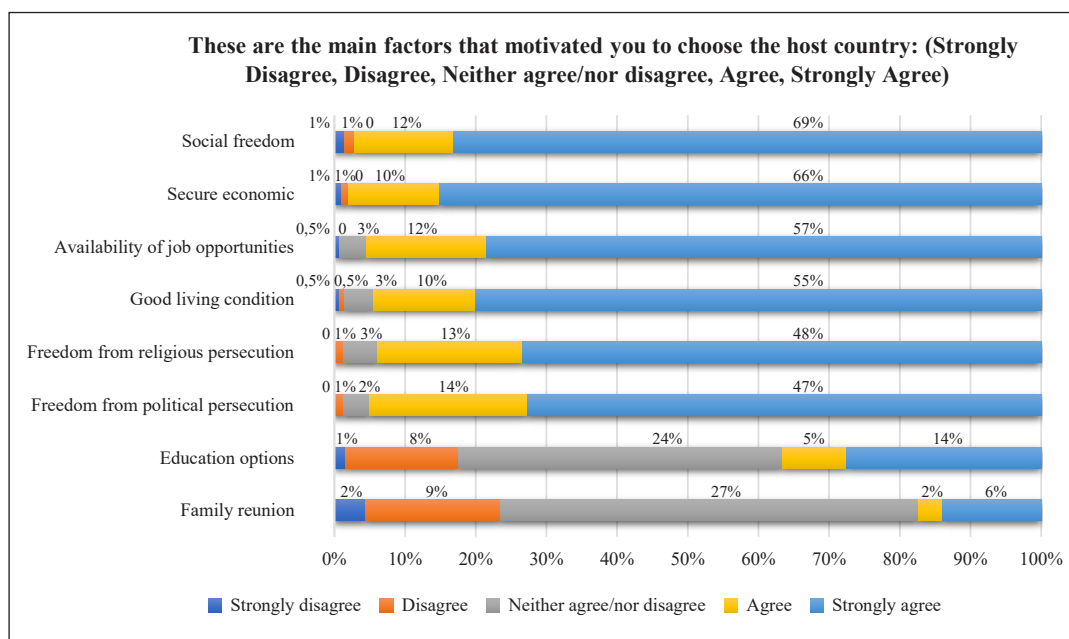


Chart 2 Pull factor items assessed using a Likert scale³

9.1.4 Main types of pull factors (factor analysis)

Eight questions related to why participants were 'pulled' to choose their destination country were factor analyzed using maximum likelihood analysis with varimax rotation.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy was 0.73, above the commonly recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 (105) = 418.78, p < .001$).

Using the scree plot and eigenvalues > 1 to determine the underlying components, the analysis yielded three factors explaining 80.07 per cent of the variance in the data.

Factor 1 was labeled 'living conditions' because of the high loadings on the following items: good living conditions, availability of job opportunities, social freedom, and a secure economy. This first factor explained 30.06 per cent of the variance after rotation.

Factor 2 was labeled 'freedom from persecution' because of the high loadings of the following items: freedom from religious persecution, freedom from political persecution, freedom from religious persecution, freedom from racial and ethnic persecution, sexual or gender discrimination, and human rights violation. This factor explained 24.11 per cent of the variance after rotation.

³ This question was asked in multiple response ways.

Factor 3 was labeled ‘other personal reasons’ because of the high loadings of the following items: education reasons and family reunion. This factor explained 13.97 per cent of the variance after rotation.

9.2 Comparison of means according to age groups and push/pull factors

The effect of the participants’ age on the push and pull factors was measured by comparing their means. As shown in Figure 1, in the younger age group, the bar for the third push factor (personal reasons such as education) is significantly higher than the other ones, which indicates that the mean value of this group is significantly different from the other groups. Similarly, the third pull factor (personal reasons such as education and family reunion) is significantly stronger than the others, indicating that this group’s mean value is significantly different from the other groups. In contrast, in the older age group, we see the opposite tendency; obviously, the pull and push factors connected with other personal reasons appear much weaker.

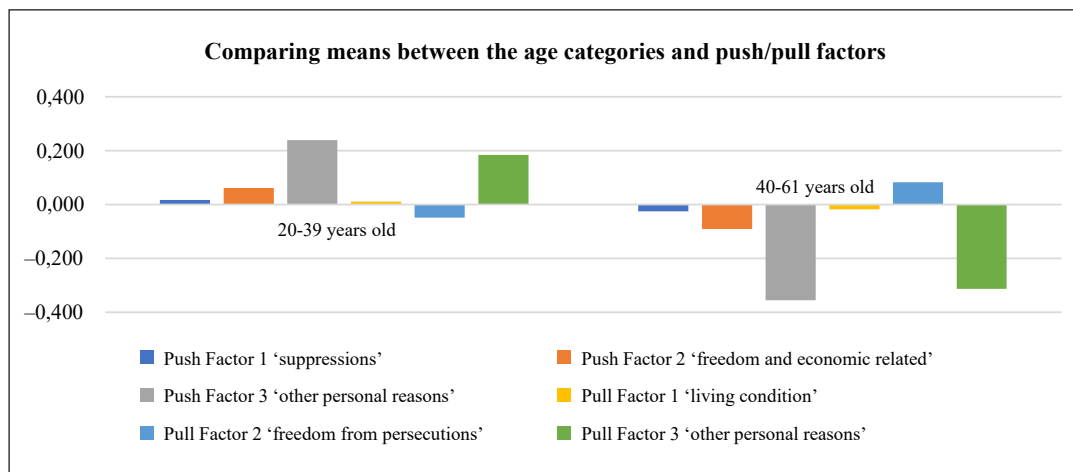


Figure 1 Comparison of means according to age groups and push/pull factors

We used one-way ANOVA as a statistical test to compare group means. Based on the F-tests, there were statistically significant differences in the above-mentioned factors; namely, push factor 3 differs between the two age groups ($F(1, 90) = [5,44]$, $p = [0,02]$), and likewise, pull factor 3 differs significantly between the two age-groups, ($F(1, 98) = [4,03]$, $p = [0,04]$). The two age groups were associated with no statistically significant difference regarding the other push and pull factors.

Furthermore, no significant differences were observed in relation to other sociodemographic factors (participant's sex, education, marital status, and employment) regarding push/pull factors, which may be due to the small number of observations.

9.3 Decision-making process

Participants' decision-making regarding their migration was closely tied to their financial status. Participants were asked how they had obtained the financial means for their migration. The most commonly chosen answer categories were as follows: 'I sold my own property in Iran' (64 per cent), 'I borrowed money from friends or family' (51 per cent), 'I did not sell anything in Iran, but I used my savings' (18 per cent). The rest chose 'Other' as their answer. One participant stated, 'Selling home furniture and cars,' which was also one of the main response options.

This financial background often intersected with participants' migrant networks. Before migrating, many participants had connections with irregular migrants in Europe, whose influence varied. Migrants were asked before their migration whether they knew any irregular migrants in Europe, and if so, what was their opinion about their decision to migrate there.

While 72 per cent were encouraged to migrate irregularly, 17 per cent were discouraged. One participant stated, 'Being forced to flee from Iran did not give me a chance to consult with anyone.' Another who consulted with others said, 'I talked to the refugees in Telegram groups and asked their opinions.' Likewise, another participant who consulted with others before leaving Iran wrote, 'Yes, I consulted with several people, and they all said to stay in Iran, but I had no choice.'

These networks also contributed to participants' perceptions of living outside Iran. They envisioned Europe as offering high living standards (82 per cent), freedom (60 per cent), and high salaries (49 per cent). Additionally, dreamy images of Europe (34 per cent) and free education (12 per cent) were prevalent. Two participants mentioned human rights in Europe. One stated, 'There is full compliance with human rights in Europe.' Likewise, the other participants wrote that 'Utopia, freedom of expression, and the true meaning of human rights are my images of Europe.'

These perceptions were largely shaped by external factors, primarily the media (61 per cent) and input from family and friends residing in Europe (53 per cent). Personal beliefs (42 per cent) and even firsthand experiences, such as prior travel to Europe to understand refugee conditions, also played a role. One participant stated that before leaving Iran, they had traveled to Europe themselves to see the situation. They wrote, 'Before that, I traveled to Europe, and I was somewhat aware of the conditions of asylum seekers and refugees.'

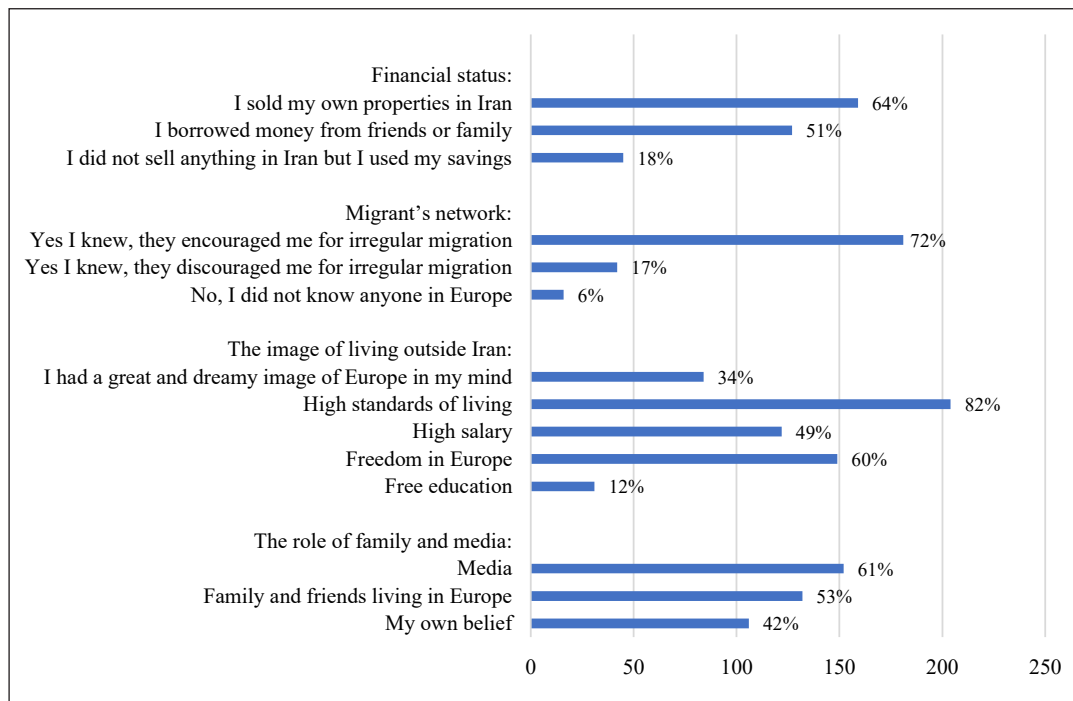


Chart 3⁴ Decision-Making Process

9.4 The route from Iran to the destination country

The journey from Iran to Europe for participants in this study involved a variety of routes and modes of transportation, reflecting the diverse strategies employed by migrants to reach their destination. Participants (n=172) utilized different modes of transportation, including air, land, and sea routes. Some (n=30) claimed that they had left Iran by direct flight. Some (n=8) had a European visa (Germany, the UK, France, Sweden), and some (n=15) had taken a direct flight from Iran to Serbia and then crossed the border(s) to other European countries. Some other participants (n=5) had taken a direct flight from Iran to Turkey and then continued on to Balkan countries. Others who went from Iran by direct flight did not mention their destination. In addition, three participants claimed they had used a fake passport and had gone directly to the destination country.

Other participants (n=45) had left Iran across the land border. Some participants (n=32) left Iran for Turkey by walking through land borders, and from there, they crossed the borders to Greece and Balkan countries. Some other participants (n=8) left Iran through the land border to Iraq and from Iraq to Turkey, Greece, and then the Balkan countries. Those whose final destination was the UK crossed the English Channel from France to the UK.

⁴ The questions were asked in multiple response ways.

Finally, two participants stated that they could not share their path from Iran to Europe, and the rest did not answer this question. One wrote, 'I cannot say because of security issues.'

Regarding finding and paying smugglers, the participants were asked if they had crossed a border at least once with a smuggler(s). The majority of participants (n=208) answered in the affirmative. We also asked how much money they had paid to smugglers (in euros). Based on those (n=105) who answered this question, payments to smugglers varied widely, ranging from 1,000 to 14,000 euros, reflecting the financial burden and risks associated with irregular migration.

9.5 Anticipation about the journey

The participants' anticipation about their journey from Iran to their destination countries was multifaceted. Chart 11 illustrates that emotional turmoil, nostalgia, and the distance from their homeland weighed heavily on their minds, with 56 per cent selecting these as primary concerns. Additionally, the challenges of crossing borders (52 per cent) and dealing with smugglers (48 per cent) were significant apprehensions. Financial issues (41 per cent) and language barriers (20 per cent) also contributed to their anticipatory stress. Interestingly, one participant stood out by expressing a lack of anticipation regarding human rights issues in Europe, highlighting a perspective perhaps less common among migrants, saying, 'Failure to comply with human rights in European countries.'

Fear and apprehension were prevalent throughout different stages of the journey. The majority (72 per cent) reported feeling most anxious at border crossings, likely due to the uncertainty and potential risks involved. Concerns were also notable in Iran before departure (38 per cent) and during transit through various countries (21 per cent). Notably, a subset of participants (n=14) cited fear specifically at airports, highlighting the tension surrounding air travel. One wrote, 'At the airports in Germany and Turkey,' and another person wrote, 'At the airport in Turkey and the UK.' Others (n=8) expressed fear during sea crossings, particularly on boats from France to the UK, indicating the perilous nature of such voyages. As one wrote, 'On the inflatable boat to the UK,' likewise another participant stated, 'On the boat from France to the UK.' Some participants (n=3) mentioned fear while using trains to cross borders, while a few (n=2) singled out Turkey, citing severed communication with friends back in Iran as a source of distress. As one wrote, 'In Turkey because communication with friends inside Iran was cut off.'

Despite these apprehensions, participants maintained hope throughout their journeys. The majority (68 per cent) reported feeling most hopeful upon reaching their final destination, suggesting a sense of optimism about better prospects ahead. Some (31 per cent) expressed hope while still in Iran before embarking on their journeys, indicating a degree of confidence in their decision. A significant proportion (26 per cent) found hope during transit through intermediary countries, perhaps fueled by the belief that each step was bringing them closer to safety and stability. Remarkably, very few participants (one per cent) identified borders as a source of hope, underscoring the challenges associated with these checkpoints. These responses reflect the complex interplay of emotions and expectations accompanying the migrant journey, encompassing both trepidation and resilience.

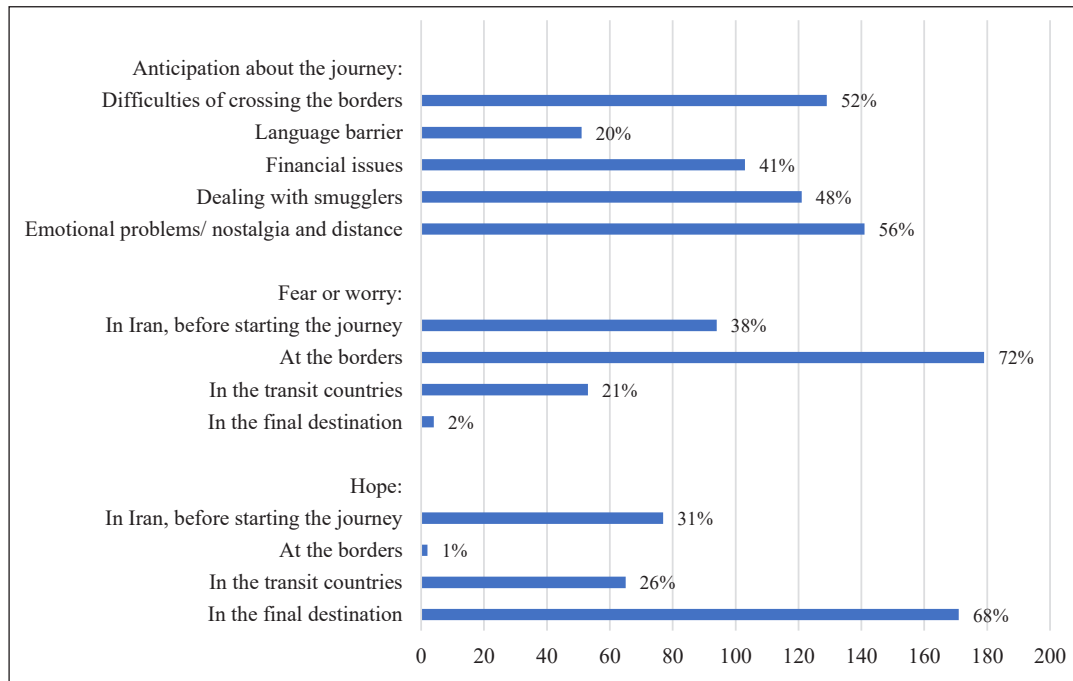


Chart 4⁵ Strength of items related to anticipation about the journey (%)

9.6 Dissuasion from undertaking the journey

The participants' narratives provide poignant insights into the significant events that dissuaded them from continuing their migration journey. Among the 41 respondents, various distressing experiences emerged. Some participants (n=10) recounted instances where they had been subjected to physical violence and humiliation by border police. One participant wrote, 'Being humiliated and beaten at the borders.' Likewise, another participant stated, 'I was beaten by the border police. I was humiliated by different people,' and, similarly described by another participant, 'When crossing borders and being humiliated by the police and beaten by the police.' Finally, one participant who was hurt by police wrote, 'The border police in Croatia beat me and broke my hand. They took all my belongings from me, broke my mobile phone and humiliated me.' Similarly, some other participants (n=10) reported having their money and belongings stolen, leaving them in a vulnerable situation. One wrote, 'My money and mobile phone were stolen. I was afraid. I had nothing at the border.' Another participant similarly stated, 'My money and belongings were stolen in Bosnia; I was very desperate.' And finally, one who had a similar experience in Croatia

⁵ The questions were asked in multiple response ways.

wrote, 'The thief at the Croatian border stole my mobile phone and money, and I had nothing to eat for two days.' Some participants (n=3) shared experiences of being deceived or exploited by smugglers. As one said, 'The smuggler took a lot of money from me, but he didn't come to the meeting spot. I didn't have any more money and didn't know what to do.' Another participant wrote, 'When crossing borders and being treated badly by smugglers.' Some other participants (n=5) mentioned other experiences. For instance, some expressed apprehension about the safety of sea crossings, with one citing fear due to holes in inflatable boats used during the journey from France to the UK. Such concerns underscore the perilous nature of maritime migration routes. One participant described being illegally deported to Turkey after spending seven months in an unspecified destination. This experience highlights the vulnerability and uncertainty faced by migrants, even after they reach a supposed place of refuge.

These narratives collectively emphasize the multitude of challenges and dangers encountered by migrants, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced protection and support mechanisms for those undertaking precarious migration journeys.

9.7 After arriving in Europe

Upon arriving in Europe, participants were surveyed regarding their preferences for social integration and national identity, revealing nuanced insights into their post-migration experiences. When asked about their preference for social interaction, the majority of participants (60 per cent) expressed a desire to engage with both the Iranian and local communities. This inclination toward a diverse social network reflects a desire for cross-cultural connections and a sense of belonging in their new environment. A notable proportion (21 per cent) favored interaction solely within the Iranian community, indicating a desire for familiarity and support from fellow Iranians. Conversely, a smaller fraction (15 per cent) expressed a preference for integrating primarily with the local community, suggesting openness to embracing their new cultural surroundings. Participants were also questioned about their preferred national identity when introducing themselves. The overwhelming majority (90 per cent) identified themselves as Iranian, underscoring a strong attachment to their cultural heritage and national identity. However, a subset of participants (n=5) identified with ethnic identities such as Kurdish or Arab, reflecting the diverse cultural tapestry within the Iranian diaspora. Notably, only a few participants (two per cent) expressed a reluctance to identify as Iranian, with one individual expressing a sense of shame associated with their Iranian identity.

When queried about their willingness to change their national identity, the majority of participants (82 per cent) unequivocally stated that they never entertained such thoughts. This resolute affirmation suggests a steadfast commitment to their Iranian identity despite the challenges associated with migration and resettlement. It reflects a sense of pride and cultural continuity even in the face of profound life changes.

In sum, the findings illuminate the complex dynamics of identity negotiation among Iranian migrants in Europe. While many aspire to maintain connections with both Iranian and local communities, their strong attachment to their Iranian identity remains unwavering, underscoring the resilience of the Iranian diaspora.

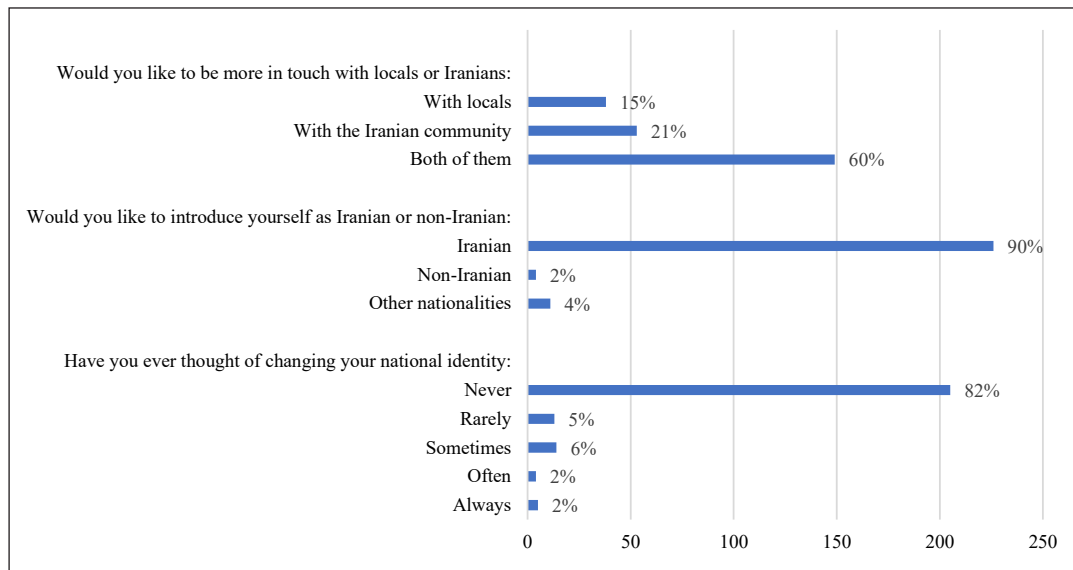


Chart 5 Elements of national identity

As shown in Chart 6, the survey delved into various aspects of refugees' adaptation to their host country, including health services, language barriers, adjustment to the weather, religious practices, sleeping patterns, and experiences of loneliness.

Regarding whether they have poor access to health/medical and counseling services in the host society, on a Likert scale of 'always' to 'never,' the answers most frequently chosen were 'rarely' (36 per cent) and 'sometimes' (31 per cent). This suggests that while these services are accessible to some extent, there may be gaps or limitations in their provision.

Regarding whether they have any communication difficulties or language barriers in the host society, on a Likert scale of 'always' to 'never,' the favored answer was 'never' (43 per cent). This indicates a relatively smooth integration into the linguistic environment of the host society, potentially facilitated by language support programs or multilingual environments.

Regarding whether they have any difficulty adjusting to the weather in the host society, the majority of participants (42 per cent) reported no difficulty adjusting to the weather in the host society. This suggests a seamless transition or acclimatization to the climatic conditions of their new environment, which may contribute positively to their overall well-being and adaptation.

Regarding whether they are able to practice their religion in the host society, on a Likert scale ranging from 'always' to 'never,' the most chosen answer was 'always' (50 per cent). This underscores the importance of religious freedom and accommodation in facilitating refugees' cultural and spiritual needs. Additionally, a notable proportion (35 per cent) identified as non-religious, reflecting diverse religious affiliations within the refugee population.

The majority (49 per cent) reported never experiencing sleeping difficulties since arriving in Europe, suggesting a relatively stable sleep pattern among participants. Finally, one factor that has been associated with an increased risk of sleeping difficulties is loneliness (Hom et al., 2020). Loneliness emerged as a noteworthy concern, with 31 per cent indicating experiencing loneliness sometimes. This finding underscores the social and emotional challenges that refugees may encounter during the adaptation process, highlighting the importance of community support and social networks.

In summary, while participants generally reported favorable conditions regarding language adaptation, weather adjustment, religious freedom, and sleeping patterns, challenges such as limited access to health services and experiences of loneliness warrant attention from policymakers and service providers to ensure holistic support for refugee integration and well-being.

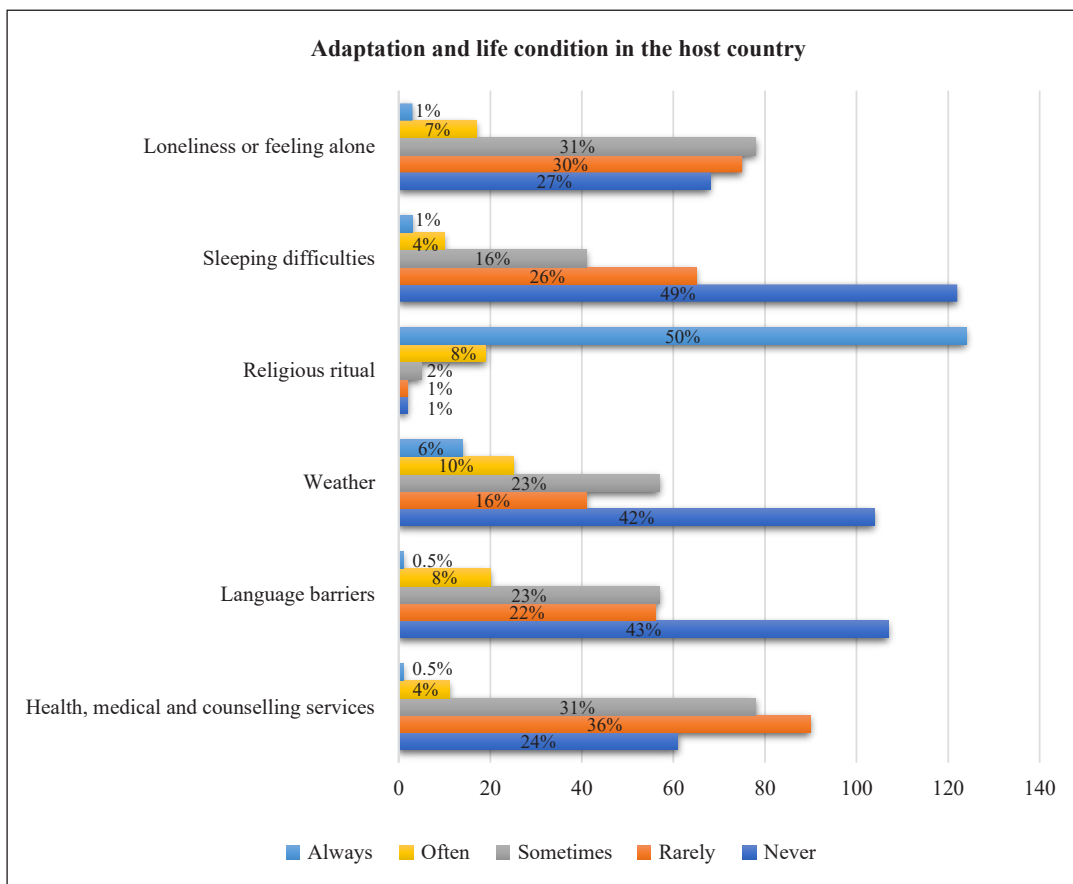


Chart 6⁶ Elements of adaptation and living conditions in the host country

⁶ This question was asked in multiple response ways.

9.8 Discrimination

The experiences of discrimination and racism faced by refugees in the host society are deeply intertwined with their expectations and aspirations upon arrival in Europe.

Many participants (n=46) reported experiencing discrimination in their host country. Instances included feeling looked down upon by locals, especially when disclosing their refugee status. One said, 'Sometimes they look at us in a bad way, like looking down on us.' Likewise, another participant said, 'They look down on me when I say I am a refugee.' Some participants highlighted discrimination based on appearance, particularly targeting women who wear hijabs, who may face ridicule and mistreatment. One wrote, 'Yes, I am a woman [who wears a hijab], and [...] many times [...] I was teased for wearing a hijab. Once, a seller spoke to me rudely and, in the end, did not sell me his product and told me to go back to my country,' Similarly, another participant wrote, 'Yes, I was mocked and insulted because of my [wearing a] hijab in a public place.' Moreover, experiences in transit countries like Serbia and Bosnia also underscored the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes towards refugees, ranging from refusal of service to outright hostility. Even in more established host countries like the Netherlands, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing prejudices, with Dutch people becoming more wary of foreigners.

Despite facing discrimination, refugees arrived in Europe with high hopes and expectations for their new lives. The most common expectations included the desire for freedom (80 per cent), a better life for their families and children (60 per cent), improved wages (59 per cent), job opportunities (50 per cent), and access to quality education (16 per cent). Notably, one participant articulated the expectation of freedom for sexual minorities, highlighting the diverse range of aspirations within the refugee community.

The experiences of discrimination and racism in the host society contrast sharply with refugees' optimistic expectations upon arrival in Europe. While they sought freedom, economic opportunities, and a better quality of life, the reality of facing discrimination and prejudice complicated their integration journey. Discrimination not only undermines refugees' sense of dignity and belonging but also challenges their ability to fulfill their aspirations in their new environment. Despite these challenges, the overwhelming majority (82 per cent) expressed a firm determination to remain in Europe, rejecting the option of returning to Iran permanently after receiving refugee status. In essence, the juxtaposition of experiences of discrimination and aspirations for a better life in Europe highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the refugee experience. It underscores the importance of addressing discrimination and promoting inclusive policies to ensure that refugees can fully realize their aspirations and contribute meaningfully to their host societies.

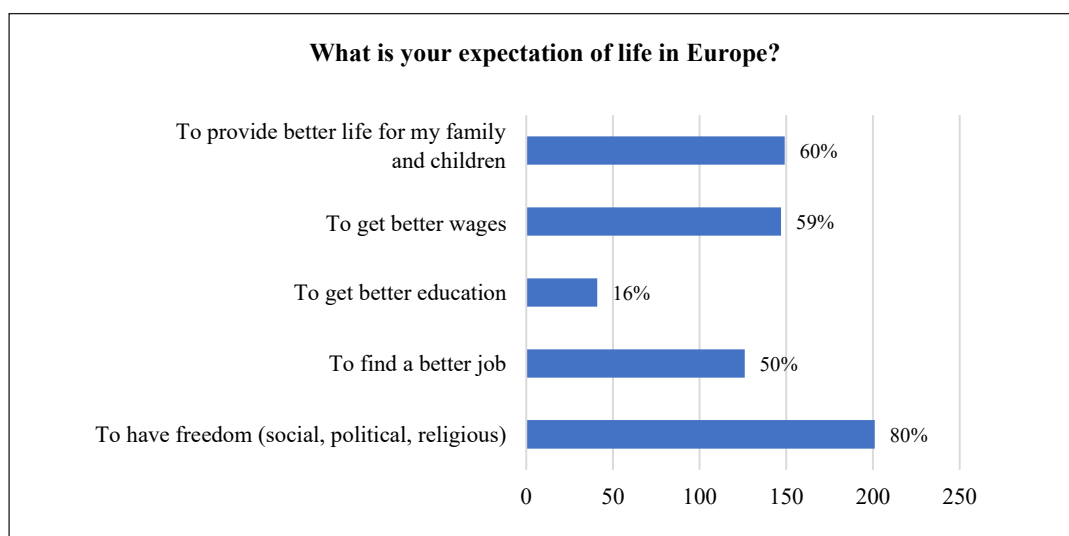


Chart 7⁷ Elements of expectations concerning life in Europe

10 Conclusion

The study examined the reasons behind Iranian asylum seekers' departure from Iran and their choice of destination countries. The research focused on identifying the factors that pushed them to leave Iran, attracted them to the destination countries, and affected how they decided to migrate. Additionally, the study looked into their adaptation and life circumstances in the new society. The study found that lack of social freedom (81 per cent), economic issues (76 per cent), and lack of job insecurity (71 per cent) were the primary push factors for leaving Iran, whereas a secure economy (81 per cent), social freedom (76 per cent), and availability of job opportunities (70 per cent) were the primary pull factors for choosing the destination countries. Furthermore, the study found that there were significant differences in the push and pull factors among different age groups. The younger age group was likelier to leave Iran for education-related reasons and be reunited with family members. While there is a limited amount of research on Iranian refugees in Europe, several recent studies (Carbajal & de Miguel Calvo, 2021; Khalid & Urbański, 2021; Zanabazar et al., 2021; Urbański, 2022) have employed the push/pull model to examine the factors influencing migration.

The majority of participants (72 per cent) had a network outside Iran, either friends or family, who encouraged them to leave the country in an irregular way. The results of several studies (Treitler, 2007; White & Ryan, 2008; Reynolds, 2010; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014) have shown that refugee networks can help individuals in several ways, including providing information about migration procedures and requirements, connecting refugees with

⁷ This question was asked in multiple response ways.

legal and financial assistance, offering support and resources for resettlement, and facilitating communication and coordination with non-government organizations. Findings from recent research conducted by El-Bialy et al. (2023) indicate that bonding networks play a critical role for refugees in Germany, particularly in navigating challenges during their initial arrival. The study underscores the significance of fostering both bonding and bridging social networks for refugees. Bonding networks act as safety nets, offering support and connections, while bridging networks assist refugees in adjusting to the unfamiliar socio-cultural environment.

Regarding national identity, most participants (90 per cent) said they would like to introduce themselves as Iranian to other people. Also, the majority of participants (82 per cent) said they never thought of changing their national identity. The experience of migration can challenge and change one's national identity. However, some refugees seem to be able to maintain a strong connection to their national identity and adapt it to their new experiences and surroundings (Burnett, 2013).

The findings indicate that the participants have successfully adapted to the health-care system, language, climate, and religious practices in the host country, and most of them did not encounter challenges regarding sleeping or loneliness. This is in line with the results of a study by Lindert et al. (2008) that showed that Iranian refugees in the Netherlands have successfully adapted to Dutch society. They were fluent in Dutch, as evidenced by the fact that 92 per cent of Iranian-Dutch participants completed the questionnaire in Dutch. Additionally, they were generally well-educated, and a large number of them had found employment in the Netherlands.

Finally, most of the study's respondents (80 per cent) anticipated social, political, and religious freedom upon leaving Iran for European nations. Additionally, a significant percentage of participants expected to be able to offer their families and children an improved quality of life (60 per cent) and higher salaries (59 per cent) in these countries.

Currently, there is a crackdown in Iran against Iranian protesters demanding basic human rights (OHCHR, 2022). If political instability and economic turmoil continue in Iran and social, political, and religious freedom remain repressive or worsen, people may be more likely to leave the country for better economic opportunities and freedom elsewhere.

11 Limitations of the study

The current study was disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic as it could not be implemented in person due to social distancing measures and quarantine restrictions, which limited our sample size and the generalizability and robustness of the findings. Due to the small number of participants, the study's results may not be representative of the larger population (the lower statistical power makes it hard to detect real differences or effects). Likewise, online surveys may not be representative of the population as a whole, as those who do not have access to the internet or are not comfortable with technology may be underrepresented.

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Memos as satire in Romanian political culture

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to define political memes as belonging to the genre of political satire and part of Romanian political culture, to outline their characteristics and functionality, and to indicate that the phenomenon of political meme-sharing is a cultural phenomenon with growing significance based on the highly affective usage of memes that allow for the recontextualization of past political events in accordance with the new realities of the Romanian political and cultural space. Using the case study that is included, which takes into account how the awareness of the political context is the basis of the memes and the features of the memes themselves, the author shows that memes can be considered a type of informal, non-conventional form of political participation and considers this in relation to the political landscape of a post-communist country, thus determining that memes are a novel element that should be considered when dealing with civic culture at large, and digital civic culture specifically.

Keywords: memes; political satire; Romanian political culture; hypotext; intertextuality

1 Introduction

During the past fifteen years, the Romanian activist scene has been reborn in response to various political and social events (Rosia Montana, Black Tuesday, health-system reforming legislation, Colectiv, and August 10, 2019), while the use of social networks has increased in this timespan. Consequently, memes have become a part of the online conversation and a way to express dissent or satirise the political establishment and developments, which often seem to surpass the absurd, thus playing a part in 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015).

While online activism has become a fruitful and rather extensive avenue of political science and sociological research, especially since the Arab Spring, Tea Party, and Gezi Park movements, approaches dealing with specific events or personalities have been dis-

paraged. With the exception of several studies which give a cultural assessment of memes in the digital culture or activist repertoires, substantial research on memes' impact on political culture is still developing; more recent Romanian-authored studies on memes have employed a variety of approaches, from underlining gender-focused archetypes to establishing a relationship between memes and mainstream media, displaying the differences between memes and political cartoons, or laying the theoretical foundations for understanding political meme-sharing as a form of political participation (Shifman, 2013; Mina, 2019; Metaheaven, 2013; Philips & Milner, 2017; Coscia, 2013; Marino, 2015; Buraga & Pavelea, 2021; Mohor-Ivan & Mohor-Ivan, 2021; Țăran, 2020; Soare, 2019; Soare, 2020; Denisova, 2019).

These studies have emerged within a longstanding broader attempt to understand the uses, functions, meanings and outcomes of political humour and political satire at large or to enable, by applying cultural-sociology methods, a better understanding of political humour and satire as autonomous cultural forms (Tsakona & Popa, 2011; Tesnohlikova, 2021). In geographical or political spaces other than Romania, memes have been established as a legitimate avenue of political participation or even an instrument for manipulation (Moreno-Almeida, 2021). They can be employed by various polity actors with very varied aims, given their affective potential and their effectiveness at influencing political agendas: memes can be – and have been – instrumentalised for promoting grassroots movements, amplifying the messages of extremist factions, perpetrating demeaning or abusive tropes or stereotypes about minorities, and in misinformation and disinformation (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020; Chagas, 2023). Recent experimental designs have attempted to determine the variables that influence the effectiveness of a meme (Bülow & Johann, 2023).

The Romanian tradition of political satire has a long history. After the 1990s, it emerged forcefully in the public space as censorship was abolished after the fall of the communist regime. Political humour was already well-established, although it had circulated only in closed, trusted circles, as a means of counterculture, producing a type of in-group allegiance not to be publicised outside of the trusted circle, becoming a mechanism of resistance revolving around informal settings and 'small things' (Goldfarb, 2006; 2012; Tesnohlikova, 2021). During the 1990s, political jokes started to pop up loudly in various contexts, from political cartoons to satirical editorials, popular live parodies, and TV shows of the 1990s. The author argues in this article that Romanian political satire has morphed into a new genre, that of political memes, and that the democratisation of the digital means of creating and sharing political humour has provided some citizens with new avenues of expressing political dissent, somewhat broadening participation to include the creation of these types of satire.

This paper aims to define memes that reference political events, personalities, parties, or ideologies as belonging to the genre of political satire and to reveal their meanings and shared contexts through the selected pairings explored in the case study, irrespective of the social networks on which they have circulated (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc) before being recirculated in mass-media, or the specific network topology that has contributed to their success.

2 Defining memes in a political context

Memes as a form of digital expression have attracted much interest in diverse avenues of research, from biology and mathematics to social sciences. The term *meme* was first employed in this sense by the biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, first published in 1976, as a way to define cultural transmission via imitation in a gene-like manner:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catchphrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots, or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins, 2006, p. 192)

While it is important to pinpoint the origin of the term, Dawkins' manner of defining memes is controversial, as the gene analogy is not necessarily accurate with respect to how memes function: while gene mutation is a time-consuming process spanning hundreds of thousands of years and is accompanied by the gene selection process (which in the political arena is a delicate subject due to the connection with eugenics), meme mutation is often what drives it forward, as the meme is adapted to a new context, thus prolonging its life and multiplying its meanings and associations.

Dawkins himself revisited his original definition after receiving criticism, and he acknowledged the fact that biological laws do not apply to memes, as initially stated. In fact, any cultural transmission implies some sort of transformation, recreation, or modification. Researchers in the social sciences have departed from this initial definition by including not only 'units of cultural production' but also broader modes such as relationship patterns or principles of society, which has led to a failure to pinpoint the exact boundaries of memes (Denisova, 2016, pp. 59–60).

One of the first – and most impactful – works to define memes in digital culture is that of Limor Shifman, who pointed out that Dawkins' definition was somewhat ambiguous and defined memes as follows:

- (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which
- (b) were created with awareness of each other, and
- (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. (Shifman, 2013, pp. 37–42)

To investigate memes and their satirical usage in Romanian political culture, a fourth criterion must be included: a *meme must make a political reference or have a political origin* to be classified as such. Moreover, political memes have an affective use (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020), as they are charged with a specific context that requires being knowledgeable about a particular event, memories of that specific event and the feelings associated with it. Inherently, sharing content over the internet has a social role, and researchers have argued about this role and its effects, noting that it may well lead to political value-reshaping in the long run (Tufekci, 2014). The key aspect to take into account

when talking about creating or sharing memes online, irrespective of the type or context of the meme under discussion, is that sharing them online has a meaning that goes beyond clicking a button – it often reveals the beliefs, thoughts, preconceptions, or values of the sharer, it can start discussions and debates, and it can add to the original context through peer-to-peer socialisation in a semi-public or public setting (Benoit, 2019).

Departing from Shifman's criteria, memes can also transgress real-life settings: the 2017 protests against OUG 13 (Emergency Ordinance 13) also featured memes printed on cardboard and displayed in Victoriei Square – where they were photographed and recirculated back in the online space (Emergency Ordinance no. 13 of 31 January 2017 for modifying and complementing Law 286/2009 regarding the Criminal Code and Law 135/2010 regarding the Code of Criminal Procedure).¹ Audio-type memes also have a strong history of transgression: *Yakety Sax*, now also known as *The Benny Hill Show* theme, has been strongly associated with humorous moments (Shane, 2022), being parodied and transformed through countless other pop shows, films and comic video edits including *The Simpsons* and *V for Vendetta*. Such a moment of comic relief was provided by activists outside Westminster Palace when then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his resignation (Kreps, 2022). This moment went viral via video excerpts of reporters' live broadcasts that day.

Shifman's definition is broad enough to cover many forms of digital expression, from GIFs (name taken from the file type, Graphics Interchange Format, first released in 1987, the internet's 'silent films') to audio snippets and static imagery. However, it also involves necessary methodological criteria; namely, memes must be created in a context in which (1) there is an awareness of the starting point, (2) of the current context, and (3) of other memes that must simultaneously exist at any point in time. We must also mention that in the contemporary understanding of the term, *memes* and their evolution can be almost confused with that of the internet – but one of the key traits back when internet boards and forums were mainstream was that a meme could be understood only by the insiders of a community through coded language and references (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021).

While in particular online communities, memes continue to be inward-oriented even today, this is in stark opposition to how mainstream political memes are used nowadays on social media: the broader the references, the bigger the chance of a meme going viral, i.e., shared quickly by a significant number of users – therefore political memes are much more outward-oriented. While anecdotal evidence shows that people can learn of political events by seeing first a meme and only second the news, this specific switch in the information flow can also work in the context of the meme alone, such as when one comes across a new meme on a familiar political event that reveals the meme's initial context and meaning (Leskovec et al., 2009; Scanlon, 2020). Therefore, we can identify a circular model in which memes can be either vehicles that transport new meanings or a manner of ascribing new meanings to existing information that manifests informally, connecting the formal political space and its mechanisms to individual-level-based political socialisation.

¹ The *Dragnea – Connecting people* meme, featuring the logo of Nokia, a well-known phone manufacturing company, very popular at the advent of mobile telecommunications in Romania.

This new mode of information transmission becomes relevant not only when looking at the younger generations' manner of retrieving information on news and current affairs. While the first impulse might be to try to establish a correlation with the declining audience for news programmes of any type in the younger demographic, one must also take into account the ease of access and affordability (that is, lack of upfront costs) associated with social media (a novelty in the media consumption environment), combined with diminishing trust in news and media measured in the United States, Europe, and especially in the Romanian space (Brenan, 2021; Newman, 2021; Newman et al., 2023, p. 94).

In this context, memes can become a form of digital, objectified cultural capital: shared experiences and solidarity goods, not reaching the status of a national holiday, for example, but being defined in a semi-public or public space, with the understanding that sharing certain content can ascribe to the sharer a specific identity, or the assumption of a particular political opinion or view, in the sense in which Cass Sunstein (2018) defines shared experiences and solidarity goods (Bourdieu, 1986; Park, 2017). In an environment where the demarcation between hard-core political debates and entertainment has become harder and harder to discern, memes about politics – typically satirising current political events or public political figures – are easy to dismiss as a frivolous concern (Baym, 2005).

However, ever since William Shakespeare and Dante Alighieri, political satire, in all its forms and genres (such as verse, rhyme, epigrams, cartoons, theatre plays, street art, camp, double-entendre, etc.), has been employed to contextualise and recontextualise political events or figures, reinforcing them in the collective memory of a society, and helping to understand and express opinions about them, without the political decorum versed analysts or journalists might employ. Memes – and political satire in its entirety – can be regarded as a form of metabolization – to draw on Dawkins' original reasoning in devising the concept of memes – of political events and leaders, thus having a strong social function (Nilsen, 1990; Tsakona & Popa, 2011; Vicensová & Trottier, 2020). Political satire and political humour have been distributed through conventional and non-conventional methods and have emerged simultaneously in relation to anything remotely resembling organised government or social classes – and their history in Romania is a long one, as documented by Cristian Preda (2020).

Notwithstanding, one of memes' key and paradoxical characteristics – adding an additional layer of complexity when analysing them – is their long-lived ephemerality, that is, the memetic symbols tend to persist longer than specific iterations of the memes. While researching the topic, one of the first observations was that the life of an internet meme does not seem to be long, as they can become obsolete or unfashionable rather quickly. The causes for this may be multiple: (1) the lack of author attribution (they often emerge from personal social media connections or popular pages dedicated to memes rather than from a more-or-less well-trusted source, like news theoretically does), (2) the specificities of their circulation patterns (some memes become very popular and are broadcast by media either in online articles or television shows, while most memes get buried under other content), (3) the lack of systematic political meme archival endeavours, aside from overarching internet archival efforts like the *Wayback Machine*, *KnowYourMeme*, or the Library of Congress' *Digital Collection*, (4) the transformations that a meme undergoes throughout its circulation, (5) the technical difficulties associated with the current internet architecture related to the measurement of views, shares and discussions about

memes, and last but not least, (6) the research efforts that, at this stage, tend to focus more on specific instances of meme usage in political activism rather than on their impact in society at large, in spite of disparaged efforts to integrate their use and impact.

Another aspect that needs attention is the multiple levels upon which political memes work: while they need to be coded and decoded through visual and written elements, they also intertwine elements of subjectivity, popular culture, aesthetics, and current affairs, which are reinforced by the environment in which they circulate. While a non-political meme can be ascribed new meanings at each occurrence, the opportunities for the contextualisation of a political meme are much more reduced, thus contributing to their greater potential for resistance (that is, memes being used to communicate hidden meanings in plain sight, as occurs with other types of layered texts or plays), with political memes having specific semiotic stability and less polysemy (Miltner & Highfield, 2017). This, in turn, contributes to the paradoxically shorter lifespan of each political meme iteration but prolongs the time when a political meme can be further inter-subjectivised, re-imagined, recontextualised, and reshuffled with new contexts (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Kirner-Ludwig, 2020).

Essentially, the anonymous character of political memes and their short lifespan indicate a type of perennialism resembling that of folklore. The novelty brought about by memes is their medium of transmission. As with any kind of cultural transmission, the meme language traits, the political events referred to, and the elements of focus preserved in popular culture that survive this form of digital translation convey meaning and have a purpose in themselves, and they can account for word-by-mouth transmission.

Fundamentally, memes rely on language, which has the core function of providing meaning. The language usually employed in memes is not complex unless the *memeable* characteristic is the complexity of the language itself. Memes, with their format of static imagery or image macros (photographic background and a script superimposed over the image, or photographic manipulation without a superimposed script), have been claimed to have key potential as political rhetoric, given their association within a given context between the sender, the receiver, the message upheld, and the overall context depicted (Shifman, 2014; Huntington, 2015).

While the form of a political meme can take many shapes, its content-related characteristics remain surprisingly stable. From a visual point of view, political memes tend to rely on potent symbols, general contexts, or well-known personalities (generally but not limited to politicians). As the majority of the memes in Romanian political contexts also include a small text applied over the image, the written perspective is where the analysis expands: memes can either maintain the original oral or written expression on which they build (*‘Am găsit la Peneteu’* – the phrasal template, *‘pepsiglas’* – malapropism) or they can exaggerate it to achieve a satirical or ironic effect. The language employed is easy to read and understand, usually imitating the characteristics of oral language originally employed (hypotext).

It might seem surprising how the audio component of memes arises, given that the political meme’s origin is usually verbal communication (political or press statement, interview, etc.). This should not lead to the statement that there is no such thing as an audio-only meme. However, audio-only, online-originated, user-generated memes have only very recently started becoming widely circulated, especially with the rise in the use of social

media avenues that easily allow for sound snippets to be laid over a different video than the original; moreover, the inclination to include videographic content in popular social media platforms, especially TikTok, makes it mandatory for the audio-meme to be joined by a visual element, thus apparently confining the re-circulation of an audio meme to a specific format.

As an American journalist remarked during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, memes, irrespective of their format, have morphed into what journalists call *soundbites*, i.e., exhaustive, concise statements:

What GIFs offer (as with radio and television before [them]) is another window into the candidate's persona that is somehow more human and authentic than conventional stump speeches and sit-down television interviews. (Bolton, 2016)

It is quite obvious that a meme cannot transmit information of a complex nature, such as a policy or the ideological positions of politicians unless the position in itself is rather vague, plainly common sense, or elicits an intensely emotional issue (the Romanian local elections in 2020 unleashed a fury of memes about public utilities, including the provision of hot tap water; an international example would be the 'Make America Great Again' 2016 meme series, which started as the Republican nominee Donald Trump's campaign slogan) (Mina, 2019). However, memes and GIFs employed as memes offer a very specific type of political insight – they are usually related to a specific reaction, a personality trait, a facial expression, or a phrase, which can be inter-contextualised using online transmission.

The written expression on a static imagery meme using a superimposed script is typically short (ten words maximum), and the text is often placed on the upper and lower margins of the image rather than centrally. This setup leads to a propensity for simple, snappy, easy-to-understand language – which is characteristic of many types of communication employed in the digital environment but also in folklore. New language is not necessarily created through a meme; the meme acts as a medium for the political language of the day, becoming a tool for dissemination or recontextualisation, or, in other words, an opportunity for political socialisation and participation.

3 Are political memes a form of political participation?

Seen from the outside, political memes can seem light-hearted, facetious, pointless, and even childish. However, given that (1) political memes can be shared both online and offline, which involves informal interaction between two or more individuals or groups of people, (2) memes are created and keep circulating on the basis of a common shared context or (3) a common shared identity, and (4) they can foster political debate, and (5) can arise out of a political conflict originating from a perceived situation of inadequacy, incompetence, incapacity, or unfairness, the phenomenon of political memes shares the characteristics of a social movement, without being one (Dina, 1992).

All these characteristics also imply that memes represent more than an opportunity for amusement. As new expressions of humour and satire, they can be meaningful mechanisms for delivering criticism or reflecting on current political personalities and events,

thus accounting for a certain level of political socialisation (Tesnohlikova, 2021). Due to their specific networked circulation, they can also reach internet users who have become disengaged citizens in the sense of formal means of political participation, thus contributing to an increase in political literacy (Tesnohlikova, 2021). While there is no sign of the institutionalisation of political memes at this point, the sense of collective identity that they forge in and by themselves is what keeps them alive – and the events or personalities they refer to – in the memory of internet users (Melucci, 1985).

In their own way, however, political memes reveal the spirit of the age by means of user-powered cultural transmission. However, unlike social movements, political memes often lack a specific political objective other than satire unless satire and satirical means are instrumentalised by social activists, political factions, electoral campaign strategists, or politicians. With memes' propensity to be circulated not only online but also in real life, it is important to note that in more recent studies, mobile communications have been demonstrated as a vehicle for social interaction and cohesion, with a ritualistic value (Neumayer & Sicart, 2023); whether a meme's purpose is to either confirm or contest the political establishment (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021) depends on the specific meme – this aspect is discussed in the case studies in the second section of the paper.

Using Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba's understanding of civic culture (1963), memes may represent proof of the existence of such a culture, as the emergence and circulation of political memes in the Romanian space demonstrates several relevant features: a collective interest in the political system, emotional, affective, responses to the issues portrayed via memes, cooperation between citizens (or internet users), and the ability to talk freely about politics. Whether political memes – understood as an expression of political humour and/or political satire – are a social fact in the Durkheimian understanding remains up for debate; it can be argued that, due to their intrinsically anonymous nature, memes generally and political memes can be considered external to the individual. However, their language and circulation rely on societal characteristics translated into the digital realm (Durkheim, 1982).

Of course, simply sharing an online meme cannot have the impact and the degree of engagement with the political process that established practices of political participation, conventional or unconventional, have, such as casting a vote, participating in a protest, or going to town hall meetings or public consultations – all of which are institutionalised to a certain degree. Memes tend to work at a lower level than formal politics and political debate mechanisms. A point to be made here is that, especially in the area of the former Soviet bloc, the totalitarian context required citizens to resort to creative means of dissent, which was not the case in established democracies. Researchers have responded to this by reconsidering the concept of political participation, noting that culture can manifest itself outside the public spectre in a non-ideological manner. It can lead to a political type of culture rather detached from the mechanisms of power (Goldfarb, 2006; 2016), underlining that the concept of political culture would benefit from being approached from a non-Western perspective.

However, no generalisations must be made regarding forms of political participation in the former Soviet bloc, as the degree to which alternative culture and, more specifically, political dissent manifested and became institutionalised as an alternative to the respective regimes varied from country to country. Romania historically stands in stark contrast

to other central European communist countries, as openly anti-regime counter-culture manifestations were (at best) disparaged due to factors specific to this case: the nature of communist suppression exerted by the state apparatus and the disconnect between the élite and the working classes (Petrescu & Petrescu, 2007). More broadly, a history of the disconnection in Romanian modernization levels as opposed to the Western countries (Alexandrescu, 2021; Boatcă, 2007) has been attributed as the reason why the Romanian society has been out of synchronisation with the Western ideal assumed by the political élites since the nineteenth century, influencing civic and participatory culture. The reasons for this are numerous, and their examination is not within the scope of this article (Glenny, 2017), but suffice it to say that applying Western-political-thought-based ‘political participation’ or ‘political culture’ concepts would not meet the requirements for assessing the impact of memes as a form of participation in the Romanian political context.

This obvious contradiction between culture in its popular sense, and politics and political culture has been examined by researchers in two main directions: either in assessing that popular culture and entertainment essentially lead to disengaged democratic citizens (Putnam, 2000) or the counter-claim that entertainment serves the democratic processes in a positive manner (Van Zoonen, 2004). One of the questions arising from this conflict is whether memes can ‘entertain the citizen’ and contribute to increasing political awareness and knowledge, commonly regarded as important factors in the establishment of a ‘good citizen’, or if they distract the citizen from conventionally participating in the political process. While this study does not aim to answer this question, it shows that memes can be integrated into the satirical context, and their creation and circulation suggest a pre-existing awareness or knowledge of their originating political context as viewers integrate the framing of the political event that the memes propose.

In this article, memes are regarded not as something stemming from inside the political establishment per se, but politics provides the ‘content’ of the political meme. However, the actual meme, its online sharing, and the discussions arising based on the said meme essentially occur outside the established formal political space. Whether political memes can be employed as a type of celebrity politics (Street, 2004) would require a separate research endeavour. However, we may ask ourselves whether political memes can be considered a form of citizen entertainment in the sense used by Liesbet Van Zoonen (2004). The answer is that, as long as the criteria for defining memes listed in this paper’s prior section are met, political memes can serve the purpose of entertainment, just as with other types of politically charged fictional artistic endeavours.

It is in the context of post-communist Romania in which we are trying to assess political memes. Regarding Goldfarb’s point about political culture being detached from the mechanisms of power, for the most part, political culture and conventional political participation seemed to account for the lack of interest of Romanian citizens – the last general elections in 2020 yielded 31.84 per cent turnout at the national level, while the only types of elections in which more than fifty per cent of voters have constantly expressed their opinion since the 1989 Revolution are presidential ones.² The two historical waves of street

² Code4Romania (2020).

protesting, in the 1990s and the 2010s, may be interpreted as outliers in the framework of Western-style political participation. However, in their own micro contexts, both have been regarded as a revival of the average citizen's Romanian civic spirit and political involvement (Volintiru & Buzaşu, 2020; Soare & Tufiş, 2020). These aspects are important for underlining the very specific context in which we should assess if memes account for political participation in the Romanian context and for adding some clarity to the political context of the case studies detailed in the second part of this article.

4 Methodological considerations

Data collection proved to be one of the most difficult parts of this research paper, as memes are often deleted or made private if not archived on the spot. In order to collect memes related to Romanian politics, a snowball-type search was first initiated, hopping from shared meme to shared meme, collecting in real-time the images or GIFs which surfaced via Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit at times when relevant political events were occurring in Romania – an approach which quickly started to resemble the ‘exploratory serendipity’ which Chris Messina, an open-source advocate, has promoted when arguing that hashtags are a useful manner of organising internet-based content (Messina, 2007).

Most of the time, new events are simply translated into new memes rather than pre-existing ones being used – the event thus becoming a meme in and through itself. Nonetheless, the lack of predictability in this approach and the dynamics of the Romanian political scene made this a somewhat unpredictable and inefficient method of data collection. A more efficient manner of gathering memes to assess their relevance to Romanian political culture would be to focus on a specific meme and its iterations, e.g., the miner, or on a specific politician and the memes sparked by this person, and to try to gather as many of its versions over time as possible. Using this approach, the focus shifts to the political event first and only then to the actual memes. However, the initial anecdotal observation that for a heavy user of social media, the meme might come first and the news second also suggests that memes rarely emerge out of the blue, instead seeming to be the result of external factors; after all, for new cultural transformations, new factors must come into play.

Based on some anecdotal evidence – namely, that in certain cases, one is informed about the latest news by seeing a meme and not understanding its context, which triggers a search for the origin of the meme and leads to finding out its full context (e.g., the political personality/statement/event/news which triggered the creation of the meme) –, we can imply that the inter-textualization factor is a significant one in meme sharing or creation from a political standpoint, as experimental designs in other geographical spaces have shown (Bülow & Johann, 2023). Initially, the author set out to check whether this inter-textualization factor is sufficient for new meme iterations to appear, as this was the spark that triggered this study. In contrast, this intertextualization would not be complete without knowing the full context of how a meme-viewer first received the meme; one's subsequent awareness of the whole context would account for the meme's complete understanding.

Because, at this stage, the author's primary aim was to determine the intertextuality level of online-shared political memes and their re-usage in other contexts, discourse analysis was employed. More specifically, the seeds for this type of sampling were sown using a parallel approach which would maximise the number of memes retrieved and included in the sample: the first step was to select the political event/news triggering the creation or use of the political meme, and then search by means of Google, Facebook and Reddit using keywords specific to the event/meme (e.g. 'am gasit la peneteu,' 'contributia mea este ca am venit aici,' 'Iohannis meme'), which yielded few but important results. The second seeding approach was constituted by searching for communities dedicated to meme creation and/or sharing with a significant and steady output of memes, which further enriched the sample. A third seed was monitoring some Romanian media outlets that would typically synthesise the creative memes or jokes circulated online in response to the day's events. This resulted in several threads to be followed, and several intermediate points of interest could be identified as a result of this endeavour.

A number of Facebook pages stood out for their constant output of memes, given the current context of the day (e.g., *Ana are meme* [Ana has memes], *Junimea* [reference to a writers' club active during the nineteenth century, which several of the most important Romanian writers were members of], *Am gasit la peneteu* [We found at the penetséu], *Jandarmemerie* [The Gendermemerie]). However, the practice of gathering a pool of memes on a given topic and re-publicizing them outside social networks on the news or creative websites was also highlighted during this stage; these endeavours may represent an archival effort but have only been started more recently and depend to a great extent on the editorial decisions taken by every outlet.

This type of dynamics can also suggest a certain instrumentalisation of memes in the Romanian political landscape, namely memes being created not by internet users who have thought of a good joke in the form of a meme and have enough digital acumen to create and share it, but by electoral campaigners, political opponents, or civic activists who have an interest in portraying their meme subject in a specific manner. Especially in the cases of news outlets re-publicizing memes, we noticed a propensity towards selecting memes in accordance with the political orientation of the outlet; if the outlet were more pro-establishment leaning, then the memes would be more positive in tone, and vice versa. This tendency was not so evident in social network-based groups or pages. This type of instrumentalisation is also suggested in the literature (Chagas et al., 2019), especially in a competitive setting such as an electoral campaign. However, we believe this competitive environment tends to be heavily influenced by particular memes reacting to or countering other specific memes (ergo, politicians, statements, or events), not necessarily taking into account politico-cultural symbols or stereotypes that require more time to be built into and be reproducible as memes.

After collecting the memes, the sample had to be selected – and several criteria came into play: the actual content of the meme (eliminating the many instances in which scurrilous or unprintable allusions were made), meme tone type (positive, neutral, negative), meme subtext (ironic, sympathetic, humorous, satirical). For this article, only memes in photographic format were selected to be discussed in the case studies due to the limits of the text format.

Another criterion to be considered was the origin of the meme – it could either (1) be generated in response to a specific Romanian political event – autogenous, (2) be borrowed from the pre-existing global pool of memes unrelated to politics, (3) originate in a different political culture and later be adapted for native use, or (4) be employed globally in response to a global political event – endogenous types of memes.

While every category deserves an analysis of its own, this paper will use a case study to illustrate three of the four characteristics mentioned above through content analysis of memes' visual and written elements. In this framework, memes may feature several types of text: written – i.e., text-only, iconic – using portraits of various personalities, transcriptions of oral text, or supra-text – a piece of text added above or below the static imagery. Some memetic transgressions were also explored, such as cartoons or protest placards. By distinguishing these components, more clarity would be hopefully achieved in the analysis.

5 Case study

This section of the article showcases a two-part case study of Romanian political memes. Each case study is prefaced by a context-providing section that unveils both the original context and the re-contextualization offered by the political meme.

The first part of the case study deals with the miner, one of the most well-recognised figures from the Romanian Mineriad of 1990. It shows that the political meme that originated then has a very high degree of stability regarding the situations framed and satirised with its help.

The second part of the case study deals with the current Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis, and aims to illustrate that the Romanian political contexts satirised in memes can also borrow and reinterpret elements from international pop culture and juxtapose them with local political contexts. It demonstrates that the diversity of such memes has increased over time due to several factors such as access to the internet and media, exposure to pop culture, and the heightened popularity of memes as a form of satire, but also due to political figures' propensity to use Western-like tricks of political communication.

While the first part of the case study allows for memes to be considered as part of the remembrance and re-contextualization of past events, the second shows that the cultural synchronisation of memes to the internet and pop culture via the memes' subtext or intent supports the argument that memes are likely to be a type of informal political participation.

Breaking apart the pool of selected memes into two groups within the case study helps underline the distinctness of the types (autogenous or self-referential, and endogenous or borrowing from another type of context than Romanian politics), thus increasing the granularity of the analysis.

5.1 The miner³

This case study illustrates the recontextualisation potential of satirical memetic approaches with an appeal to memory in Romanian political culture. This case study has been selected to demonstrate how a political meme can be made such via constant reinterpretation, generated in one Romanian political context and re-textualized in another, thus classifiable into the first category of meme origins (autogenous). It did not lose its original meaning and emotional charge but only added to it via popular reinterpretation and inter-subjectivity, reinforcing itself with every iteration, featuring a long lifespan, and helping with re-disseminating the original context. Also, this case study can serve as an example of the affective potential of a meme.

One of the defining events of the Romanian political scene after the 1989 Revolution was the series of *Mineriads*, violent altercations between the miners of Jiu Valley and residents of Bucharest, which started in 1990 in response to the National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale, FSN) to the *Piata Universității* movement and continued until 1999. During the 1989 Revolution (December 1989), the National Salvation Front was constituted as the temporary legislative and executive power that would ensure the organisation of the first free and fair elections in post-communist Romania. Immediately after abolishing the single-party system, the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL) and the National Peasant Party (Partidul Național Țărănesc, PNT) – the most important historical parties of the interwar period – would be registered. Despite the initial promises that FSN leaders made that the formation would not be registered as a political party and would not participate in the 1990 elections, in February 1990, the National Salvation Front was registered as an official party to enable it to be able to take part in the April 1990 elections. In response, PNL and PNT organised a series of anti-FSN mass rallies in Bucharest, resulting in these violent altercations now referred to as *Mineriads*.

Further explaining the current context of this case study and the Romanian post-communist political history, it is necessary to mention that FSN went through important transformations over the years; the current Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD), centre-left leaning, originates from a faction of FSN, with Ion Iliescu having served as the Social Democratic Party president between 1997 and 2000 – when he was elected President of Romania for his second term. Iliescu joined the communist ranks in 1944 and held his first official position within the Union of the Communist Youth in 1956, advancing until 1972 when he was sidelined from the Central Committee and the position of Minister of Youth and finally relegated to the head of the Technical Publishing House (*Editura Tehnică*).

The most violent episode of the *Mineriade* was the first one, on June 13–15, 1990, when the miners first came to Bucharest in an attempt to ‘clean up’ *Piata Universității* from ‘disturbing elements’, in the words of the then-leader of FSN, Iliescu, who had also become the President by that time. While an official account of the events has not surfaced yet, it is well-established by now in Romanian political culture (while not from a le-

³ The miner was interviewed by a crew of Rai Uno journalists, who used an interpreter, to identify what the situation was in 1990 in Bucharest during the *Mineriade* (Nastaila, 2020).

gal point of view, as the legal case of the Mineriads is yet to involve a final settlement) that this was one of the defining moments of Romanian post-communist society, as the incredibly violent action of the miners (beatings, rape, arson, killing) were to leave a permanent mark on Romanian collective memory.

It was during this episode that a crew of Italian journalists interviewed a miner, thus giving birth to probably the first Romanian post-communist political meme: the miner talking about what they had found at the headquarters of the National Peasants' Party (Partidul Național Țărănesc, PNT) and the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL), the two historical parties reestablished immediately after the 1989 Revolution that were opposing FSN's involvement as a political party in the elections. The recording of this interview has been widely used and recirculated not only at each commemoration of the June 1990 Mineriad in documentaries and TV accounts of the events but also in informal contexts, and it is easily accessible by searching YouTube.

This interview was conducted by a journalist with the help of a translator, as the questions were asked in Italian. However, watching the recording, it is obvious that the translator also whispers some answers to the miner. Despite this, the obvious confusion displayed by the interviewee gives us a clue about how accurate his assertions were. This interview became one of the symbols of the Mineriads (Figure 1). Although it is not possible to provide a one-hundred per cent accurate translation of this interview, one of the most prominent features of the oral expression here was the usage of popular abbreviated forms of the historical parties to which the miner referred: National Peasants' Party, Partidul Național Țărănesc – [*penetséu*], and National Liberal Party, Partidul Național Liberal – [*peneléu*], thus transforming into substantives the party names' abbreviations. This form of expression greatly contributed to the popularity of this interview despite the fact that it is a series of anacolutha. It is also worth noting that all the things mentioned by the miner as having been found at the Liberals' headquarters were illegal or strictly regulated under communist rule: drugs were virtually unheard of, the possession of foreign currency constituted a crime, armaments and ammunition were strictly regulated, while typewriters had to be registered with the police, and private citizens could only have one if they obtained special authorisation from the police (Decret nr. 98 din 28/03/83).

Reporter: Ciao!..

[The miner kisses the reporter's hand]

Reporter: Perque sei venuti qui?

The miner: Because of the hooligans... and because the molestation of the Army... and the Police... if they want it like this... We found at the *penetséu* drugs, armament, ammunition, a typewriter, and printed money at the *peneléu*; it's in the *Adevarul* paper, and... these repressions...⁴

⁴ Original:

“Reporter: Ciao!..

[Minerul sărută mâna doamnei reporter]

Reporter: Perque sei venuti qui?

Minerul: Am găsit la Pe-ne-țeu droguri, armament, muniție, mașină de scris automată, tipărit bani la Pe-ne-leu, este în ziarul *Adevarul*, și ... represiunile astea cu....” – translation provided by the author.



Figure 1 Screen-capture of the miner interview recording.

Source: Mediafax.ro

While this video frame alone might trigger painful memories of the events for those who witnessed them or the satire that emerged after that, the episode has certainly incited tragicomedy for the past thirty years. This is the meme that constantly emerges whenever a significant political event occurs. Text-only references to this meme abound on the Romanian-speaking internet, with the author having even retrieved some Reddit threads entitled ‘Am gasit la... [Pesedeu]’, thus pointing to its existence as a phrasal template. For the purposes of this paper, only static imagery with supra-text has been taken into analysis.⁵ Events that spur the usage of the meme seem to have been relatively frequent, like the block migration of mayors who had run initially under the Social Democratic Party’s colours but switched party affiliation after the general elections of 2020 (Figure 2). Although the winner of the elections was the Social Democratic Party, the parties which went on to form a governing cabinet were the second-placed National Liberal Party, and the third-placed Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România, USR). This specific meme cannot be found on KnowYourMeme.com, a popular website for meme tracking, although the latter heavily leans towards US-circulated memes, and several keywords were employed to search for it. However, the meme is available as a template on imgflip, a popular meme-creating web-based service, and most of the memes referenced below were created with the help of this tool.⁶

⁵ https://www.reddit.com/r/Romania/comments/8tb0aw/am_g%C4%83sit_la_pesedeu/

⁶ Imgflip, Am gasit arme droguri la penetséu meme template. <https://imgflip.com/memetemplate/187169667/Am-gasit-arme-droguri-la-penetet>

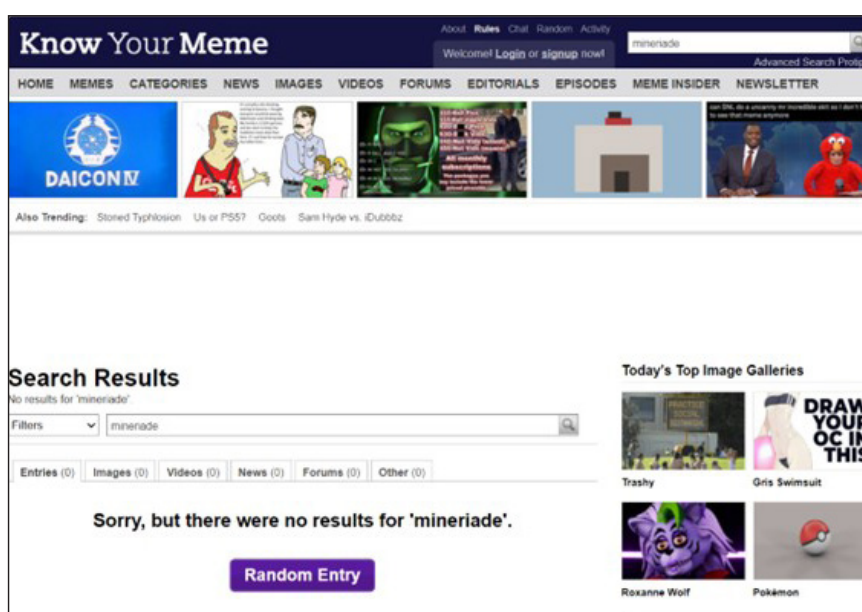


Figure 2 KnowYourMeme.com search result for “mineriade” and similar. “No results” was returned whenever searching for other variants like “mineriads.” “Miner” returned a few results, none having any connection to the Romanian context.

Source: Screen capture by the author.

Over time, this meme has kept a few of the original characteristics of the initial context: first, the image of the miner; second, the oral expression is maintained by tweaking the written abbreviations of the parties’ names and the name of the party from whose headquarters certain subversive elements were presumably retrieved; the original meme is also added to by putting it into a new political context – that of mayors migrating to another political party in order to keep their access to financial resources intact (Figure 3).

The same meme emerged when Florin Cîțu, the president of the National Liberal Party, publicly declared that:

I believe we found many things that can unite us [the Liberals and the Social Democrats], for example, the situation we are witnessing today in Romania. We have a health crisis, an energy crisis, and for this we need a Cabinet, a stable governing. If we will be able to manage this together with those at PSD, it’s OK. (Agerpres, 2021, translation provided by the author).

This declaration was made because the former governing alliance with the USR had collapsed through a censorship motion, and the Liberals were looking to form a new government with either PSD or USR (Figure 4).



Figure 3 “We found at the PNLeu/Half of PSDeu”

Source: Am gasit la peneteu [We found at the penetéu]. Facebook page.



Figure 4 “We found at the Peneleu and Pesedeu/Many things that can unite them”

Source: Am gasit la peneteu [We found at the penetéu]. Facebook page.

While the meme maintains its specificity by employing the same folk abbreviations of the parties' names, it also adds to it by adding the exact oral expression used by the interim prime minister. It satirised the historical context in which the Liberals were antagonists of the Social Democrats, thus stressing the fact that after the demise of communism, despite the regime change, the élite had managed to preserve political power.

Using this meme, other Romanian politicians were ironised, such as Liviu Dragnea, another former president of the Social Democrats between 2015 and 2019 (Figures 4 and 5). This occurred during the *TeleormanLeaks* scandal, in which a suitcase full of official documents seeming to incriminate Dragnea, the then-president of the Social Democratic Party, was retrieved by the journalists at Rise Project, resulting in a journalistic investigation and a public scandal entitled *TeleormanLeaks* by journalists, the name of the county where Dragnea was born and started his political career (Figure 5) (Dumitru & Munteanu, 2018).

The creation and usage of this meme also point to its instrumentalisation by political activists, as this scandal emerged amid accusations of corruption against Dragnea; he had already been convicted with a suspended sentence for coordinating a network of people to cast their vote through illegal means in the 2012 presidential impeachment referendum of Traian Basescu. In 2018, he was again convicted for instigating the abuse of office, and this time, he was imprisoned.



Figure 5 "We found in Teleorman a suitcase with Dragnea's documents"

Source: Adevarul.ro

Another meme in the same series (Figure 6) dedicated to one of Dragnea's statements emerged when, during the 2019 European elections campaign, a debate was started by members of Alianța USR PLUS regarding private property rights, a sensitive subject in Romania after 1989. Dragnea answered that,

They want to abolish the right to property. People can vote for them, it's a free country. If you don't want any more houses, land, cars, fridges, cooking stoves, it's alright. But you must knowingly vote. (Ghiciov, 2019, translation provided by the author)



Figure 6 “[We] found at PNȚ drugs, foreign currency, a typewriter. / I also found an automatic washing machine”

Source: Vasile (2017).

Throughout these iterations of the meme, we notice that the initial context was preserved yet re-contextualised with current affairs; the static imagery remains identical (the snippet of the miner taken from the video interview) while the added text maintains the oral features of the original vernacular language; however, the transformations that occur within the subtext heavily satirise the absurdity of the political statements and lack of actual reform within the political establishment, without explicitly pointing to the original source of either of the statements, which implies a good knowledge of both current affairs and of Romanian post-communist history.

The miner meme has nonetheless transgressed its original visual form, the portrait of the miner taken during his declaration in 1990, and it was also satirised by a Romanian illustrator, Sergiu V. Vasile (2017) in the form of a cartoon depicting the dialogue between two miners. The first miner (on the left of the illustration) states the initial line: ‘We found at the penetséu drugs, foreign currency, an automated writing machine’, while the second miner replies, ‘I also found an automatic washing machine’ (translation provided by the author).

This specific iteration of the meme suggests highly affective, highly mnemonic usage, with a clear reference to the historical context and a deep satirical take using synecdoche. This is an interesting example in the case study, as it balances between a political cartoon and a political meme. We have included it in the analysis as its origin and its memetic potential point towards a memetically-used trope of Romanian political culture. While the re-contextualization process remains the same as in the case of other memes, it uses the specific pseudo-dialogue usually observed in cartoons to add a punchline. This occurrence might suggest that, depending on the illustrators' choices, cartoons can use the same rhetorical and framing techniques as memes (Soare, 2019). However, it also demonstrates that the empirical boundaries of memes can be blurred (Denisova, 2016).



Figure 7 “We found at the Usereu washing machines, cooking stoves, gas bottles and a vintage radio set”

Source: Am gasit la peneteu [We found at the penetéu]. Facebook page.

Another transgressive example of this meme was found in a hand-made protest placard, photographed during the OUG 13 protests and retrieved online. The text reads, ‘We found at the PeSeDeu always-on-the-takers, thugs, an automated stealing machine’, – with evidently affective use during a protest, satirising the political élite, thus the meme is in tune with its other circulations. While it respects the orality of the party names, thus pointing clearly to the original context, it also uses a pun on the second part of the phrase, changing the ‘automated writing machine’ (typewriter) to an ‘automated stealing machine’ – another obvious allusion to the corruptness of the élites, and specifically, the Social

Democrats. Notably, the meme was employed in an unconventional context of political participation in an openly public setting, with a scope rather in tune with the formal mechanisms of power.



Figure 8 Protester holding a hand-made placard stating ‘We have found at the PeSeDeu/always-on-the-takers, thugs, / an automated stealing machine.’

Source: <http://casazicasa.ro/colectie-pancarte-protest/img/Am%20gasit%20la%20PeSeDeu%20spagari%20borfasi%20si%20masina%20de%20furat%20automata.jpg>

Borrowing from Phillippe Soler’s concept of *intertextualité* (1968), if we decode the actual sequence of meme iterations featuring the miner, we can clearly see the intertextuality of the content, as well as the original occurrence of the meme as a hypotext, acting as the anchor on which later reinterpretations were built (Genette, 1989). This political meme features a high degree of semiotic stability, especially with regard to the visual and oral expression reproduced in text form, while simultaneously allowing for an array of recontextualisations.

However, it is interesting to note that these intertextualities of the meme appear within a very specific range, that of the history of Romanian post-communist politics, and always with strong reference to the original political context of the Minerriads and the lack of significant changes at the political élite level in spite of the political events of the day (corruption, political coalitions between seemingly incompatible political parties, debates about private property rights). We also note that there are far fewer iterations of this meme associated with the general political context than those connected to more recent political events, thus sustaining the claim that this particular meme can be ascribed to a

very specific political context, explaining its restricted circulation. The miner meme, as such, adopts a deeply negative tone about the Mineriads that is sustained throughout its re-contextualizations with the added weight of satire aimed at the political élite and the latter's lack of intellectual refinement. All these arguments suggest that this meme can be considered endogenous – born in the local political environment and used self-referentially within the same local environment, with the important note that it clearly shows how transgressions from the real-life environment to the online and back can occur. We must mention here that versions of the meme that use scurrilous language were removed from the analysed sample.

Just as with protest movements, the cultural influences forged by political memes have effects beyond the initial context through reinterpreting the original context and drawing from various mainstream symbols, such as political public discourse, personalities, and policy changes; simultaneously, on the internal online space political memes have the ability to forge new meanings (Meyer, 2006, pp. 164–172), but in this particular case study, we find that the new meanings are always integrated with the initial context, as an overarching satire of Romanian political evolution post-1990, and by extension, a critique of the political establishment at large. The affective use (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020) of the miner meme becomes very apparent when the initial context and the subsequent iterations of the meme are compared, thus confirming the fact that memes are charged with a specific visual and memory potential brought forth both by the initial context and its subsequent iterations. Knowledge of the initial context of the Mineriads is absolutely necessary for correctly decoding the subsequent iterations of the meme. This series of memes suggests that the viewer at least knows the original context and the political developments of 1990s Romania. At the same time, remembering these events is the inherent pre-condition for the recirculation of the miner meme. This fact also explains why this meme has not circulated outside the Romanian cultural space (Figure 2).

5.2 President Klaus Iohannis

Klaus Iohannis, the current President of Romania and a former physics professor, started his political career in 1990 as a member of the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania. In 2000, he won the local elections and became the mayor of Sibiu, his hometown and the historical centre of the German minority in Romania. In 2009, he was nominated as a candidate for the position of Prime Minister by a coalition formed by the Liberals, the Social Democrats, and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). However, he was not appointed by Traian Basescu, then-President. In 2013, Iohannis formally joined the National Liberal Party (PNL) and won the presidential elections in 2014, thus starting his first term, marked by a powerful anti-corruption stance aimed at improving education standards. He won his second term in 2019 in a political landscape that featured significantly less political competition; overall, under his presidency, there has been democratic backsliding – in the Economist's Democracy Index 2022, Romania is categorised as a 'Flawed democracy.'

Informally, he has been satirised for his sober stance, rarely showing his emotion, for his manner of speech (very slow, playing to the cultural trope of Transylvanians gen-

erally being very slow to act), for a property scandal (the number of properties he owns suggests more sources of income than just a professor's salary), and for his passion for sports – an avid skier and tennis player who likes taking bike rides, enjoys golf, and is considered to be in good physical shape. His sartorial choices have been reminiscent of those of other Western political figures, such as Barack Obama or Justin Trudeau, including the preference for wearing sunglasses, and he counters the local cultural trope that politicians are out of physical shape. These details are relevant, as political memes with him as a subject have used these characteristics, displaying him in a variety of instances.

This sub-section aims to reflect on how political memes in Romania can also be ascribed to international cultural tropes, not just local ones and that they can also be used in more positive contexts, although the satirical undertone remains at the forefront. Another aspect that is revealed is that in this case study, the tendency to borrow from international contexts is much more evident than in the case of the miner meme, and various factors justify this: (1) the level of international pop-culture consumption in Romania, and its synchronisation with Western levels after the demise of communism; (2) the increasing popularity of memes as a satirical or humorous tool, (3) the specificity of the memeable context, that is, because these memes focus on a Romanian politician who belongs to a newer generation, more akin to the Western political leaders.

One of the first instances when Iohannis became the subject of memes was during his first term in 2017 when he visited Romanian Air Force Base 57 near Constanța for an official meeting with the NATO Military Commander. His sartorial choice of the day and the photographs taken on the tarmac prompted a series of memes we can ascribe as either negative or positive; despite being involved in a scandal regarding his properties in Sibiu, general perceptions of him were still positive, being dedicated to his aim of eradicating anti-corruption. Figure 9 shows the original photograph based on which the subsequent memes were created.



Figure 9 Original photograph depicting President Klaus Iohannis next to the Chief of General Staff, Nicolae Ciucă.

Source: *presidency.ro*, as reproduced by the Romanian Public Radio, *Radiojournal* (2017, July 13).



Figure 10a (left). Figure 10b (right).

Source: Digi24.ro (2017).

Figure 9a generally indicates the positive approach towards Iohannis employing various internationally borrowed contexts: borrowing from a very popular movie, *Top Gun*, and juxtaposing Iohannis' preference for wearing sunglasses and his stance to that of a movie hero, Lieutenant Pete Maverick. These features associate with his personality an internationally acclaimed actor and cultural symbol (Tom Cruise) and a movie character, creating a telecinematic reference point (Kirner-Ludwig, 2020). Figure 10b features a widely popular internet meme ('you vs. the guy she told you not to worry about') that summarises the then-political context: on the left, we see a portrait of a smiling Liviu Dragnea, then-leader of the Social Democrats, juxtaposed against the portrait of Iohannis on the tarmac. These memes create a context completely outside the Romanian political milieu. However, they manage to make sense of it in the national context, therefore involving a degree of intertextuality far superior to the situation of the miner meme, explainable by the very specific origin of the latter and by Iohannis aping the image of other Western leaders. At the same time, the meme essentially displays the primary political cleavage at that moment.

Another iteration of Iohannis' portrait on the tarmac (Figure 9c) features a local context juxtaposed with a popular movie trope, the blockbuster movie hero calmly walking away unscathed from a big explosion that is occurring in the background. The metaphorical layers to be uncovered here are multiple: while we can still see a pop-culture context outside the Romanian cultural space, the reference to the property scandal associated with Iohannis is obvious as the supra-text is provided in Romanian ['When the renters have not paid their rent...'], translation provided by the author], thus limiting the circulation of this meme to Romanian speakers, who would presumably be aware of this news.

Iohannis was featured in memes on other occasions as well, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, as his public appearances were highly frequent, and the meme featured in Figure 10b is based on a photograph taken of him while he was being vaccinated against Covid-19, playing to multiple tropes simultaneously: that of the slowness typical of both Transylvanians and the Windows operating system, to conspiracy theories around vaccines containing microchips, and to his seemingly robotic stance, as he was likened multiple times to an inanimate object. The hypertext provided here suggests a harmful type of meme, deeply satirical, regarding multiple issues and layers.



Figure 9c 'When the renters haven't paid their rent...'

Source: Florea, A. (2017).



Figure 11a Original image of President Iohannis immediately after being vaccinated against Covid-19.

Source: Pauleanu R. (2021).

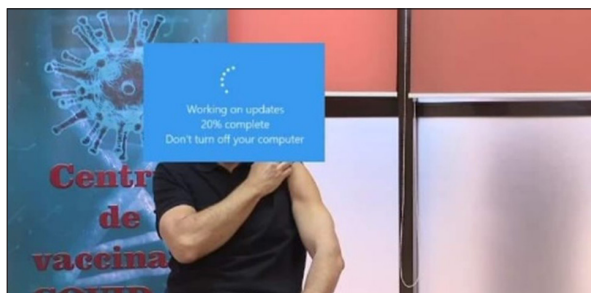


Figure 11b (right).

Source: IQAds. (2021).

Figures 12b, 12c, 12d, and 12e also display Iohannis and various graphical manipulations based on the original photograph (Figure 12a) of him during a bike ride to Cotroceni Palace in 2021 as part of a public campaign in which high-ranked officials vouched for alternative means of transportation (*Digi24.ro*, 2021).



Figure 12a Klaus Iohannis riding his bike on his way to Cotroceni Palace.

Source: Klaus Iohannis (Facebook).

The specificity of this meme is that no supra-text is employed, except for a single iteration, and the memes uses collages ascribing to various tropes: the properties scandal (Figure 12b, where Iohannis seems to be dragging along a big house behind the bike), chasing Liviu Dragnea (Figure 12d), and a very intricate collage showing him on a snow-bike on a ski-trail (Figure 12e). We suggest this series of memes could be ascribed to the iconic category. Figure 12c is the only meme in this series which features a supra-text – ‘When your shaorma from Doner is late’, showcasing Iohannis with a delivery backpack, once again re-contextualizing the original photo with the slowness trope, but also drawing on the rising popularity of home-delivery services provided by alternative means of transportation.

The single neutral or fairly positive meme in this series is Figure 12d, where the president seemingly chases Liviu Dragnea – an allusion to his proclaimed fight against corruption and the Social Democrats; all the other ones feature a negative undertone. Underlying all the memes, we can identify a high level of awareness of the political context and specific history of Iohannis, the subsequent political language employed, and the cultural space in which these memes are created and shared.

The tropes that each series of memes employs remain constant throughout time, and the memes rely on known facts or personality traits of Iohannis. However, the content of the memes is varied, suggesting an apparently different process of memeization than of the miner meme; we believe this process is only apparently different, as, in essence, the memetic traits remain a constant throughout the memes, satirising the same characteristics or facts from Iohannis’ political career or personality traits, just as in the case of the miner meme, where the constant feature is a stance satirising absurd political statements or contexts and a powerful anti-corruption message – characteristics by no means unique to the Romanian space (Chagas, 2020).



Figure 12b Klaus Iohannis on his bike, seemingly dragging along a (Photoshopped) house.

Source: Stan (2021).



Figure 12c Klaus Iohannis on his bike, but also wearing a bag bearing the logo of a popular home-delivery service in Romania.

Source: Paranteze.md (2021).



Figure 12d Klaus Iohannis on his bike, with a runner seemingly running away from him. The head of Liviu Dragnea is Photoshopped over the runner.

Source: Paranteze.md (2021).



Figure 12e Iohannis on a snow-bike, over a stock image of Poiana Brasov, the most popular ski resort in Romania.

Source: 'Ana are meme' [Ana has memes]. Facebook group.

Whether we can discuss a 'right to satirize' (Chagas et al., 2019) remains up for debate. Had we considered only the competitive political environment and the memes circulated exclusively during a high-stakes electoral campaign, we would have more clearly identified the instrumentalisation of memes as political discourse; however, these approaches should be more clearly connected to the means of assessing the actual effect of a meme on users, as one important aspect is how they are essentially perceived by the public – thus accounting for the 'user-generated frame' (Ross & Rivers, 2019).

Taking into account memes which have persisted in time (either by means of clearly tracking their originating point and then following them across mediums and re-contextualizations, as in the case of 'the miner' meme, or focusing on a single political figure and the variety of contexts and allusions in which the memes subject the respective figures) allows for a more finely-grained assessment of memes' persistence, contextualisation, and transgression potential, which are important components of satire through memes, as they contribute to their shared meaning. In the case of 'the miner' meme, the persistence in time and the stability of the image macro and the oral language point to how the meme can be considered a transformation of a political event into memetic form, thus confirming the initial observation that political memes do not create language, but only re-contextualize it. In the case of a political-personality-based meme, the variety of contexts that is employed does not necessarily point to the same degree of memetic stability nor to the same degree of persistence as a political/cultural symbol; it is the intersecting contexts (local and pop-culture) that power the meme, as well as the inherent visibility of the public personality.

This section has focused primarily on how the meaning, the memory, and the knowledge of the original context or the political personality are necessary for demonstrating that political memes circulate in a space which is informal (usually social networks, later on retrieved and re-popularised by news or creative outlets), but where knowledge about current and past affairs is definitely present. The second aim of the section has been to

strengthen the argument that memes are now an integral part of the Romanian political culture and one of the main tools employed online to satirise various political contexts, statements, or personalities.

The two subdivisions of the case study are differentiated by specifying the purpose of the meme: the miner meme features a high degree of stability over time, as the initial events unfolded in 1990, and memetic recontextualisations have usually been employed to satirise the lack of change within the Romanian political context by means of triggering an emotionally charged, memory-based response. It also suggests that the transgression potential of memes is an important factor that prolongs their life – autogenous political memes have a higher chance of becoming political-cultural symbols outside the memetic universe. The second part of the case study shows, however, that memes in the Romanian political context can also circle back to reference international pop-culture symbols, with a high degree of adaptability and precision as to the referenced context, thus confirming the circularity of the memetic environment, but also suggesting that current events can be re-contextualised using an array of references. Thus, this set of memes is markedly more endogenous than autogenous – although the two types are not exclusive as they may exist simultaneously or with a meme showing characteristics of both types (Figure 9). The second part of the case study also shows a multitude of static-image meme formats, either using supra-text or employing a variety of Photoshop-based manipulated imagery, thus suggesting that adaptations of meme formats can occur based not only on the originating context but on other societal features or trends – but the memes' discourse stability remains yet to be determined.

Ultimately, since the time the miner stated that he had found seemingly 'illegal' possessions at the Liberals' headquarters to Iohannis' movie-hero-like appearances in memes, approximately thirty years have passed, in which Romania has undergone a rapid transformation from multiple points of view – but the freedom of speech and that of association are probably two of the most cherished ones. Creating and distributing these memes in a semi-public or public setting remains a testament to these freedoms.

6 Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to define political memes in the Romanian political culture and historical political context, to outline their characteristics and specificities of their functioning, and to indicate that the phenomenon of political meme-sharing is not just a frivolous thing to do while browsing the internet, but a significant phenomenon that, while it does not have the same weight as conventional or unconventional political participation (voting or protesting), can be considered a type of informal political participation, an addition to how political socialisation functions, and a novel element to be considered when dealing with civic culture at large, and digital civic culture more specifically. Notably, this research shows that a meme can move from an offline setting to an online setting and back to offline, thus making memes a potent vehicle for cultural transmission. The memes showcased in this research play to specific cultural tropes or feature a heavily charged and complex event, such as that of the Mineriads, essentialised through a phrasal

template. The popularity and the informality of this type of political participation can be explained in the Romanian post-communist context, as it is a type of involvement with no apparent ties to the structures of power, with no other significant aim but political satire (with either positive or downgrading subtexts) of current affairs or personalities.

Political memes share many features with political folklore (anonymous character, peer-to-peer sharing, and the semi-public online setting in which they are mainly circulated). However, the medium drastically changes their reach, transforming them into a noteworthy public and political phenomenon that is covered by the media, being in some cases relevant to Romanian society through the lens of political culture.

The two parts of the case study show the interesting differences between older and newer political memes from the standpoint of their original memetic characteristics: (1) the variety of contexts that are employed regarding a political personality or event across time varies significantly and might suggest some synchronisation with the levels of popularity of the said personality or event, (2) the tendency to referencing pop-culture tropes or symbols in memes tends to increase when the memes reference a very recent political event, but not in cases in which the political event or personality being referenced has a high emotional charge or concerns a particular political context. This effect, however, may be identified due to the sheer availability of the memes if the memetic originating point is more recent, as most of the time, the respective memes are not archived, and the snowball sampling method applied to identify the memes analysed in this research endeavour does not account for this variable. These dimensions can constitute an avenue for further research into Romanian digital participatory culture.

As per their definition, an awareness of the original context and other emerging iterations of memes leads to their being recognised as memes, keeping specific events alive in collective memory. They cannot transmit complex messages only through text or static imagery, but the subtexts and their reinterpretation can accurately represent how collective memory is metabolised. As a recent digitally translated genre of political humour or political satire, memes have some pregnant digital characteristics, such as a propensity for using imagery and less written language – and when written language is employed, it is in a brief form. They do not necessarily transmit complex messages, but they do emerge in contexts which have sometimes been decades-long in the making (but other times overnight), reshuffling and re-contextualizing themselves and transmitting powerful popular symbols through the ephemerality of internet bytes as an everyday occurrence – digitally translated folklore (Iloh, 2021; Denisova, 2019).

Finally, memes can be ascribed to a more private or individual type of political culture, somewhat detached from the mechanisms of power (Goldfarb 2006; 2012), especially in the Romanian political space as a post-communist country. They usually aim to satirise a political event, personality or statement, and they are circulated in a context in which there is often an awareness of both the original starting point and of other iterations; they do not have a (quasi-)institutionalised aim in the sense of regular protests, for example, but they can be instrumentalised in other more public types of political participation. Memes add to the metabolisation of political contexts, past and present, and can be a tool for revealing attitudes concerning politics at large.

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Framing displaced persons: An analysis of Turkish media's use of migration metaphors on Twitter

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Abstract

In recent years, social media has been recognized as instrumental in shaping the discourse around displaced persons, particularly through the power of metaphorical framing. Given that online communication can lead to real-world consequences for individuals, X (formerly known as Twitter) now stands out as a crucial platform for discussing migration issues in Turkey. However, while Twitter holds significant sway over public discourse in Turkey, there remains a research gap concerning its role in migration-related metaphorical framing. This study, employing critical metaphor analysis (CMA), delves into the metaphorical representations associated with the terms *göçmen* ('migrant'), *sığınmacı* ('asylum-seeker'), and *mülteci* ('refugee') in the tweets of four major Turkish media outlets: *Hürriyet*, *Haber Türk*, *Sözcü*, and *Cumhuriyet*. The findings reveal a predominant negative framing of all three terms, with *göçmen* and *sığınmacı* often equated with crime and *mülteci* with objectification. Also, the political inclination of the media outlets played a role, with those aligned closer to the Turkish government showcasing fewer negative frames. In conclusion, the study highlights the profound impact of media's metaphorical framing, revealing its capacity to color public perceptions about displaced populations, a phenomenon accentuated by the specific terms chosen and the media's political leanings.

Keywords: migration; Turkey; metaphor; framing; displaced persons; discourse

1 Introduction

Due to conflicts and human rights violations, notably the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011, there has been a significant surge in migration and asylum-seeking, with Turkey emerging as a pivotal transit point (Hasdemir & Çetin, 2018; Nurdoğan & Öztürk, 2018). As these numbers grow, the media's role in shaping discourse on asylum seekers becomes increasingly crucial (Livberber, 2021). Media discourse is influenced by 'frames' – structures that shape how information is presented and understood (Gitlin, 2003). According to

Benczes and Szabó (2020), frames have emerged in various fields such as artificial intelligence (Minsky, 1975), psychology (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984), semantics (Fillmore, 1976), and cognitive linguistics (Lakoff, 1986). Although the exact definition of a frame varies among these disciplines, they commonly view frames as ‘means for structuring and understanding our surroundings through stable cognitive models’ (Benczes & Szabó, 2020). Furthermore, the idea of a frame is known by many names, including script, scenario, and scene, but fundamentally represents a coherent organization of ‘human experience’ (Kövecses, 2006).

This paper specifically concentrates on metaphorical framing, as metaphors are often regarded as fundamental triggers of framing, a concept highlighted by Krippendorff (2017), and profoundly impact public opinion by organizing information using metaphors (Burgers et al., 2016). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 2003), a metaphor is a way of understanding one kind of thing in terms of another, involving a conceptual mapping between two different domains. In this context, the ‘source domain’ is the domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions, and the ‘target domain’ is the domain that we seek to understand or describe. For example, in the metaphor ‘time is money,’ ‘money’ is the source domain from which we borrow concepts to understand and express ideas about ‘time,’ the target domain. This conceptual framework highlights how metaphors shape our perception and understanding of the world. In other words, metaphors bridge the familiar with the unfamiliar, offering both simple and complex comparisons, such as viewing socio-political issues through relatable terms (Charteris-Black, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For instance, the phrase ‘tax relief’ embodies the metaphor ‘taxation is a burden,’ framing taxes as a heavy load on taxpayers, creating negative sentiment (Lakoff, 1996). This interpretation not only casts taxes in a negative light despite their role in funding public services but also implies that politicians should aim to lessen this burden by reducing taxes. Frequent media usage embeds these metaphors in public thought, eventually making them indistinguishable from the concepts they illustrate (Burgers et al., 2016). This shows metaphors’ role in shaping and constructing reality, highlighting their significance in power dynamics and the media’s influential role in shaping societal perspectives (Kövecses, 2020; Musolff, 2007).

2 The framing of migration

Numerous studies have demonstrated the negative impact of metaphorical framing on public opinion about migration and migrants (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018; Baider & Kopytowska, 2017; Benczes & Ságvári, 2021; Charteris-Black, 2006; Musolff, 2015; Taylor, 2021)2006; Musolff, 2015; Taylor, 2021. For example, in recent years, Hungary has been at the center of controversy over migration, with the highest rate of refusal of migrants from poorer non-European countries, which began in 2015 when the migration crisis started (Messing & Ságvári, 2019). This negative attitude toward migrants was also detected in Benczes and Ságvári (2021), who analyzed the metaphorical framing of three Hungarian keywords used to refer to displaced people, namely *bevándorló* (‘immigrant’), *migráns* (‘migrant’), and *menekült* (‘refugee’), in both pro-government and non-government media

outlets from 2015 to April 2018. Their study found that media outlets commonly used war- and flood-related metaphors to frame migrants negatively, with pro-government outlets employing more hostile source domains than non-government news portals.

Hungary is not the only country in Europe where migrants are framed negatively in the media. Another piece of research concerning the framing of refugees through metaphor in the Austrian media showed that refugees were mostly framed in connection with security and economic problems (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). Similarly, Farris and Silber Mohamed (2018) demonstrate that immigrants are frequently characterized as unauthorized groups of people trying to break into the US. Furthermore, Harris and Gruenewald (2020) uncovered that the framing of immigrants as criminals increased significantly between 1990–2013, and immigrants were framed as responsible for increasing crime rates in the US. Many other studies found that migration is framed negatively in different countries and regions (Ana, 1999; Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018; Baidar & Kopytowska, 2017; Catalano & Mitchell-McCollough, 2019; Charteris-Black, 2006; Hart, 2021; Montagut, 2020). Metaphors are essential in this regard as they compete with each other to dominate the common narrative and establish realities (Miller, 1979).

While countries like Hungary host a minuscule number of people who have fled, as of 2023, Turkey has become the global epicenter for people, hosting a staggering 3.9 million people (*Türkiye Fact Sheet*, 2023). This influx, mainly from Syria, has created linguistic challenges, with media frequently blurring distinctions between terms such as ‘migrant,’ ‘asylum-seeker,’ and ‘refugee’ (Fansa, 2021). As a result, Turkey has implemented legal nuances by issuing the Law on Foreigners and International Protection and the Temporary Protection Regulation. This reflects recognition of the unique situation of Syrian people living in Turkey, leading to the adoption of the term ‘temporary protection’ (Fansa, 2021, p. 300). Consequently, it is increasingly considered appropriate to define Syrian individuals residing in Turkey as ‘Persons under Temporary Protection’ rather than using conventional terms such as refugee, asylum seeker, foreigner, or stateless. Furthermore, the discourse around migration in Turkey is intricate and influenced by various factors. Aydemir (2022) illustrates how different political ideologies and affiliations interpret the presence of Syrian refugees. Notably, the governing Justice and Development Party’s (JDP) initial openness to Muslim populations, rooted in Neo-Ottoman inclinations, underwent a transformation post-2016. Similarly, the alignment of Turkish nationalists with the JDP in 2018 brought about a moderation in their views. The broader conversation oscillates, with some narratives echoing Western European concerns of Syrians as a ‘threat,’ while others, influenced by the JDP’s civilizationist populism, emphasize humanitarian aspects interwoven with security and economic considerations (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017; Yanaşmayan, 2019).

Against this backdrop, it is important to briefly mention the state of media ownership in Turkey. Since the economic liberalization of the 1980s, Turkey’s media ownership landscape has undergone significant transformation. Research by Akser (2018) underscores the industry’s consolidation, leading to growing concerns about censorship and the pronounced political influence of media entities. Highlighting the threat to pluralism, Gül (2011) delves into the challenges posed by media monopolization. In the contemporary landscape, three major media groups – Demirören, Kalyon/Turkuvaz, and Doğuş – command a staggering 95.04 per cent of the audience across various media platforms (Media

Ownership Monitor Turkey, 2021). Their close alignment with the JDP critically influences news representation and public discourse (Digital News Report 2021, 2021). Amidst this media landscape, Twitter emerged as an essential platform, offering an alternative space for the public voice and diverse perspectives.¹

Building on the context of media ownership in Turkey, it is imperative to recognize the role of online platforms. Given that online communication can lead to real-world consequences for individuals (Goodman et al., 2017), Twitter, the second most popular platform after YouTube (Digital News Report 2021, 2021), stands out as a crucial platform for discussing migration issues in Turkey. According to Ozduzen et al. (2021), there is a shared sentiment among the Turkish community on Twitter about the perceived threats posed by immigrants, especially Syrians, present in their daily lives and their perceived roles not only in Turkey but also in Western nations. These prevalent narratives intertwine with decision-making strategies regarding Turkey's existential challenges, and the solutions they imply – taking back control from groups like the JDP, Arabs, and Kurds – reflect an underlying racialization of Syrians within Turkey (Ozduzen et al., 2021, p. 3365).

Numerous studies address Turkey's migration and refugee situations, yet few explore metaphorical framing – only two, to my knowledge. Notably, Çoban Keneş (2016) identified metaphors like 'flood' and 'wave' for displaced Syrians and depicted them as an 'economic burden' or 'cheap and illegal labor.' Another study by Çakır & Köseliören (2022) highlighted negative migrant metaphors in mainstream newspapers, mirroring rising anti-migrant sentiments. While their focus was online news, this research shifts the lens to metaphorical framing on social media concerning displaced persons because, despite Twitter's influence, there is a notable gap in research that addresses metaphorical framing on Twitter. This study seeks to bridge literature gaps regarding Turkey's metaphorical framing of displaced individuals, employing the specialized critical metaphor analysis (CMA) approach pioneered by Charteris-Black (2004; 2018). CMA integrates corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and critical discourse analysis to unearth underlying intentions in language use. Specifically, the focus is on the metaphorical portrayal of displaced individuals by prominent Turkish media on Twitter and how political biases influence these metaphor choices.

Three prevalent terms for displaced individuals – *göçmen* (migrant/immigrant), *mülteci* (refugee), and *sığınmacı* (asylum-seeker) – were chosen for this study. Meanwhile, the corpus is sourced from four leading Turkish digital newspapers on Twitter: *Habertürk*, *Hürriyet*, *Sözcü*, and *Cumhuriyet* (BoomSocial, 2023). The study is based on two research questions:

RQ1 What kinds of metaphorical conceptualization emerge depending on the keyword (*göçmen*, *sığınmacı*, *mülteci*)?

RQ2 How does the political leaning of the four Turkish media outlets (*Hürriyet*, *Haber Türk*, *Sözcü*, and *Cumhuriyet*) affect the choice of metaphorical framing of displaced persons on Twitter?

As mentioned, Twitter serves as the primary medium for this study due to its pivotal role in influencing public discourse, exhibiting both direct and mediated impacts on public

¹ X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, is referred to by its historical name, Twitter, throughout this paper.

opinion (Gaisbauer et al., 2021). Furthermore, in Turkey, Twitter's prominence is evident; it is a leading platform that fosters transparency, enhances public services, promotes civic engagement, and upholds democratic ideals (Sobaci & Karkin, 2013). The platform's significance was further heightened due to its pivotal role during the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake, aiding search and rescue missions and facilitating public debate on the disaster response (Susarla, 2023). Second, despite its influence, there remains a notable gap in research addressing metaphorical framing on Twitter, especially concerning migration narratives.

3 Methodology

3.1 Corpus building

The corpus of this study is comprised of four media outlets from Turkey, containing 600 tweets, covering the period of 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2022. In the last five years, Turkey has experienced a further influx of asylum-seekers, compounded by significant economic crises, such as a declining currency and inflation (Rogalewicz, 2022). Simultaneously, diplomatic tensions with the U.S. and EU escalated due to divergent stances on Turkey's actions in Syria, the handling of refugees, and border confrontations with Greece involving asylum-seekers (Cook, 2018; van Heukelingen & Püttmann, 2023). In addition to the challenges Turkey confronts, public and media perceptions further emphasize the perceived migration burden, shaping the national discourse on the issue. These intertwined socio-political events make this period essential in any scrutiny of how the media depicts and influences public views on displaced people. The four most widely-followed newspapers among Turkish Twitter users are *Habertürk* (@Haberturk) with 4.8 million followers, *Hürriyet* (@Hurriyet) with 4.3 million, *Sözcü* (@gazetesozcu) with 3.6 million, and *Cumhuriyet* (@cumhuriyetgzt) with 3.5 million (BoomSocial, 2023). *Hürriyet*, once the most prominent newspaper in Turkey, was bought by the pro-government conglomerate Demirören Group in 2018, resulting in a significant shift in its editorial policy and political leaning (Kızılkaya & Ütücü, 2021). *Habertürk* still has some critical journalists but is also known for its pro-government bias (Kızılkaya & Ütücü, 2021). On the other side, *Sözcü* is one of Turkey's most popular publications and is renowned for its strident, Kemalist criticism of the incumbent president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the governing Justice and Development Party (Bianet, 2016; Eurotopics, 2023).² Finally, one of the oldest newspapers in Turkey, *Cumhuriyet*, was categorized as an established, independent, and secularist newspaper (p. 11).

The tweets were collected using Twint (a Twitter intelligence tool) and Apify (a data extraction platform). The process was automated from the very beginning by extracting the tweets based on the three keywords, time frame, and Twitter profiles of each media outlet. After collecting the tweets, duplications and tweets that included the keywords but

² The term 'Kemalism' refers to the ideas and beliefs of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who established the Republic of Turkey (Heper & Sayari, 2013).

in a different context other than human migration (such as tweets that refer to routes of migratory birds) were removed. Then, tweets were randomized, and 50 tweets from each account were selected and compiled. Thus, a corpus with 600 tweets was created. The following table, Table 1, summarizes the distribution of the analyzed tweets.

Table 1 Number of tweets, media outlets, and keywords

Hürriyet	Habertürk	Sözcü	Cumhuriyet
Göçmen (50 tweets)	Göçmen (50 tweets)	Göçmen (50 tweets)	Göçmen (50 tweets)
Sığınmacı (50 tweets)	Sığınmacı (50 tweets)	Sığınmacı (50 tweets)	Sığınmacı (50 tweets)
Mülteci (50 tweets)	Mülteci 50 (50 tweets)	Mülteci (50 tweets)	Mülteci (50 tweets)
Total: 150 tweets	Total: 150 tweets	Total: 150 tweets	Total: 150 tweets
600 tweets, four subcorpora			

3.2 Critical Metaphor Analysis

Critical metaphor analysis (CMA) is a method that combines corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and critical discourse analysis to uncover the hidden intentions of language users (Charteris-Black, 2004; 2018). CMA focuses on analyzing metaphors and their sources to understand how they persuade people by provoking emotional reactions (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 41). As a tool for studying metaphors, CMA sheds light on metaphor use associated with sociopolitical issues and raises awareness of powerful groups' metaphorical language, prompting language users to approach metaphors with caution. The methodology hinges on comprehensive corpus-based studies. This inherently systematic approach does not stipulate the number of researchers required for its effective implementation. Given its structured nature, it is feasible for a single researcher to navigate the CMA, as shown by Felder (2022), Martin (2020), Mavrodieva (2020), and Zibin (2020). Nevertheless, while a solo endeavor is justifiable, collaborative efforts might add depth, especially when dissecting expansive corpora. Therefore, having only one analyst associated with this study can be viewed as a limitation.

While there are alternative metaphor identification methods like the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) and the discourse dynamics framework (DDF), CMA was chosen due to its depth in socio-political contexts within news discourse. CMA provides a holistic view of societal narratives and power dynamics; these dimensions are not present in MIP (as it focuses on language) or DDF (which highlights metaphor evolution). The frequent use of CMA in migration discourse research further validates its efficacy in unraveling intricate societal interpretations (Çakır & Köseliören, 2022; Martin, 2020; Zibin, 2020).

3.3 Stages of Critical Metaphor Analysis

- 1) **Contextual analysis:** The first stage of CMA requires generating research questions based on the awareness of the potential influence of metaphors on society (Charteris-Black, 2018, p. 217).

- 2) **Metaphor identification:** The second stage of CMA, metaphor identification, focuses on 'what to count as a metaphor' (Charteris-Black, 2018, p. 18). This stage requires an intense reading of a sample corpus – in this case, 600 tweets collected from the Twitter accounts of the four Turkish media outlets. Furthermore, it entails carefully reading the tweets to spot words that exhibit semantic tension due to domain shifting, which are marked as initial candidates for metaphorical expressions. In this context, domain shift denotes a word's transition from its literal meaning to a different, often more abstract, domain, indicating its potential metaphorical use. For instance, when one says 'time is flying,' 'flying' shifts from its literal meaning of moving through the air to represent the swift passage of time. At this stage, further qualitative analysis is then conducted on each candidate metaphor using *Türk Dil Kurumu Sözlüğü* (TDKS, the dictionary of the Turkish Language Association), the official regulatory body for the Turkish language. This dictionary was chosen as a guide because of the Turkish Language Association's authority in regulating the Turkish language. If domain shifting is confirmed after this second stage, the candidate metaphor is identified as a metaphorical expression. According to Charteris-Black, counting is done at the phrase level, as metaphors typically occur in phrases or collocations. For instance, the phrase 'refugee invasion' would be counted as one metaphorical expression. This stage is crucial in the CMA process as it determines the presence of metaphorical framing in the sample corpus, contributing to understanding metaphorical language use on Twitter in the context of migration discourse.
- 3) **Metaphor interpretation:** The third stage concentrates on categorizing metaphors. At this stage, metaphors are classified and organized based on either source or target domains (Charteris-Black, 2018, p. 218). While the source domain refers to the literal meaning of a word we map onto the target domain, the target domain is what we understand in terms of the source domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In this study, metaphors were categorized based on their source domains as they are used to understand displaced persons (target domain). Also, categorization based on source domains is common in CMA-based studies. The online version of *TDKS* was used as a point of reference to identify a word's literal meaning and contextual meaning. For example, in the case of *mülteci akını* ('refugee influx'), the literal meaning of the word *akın* ('influx') refers to the 'unceasing coming or arrival of something crowded.' Therefore, refugees are conceptualized as 'an uncontrolled natural disaster/movement' that is trying to break into Turkish land, and the collocation was identified as an example of the natural disaster metaphor.
- 4) **Metaphor explanation:** The fourth stage of CMA determines the discourse function, social agency, and ideological/rhetorical motives of metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 39; 2018, p. 2019). This stage was crucial for answering the second research question on how the political leaning of Turkish media outlets affects the choice of metaphorical framing of displaced people. Moving from stage three to stage four, metaphors were systematically linked to broader ideological frameworks. This linkage was informed by media monitoring reports on Turkey, which illuminated both media ownership dynamics and their ideological orientations. Thus, metaphors were contextualized against these findings, revealing their alignment with prevalent ideological alignments and narratives in the Turkish media.

Critical metaphor analysis is not without limitations. There is inherent subjectivity in metaphor interpretation, even with literature checks and peer consultations. Metaphor meanings can change with context, posing interpretation risks. A focus on dominant metaphors might also overlook subtle ones. These issues are further discussed in the limitations section.

4 Results and discussion

To avoid redundancy, I first introduce the most prevalent metaphorical source domains identified in the corpus. Subsequently, I display the frequency of these metaphors alongside the associated keywords and discuss their potential implications. Finally, I present the metaphors and keywords in context with the news outlets and their respective political affiliations. Since some source domains – terror, animal, war – appeared at very low frequency, a detailed analysis of them is not provided.³

As seen in Table 2, the crime metaphor emerged as the most dominant, accounting for 44 percent of the total, framing migrants predominantly in a negative light. Following this, the object domain, which dehumanizes migrants by likening them to inanimate entities, constituted 24 per cent. The natural phenomena metaphor, which portrays migrants as uncontrollable forces of nature, such as a flood, made up 11 per cent. The pressure/burden metaphor, indicating migrants as a strain or liability, represented 9 per cent, whereas the victim domain, emphasizing the vulnerability and plight of migrants, accounted for 7 per cent. Last, terror, animal, and war domains appeared at very low frequency, occurring at only 1 and 2 per cent. These percentages reflect how migrants are metaphorically conceptualized in the given corpus.

Table 2. Source domains and their occurrence with keywords

Source Domain	<i>göçmen</i>		<i>sığınmacı</i>		<i>mülteci</i>		Total (Occ.)	Total (%)
	Occ.*	%	Occ.	%	Occ.	%		
animal			1	3%	1	3%	2	2%
crime	34	67%	16	40%	6	17%	56	44%
natural phenomena	2	4%	5	13%	7	19%	14	11%
object	9	18%	7	18%	14	39%	30	24%
pressure/burden			6	15%	6	17%	12	9%
terror			1	3%			1	1%
victim	6	12%	3	8%			9	7%
war			1	3%	2	6%	3	2%
Total (by keyword)	51	100%	40	100%	36	100%	127	100%

³ Conventionally, metaphor domains such as war and crime are written in lower case in metaphor research.

* Occ. refers to the number of source domain occurrences in the corpus, while % refers to frequency percentage.

4.1 Metaphorical conceptualization of keywords

Across the four media outlets, *göçmen* was the most popular keyword used to address displaced persons, with *Hürriyet* using it the most at 59.3 per cent. *Mülteci* was the dominant term in *Sözcü* at 43.3 per cent. Meanwhile, *sığınmacı* was almost equally preferred by *Habertürk* and *Cumhuriyet*, at 32.4 per cent and 36.1 per cent, respectively. Overall, *göçmen* was used most, at 40.2 per cent.

In the comprehensive analysis presented in Table 2, distinct metaphorical source domains emerged for the terms *göçmen* ('migrant'), *sığınmacı* ('asylum-seeker'), and *mülteci* ('refugee'). Specifically, for *göçmen*, a significant 67 per cent of the corpus associated it with the crime domain, suggesting a pronounced inclination toward criminalizing this group. This was subsequently followed by OBJECT at 18 per cent, VICTIM at 12 per cent, and NATURAL PHENOMENA at a minimal 4 per cent. In the context of *sığınmacı*, the data showcased a notable pattern, with CRIME again taking the lead at 40 per cent. This was closely trailed by OBJECT at 18 per cent, PRESSURE/BURDEN at 15 per cent, NATURAL PHENOMENA at 13 per cent, and VICTIM at 8 per cent. It is worth noting that metaphors rooted in WAR, ANIMAL, and TERROR domains were rare, each accounting for a single occurrence in the corpus for this term. On the other hand, the metaphorical landscape for *mülteci* was slightly different. OBJECT was the most dominant domain, distinguishing it from the other two terms. This was followed in frequency by NATURAL PHENOMENA, PRESSURE/BURDEN, CRIME, WAR, and ANIMAL. Below, an example for each domain is provided, accompanied by a contextual analysis.⁴

4.2 The most common metaphorical domains

a) Crime

- 1) #SONDAKİKA | İzmir'de şok operasyon! Gemide 276 sığınmacı yakalandı.
#BREAKING | Shocking operation in Izmir! 276 asylum seekers caught on shipboard.
(Hürriyet, 2020)

For example, *yakalandı* ('caught') was identified as an occurrence of the crime metaphor because it associates people seeking protection with criminals. This framing was strengthened with *şok operasyon* ('shocking operation'). The word operation refers to the action security forces took to capture those involved; thus, it implies that those caught were criminals. Additionally, the word 'shocking' further dramatizes the effect of that 'operation.' Considering the meaning of *sığınmacı*, which refers to a person who has left their country and is seeking protection, the use of the metaphors mentioned above with *sığınmacı* frames them as a threat. As Arcimaviciene and Baglama claim (2018, p. 10), the use of the crime metaphor generates an unfavorable view of migration and displaced people because it strengthens sentiments of uneasiness and anxiety toward them. Moreover, it encourages and legitimizes any measures undertaken against migrants. The crime metaphor has

⁴ Translations provided by the author.

already been identified in numerous works (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018; Harris & Gruenewald, 2020; Benczes & Ságvári, 2021). However, this metaphor did not occur as frequently in the previous studies as in my findings.

b) Object

2) *Türkiye Batı'nın sığınmacı deposu değildir.*

Turkey is not a storehouse of refugees for the West. (Cumhuriyet, 2021a)

The second common source domain was object. In the example, *sığınmacı deposu* was marked as a metaphorical expression because refugees were likened to objects that can be stored for use, as *TDKS* (n.d.) defines *depo* ('storehouse') as the following: 'a place where something is placed to be protected, stored or used when necessary, warehouse.' Specifically, while Turkey was likened to a storehouse, refugees were referred to as inanimate beings that do not belong to this storehouse. Therefore, this expression was coded as an object metaphor. In this example, the object metaphor can be interpreted as a negative framing because it dehumanizes asylum-seekers by referring to them as lifeless objects without any sentiment or will to decide for themselves. Therefore, it removes the need for social responsibility toward asylum-seekers. Unlike the crime metaphor, which 'heightens negative emotions' and 'legitimizes moral authority' against refugees (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018, p. 6), the object metaphor dehumanizes refugees by suppressing positive emotions about them. In other words, metaphorical framing caused by the object metaphor objectifies humans; therefore, it prevents any kind of empathy for refugees.

c) Natural phenomena

3) *'Geçişler yüzde 150 arttı': Türkiye'ye yaklaşan büyük mülteci dalgası.*

'Crossings increased by 150 per cent': a big wave of refugees approaching Turkey. (Cumhuriyet, 2021b)

The third common domain was natural phenomena, one of the most common ones in the literature about migration. For example, *büyük mülteci dalgası* ('the great refugee wave') was identified as an occurrence of natural phenomena because the basic meaning of the word *dalga* ('wave') means 'curled movement, usually caused by wind, earthquake, etc., on large water surfaces,' (*TDKS*, n.d.). In this example, the meaning of *dalga* was mapped onto refugees; therefore, refugees were framed as an uncontrolled natural force possessed by water. The framing was strengthened with *büyük* ('big'). This is a type of metaphor that uses natural events or processes to describe social or political situations (Charteris-Black, 2006). Furthermore, it can frame migration as a natural and inevitable phenomenon that cannot be controlled or stopped by human intervention. According to Arcimaviciene and Baglama (2018, p. 9), the use of such a metaphor while referring to refugees strengthens the unfavorable opinion about refugees because it signifies refugees as a fierce and unpredictable natural phenomenon that causes fear. In addition, one feature of flood metaphors

is that they are frequently employed to depict a rise in migration by framing migration as an inflow of water (Charteris-Black, 2006, p. 571). This claim also complies with the example provided because there is a reference to migration rates before using the flood metaphor.

d) Burden

- 4) *Dışişleri Bakanı Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu: İlave bir mülteci yükü kaldırmamız söz konusu değil.*
Foreign Affairs Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu: It's out of the question for us to carry an additional refugee burden. (Hürriyet, 2021)

The fourth common source domain was pressure/burden. In the example, *mülteci yükü* ('refugee burden') was identified as a metaphorical expression because refugees were referred to as an additional *yük* ('burden') that cannot be carried by Turkey. The basic meaning of *yük* is 'all things carried by cars, animals, etc.' (TDKS, n.d.). In this context, refugees were metaphorically framed as a burden that puts pressure on Turkey; therefore, this expression was categorized as a pressure/burden source domain. It implies that refugees are a problem or a liability for the host country, and it is often used to represent migration as a negative or undesirable phenomenon that causes stress, strain, or hardship for the host society (Taylor, 2021).

e) Victim

- 5) *Onlarca göçmen ölümün kıyısından kurtarıldı.*
Many migrants were rescued from the brink of death. (Cumhuriyet, 2021c)

The fifth common source domain was the victim domain. In example five, *ölümün kıyısından kurtarıldı* ('rescued from the brink of death') was identified as a metaphorical expression because it refers to an extremely dangerous situation in which migrants were about to die. More specifically, the expression addresses the severity of the situation in which migrants were victims. Therefore, this can be interpreted as an instance of the victim metaphor. According to Taylor (2021), the victim metaphor portrays migrants as vulnerable people who suffer from oppression, violence, or poverty in their countries of origin or destination. It often implies that migrants need protection and sympathy from others. Uniquely, this metaphorical framing – though rare – evokes migration in empathetic and compassionate terms, emphasizing migrants' vulnerability. Finally, the following section presents the metaphorical domains the media outlets used to frame displaced persons.

4.3 Choices of media outlets

Table 3 Frequency of metaphor domains according to news outlets and keywords

	animal	crime	natural phenomena	object	pressure/burden	terror	victim	war	Total
<i>Hürriyet</i>		52%	11%	19%	7%		11%		100%
göçmen		75%		19%			6%		100%
mülteci			43%	29%	29%				100%
sığınmacı		50%					50%		100%
<i>Habertürk</i>		59%	12%	12%	9%		9%		100%
göçmen		80%		7%			13%		100%
mülteci		25%	13%	25%	38%				100%
sığınmacı		55%	27%	9%			9%		100%
<i>Cumhuriyet</i>	3%	36%	8%	33%	3%	3%	6%	8%	100%
göçmen		60%		27%			13%		100%
mülteci	13%		13%	50%				25%	100%
sığınmacı		31%	15%	31%	8%	8%		8%	100%
<i>Sözcü</i>	3%	30%	13%	30%	20%		3%		100%
göçmen		20%	40%	20%			20%		100%
mülteci		31%	15%	46%	8%				100%
sığınmacı	8%	33%		17%	42%				100%

1) *Hürriyet*

Table 3 indicates that more than half of the metaphors identified in *Hürriyet*'s tweets were based on crime, whereas 19 per cent were based on object domain. On the other hand, natural phenomena and victim domains followed object with 11 percent. Overall, *Hürriyet* framed displaced persons negatively because apart from the victim domain, all the remaining domains (89 per cent in total) convey a negative framing of them. Since these domains and their indications were explained in the previous sections, further explanation is not provided.

What can be understood from these results regarding the political leaning of *Hürriyet* and metaphor choice? As mentioned, *Hürriyet*'s news discourse is closely linked to JDP (Kızılkaya & Ütücü, 2021, pp. 12–13; Media Monitoring Report, 2020). JDP's migration policy towards displaced people was characterized by an 'open border' approach (Goularas &

Sunata, 2015). JDP considered them as part of its *ummah* ('Muslim community'); therefore, particularly Syrians were an integral part of the JDP's new understanding of the nation rather than considered refugees or migrants under temporary protection (Saraçoğlu & Demirkol, 2015 as cited in Balkılıç & Teke Lloyd, 2020, p. 560). In this regard, Turkey was illustrated as a crucial actor in protecting Muslims from persecution. This welcoming attitude towards displaced people is reflected in the Turkish media. For example, one study finds that most of the news articles use positive or balanced language toward displaced people in the first five years of the Syrian Civil War (Paksoy & Şentöregil, 2018). Furthermore, the idea of Turkey as a protector of the *ummah* was closely linked to the discourse around 'the downfall of the Western civilization and the rise of Islamic ideals' as a solution to the worldwide humanitarian crisis. Although this Islamic discourse legitimized the open border policy, it referred to displaced people as temporary guests rather than refugees (Abdelaaty, 2021; Balkılıç & Teke Lloyd, 2021). Therefore, this Islamic discourse and policy of JDP created a fragile group of displaced people who were part of the *ummah* as guests without giving them refugee status. In addition, the attitude towards displaced people in Turkey changed over the years, and anti-migrant sentiments increased gradually in the country (Doğanay & Keneş, 2016; Onay-Coker, 2019). Regarding the metaphorical framing of displaced people, the results indicate that the recent anti-migrant sentiments that have been growing in Turkey are reflected in *Hürriyet*'s conceptualization of displaced people. As the numbers show, 89 per cent of the expressions refer to displaced people negatively, whereas only 11 per cent can be considered positive or neutral framing.

2) *Habertürk*

Habertürk also primarily used metaphors based on crime while reporting on displaced persons. However, the percentage of the crime source domain was slightly higher in *Habertürk*'s tweets (59 per cent), as demonstrated in Table 3. The natural phenomena and object domains followed the crime domain with 12 per cent. On the other hand, victim and pressure/burden made up 9 per cent. Therefore, the results indicate that the negative conceptualization (91 per cent) of displaced people – including the crime, natural phenomena, object, and pressure/burden domains – outweighed the positive conceptualization (9 per cent) – using victim.

What are the implications of these findings regarding the political leaning of *Habertürk*? Kızılkaya and Ütücü (2021, p. 13) suggest *Habertürk* has a small number of critical journalists on staff; however, it still exhibits a significant pro-government bias while covering important issues. Therefore, it is expected that *Habertürk* shows pro-government bias regarding the issue of migration. As explained, the migration policy and discourse of the JDP involve contradictory elements. On the one hand, displaced people are part of the *ummah* who were accepted by the open-border policy; on the other hand, they are also guests who are expected to leave; thus, they are not refugees (Balkılıç & Teke Lloyd, 2021, p. 560). Furthermore, the welcoming attitude has significantly shifted in recent years, and negative attitudes have dominated the discourse about displaced people in pro-government media outlets as well. Thus, the results show that the recent shift and increase in anti-migrant sentiment manifested in the coverage of *Habertürk*. Hence, it could be anticipated that *Habertürk* would be similar to *Hürriyet* regarding the framing of displaced people.

3) *Cumhuriyet*

Regarding *Cumhuriyet*, the findings in Table 3 indicate that crime (36 per cent) and object (33 per cent) domains dominated the corpus. The remaining domains are as follows: natural phenomena and war (8 per cent), victim (6 per cent), pressure/burden, terror, and animal (3 per cent). Thus, the negative conceptualization (94 per cent) was even greater than in *Hürriyet* (89 per cent) and *Habertürk* (91 per cent). This can be considered an unexpected result because *Cumhuriyet* is categorized as a left-wing independent media outlet (Kızılkaya & Ütücü, 2021). It is widely assumed that left-wing organizations tend to be pro-immigration (Natter et al., 2020) because left-wing politics are known to favor progressive policies that generate socioeconomic equality for everyone. Thus, the frequent occurrence of the crime metaphor – which heightens negative emotions via moral authority – or the object metaphor – which suppresses positive emotions via dehumanization – seems contradictory to *Cumhuriyet*'s political position.

Despite its left-leaning nature, *Cumhuriyet*'s strong opposition to JDP may be a reason for framing displaced people negatively. More specifically, *Cumhuriyet* is described as a secularist, independent media outlet that opposes the JDP (Kızılkaya & Ütücü, 2021; Media Monitoring Report, 2020). *Cumhuriyet*'s opposition to JDP's policies and discourse explains why it framed displaced people negatively. In connection to this, Efe (2015, p. 65) notes that *Cumhuriyet* often criticized the government's migration policies and focused on the economic problems 'caused' by the Syrians. Another study by Yaylacı and Karakuş (2015, p. 245) states that 'Cumhuriyet takes problems concerning Syrian refugees as a means of criticizing the government.' This criticism includes concerns that refugees will become Turkish citizens and obtain the right to vote in elections. Therefore, the negative metaphorical framing by *Cumhuriyet* might be linked to its position against the JDP.

4) *Sözcü*

Regarding *Sözcü*, 30 metaphorical expressions were identified. The results show that *Sözcü* mainly employed object (30 per cent) and crime (30 per cent) domains about displaced persons. These were followed by pressure/burden (20 per cent) and natural phenomena (13 per cent), while victim and animal occurred once, as shown in Table 3. Thus, *Sözcü*, among the four outlets, employed the greatest number of negative metaphorical expressions, at 97 per cent.

Overall, the numbers imply that the majority of the metaphors used by *Sözcü* (97 per cent) framed displaced people negatively. This positions *Sözcü* as the most anti-migrant outlet among the four in the given period. The anti-migrant sentiment that *Sözcü* displays is not unexpected because the outlet exhibits a very critical stance vis-à-vis the government's migration policy. One possible explanation is that similar to *Cumhuriyet*, *Sözcü* uses the issue of Syrian refugees to criticize the administration. For example, one study contends that *Sözcü* reflects an extremely critical position toward the JDP (Onay-Coker, 2019). Those who adhere to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's principles of a secular, modern, and democratic Turkish Republic make up the majority of its audience, and through its Kemalist philosophy, it symbolizes the secular Turkish worldview (p. 373). As a Kemalist newspaper, *Sözcü*'s framing of displaced people might be even more negative than other media

outlets because one of the core elements of Kemalist ideology is Turkish nationalism (Hanioğlu, 2017). Since the majority of the displaced people in Turkey are Syrian Arabs, the rise of Kemalism along with Turkish nationalism in the twentieth century is important because the history of anti-Arabism has a special place within Kemalism. While Atatürk himself did not exhibit anti-Arab sentiments, the Kemalist ideology following his demise evolved to encompass elements of anti-Arabism. For example, one study suggests that Turkish historiography depicted Arabs and their culture in a negative way to legitimize Turkish reforms (Aktürk, 2010). These depictions were not just about the Arabs but reflected and justified the secular modernizing reforms of the new Turkish Republic, which was reflected in Turkish school textbooks that uniformly depicted Arabs as traitors in the same unfavorable light despite changing relations and periods (al-Daqui, 1996, as cited in Bengio & Özcan, 2001). Additionally, the study implies that misleading Western conceptions about Arabs as ignorant, disloyal, womanizing, and obedient people impacted Turkish public opinion, especially that of journalists. Consequently, Turkey developed a long-standing anti-Arab discourse that might be influencing the lives of Arab refugees in Turkey. This long-standing anti-Arab discourse might be reflected in *Sözcü*'s conceptualization of displaced people.

5 Conclusions

This study has explored how the words *göçmen*, *sığınmacı*, and *mülteci* are framed on the Twitter accounts of four Turkish newspapers: *Hürriyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Sözcü*, and *Habertürk*. The main goal was to understand the common metaphorical conceptualizations linked to these words. The findings identify mainly negative associations: *göçmen* and *sığınmacı* were often linked to the crime metaphor, while *mülteci* was likened to the object metaphor. Additionally, media outlets' political leaning influenced metaphor choices and frequency. Closer alignment with the ruling JDP resulted in fewer negative frames.

Compared with the literature on migration, it is evident that the metaphorical framing in Turkish media resonates with broader global trends. The implications of these representations are profound, as they not only shape public perceptions but also inform policy directives. Furthermore, as media narratives continue to evolve in response to the changing political landscape in Turkey, the interplay between politics and media representation requires deeper exploration. For example, migration and its portrayal emerged as a significant concern in the 2023 Turkish elections, with voters ranking it as the second most critical issue after the economic crisis. Future research endeavors could further dissect the nuanced shifts in metaphorical framing over time, especially given the transformative power of media in shaping societal discourses on migration.

6 Limitations

This study is subject to at least three limitations. First, although the methodology is rooted in comprehensive corpus-based studies, having a single analyst might limit its depth and reliability, especially when applied to extensive corpora. Collaborative efforts can poten-

tially enhance both of the latter. Second, critical metaphor analysis is inherently subjective. While literature checks and peer consultations were employed, metaphor meanings can shift with context, and there is a risk of misinterpretation. Additionally, focusing on dominant metaphors might lead to missing subtler ones. Third, the random sampling used in this study complicates the identification of specific year-by-year trends. However, it is crucial to recognize that the broader socio-political shifts between 2018–2023 could have impacted media portrayals, even if this is not explicitly evident in the data.

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ONUR ALP YILMAZ* & MELEK AYLIN ÖZOFLU**

The construction of reconciliation and social cohesion
by Turkey's Republican People's Party: A critical
discourse analysis of Kılıçdaroğlu's *Helalleşme* call

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Abstract

In November 2021, Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP) leader, Kılıçdaroğlu,¹ shared a video via Twitter in which he made a call for *helalleşme*² to Turkish society. While the repercussions of the call have been reflected differently within the political spectrum in Turkish society, this study investigates how social cohesion and reconciliation are envisaged and addressed by the main opposition party. It does this through a discursive analysis of Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches released since his *helalleşme* call that builds upon theoretical discussions about reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness. Research on reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness literature associated with the Turkish case mainly revolves around the Turkish government's or Turkish nationalists' approach to ethnic minorities, such as the Kurdish question. However, studies investigating the stance of the main opposition party concerning the debate about fragmentation within Turkish society are very limited. Therefore, this study will aim to fill this gap. To thematically analyze the underlying messages of and motivation for the discourses, it will employ the discourse historical approach (DHA). In this way, the current study will contribute empirically to the relevant literature.

Keywords: *helalleşme*; Turkey; Republican People's Party (CHP); reconciliation; social cohesion; Discourse Historical Approach (DHA)

1 Introduction

Turkey has recently become a highly polarized nation, culminating in a defective social peace and cohesion associated with the past and ongoing traumas related to different political, religious, and ethnic groups. Existing cleavages include mainly the divisions

¹ At the time of writing this paper, Kılıçdaroğlu has been the chair of the Republican People's Party (CHP).

² This Islamic co-functional term refers to the mutual writing off of sins, thus forgiveness by multiple parties and reconciliation.

between Islamists-secularists, Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, and Sunnis and Alevis (Aydın-Düzgit, 2019). Such polarization has incrementally divided civil society and increased partisanship (ibid.). Moreover, it has also aggravated intergroup differentiation, discrimination, and tension along the lines of ethnic, sociopolitical, and sectarian identities.

To address this severe polarization, substantial efforts have been initiated by the main opposition party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, since he became the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) in 2010. Following his leadership, CHP underwent a transformation process during his chairmanship that resulted in the elimination of the exclusive état-nationalist stance of the party and a move towards being more inclusive of previously excluded ethnic and socio-political groups. The political transformation, which appeared as 'social reconciliation,' was also reflected in the party's discourse and propaganda.

As the most groundbreaking element of this newly transformed inclusive political vision of the party, the helalleşme call was articulated by Kılıçdaroğlu in a video on Twitter. He emphasized the importance and prior condition of 'forgiving each other' to ensure peace in the country. This study investigates how the main opposition party envisages and addresses the social cohesion and reconciliation process among the different identity groups within Turkish society. To this end, it will discursively analyze Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches since his helalleşme call by considering the wider socio-historical and political background.

Research on reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness literature associated with the Turkish case mainly revolves around the Turkish government's or Turkish nationalists' approach to ethnic minorities, such as the Kurdish question (Güneş & Zeydanlioglu, 2013; Baysu & Coşkan, 2018; Köse, 2017; Casier et al., 2011; Bakiner, 2013; Günay & Yörük, 2019). Although Keyman previously analyzed the reaction of the CHP to the democratic opening initiatives of the AKP (Keyman, 2010), we lack a novel approach that takes the opposition's point of view into account from the perspective of reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness in a deeply polarized Turkish society due to different political, religious, and ethnic affiliations. The current study aims to fill this gap.

The paper first briefly elaborates on the conceptual framework of reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness. Second, it discusses the discourse historical approach (DHA) strand of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological framework. Then, CHP's renewed strategy for assuring reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness under Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP leadership will be discussed. Finally, the study will illustrate the range of discursive constructions of the reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness process among diverse identity groups by Kılıçdaroğlu.

2 Reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness

Forgiving is difficult [...]. Nonetheless, forgiving is necessary and desirable. It paves the way for reconciliation and furthers healing, thereby making a better future possible. (Staub & Pearlman, 2001, p. 207)

Reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness are the prior conditions for lasting peace in deeply divided societies (Lederach, 1997). Without them, there is a risk of renewed resent-

ment, hatred, and violence between conflicting parties, which threaten the well-functioning of democracy (Nagy, 2002). Social and political psychology literature on reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness adds value to research aiming to reveal attitudes and motivations related to social cohesion and peace. It also puts forward a critical framework for researching whether societies are liable to unite or divide (Liu et al., 2002). Therefore, this sub-chapter will provide a brief overview of reconciliation and intergroup forgiveness as concepts that help define the definitional standpoint of the research within the analysis.

There are different definitions of the concept of reconciliation in the literature. It is often approached as a process, outcome, or both. Govier and Verwoerd (2002) argue that reconciliation is the process of establishing constructive relationships between former adversaries either at the interpersonal or intergroup level. They put forward that establishing such a relationship relies on rebuilding trust between 'othered' sides. In a parallel way, De Gruncky (2002) defines reconciliation as a process fed by love and hope that works towards building a shared, prosperous future. While it mainly appears to be a future-oriented process, reconciliation also embodies overcoming past enmity through a mutual commitment to preventing future atrocities (Du Toit, 2009). This necessitates putting memories aside and both parties accepting responsibility for wrongdoing for the sake of living together (Bhargava, 2012). Thus, reconciliation envisages building solidarity (Nagy, 2002) and social integration between the conflicting groups (James, 2008).

Some scholars also define reconciliation as an outcome. Bhargava (2012) explains it as the outcome of the collective efforts of former enemies, out of which shared collective values emerge. In this vein, reconciliation alters the psychological attitudes of hostile groups toward each other (Staub, 2005). This implies a restored and constructive relationship among the members of the hostile groups. In this respect, as Leiner states, reconciliation establishes normal, peaceful, and trusting relations as an outcome (Leiner, 2018). On the other hand, some scholars approach reconciliation as a process and an outcome (Harrowell, 2018; Kelman, 2008; Rouhana, 2011). While Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004) accept reconciliation as an outcome involving the emergence of peaceful relations, mutual commitment, and trust, they simultaneously highlight reconciliation as a daunting and multifaceted process of changing motivations, goals, and emotions for the purpose of building sustaining relations and future cooperation.

Considering all these important definitions of reconciliation, our conceptualization of reconciliation is closely aligned with Hayner's (2010) definition that proposes it involves societal healing through which a country restores damaged relationships 'between different ethnic, religious, regional, or political groups, between neighbors, and between political parties...' and '...undergoes a process of reconciling itself with its past, and groups reconciling with each other.'

The concept of reconciliation is inherently correlated with intergroup forgiveness on the grounds that forgiveness is the indispensable component of long-term stable reconciliation within inter-group/personal relations (Staub, 2001). Intergroup forgiveness is defined as an emotional process comprising the '...reduction of feelings of revenge, anger, and mistrust towards the perpetrator group and intentions to understand, approach, and engage with its members' (Cehajic et al., 2008, p. 352). Although the definitional standpoint of the term implies a one-sided process of the victimized group forgiving the offender group, in the present study, we will consider it a reciprocal process among different groups while examining the CHP's reconciliation endeavors.

3 Method

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a specific emphasis on Wodak's discourse historical approach (DHA). CDA is a unique discourse analytical research approach that focuses on language use beyond the sentence level and analyses relations between discourse and social/cultural developments in different social contexts. Its scope of analysis covers different forms of spoken and written discourse units, also known as 'genres,' including political statements, speeches, newspapers, public releases, spoken interactions, and different gestural forms (Reisigl, 2008). Since it mainly incorporates a critical perspective into the analysis of discursive actions, texts are approached as 'sites of struggle' (Wodak, 2009) in which covert discursive tactics and structural relationships present in the language, such as power, control, dominance, and discrimination can be revealed (Van Dijk, 2009). In doing this, it handles social problems and political issues that require a rigid emphasis on social and political contexts.

The reason for specifically employing the DHA strand of CDA in this research is twofold. One is the fact that the approach creates viable grounds for the compilation of an extensive amount of knowledge regarding the background of the social and political domains and historical sources in 'which discursive events are embedded' (Wodak, 2015a). In addition, the historical component of the discursive action is examined to see how/whether particular genres of discourse undergo diachronic change. The second reason is that DHA utilizes a novel triangulation approach, integrating knowledge on four levels of analysis, namely: the textual level (the detailed transcription of the talk/speech), the intertextual level (relationship between utterances/statements), the extralinguistic level (e.g., facial expressions, gestures), and the socio-political and historical context (Wodak, 2018, p.10). In this way, the approach assures multi-perspectivity through which the analysis is integrated into '...knowledge about historical, intertextual sources and the background of the social and political fields within which discursive events are embedded' (ibid.). DHA regards triangulation as crucial since it maintains that language as a social practice is a means of obtaining and maintaining the power of social actors belonging to different social groups in their search for legitimization or delegitimization (Wodak, 2015b). In revealing the hidden meaning of the discursive act, the different layers of the triangulation approach compile multimethodological, multi-theoretical, and self-reflective perspectives together (Wodak, 2015b).

Moreover, DHA offers two critical concepts, intertextuality and recontextualization, within the analysis of a discursive phenomenon (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002). Intertextuality refers to interconnecting all texts, including those produced both in the present and the past, as well as references to other texts. In contrast, recontextualization refers to taking discursive practice out of context and implementing it in a new context (ibid., p. 17). By doing so, DHA creates suitable ground for understanding and analyzing the complexities of the calls for reconciliation by Kılıçdaroğlu. In his references to the victim groups in society, Kılıçdaroğlu builds a firm connection with social, historical, and political events, when discrimination based on different political, ethnic, and religious group memberships is also addressed. In addition, the repercussions and reflections of the events/affairs he highlighted in his speeches remain influential within the socio-political realm of society to this day. Therefore, applying DHA is valuable in relation to the main motivations and premises of this research.

The total number of corpora of Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches that included specific references to his helalleşme call that was identified on the official website of the CHP (<https://chp.org.tr/>) is 102. The specific excerpts illustrated here include speeches from a video released on Twitter from the helalleşme meeting on 14 August 2022 and CHP's parliamentary group meeting on 16 November 2022. According to the representativeness criteria of DHA, these may be treated as typical discourse fragments that re-occur within the wide range of discursive strategies among the main body of the analyzed sources (Jäger & Maier, 2009). The former speech initiated the helalleşme call, while the latter, as a parliamentary group meeting speech, represents a prototype of political communication in which Kılıçdaroğlu directly addresses his constituency (Elçi, 2019).

4 Background to polarization in Turkey and Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP leadership

Inter-group differentiation in the form of 'us versus them' within Turkish society has grown over the years. As Mardin (1973) points out, the economic and cultural enmity between the ruling center and the governed periphery of the Ottoman Empire persists in the current Turkish political structure. Following the establishment of the Republic, the center-periphery divide was between the Kemalist political elites and religious, rural, low-educated groups. While the former prioritized secularism, a unitary state, and Turkish nationalism, the latter represented pro-Islamism and conservatism (Elçi, 2019). Such a dichotomy led to the emergence of the politicized Islamic movement as a counter to the top-down project of secular national identity construction. Islamist politics in Turkey began in 1970 with the formation of the National Order Party (MNP: *Milli Nizam Partisi*), which was banned because of its anti-secular activities. While its successor, the National Salvation Party (MSP: *Milli Selamet Partisi*), was founded in 1972, it was also banned by the military regime following the 1980 coup d'état. During the following process, the viable ground created by the military and state elites led to the flourishing of an Islamic lifestyle and the election victory of the Welfare Party (RP: *Refah Partisi*), the major Islamist party of the 1990s. The increasing public appearance of the Islamic lifestyle through the political success of the Welfare Party alarmed the secular generals of the army, who intervened in politics in 1997 with the '28 February Measures'. These included harsh restrictions on religious life, including a strict headscarf ban in public institutions and shutting down many religious high schools, leading to the marginalization of the Islamic conservative groups.

Since the establishment of AKP and its election victory in 2002, Erdoğan has portrayed himself as a safeguard of the 'silent majority' against the secular civil-military elite's tutelage. The above-mentioned restrictions on Islamic lifestyle practices were lifted. While the Islamic conservative masses who had felt marginalized and disadvantaged were integrated into powerful political and economic positions, the strengthened tone of AKP's Islamist and conservative stance (Özbudun, 2006) culminated in a new type of polarization within society. Laws passed by the AKP removed checks and balances, consolidating its political power and Islamic cultural and economic hegemony, continuously limiting the space for opposition groups, journalists, academics, trade unions, and intellectuals (Aşık, 2022). Moreover, polarization was further reinforced through the political discourse that

juxtaposed 'Us' (the Islamic conservatives) versus 'Them' (the secular opposition). Semerci and Erdoğan (2018) claimed that Turkish citizens are reluctant to express their opinions in the public sphere. As a result, two basic problems arise: i) Opposition masses enter a 'spiral of silence' against the government's political hegemony, and in return, the government's hegemony is reinforced. ii) The masses become increasingly homogenous in their social environment, strengthening the sense of 'other' and creating further polarization. Therefore, overcoming polarization requires social dialogue that goes beyond the political identity-based drawn boundaries of the government. This objective was strongly intended by Kılıçdaroğlu in his call for *hellalleşme*.

Before Kılıçdaroğlu's chairmanship, the political program of the CHP was based on secularism and nationalism in the political arena (Uslu, 2008; Emre, 2015). However, Kılıçdaroğlu enacted unprecedented measures within the party organization and political discourse to revitalize the CHP as a representative and inclusive political party (Ciddi & Esen, 2014). He gradually liquidated the *état-nationalists* from the party. In order to position the party closer to the center, he attempted to open dialogue channels with Kurds and conservatives, those groups previously othered and excluded by the *état-nationalists* of the party. He invited some vital figures³ from these groups to the party and designed a new political program based on the main motto of 'social reconciliation,' which is the secular synonym of the *hellalleşme* (Uysal, 2011). He also supported permitting headscarves in public institutions, in contrast to the adamantly oppositional stance of the preceding Baykal leadership (Gülmez, 2013). Dramatic transformation has also been observed in the party's discourse. The previous exclusionary rhetoric that was observed to strengthen the threat perception of CHP's *état-nationalist* base against the Kurdish movement and political Islam (Cumhuriyet, 2010) has been distanced.

The transformation of the party throughout the Kılıçdaroğlu era was clearly summarized by the Election Bulletin of 2011, which envisaged libertarian democracy, equality and social solidarity, and a foreign politics based on peace, democracy, and development (CHP 2011 Election Declaration, 2011). The declaration also emphasized that the party is 'libertarian, egalitarian, solidarist and pluralist.' In this respect, the Election Bulletin of 2011 clearly stated:

We will overcome the obstacles in front of our Kurdish citizens preventing them from living their identities by establishing a pluralist and libertarian democracy. We will provide all citizens with the ability to use all their rights equally [...] regardless of their language, religion, ethnic identity, belief, communion, gender, sexual orientation and sexual identity, age, and political view. (CHP 2011 Election Declaration, 2011, authors' own translation).

The CHP is pluralist: Deepening social democracy is the precondition of inner peace and development in our country where there are different social classes, beliefs, cultures and ethnic identities. (CHP 2011 Election Declaration, 2011, authors' own translation).

³ Mehmet Bekaroğlu (2014), Sabri Erbakan (2014), Cihangir İslam, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Sezgin Tanrıku were invited to join the party.

The recalibration of the party program implied defending pluralism to include Kurds, Alevis, Roma people, religious, non-Muslims, as well as all other marginalized ethnic, religious, and gender groups in the political arena. To this end, Kılıçdaroğlu particularly focused on the solution to the Kurdish question, which relied on the democratization paradigm and foresaw critical measures such as ending the military conflict with PKK, granting the Kurds cultural rights, and allowing Kurdish language classes (Aslan-Akman, 2012). In addition, Kılıçdaroğlu committed to eliminating the reservations of Turkey concerning the European Charter of Local Self-government in Hakkari, one of the mostly Kurdish-populated provinces of Turkey, in 2011 (Bila, 2011). While the CHP was previously one of the fierce critics of the Reconciliation Process (Keyman, 2010; Kayhan, 2014) that was launched through government talks with the imprisoned leader of the PKK by the AKP, Kılıçdaroğlu supported the process (Gunes, 2012).⁴ In this way, Kılıçdaroğlu aspired to both appeal to a broader voter base and challenge AKP's political hegemony (Yeğen, 2015) concerning the Kurdish question.

According to the CHP, building an institutionalized and transparent peace process based on mutual parliamentary democratic control must commence along with four initiatives that would foster intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation. The first is equal citizenship based on a developed democracy. The second is establishing a Social Reconciliation Commission (*Toplumsal Mutabakat Komisyonu*) (Tanrıku, 2014) to include all political parties represented in parliament, thereby opening up intergroup dialogue among different social groups for the purpose of reconciliation. The third foresees the establishment of a Common-sense Committee (*Ortak Akıl Heyeti*) (ibid.) to include groups, political parties, NGOs, trade unions, and employers' organizations that are not represented in parliament. The committee, operating under parliament, would also follow the PKK's disarmament process. The last proposal was to establish a Reality Research Commission (*Gerçekleri Araştırma Komisyonu*), whose aim would be to examine the arguments for peace processes in the world on the one hand and to confront the historical-social dynamics that caused the alienation of the Kurds on the other. In this respect, CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership envisaged a pluralist, inclusive, and transparent peace process that would open dialogue channels between the opposition actors, the Kurdish movement, and Turkish nationalists.

The inclusive attitude of Kılıçdaroğlu was sustained during successive rounds of national elections. Kılıçdaroğlu concentrated on two objectives: first, making HDP a part of the opposition block, and second, criticizing the peace process to show CHP's vision and its divergence from the AKP peace process. In this vein, through its 2015 election manifesto entitled 'CHP's View on Turkey's Kurdish Question and Solution Framework' (CHP Election Declaration, 2015), CHP highlighted that although the peace process initiated by the AKP was important in terms of ending the armed conflict, it was not sustainable (ibid.). Its manifesto emphasized libertarian, pluralistic, and social solidarity elements by promising that 'politics will not be conveyed based on ethnic identity, belief, and lifestyle' (ibid.). These expressions implied a more liberal line of politics.

⁴ Kılıçdaroğlu supported the government's talk with Abdullah Öcalan, the long-imprisoned PKK leader.

Kılıçdaroğlu also attempted to prevent the conflict between the Kurdish movement and Turkish nationalists from undermining the opposition's initiative. He noted: 'We cannot ignore any party or our citizens who voted for that party. It is the greatest danger to ignore someone or a party because of their ethnic identity, belief, or lifestyle' (ibid.). In this respect, he laid the foundations for intergroup dialogue channels among the different subordinate entities.

His attempts to generate social cohesion are referred to as the 'Kılıçdaroğlu doctrine' by Yunus Emre, İstanbul Deputy of CHP. According to him, this doctrine has successfully formed an opposition block against Erdoğan (Emre, 2021). In his perspective, the doctrine is designed to form a coalition of the opposition that would be as inclusive as possible. He argues that the main objective of this inclusive doctrine is to re-democratize Turkey by reasserting human rights and the rule of law (ibid.).

The most crucial development in terms of strengthening the doctrine happened following the arrest of Enis Berberoğlu, deputy of CHP. To protest Berberoğlu's arrest in particular and injustices in general (Cansu, 2017), Kılıçdaroğlu started a 'March for Justice' from Ankara to İstanbul on 15 June 2017. The march was supported by the intra-party opposition group of the MHP (Diken, 2017). HDP joined the march with their co-chair and six deputies (CNN Turk, 2017). In accordance with the slogan used for the march, which was 'Rights, Law, Justice,' Kılıçdaroğlu formed a rights-based political vision.

Kılıçdaroğlu's longstanding strategy of creating a united opposition block led to victory in the 2019 municipal elections. In the elections, CHP's candidates have been the mediated figures among the different sides of the political spectrum to collect the votes from both Turkish nationalist İYİ and the Kurdish movement's party, HDP. Officially, CHP's election alliance was with Turkish nationalist İYİ. However, HDP also decided to support CHP candidates by not nominating candidates in cities other than in the east and south-east. As a result of this alliance, CHP won four of Turkey's five largest cities, including İstanbul and Ankara (YSK, 2019). Although his strategy did not open up a comprehensive intergroup forgiveness process, Kılıçdaroğlu succeeded in supporting unification among different political groups based on a common purpose.

Following the opposition's election victory, intra-party opposition within the AKP emerged. During this process, two parties whose leaders are among the founders of the AKP emerged. First, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was both the Prime Minister of Turkey and Chair of the AKP, founded the Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*, GP) in December 2019 (BBC News, 2019). Second, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Economy, Chief Negotiator for the EU, and Deputy Prime Minister of AKP governments, Ali Babacan, established the Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*, Deva) in March 2020 (Deva, 2020). Both parties declared they were committed to establishing a transparent, just, and democratic parliamentary regime (BBC News, 2019; Deva, 2020). This development represented a new stage in the democratic bloc that Kılıçdaroğlu established against Turkey's polarization because his idea started to be endorsed by symbolic figures from AKP for the first time. The new conjuncture provided Kılıçdaroğlu with an important opportunity to establish an alliance for the upcoming elections of 2023. Through Kılıçdaroğlu's initiative, deputy chairs of all parties of the Nation Alliance (CHP, DP, İYİ, and SP) and the new parties (Deva and GP) came together on 21 September 2021 to discuss the prospective restoration of the parliamentary system and its principles that would be

established following the 2023 elections.⁵ A consensus among these political parties was achieved. Their envisaged agenda foresaw embracing differences among them through opening up an inter-party dialogue that would launch a process of social peace, reconciliation, and intergroup forgiveness among different identity groups within the deeply fragmented society of Turkey. Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership in forming such an alliance with other parties from different ideological/sociological backgrounds also marked part of his reconciliation effort.

5 Findings and discussion

Kılıçdaroğlu shared a video via Twitter on November 13, 2021. In this video, he made a call to Turkish society through which he constructed himself as the 'national defender/ front' and 'man on a mission' and the *helalleşme* call as a norm-based responsibility. He also (underlying the message) highlighted the fact that pre-existing hostilities between different groups, which pose a risk of future/prospective conflict, remain:

In my life, I have seen both hate and love. I now want love to win. There is a need for our country to get better, to make amends. *Helalleşme* would not change the past but would save our future. Our party also made mistakes in the past, but I have taken a decision to set out on a journey of *Helalleşme* [...]. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2021a)

In his call, the rationalization and justification of the need for the *helalleşme* process for Turkish society were maintained through his interpretation and definition of the word *helalleşme*:

We do not want a polarized Turkey, we do not want a conflicting Turkey. We want to live peacefully. If politics lead to polarization, that results in deep wounds within large masses. These wounds harm us and Turkey. *Helalleşme* is not an ordinary call, it also means sitting and thinking about why we are fighting, at least we should know how to make up. If we can do this, we will bring peace and unity to the country [...]. *Helalleşme* means reconciliation, reconciliation with the person we are separated from. *Helalleşme* means sitting and talking, it means sitting at the same table, sharing food, and dinner prayers. *Helalleşme* means healing, healing the wounds of the past. There are wounds, politicians are scratching them to make them bleed more. No, sir, it is necessary to heal the wounds, it means learning from the atrocities of the past and not repeating the same mistakes. Without this, we cannot achieve unity. It is a very important move for us [...]. We should be together now, of course, there might be differences, there might be different opinions, but these should not be a reason for fights, we should know how to overcome them. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022)

In the excerpt above, Kılıçdaroğlu emphasizes his understanding and definitional standpoint of *helalleşme* through the specific contextualization of Turkish fragmented societal dynamics, which, in fact, lays the ground for the justification of his initiative to a great extent. Such a justification is based on the rationale that 'since the wounds and past

⁵ The six parties agreed on a detailed 48-page text on a 'Strengthened Parliamentary System', and shared it with the public at a launch on February 28, 2022.

atrocities harm us/Turkey, we should fight against them,' and the argument is further developed through the conditional: 'if we want to leave peacefully, we have to initiate the helalleşme process.' In order to sustain his stance, he anthropomorphizes Turkey by employing the conceptual metaphor '*conflicting Turkey, wounds harm Turkey*' as well. While Kılıçdaroğlu utilizes an inclusive discourse embracing all different groups of society without explicitly mentioning their names, one of his indirect emphases appears to blame politicians for the ongoing fragmentation and polarization of society: '*politicians are scratching wounds to make them bleed more.*' In this respect, his message conveys the ideational core of populist discourse, which constructs both moral and causal opposition between the 'good people' and corrupt political elites (Hameleers et al., 2018).

His repetitive uses of 'we' construct an in-group, leading to identification with Turkish society, implying a unity between himself and the nation and distinct boundaries by creating 'Otherness.' Accordingly, this anticipates three consecutive processes in building intergroup relations: positioning himself on the side of the people, negative othering ('we' implies there is also 'them'), and 'others' who are not on the side of the people. On the other hand, to construct the sameness of the in-group, Kılıçdaroğlu refers to cultural (sharing food) and religious (dinner prayers) elements of Turkish society. The religious referrals in his call illustrate the changed vision of the CHP under his chairmanship. In addition, such societal-values-based construction of the in-group by Kılıçdaroğlu, in fact, implies presenting a counterargument to what has been claimed by the AKP, as discussed by Yalvaç and Jonathan (2020) – that CHP is the representative of state-building-elites that are alien to the 'actual' values of society. Kılıçdaroğlu equating himself with the 'people' is further developed through a statement within his call that:

[I]f we want to live together, to have peace and prosperity in every house [...]. We should know how to greet people we do not know on the street [...]. My childhood was spent in such an environment. Anatolia, where I grew up, I was such an Anatolian. In secondary school, we used to go to villages. We used to go to the villages of the Genç district of Bingöl [...]. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022)

Through underlining his Anatolian origin, Kılıçdaroğlu develops a populist mantra of equating himself with a large section of the Anatolian Turkish people. This equivalence also simultaneously responds again to the elitist accusations that the AKP has often engaged in hegemonic resistance by directing social resentment against the established elites (Yalvaç & Joseph, 2019), as portrayed through their association with the CHP.

During his party's parliamentary group meeting on 16 November 2021 in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Kılıçdaroğlu explicitly specified the target groups of his call and constructed connection and empathy by creating sameness among different social, ethnic, religious, and political groups in Turkish society:

Reconciliation means [...] being able to make peace and to continue. We're going to do this with communities with scars. We will close up the injuries caused by 28 February [the so-called 'post-modern coup' of 1997] and make amends. We will make amends to our headscarved girls who were placed in 'persuasion rooms.' We will make amends to Roboski. The state will pay compensation to people, but on the other hand, we will also make amends.

We will make amends to victims of Sivas and Kahramanmaraş [massacres]. Several other groups have been wronged in the past by the policies of the governments. Among them [...] Diyarbakır prison inmates, Roma people who have been marginalized with the recent gentrification process, minorities on whom a 'wealth tax' was imposed [*varlık vergisi* in Turkish], victims of the September 6–7, 1955 İstanbul pogrom, Turkey's bright youth who migrated abroad, the family of killed Gezi Park protester Ali İsmail Korkmaz, family members of men killed in the Soma mining disaster, and exiled Kurdish singer Ahmet Kaya. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2021b)

In the excerpt above, Kılıçdaroğlu bases his argument on the historical traumas of the different identity groups of society to draw a link with the contemporary 'ongoing' struggles of Turkish society. In this respect, in his construction, he mentions historical events to refer to the destructive consequences of inter-group hostility within society, as discussed above. His referral to the historical events unleashes the usage of topos of history: '[B]ecause history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation comparable with the historical example referred to' (Reisgl & Wodak, 2001). In this way, by highlighting the struggles that originated in past incidents, he again justifies and legitimizes his call to *helalleşme*.

Kılıçdaroğlu clearly and discursively defines the different subordinate identities as the subjects of these historical events, including ethnic, racial, political, and religious groups, by building a victim-victimizer relationship between them and the Turkish government(s). While such construction of duality relies on the positive representation of the – above clarified – 'victims versus the – then and current – political regimes,' he in fact repetitively makes use of the populist construction of 'us' and 'them,' creating distinct boundaries concerning the 'otherness' of leading political elites (Ibáñez-Rosales, 2019). In this respect, he employs the type of polarization characteristic of populist dynamics, as seen in most European right-wing discourses, that functions to bolster the political opposition between the people and the elites (as put forward in the valuable findings of Van Dijk, 2003). However, his populist construction is not intended to marginalize or alienate any ethnic, minority, or migrant group within society, in contrast to most European right-wing discourses. Instead, Kılıçdaroğlu's construction is empathically aimed at bringing about social harmony and reconciliation among the subordinate group members. In this respect, Kılıçdaroğlu utilizes an anti-establishment yet inclusionist discourse. Such a comparison between the mainstream populist discourses of the European right-wing political discourse with Kılıçdaroğlu's *helalleşme* call shows that the latter populist discourse that juxtaposes the people and the political elites is based on the premise that society is fully integrated and peacefully co-exists, thereby ignoring the specific fragmentation and potential or ongoing conflict among subordinate groups. Kılıçdaroğlu clearly defines the pre-existing identity-based fragmentation of Turkish society. This is evident in his explicit referrals to various minority groups such as ethnic (Alevi, Roma, Kurdish, victims of the September 6–7, 1955 İstanbul pogrom – i.e., the Greek diaspora in İstanbul), and religious (headscarved girls, victims of the 'wealth tax,' i.e. non-Muslims) and political (Ali İsmail Korkmaz) minorities. Thus, his method of mobilizing populist elements strongly differs from those associated with mainstream populist discourses. Through such a specific defi-

nition of the subordinate identities within society, Kılıçdaroğlu creates an equivalence between socially and politically excluded groups, implying socio-political transformation in the hierarchy of identities within Turkish society. In this respect, his political discourse is adjusted to entail the democratic and inclusionary nature of CHP's populism.

With such a populist attitude, he also refers to socioeconomically deprived groups (Turkey's bright youth who have migrated abroad, family members of men killed in the Soma mining disaster) through the construction of an appeal that focuses on the economic problems in society, unemployment, the poverty of youth, and the 'covertly' risky conditions of labor. The reconciliation of his discourse with the economic concerns of economically weaker/deprived groups is further boosted by statements in his helalleşme call: '[...] If I cannot end the fight just to be a breadwinner, if I do not fight for peace in every house, why am I doing politics?' (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022). The promise of the economic-conditions-based inclusion of the people can be regarded as grounded in and part of left-wing populism. It also implies Kılıçdaroğlu's vision of social policy and the welfare state he envisages for the 'future.' With regard to this, he also portrays images of a shared future in terms of achieving social cohesion, in parallel with the findings of Vaara et al. (2003), who argued that visualizing a common future is employed to enhance a shared identity:

We love our country, our flag, our people, so what is this fight then? Helalleşme also means growing love. We have to grow love, brotherhood, and friendship. We have to embrace each other. We have to share our pains and happiness. Helalleşme also means growing companionship. We have to do this [...]. My party will go through heavy 'pressure' due to this reconciliation process, but someone has to do it [...]. We will make amends, my friends. When our children look at the past in the near future, they will say, 'So many things happened, but they knew how to look ahead, well done to them [...].' My party is opening a door to a future that will serve many more governments ahead. (Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022)

'History is the centerpiece of identity' (Cohen, 1999, p. 28), providing guidance for the future regarding where we are heading (Hedetoft, 1995). In the excerpt above, legitimization is achieved through a hypothetical future connected to the past, present, and future; one of the legitimization strategies employed within political discourses, according to Reyes (2011). In parallel with these arguments, after highlighting the contemporary struggles that originated from past events, as discussed above, Kılıçdaroğlu reveals images of a shared future of 'growing love, brotherhood, and friendship, companionship' as a prescription for an ideal state of reconciliation and social cohesion. In this respect, through the excerpt above, the future and history are used to portray the grounded reasons for his helalleşme call and legitimize his political action. In contrast to the country's divided past and contemporary struggles, the positive vision for the future is utilized as a vehicle for advancing people's belonging to society associated with a prosperous, peaceful, and reconciled future. Accordingly, the future prospect *par excellence* is constructed as hinged upon the fulfillment of Kılıçdaroğlu's helalleşme call. His presentation of his call as the right thing to do reinforces the level of commitment to his call regarding promoting the common good of the community. It is an act of persuasion that targets his political party base to convince them of the need to bear the dramatic consequences of 'going through heavy pressure.' In addition, in facing dramatic consequences by endeavoring to promote the common good of Turkish society, he implicitly refers to himself as a 'man on the mission.'

6 Conclusion

The main opposition party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has put substantial effort into renewing CHP's approach to addressing the severe polarization within Turkish society since he obtained a leadership position. The most striking element of this so far has been his recent helalleşme call. The present study investigated how Kılıçdaroğlu constructs and envisages the reconciliation process among hostile groups of society. This article substantiates the following claims by discursively analyzing his speeches at the textual and inter-textual levels.

First, Kılıçdaroğlu's justification and legitimization of the helalleşme call as a form of political behavior relies on the topos of history regarding how it highlights the necessity of standing together and preventing the repetition of past atrocities in Turkey through a reciprocal process of helalleşme. In this respect, the future prospect *par excellence* is constructed as hinged upon fulfilling his call for helalleşme. His presentation of his call as the right thing to do and for the common good of the community is constructed to reinforce the level of commitment and appeal to the call.

Second, Kılıçdaroğlu employs an inclusive rhetoric that embraces different identities and inter-group relations and dialogue. Within such a construction, he indirectly blames politicians for society's ongoing fragmentation and polarization. In this respect, his message conveys the ideational core of populist discourse, which constructs moral and causal opposition between the 'good people' and corrupt political elites. This further contributes to his construction of himself as a 'man on the mission.' Through specifying subordinate identities within society, Kılıçdaroğlu creates equivalence between socially and politically excluded groups, implying a socio-political transformation of the hierarchy of identities within Turkish society. In this respect, his political discourse is adjusted to entail the democratic and inclusionary nature of CHP's populism.

Here, another important finding is that the inclusionary discourse that aims to bring about social harmony and reconciliation among subordinate group members differs greatly from mainstream populist discourses of the European political right wing. Such a finding shows us that the latter populist discourse, which juxtaposes the people and political elites, is based on the premise that society is fully integrated and peacefully co-exists, ignoring the specific fragmentation and potential or ongoing conflict among subordinate groups. This revealed difference suggests a further research agenda – an investigation (in different contexts) of how identity fragmentation is discursively addressed by opposition parties within different political settings.

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Legislation and practice of observing of human rights in Turkey in terms of European integration processes in the country

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Abstract

The relevance of the stated topic is determined by the constant decline in the level of democracy in the Republic of Turkey over the past few years, which is characterised by the decline in the development of the fundamental rights and freedoms of its citizens. Arbitrariness in the judicial system, international law violations, antidemocratic legislation is the chosen course for deeper European integration and has every chance to remain an exclusively imaginary strategy without its external embodiment. In this regard, this work is aimed at analysing Turkish legislation in the area of human rights and determining its compliance with the principle of the rule of law. Also, the study is focused on covering the essence of the effective democratic governance, controversial political and legal decisions of the Turkish government, as well as Turkey's political problems in its relations with the European Union.

The leading methods of the study were theoretical methods of generalisation and analysis, with the help of which the current factors inhibiting European integration processes in the state were comprehensively considered, as well as the method of studying regulatory documentation, which made it possible to analyse the national legal framework and the current state of compliance with international treaties in the area of human rights protection.

The article reveals the importance of the rule of law and freedom in the fight against discriminatory manifestations within the country, as well as the need to develop a protected legal framework as a necessary criterion for membership of the European Union. At the same time, the gradual waning of democracy and the reinforcement of authoritarianism in the Republic of Turkey were substantiated. The materials of this scientific work are intended to draw the public's attention to the democratic freedom issue and especially its absence, and the obtained conclusions will be a foundation for further practical studies.

Keywords: fundamental freedoms; political control; European Union; authoritarianism; democracy

1 Introduction

The rule of law is one of the foundational pillars of modern democratic societies, intricately woven into the fabric of governance and social contract theory. At its essence, the rule of law promotes the principle that all individuals, including the government itself, are subject to and accountable under the law. This concept provides a robust framework for the protection of fundamental rights, ensuring that power is neither arbitrary nor unfettered. A society upholding the rule of law is one where laws are transparent, predictable, enforceable and applied evenly, irrespective of an individual's status or power (Melnyk, 2022). Embedded within the framework of the rule of law is the unwavering commitment to human rights (Tykhonova, 2022). These rights are not merely lofty ideals; they represent tangible obligations. Their enforcement ensures that individuals are protected from actions that infringe upon their inherent dignity. Furthermore, human rights are not just static principles but are constantly evolving, expanding to address the multifaceted challenges of modern societies.

Turkey's journey towards European integration offers a rich tapestry of complexities and contestations in this domain. While the country has, at various moments, demonstrated its commitment to aligning its human rights practices with European standards, there have been instances of divergence as well (Yuzheka, 2023). Scholars have pointed out the dichotomies in Turkey's legislation and its practical enforcement, especially in areas concerning freedom of expression, minority rights, and judicial independence. It can be argued that while Turkey has taken considerable strides in formulating progressive legislation in line with European directives, challenges remain in their consistent and impartial implementation. Furthermore, while the discourse often places Turkey in the spotlight, reflecting on its democratic backsliding or human rights breaches, a more holistic view requires examining the EU's role in this evolving relationship. The Union's oscillating commitment to Turkey's accession, couched in terms like 'privileged partnership' or concerns over 'absorption capacity', has also contributed to the dynamics, influencing Turkey's own stance towards European norms (Bettiza et al., 2023).

At its core, the concept of the rule of law stands as a foundational principle, asserting that no individual or institution is above the law, and that laws should be justly and consistently applied. It emphasizes governance through established laws rather than arbitrary dictates, ensuring fairness, predictability and stability (Buzunko & Krasnova, 2022). Integral to the concept of the rule of law is the protection and enforcement of human rights, which function as a cornerstone for the development of democratic societies. These rights, grounded in the principles of justice, freedom, and equality, are recognized universally, transcending borders, cultures, and systems. Illiberal political systems have increasingly become a subject of discussion in contemporary political science. Characterized by a retrenchment of democratic norms, these systems often reflect a centralization of power, curtailment of freedoms, and suppression of opposition. While illiberalism can manifest itself in various degrees and forms, it stands in contrast to liberal democratic systems that value individual freedoms, pluralism and checks and balances (Tekdemir, 2023).

Positioning Turkey on this spectrum requires a nuanced understanding of its evolving political landscape. Historically, Turkey has oscillated between periods of democratic openness and authoritarian tendencies. Recent years have seen challenges to the independence of the judiciary, restrictions on media freedoms and suppression of dissent. Yet, categorizing Turkey purely as an illiberal state oversimplifies its complexities. Regarding the focus of this study, it is crucial to contextualize why certain issues, like women's rights and LGBTQI rights, are emphasized in the context of the EU's normative framework. The European Union prioritizes these rights as essential indicators of a country's adherence to democratic values and human rights. Thus, Turkey's alignment or divergence from these standards becomes a litmus test for its European integration aspirations. Lastly, the significance of Turkey's Anti-Terrorism legislation is pivotal. Often, counter-terrorism measures, when unchecked, can compromise the rule of law, leading to potential abuses and violations. In the Turkish context, understanding how this legislation is framed and implemented provides insights into the balance – or imbalance – between security concerns and upholding the rule of law, a key criterion for EU integration (Way, 2022; Pirro, 2023).

Such primary criteria as the rule of law or democracy are essential for the cooperation of the world's leading states and their joining the economically powerful alliances. The repeated violation of values enshrined in The Treaty of Lisbon (2009), such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, is collectively perceived as one of the key factors in the suspension of European integration processes in the Turkey. Having a rather long history of negotiations, even after decades, Turkey has not been able to establish itself as a Member State of the European Union. Moreover, the gradual enforcement of authoritarian attitudes only separates the state's potential affiliation from a political alliance. Certainly, legal factors are not the only criteria for joining the EU, but they occupy an important place in developing conditions for gradual integration. That is why it seems appropriate to consider the reasons for the inaccessibility of the desired membership due to a significant lack of rule of law in the country (Aydın-Düzgüt & Kaliber, 2016).

In general, the topic of democracy or the issue of the enforcement of human and citizen rights is a central place in the works of many researchers, for example, E. Yazici (2019), who covered the connection between the nationalism elements and the practice of observing human rights, or S. Akboga and O. Sahin (2021), who analysed the reasons for the decrease in satisfaction with democracy among Turkish citizens. At the same time, the seeds of an authoritarian regime in Turkey are clearly demonstrated in the works of E. Fratanuono (2020) and B. Çelik (2020), both of whom emphasised the role of the current Turkish president in the development of antidemocratic attitudes. Along with this, the chronology of the European integration processes of Turkey was considered in the work of O. Kurylo (2019) who paid attention to the analysis of diplomatic relations between the country and the European union.

This topic really has a rather extensive scientific base, however, the systematic violation of constitutional freedoms, gaps in legislative regulation and a significant increase in cases of illegal imprisonment forces us to study this issue again.

2 Materials and methods

The basis of methodological study is a combination of theoretical methods of generalisation and analysis. Using the scientific method of generalisation, the current level of observance of the basic rights and freedoms of Turkish citizens was analysed, as well as the work of the judicial system and available methods of legal protection were considered, their efficiency was also determined. The method of theoretical analysis of regulatory documentation was a tool for studying the national legal framework of Turkey in the area of observing the interests of citizens, identifying gaps in legislation and conflicting constitutional provisions. In particular, the authors reviewed Turkey's anti-terrorist legislation and the provisions on the Institution of Human Rights and Equality. At the same time, the analysis method made it possible to study the way of the Republic of Turkey as a candidate for joining the European Union and to identify the main political factors behind the suspension of negotiations and the constant approach of an antidemocratic regime. First of all, the scientific work is focused on covering unvalued contribution of fundamental freedoms to the world political institutions functioning, as well as establishing the central factors of freezing the prospects of Turkish European integration. The theoretical base, prepared in advance by the authors, is a useful scientific basis for further analysis of the issue at hand.

The works of European, Ukrainian, and especially Turkish researchers who devoted attention to covering the problem of systematic violations and restrictions of the constitutional privileges of citizens of the Republic of Turkey form the theoretical basis of this work. European conventions, regulatory protocols and international pacts relating to the protection of fundamental human rights were also necessary materials.

This scientific work was carried out in three main stages. First of all, the authors defined the main purpose and issues of this scientific article. The preparation of the international and Turkish legal and regulatory framework was carried out for its further analysis, the studies of existing legislative gaps, as well as identification of the reasons for the introduction of the unlawful legal documents' list. At the same time, the first stage was marked by the consideration of the Copenhagen criteria and the determination of the leading violation factors by the Turkish government of the political conditions of membership in the European Union. The importance of observing the principle of the rule of law in terms of European integration processes within the state, as well as the primary causes of the current manifestations of the authoritarian regime of the Turkish government were covered.

The second stage of study work was characterised by covering the current status of women in the conditions of modern transformational processes in the country and establishing the reasons for the increase in the number of daily manifestations of femicide against the female population of Turkey. The article also reveals the contradictory actions of the Turkish government regarding the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) community that directly contradict the European Union directives and shows how such decisions bar the Republic of Turkey from EU membership. Regular restrictions on the rights and freedoms of the ethnic Kurdish minority are also emphasised, which once again undermines the democratic regime and legality in general. At the same time, the

impact of religious freedom on the implementation of European values was studied. At the second stage, the conclusions obtained during the study work were clarified and the authors' analytical material was provided.

At the third stage, the final conclusions were formulated and effective ways to overcome the systematic violations problem of the fundamental rights of Turkish citizens were proposed. A number of illegal legislative acts that are tools for the prosperity of antidemocratic government were also identified. In the future, the results of this scientific study will be a relevant basis for further searches for ways of fighting illegal restrictions of fundamental human rights.

3 Results

The relations model between Turkey and the European Union has always been characterised by their complexity and dynamics. Having started its journey at the end of the 1950s of the 20th century, achieving full membership turned out to be too complicated, which was to some extent predictable. Obtaining the status of a candidate country in 1999 meant the enforcement of the state's partnership with the political union, but in practice it did not bring the expected results. The Cyprus problem, the government's obstacles to the implementation of political reforms and the attempted Turkish coup are the pretext for stalling the negotiations which became more and more obvious every year. Here it should be added that from the very beginning, the European Union did not consider Turkey sufficiently prepared for the start of negotiations on full membership due to its economic characteristics and, more importantly, the lack of respect for human rights (Turan et al., 2019). After all, it was the restriction of constitutional rights and the lack of effective means of legal protection that forced the European Parliament to vote to pause joining negotiations with Turkey. And although clearly defined differences between the Turkish worldview and European values significantly hinder the cooperation establishment, different beliefs regarding the issue of the protection and observance of fundamental freedoms are a source of friction in the Turkish European integration processes.

First of all, it should be emphasised that the strained relations between the EU and the Republic of Turkey are mostly based on the latter's violation of a number of requirements, the implementation or observance of which directly implies potential membership in the European Union. The joining criteria, better known as the Copenhagen joining criteria, were officially introduced as a fair and open method of competing for EU membership, receiving practical feedback and finally implementing the standards in the most effective way (Veebel, 2011). Figure 1 shows the conditions according to three main criteria.

For a long time, Turkey's policy focused on the economic market development and implemented European directives as part of national legislation, but the issues of promoting the principle of the rule of law or protecting the civil/political rights of the population occasionally became the subject of public discussions. The European Commission's conclusions about the progress towards the implementation of membership conditions had the following statements as 'serious concession has taken place,' 'progress is generally restricted,' 'withdrawal is continuing and the recommendations of previous reports have not

been accepted or implemented' or even 'a rapid deterioration of the situation regarding human rights' (Galan & Marini, 2021). It is obvious that compliance with the principle of the rule of law should be seen as a guarantee of a high level of justice, the establishment of an anti-discrimination policy and the functioning of available and effective means of protection of civil rights. Therefore, member countries, or in the case of Turkey, candidate countries, recognise European values and make the first attempts to join the political union.

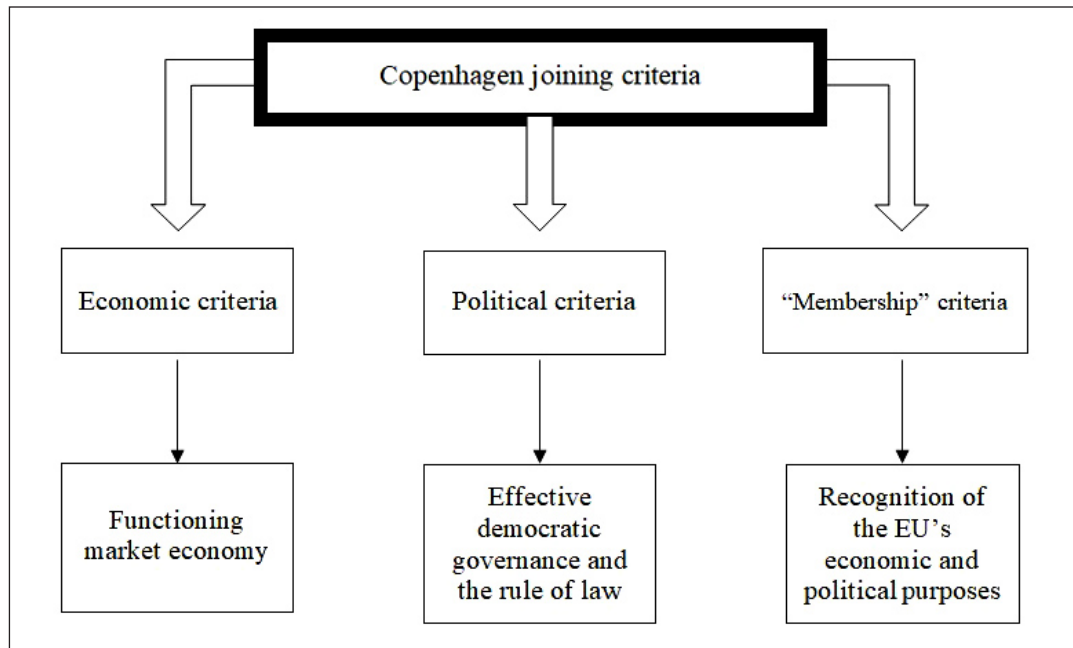


Figure 1 Copenhagen joining criteria

However, currently, the main achievement of the Republic of Turkey among other candidate states is the catastrophically low level of observance of the rights and freedoms of its citizens. In Turkey, there is a restrictive environment for the mass media, human rights defenders, the LGBT community, Kurdish political activists and other government critics (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The Turkish legal framework contains a considerable number of documents that significantly restrict main freedoms and directly contradict the European conventions.

(1) International human rights organisations are extremely concerned about the Turkish Anti-Terrorism legislation, which, in addition to preventing the use of violence, is aimed at purposely intimidating citizens who are not in favour of the Turkish government. Law of the Republic of Turkey No. 3713 'On Combating Terrorism' (1991) and Law of the Republic of Turkey No. 7262 'On Prevention of Financing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction' (2020) significantly exceed the legitimate purpose of deterring cases of terrorist acts, instead of this they generate a legally regulated justification of repressive procedures. Selahattin Demirtaş, Nazli Ilicak, Osman Kavala, Yasin Ozdemir are a small

list of political figures, journalists and philanthropists who due to public statements, comments on social networks or active citizenship, were wrongfully accused of involvement in terrorist activities. 'In Turkey, human rights lawyers are particularly prosecuted for their work that represents human rights defenders, victims of human rights violations, victims of police violence and torture, as well as many people who simply express dissenting opinions' – United Nations Special Rapporteur Mary Lawlor (2021). If membership of the European Union requires a democracy guarantee, then from the Anti-Terrorism Laws point of view, the Turkish government is doing everything possible to destroy the possibility of potentially joining, because the court decisions issued after the coup attempt in 2016 are devoid of any legal basis. This judicial practice created another precedent of criminal liability, contrary to the presumption of innocence.

(2) The illegal actions of the Turkish authorities contradict not only international conventions, but also the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey (1982) that de jure enshrined the state's obligation to respect the freedoms of every individual, but in practice is not perceived as an effective legal protection instrument. Probably, one of the most inconsistent constitutional provisions is Article 26, which affirms the common right to spread their thoughts and views verbally, in writing or in images, as well as in other ways individually or collectively. However, the observance of this constitutional right obviously does not extend to criticising the Turkish president. Any criticism of Erdoğan is met with threats such as investigation, punishment and arrest as the regime tries to frighten society (Türkoğlu, 2018). It is clear that freedom of expression exists on paper, but in real life one must be extremely careful.

Indeed, it would be wrong to claim that the Turkish regulatory framework does not attempt to coordinate national legislation with the legal system of the European Union. Thus, for example, Law of the Republic of Turkey No. 6701 'On the Institute of Human Rights and Equality' (2016) formally recognises the priority of fundamental rights and prohibits discrimination in any of its manifestations, and the established Regulation of the Functioning of the National Human Rights Council (2017) should confirm the wish of the Republic of Turkey to accept obligations in the area of protection of civil freedoms. Although discrediting demonstrations based on religious views or sexual orientation occur systematically, the state has at least laid the legal basis for the elimination of discrimination and intolerance. A similar situation is observed with international regulatory acts. Table 1 shows Turkey's clear commitment to international law in the area of fundamental human rights protection.

Certainly, the provided list is only a small fraction of the total number of signed legal acts, but it clearly indicates the readiness of the Republic of Turkey to comply with the legislation of the European Union. However, it should be noted that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which entered into force in 1976, was signed by Turkey only in the middle of 2000, which is surprising, because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the text of which can be traced in the content of the Covenant, was adopted almost immediately after its announcement. If they adhere to the statement that the level of human rights in the country (at least partially) depends on the influence of international laws of human rights (Chae, 2021), then in this case their priority over the internal legislation of the republic is only of a formal nature. Citizens of Turkey are indeed protected by a number of European conventions officially recognised by the state, how-

ever, in the authors' opinion, this protection in the legal framework is abstract, while in practice the country does not have any specifically defined instrument for the protection of basic interests and freedoms, including the judicial system.

Table 1 International legal documents ratified by Turkey

Regulatory documents	Date of ratification
Convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms	18.05.1954
European convention for the prevention of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment	26.02.1988
Convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment	02.08.1988
Optional protocol to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women	08.09.2000
International covenant on civil and political rights	23.09.2003

Source: Convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (1950), European convention for the prevention of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (1987), Convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (1984), Optional protocol to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (1999), International covenant on civil and political rights (1966).

The country's state policy on the female half of the population is also quite controversial. At the beginning of the 20th century, Turkey had a very liberal position, being one of the first states, which in 1930 gave women a number of political and civil rights. In the first ten years after the republic's proclamation, the status of a woman as an 'equal person' in the family, education, public life and politics was ensured (Kayrak & Kahraman, 2016). The right to abortion, to obtain a permission to divorce, the right to be elected and occupy higher state positions, it would seem that Turkish women have a wide range of freedoms and constitutional protection. However, each generation of women is constantly faced with manifestations of domestic violence and women fall become victim to forced marriages. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has repeatedly emphasised Turkey's violation of European legislation regarding the prohibition of torture, inhuman, humiliating treatment (Abdel-Monem, 2009). However, May 2021 saw President Erdoğan issue a decree, which reports Turkey's decision to leave the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and the Combating these Phenomena. Certainly, the reaction of the world community was clearly negative, not to mention thousands of women who protested on the capital's streets. Not only the EU representatives but also the leaders of the Western world called on the President to change this decision. However, if the European community was more concerned about potential signals for Member States, then Turkish human rights activists were concerned about the real consequences for the Turkish and Kurdish population. Since women in Northern Kurdistan are too often victims of rape, oppression, forced labour and especially domestic violence, withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention will cause a new wave of femicide and illegal legislative proposals.

It is quite obvious that the wish of the candidate countries to join the political alliance should reflect their willingness to be guided by the guiding principles of the European Union. Thus, they are not legally binding, but de facto form the foundation for future cooperation and representation. Among other principles that are of concern to the public to one degree or another, the principle of respect for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community is perhaps the most frequently violated by the Turkish authorities. Although homosexuality is not criminalised in the country, as in most Muslim countries, LGBT discrimination is a fairly common practice. Certainly, Turkey is not the only country that restricts the freedoms of representatives of non-traditional relationships, moreover, the republic remains a deeply religious state, but beatings, harassment and death threats have nothing to do with religious beliefs. It seems that the main factor that will lead to the introduction of new antidiscrimination laws in Turkey will be the result of the country's wish to join the EU (Fishman, 2013), however, constant violations of international directives are an unreasonably high risk both for the Republic of Turkey itself and for its potential joining the political union.

It seems that when discussing the above categories alone, they do not constitute a real threat to the prosperity and development of democratic rule, because it would be a mistake to say that the Turkish Republic is not completely modernised or improved, especially comparing it with other Eastern states. However, considering the existing picture comprehensively, it becomes clear that small steps, but obviously the democratic style of Turkish authority is increasingly reminiscent of an authoritarian one, and the current development hides instability and chaos. It is clear that July 2016 had its consequences in the form of a prolonged state of emergency, and what is the most important a new wave of governing authorities' permissiveness. The efforts of the President to consolidate political domination have become the beginning of serious transformational processes, which have since provided neither liberal reforms nor the development of an independent human rights institution but have probably contributed to enforcement of the authoritarian progress. As a result, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on Turkish authorities to take the necessary measures to restore democratic principles (Soyaltin-Colella, 2021).

It is essential to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of Turkey-EU relations. While the democratic backsliding in Turkey over the years is undeniable, the EU and its Member States have also played a role in shaping the current dynamics of this relationship. The EU's approach, often emphasizing concepts like 'privileged partnership' and concerns over 'absorption capacity', has arguably created a sense of distance and skepticism from the Turkish side. This perception of a lukewarm reception from the EU has at times furthered the sentiment in Turkey that European integration might not be as achievable or beneficial as previously thought. The relationship is a two-way street, and while internal politics in Turkey have evolved in a direction that raises concerns about democratic norms, the EU's approach and certain reservations expressed by member states have also influenced Turkey's stance towards European integration.

Once the most democratic country in the Middle East, it currently suffers from increasing autocracy and a lack of reliable legal institutions. Violation of international obligations in the area of human rights protection is a logical component of repressive policy. Criminalisation of opposition opinion, the politicisation of the judiciary, the wish of the political elite to censor every civil area, the destruction of mass media freedom as well as

ignoring the directives and jurisdiction of the ECHR, regrettably, but, in the author's opinion, the Turkish government is destroying not only the democratic regime, but also the legal future of the country in general.

4 Discussion

Despite the wishes of the leadership of the Republic of Turkey, the level of compliance with the principle of the rule of law in the international arena remains one of the key factors in building a diplomatic foundation. After many years of struggle for a European future, the fragility of democratic rule and the gradual decline of the institution of law is the decisive factor that can fundamentally separate Ankara from the leading countries of Europe.

As it turns out, enshrining the term 'democracy' in the Constitutional Law of the state does not automatically transform its political processes: intimidation, arrests and political repression actually degrade this regulatory norm. History has many examples of populist states whose totalitarianism could not be hidden by either the Constitution or the electoral system. Studying the legislation of Turkey concerning the protection of civil rights, the authors came to the conclusion that in fact the regulatory acts do not contain any human rights protection mechanism that they promise. Certainly, it is referred to the Institute of Human Rights and Equality (IHRE), which was introduced by the Law of the Republic of Turkey No. 6701 'On the Institute of Human Rights and Equality' (2016) mentioned above. Considering the annual practice of destroying constitutional freedoms, it can be stated that the functioning of this body is restricted only by its existence. Turkish researchers hold a similar opinion, for example, Ö.H. Çınar and T. Şirin (2017) noted the narrowness of Law of the Republic of Turkey No. 6701 'On the Institute of Human Rights and Equality' (2016), as it cannot fight either against discrimination against women or against discrimination based on sexual orientation. From their part, B. Gunes (2017) summarised that the IHRE cannot play an active role in overcoming bias and discredit precisely because of the current legal framework. Surprisingly, the signing of international conventions or the constant adoption of new draft laws are not urgent measures that will restore the damage caused to the rule of law, at least without the intention of their implementation and gradual realisation.

The Institute of Human Rights and Equality (IHRE) holds a 'B' status as a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI), a designation provided by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI). On examining the IHRE's practices and structure in light of the Paris Principles, there are commendable efforts but also areas of concern. The IHRE's mandate is clear and grounded in human rights, and it has made significant strides in promoting and advocating for human rights within its jurisdiction. Its efforts in raising awareness, providing education, and advising the government on human rights issues have been noticeable. However, the 'B' status also indicates areas where the IHRE could potentially improve. The primary concerns revolve around its independence and pluralism. While the IHRE is designed to operate autonomously, there have been instances where its decisions or stances might appear influenced by external factors or governmental pressure. This potential lack of complete independence can sometimes

undermine its credibility and effectiveness in the eyes of the public and the international community. Pluralism, both in representation and in inclusive decision-making, is another area where the IHRE could strengthen its practices. Ensuring diverse voices, including minority groups, are adequately represented and heard is crucial for any NHRI.

Surely, European integration processes are connected not only with law-making transformation, but also with social and political factors. The path of Turkey's joining the European Union has already taken more than half a century and is an example that legislative reforms and consistent implementation of legal regulation standards and political mechanisms of the European Union are not an absolute guarantee of joining the European Community (Kurylo, 2019). Cultural and ethnic, and especially religious factors, have a direct impact on the state system of the Turkish Republic, and therefore, compared to all other Member States, play a significant role in the implementation of pan-European standards. As was already noted, the government of the republic has chosen a clear course for Islamisation of society, which not only contradicts the Constitutional provisions, but also exacerbates the differences between Christian Europe and Muslim Turkey. A. Kaya (2020) notes that the growth of right populism in EU member-states is an obstacle to the integration process of Turkey through hostility to religious and ethnocultural diversity. Indeed, the prosperity of secularisation and the principle of free choice of worldview can significantly damage the conservative policies of authority representatives, and especially the Head of state, who have been persistently imposing religious order over the secular for the last decade. And yet, according to the author's opinion, the Muslim country joining the European Society would significantly contribute not only to the expansion of religious freedom of its citizens, but also to the modernisation of social views in general. Being perhaps the most developed state of the Middle East, Turkey had once proved that it could combine the latest democratic aspirations with a comprehensively rooted Islamic identity.

However, the shift in steadfast church dogmas will undoubtedly affect the most vulnerable groups of the population: women, children, ethnic minorities and representatives of the LGBTQ+ community. The latter currently face physical or psychological violence and various forms of discrimination on television, in the mass media and in politics on a daily basis. In addition, even though the EU includes the fight against homophobia in political dialogues almost all the time, as noted by H. L. Muehlenhoff (2019), the European Union has not succeeded in promoting the rights of sexual minorities in its external relations, and the community funding of LGBT rights organisations in Turkey had ambiguous consequences. It is clear that it would be a colossal mistake to assume that conservative countries with high-volume religious heritage will have rapid success in promoting sexual freedom and tolerance. However, in this case it is not even about the legalisation of same-sex relationships, which in terms of current Turkish politics it is extremely early to talk about, but about respect for the individual and their civil freedoms. The author believes that the elimination of homophobia and transphobia in the political environment of the state is on the agenda first, increasing the level of government respect for the freedoms of its citizens, not to mention the practice of observing fundamental rights. Since this Muslim religious country chooses the European integration way, it should learn to recognise the universal human values that should be connected only with the democratic attitudes of Turkish society.

It should be reiterated that democracy itself, as the primary focus of modernisation and liberal reforms, is currently in an incredibly weak position. According to B. Burak (2021), what has been happening in Turkey since 2018 can be considered a 'political collapse'. Observing the steady destruction of legal institutions and the unavailability of the independent activity of judicial bodies, this statement is quite difficult to disprove. However, it is the period of Erdoğan's presidency that is connected with the beginning of the authoritarian era in the republic. For example, studying the personalistic rule of the twelfth president of Turkey, scientists came to the conclusion that his personality is currently the 'foundation of legitimate governance,' which cannot be undermined by any statement or dissatisfaction (Över & Tuncer-Ebetürk, 2022). At the same time, Z. Yilmaz and B. Turner (2019) stated that the totalitarian core within its current project of an authoritarian regime gradually eroded the already fragile divisions in the areas of knowledge, law and politics at every moment of political crisis. The author fully agrees that the government of the current president is extremely difficult to portray as a liberal government: note the destruction of freedom of speech, the arrest of human rights defenders, the practice of violence and political chaos. It should be mentioned at least that during the years of his rule, Erdoğan openly hinted at the potential legalisation of the death penalty several times (Ceylan, 2022). It seems as if modern Turkey has the lowest level of democratic freedoms in its entire history. Certainly, it is easier to govern the country by narrowing the scope of civil rights, but maintaining the image of an economically strong, social and legal state. As M. Lowen (2016) notes: 'When it comes to the democracy vision, there are two realities in Turkey – each side has its own narrative.'

It is obvious that the enforcement of authoritarian manifestations harms not only the establishment of political relations with the countries of Europe, but also, first of all, the progress within the Muslim, one-time democratic country. The definition of the 'permitted freedoms' framework is based on the worldview of one person, whose autocratic rule reduces the existence of liberal government institutions to nothing. Pre-empting its neighbours in the past, today's Turkey has every chance to compete for the title of the most conservative country in the region. The practice of observing fundamental rights, or more precisely, its absence, objectively shows the decline of Turkish freedom and the consequences of the permissiveness of the governing bodies. Gradually, the government uses less diplomatic rhetoric, which cannot but affect the level of its support. Certainly, the socio-economic level plays far from the last role, but the potential of the Republic of Turkey joining the European Union with almost destroyed political and public freedoms looks more doubtful or even impossible than ever.

5 Conclusions

Therefore, neither membership in the Council of Europe, nor the declaration of its leading principles in its constitution, nor the ratification of European legislation – nothing guarantees automatic joining of the ranks of the European Union. The Republic of Turkey is a clear example of a long-term way that has practically ended before it even began. Despite the close economic connections, the full consolidation of the country as part of the EU is impossible without a strong foundation in the form of a functioning institution of the rule of law.

Currently, it can be noted that the fundamental rights of Turkish citizens are almost destroyed by the centralised government, which continues its destructive policy against democratic freedoms. Firstly, as this study has shown, the signing of international pacts does not determine the level of legal security at all if the country's government prefers domestic discriminatory legislation. The presence of ambiguous regulatory documents only hints at the unwillingness to improve social and legal instruments and to some extent restrict the activities of human rights organisations. The Turkish government uses the legal system to impose 'convenient' views and threatens repressive policies. Secondly, it seems that none of the implemented reforms were aimed at developing or at least protecting the constitutional rights and interests of the citizens of the Republic of Turkey. Women, opposition activists, lawyers, ethnic and sexual minorities – the list of vulnerable groups is only added to every year, but the authorities do not provide effective independent protection mechanisms. The public withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention once again showed the authority of international obligations for the country's governing bodies, and the actual criminalisation of opposite opinion confirmed the autocratic course of the state. In addition, the discrediting statements of the political elite show clear disrespect for citizens and encourage policies of violence and coercion.

Since the purpose of this scientific work was to characterise the mechanism of development and protection of the state's legal basis, summarising everything above listed, the authors should state that currently this instrument does not exist within the Republic of Turkey, which is transparently hinted at by internal legislation and the political situation of the country. Obviously, the legal doctrine of the rule of law is covered in the most convenient form for the Turkish government, gradually losing its original meaning. That is why the search for effective ways to overcome the democratic crisis should attract the attention of researchers and lawyers. Certainly, Turkey is still far from a totalitarian regime, but an effective liberal government is losing prospects for future existence every year, and the arbitrary behaviour of the government is no longer restricted by the constitution or the 'democratic' status.

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The effectiveness of the EU's rule of law
conditionality mechanism: Theoretical observations
based on the case of Hungary

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Abstract

The effectiveness of post-accession conditionality within the EU has been of pivotal importance for the EU in past years. The European Union has plenty of tools for monitoring the compliance of EU Member States; however, when it comes to enforcement mechanisms, EU institutions perform poorly. Respect for the rule of law is especially crucial in this regard, as certain Member States (i.e. Poland and Hungary) have committed violations in this area. Hungary has been subject to several infringement procedures due to failure to comply with EU law, and the Article 7 procedure has even been activated against it. In 2020, the EU decided to connect rule-of-law violations to the EU budget disbursement by introducing the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism, which was launched against Hungary in 2022. This paper evaluates this conditionality mechanism through the example of Hungary and assesses whether it is more effective than the previous tools used to address rogue Member State behaviour and prevent continuous rule-of-law violations on a national level.

Keywords: EU conditionality; post-accession conditionality; rule of law; rule-of-law conditionality mechanism; Hungary

1 Introduction

The topic of conditionality within the European Union is a gold mine for EU experts, and it has been so since enlargement started decades ago. In recent years, however, the effectiveness of post-accession conditionality rather than pre-accession has become a prominent question. The main reason is that there have been no accessions to the EU since 2013, so the EU has entered its longest period without enlargement since 1973.

Simultaneously, protecting the rule of law has become the number-one priority of EU institutions. This comes as no surprise, as the recent crises the world and Europe have had to endure, such as the migration crisis and economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, re-wrote the international playbook in many areas. In this context, some Member States used these crises as an excuse for non-cooperation and pursued behaviors potentially detrimental to EU values.

Hungary has been considered a ‘rogue’ or ‘disobedient’ Member State in the European Union ever since Fidesz won the elections in 2010 with the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and acquired a two-thirds majority in parliament. This government started pursuing a strategy that departed from that of its predecessors. It has openly focused on the country’s perceived national interests and contradicted EU rules and legislation in numerous policy areas. The Orbán government, taking advantage of its parliamentary majority, gradually started to dismantle checks and balances in the Hungarian political system, weakening the role of judiciary institutions, the freedom of the press, and academic freedom (Medvegy, 2019). Hungary became the most vocal advocate of handling the refugee crisis by simply shutting down the borders, thus violating refugees’ fundamental rights. Moreover, people from close government circles have infiltrated Hungarian public procurement procedures, so corruption has become increasingly common in the country (Scheppel & Mészáros, 2022b). These issues have obviously raised concerns in several EU institutions.

The year 2022 was a pivotal one in the EU regarding its effort to protect the rule of law from breaches committed by Member States (Maurice, 2023, p. 1). In April 2022, the rule of law conditionality mechanism (or budget conditionality mechanism) was activated against Hungary, which involved the risk of the withdrawal of EU funds from the country. This paper evaluates the newest post-accession conditionality tool of the EU, the rule of law conditionality mechanism, through the example of Hungary, and assesses whether this mechanism is more effective than the previous tools of the Union used to address rogue Member State behavior and prevent continuous rule of law violations on a national level. It should be noted that the budget conditionality mechanism is primarily designed to protect the EU budget and not the rule of law. Yet, by forcing a Member State to enact certain domestic reforms, it can (and should) indirectly affect the rule of law of the Member State in question.

The paper starts with a theoretical review of conditionality and Member State compliance. This allows for evaluating the budget conditionality mechanism along the axis of enforcement-management and from the perspective of negative conditionality. Then, pre-existing methods used by the EU to regulate rule of law violations are briefly presented, followed by a detailed analysis of the rule of law conditionality mechanism applied against Hungary by the Commission. Last, the paper discusses whether this mechanism gives new impetus to the EU’s rule of law regulatory activity and, if not, what possibilities lie ahead for the EU.

2 Theoretical background

Navigating between sovereign Member State decisions and the legal obligations outlined by the EU is a regular feature of any EU government. The non-compliance resulting from this navigation can, however, take multiple forms. For instance, occasional noncompliance is not the same as systemic noncompliance (Kochenov & Bárd, 2018). While the former is usually involuntary and a consequence of the nature of EU law or domestic administrative constraints, the latter is a deliberate and ideological choice and, therefore, should be treated differently (Jakab & Kochenov, 2017).

The primary aim of the EU's rule of law tools is to restore compliance with democratic norms and the rule of law in backsliding Member States and to prevent similar developments in other Member States. This kind of monitoring contrasts with the EU's accession conditionality (Sedelmeier, 2011). It breaks with the 'reinforcement by reward' logic and introduces negative conditionality (Blauberger & van Hüllen, 2021, p. 4). There are two dominant approaches in compliance studies concerning how to influence non-compliant behavior (Börzel & Cichowski, 2003): the management approach (Chayes & Chayes, 1993) and the enforcement approach (Downs et al., 1996). The former assumes that noncompliance is not deliberate but accidental because fulfilling commitments is in the primary interest of states. According to this view, the factors behind violations are imprecise treaty language or limited administrative capacities. On the other hand, the enforcement approach supposes voluntary noncompliance, whereby governments disregard legal commitments based on cost-benefit calculations (Priebus, 2022). Therefore, the management approach implies that noncompliance can be addressed through prevention and dialogue, while the enforcement approach relies on sanctions to address such state behavior (Priebus, 2022).

Regarding the EU's tools, Priebus argues that there is one instrument in the Commission's hands, the rule of law conditionality method, that follows the logic of enforcement and thus considers sanctions to be the adequate response to rule violations. All others follow the logic of management, which explains the ineffectiveness of these instruments given the 'mismatch between the sources of rule violations and the remedies chosen' (Priebus, 2022, p. 6). These tools do not sanction voluntary noncompliance but rely on soft measures. They are appropriate for handling involuntary noncompliance but ineffective in cases of deliberate noncompliance (Priebus, 2022). Previous research shows that the Commission's approach mainly falls into the category of managing and not enforcing the fundamental values of the EU because the Commission is still focused on prevention through early detection and dialogue (Priebus, 2022).

Blauberger and van Hüllen analyzed the effectiveness of the rule of law conditionality mechanism at the early stages of the creation of the regulation. In an article about the conditionality of EU funds written in 2021, they revisited the literature on EU enlargement 'to identify a list of scope conditions of effective conditionality' (Blauberger & van Hüllen, 2021, p. 2). They also analyzed the literature on international sanctions and used a combination of these two theoretical angles to start a debate on the possible effectiveness of the EU's financial conditionality first proposed by the Commission in May 2018 (European Commission, 2018). They created five criteria to evaluate the potential effectiveness of the EU's proposed conditionality: the determinacy of conditions (1), the size and speed of sanctions (2), the credibility of conditionality in terms of its likelihood of application (3), the domestic adoption cost dependent on the perceived legitimacy (4), and the domestic context of the application (5) of EU sanctions (Blauberger & van Hüllen, 2021). Based on these aspects, they argue that the proposed rule of law mechanism had the potential to increase the credibility of the Commission, particularly in contrast with the Article 7 procedure, to speed up the process and to burden Member States with a considerable amount of sanctions (Blauberger & van Hüllen, 2021). On the other hand, the regulation at that time did not clearly define and operationalize the deficiencies of the rule of law and left great discretion to the Commission. Their analysis showed, despite such potential, that conditions

and procedures were too vague, which raised questions of legitimacy and doubts regarding success (Blauberger & van Hüllen, 2021). The authors projected that ‘the proposed regulation would reinforce rather than alleviate the deficits regarding the legitimacy of the Commission’s enforcement instruments against democratic backsliding’ (Blauberger & van Hüllen, 2021, p. 13). Table 1 shows the evaluation of the proposal based on the five criteria (see Annex). As Blauberger and van Hüllen analyzed the proposal before the mechanism had been tested, this study evaluates the newly introduced rule of law mechanism based on their criteria and its enforcement potential.

3 Existing rule of law methods of the EU: The rule of law conditionality mechanism as a step towards enforcement?

Before discussing the rule of law conditionality mechanism in detail, a brief assessment of the EU’s other tools for addressing Member State noncompliance is in order. The Justice Scoreboard was introduced in 2013 as part of the European Semester. It clearly lacks enforcement potential, as its main goal is to provide comparative data on the independence, quality, and efficiency of national justice systems (European Commission, 2013).

Infringement procedures are the oldest and most effective tools for monitoring Member State compliance with EU law. This approach has the potential to deal with systemic problems in EU law (see the idea of systemic infringement procedures by Scheppele, 2013), but the Commission has not been eager so far to evolve in this direction. Despite the Commission’s recent attempts to address rule of law violations (see, for example, its infringement action against Hungary over a law that discriminates against people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity), we cannot say that this tool is very effective in this area due to its tardiness (European Commission, 2022d). When a procedure is fully implemented, the damage caused by a specific regulation in a Member State is done and may be irreversible. Some Member States (such as Poland or Hungary) refuse to heed the rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU, so it is safe to say that the Commission has ‘reached the limits of the logic’ when it comes to infringements (Maurice, 2023).

The Article 7 procedure of the EU is supposed to be the most aggressive tool for addressing rogue Member State behavior. The possibility of launching this procedure has existed in the past decade concerning some Member States, especially Hungary, but was not initiated until 2017. The Commission took the initiative and launched the Article 7 procedure against Poland in 2017. However, in Hungary’s case, the European Parliament triggered the process in 2018. The procedure was nicknamed the ‘nuclear option’ prior to its deployment in relation to these two countries (Barroso, 2012). However, it became clear that it was not as dangerous for the Member State targeted by it as it was supposed to be. The main problem is the incapacity of the European Council to proceed with any of the cases. The ineffectiveness of the tool is proven by the fact that only the first paragraph of Article 7 has been activated (clear risk of a serious breach), at which stage sanctions are not allowed. Paragraph 2 would have to be activated (i.e., the determination of the existence of a serious and persistent breach of Article 2 values) for the possibility of imposing sanctions, but this requires unanimity from the European Council. This is unlikely in

either of the two cases because the two Member States would support each other in the voting.¹ Therefore, it is evident that the procedure was halted in both cases.

The Annual Report on the Rule of Law was introduced in 2019 as part of the Annual Rule of Law Review Cycle for regular monitoring. The first Report under this framework was issued by the Commission in 2020 (European Commission, 2020). Although it assesses all EU Member States' rule of law conditions, this tool is still ineffective against deliberate, systemic noncompliance and autocratic regimes. The Report nevertheless can shape certain Member State practices: Hungary submitted its recovery and resilience plan (RRP) in May 2021, but it was accepted by the Commission only in December 2022 as its acceptance was tied to the conditions outlined for Hungary in the 2019 and 2020 country-specific reports (reforms in the areas of EU budget protection and rule of law). It was the Covid-19 pandemic that allowed the EU to tie the rule of law concerns to the budget. The EU set up the €750 billion NextGenerationEU plan in the summer of 2020, which was implemented in the spring of 2021 through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) to support and help Member States to revive their economies. The RRF, endowed with €672.5 billion, is integrated into this plan. Under the RRF, each Member State must draw up a national plan (an RRP) that contains milestones and targets. The Commission and the Council evaluate the achievement of these plans, and the payment of EU grants or loans, which run until 2026, are tied to them (European Council, 2023). The RRFs are especially useful because they contain the element of conditionality, and the amount of money at stake is strong leverage in terms of forcing governments to act in line with EU law. Some members of the academic community have argued that the RRFs have become the EU's main instrument for acting to protect the rule of law (Maurice, 2023).

The operation of the RRF introduces a *de facto* conditionality, but it is not specific to the rule of law. The European Semester and the Annual Report have not shown any tangible results in the past. However, the Commission gave new power to these mechanisms because the recommendations used in these two define the objectives to be met in post-COVID recovery plans, and their implementation is conditional upon the payment of funds (Maurice, 2023). In these mechanisms, however, the bias is towards economic efficiency rather than values, but this is based on the assumption that a more efficient justice system or an effective fight against corruption is more favorable to business and growth. The fact that the RRF is integrated into the EU budget means that the budget conditionality mechanism can be applied if a certain rule of law condition jeopardizes the EU's financial interests. This allows the EU to conduct a new type of rule of law protection strategy and combine different tools to control Member State behavior. This new wave of mixing different financial tools is a step towards enforcement. Moreover, it also increases the perceived legitimacy of the instruments as their tools provide a more transparent monitoring system.

¹ The Polish parliamentary elections of 2023 might change the dynamic and speed up the two ongoing Article 7 procedures. If the Law and Justice government loses, Hungary might lose its ally in the Council, and the possibility of the two countries vetoing each other's procedures would decrease significantly.

Tying the rule of law requirements to the budget was further reinforced by the rule of law conditionality mechanism introduced by Regulation 2020/2092 on a general regime of conditionality to protect the Union budget (Official Journal of the European Union, 2020). This is the only mechanism that could culminate in a complete freezing of EU funds. According to the original idea, the Commission could propose different measures if it detected ‘generalized deficiencies as regards the rule of law’. The regulation that was ultimately adopted replaced the phrase ‘generalized deficiencies as regards the rule of law’ with ‘breaches of the principles of the rule of law in a Member State [which] affect or seriously risk affecting the sound financial management of the Union budget or the protection of the financial interests of the Union in a sufficiently direct way’ in a Member State (Priebus, 2022, p. 9). This change in the original wording transformed the original mechanism that served to protect the rule of law into a mechanism for protecting the EU budget. This means that the mechanism cannot be activated if general rule of law violations are detected but only if the violations directly affect the implementation of the EU budget or the spending of EU money (Priebus, 2022). The measures this tool allows for in the case of non-compliance with the Commission’s requirements are substantial. They include the suspension of payments and commitments, the suspension of the disbursement of installments or the early repayment of loans, a reduction of funding under existing commitments, and a prohibition on entering new commitments with recipients or entering into new agreements on loans or other instruments guaranteed by the Union budget.

4 Hungary and its current affairs with the Commission on rule of law matters: Focusing on the budget conditionality mechanism

The following pages evaluate the effectiveness of the budget conditionality mechanism through the dialogue between the Commission and Hungary.² As mentioned earlier, the instrument itself was introduced in December 2020. However, the procedure against Hungary did not start until November 2021, when the Commission sent a request for information to Hungary pursuant to Article 6(4) of the Conditionality Regulation. The application of the regulation was delayed partly due to Hungary and Poland, which each brought an action before the European Court of Justice for the annulment of the Regulation. They both claimed that the actions outlined in the regulation did not have an appropriate legal basis in the TEU and TFEU, and they also argued that the EU had exceeded its powers in creating such a mechanism. Their endeavors to prevent the adoption of the Regulation were unsuccessful, as the CJEU dismissed both claims. Moreover, the Court even elevated the meaning of the rule of law, as it concluded that Article 2 TEU and its commitment to the rule of law have a legally binding quality (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2022a, p. 264) and the rule of law is an integral part of the EU’s identity (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2022b, p. 127).

In January 2022, Hungary replied to the Commission’s request for information; nevertheless, on 27 April 2022, the Commission officially triggered the conditionality mecha-

² See Table 2 in the Annex for the timeline of events.

nism against Hungary. Hungary received a written notification from the Commission, which raised alarming issues concerning Hungary's public procurement system and the use of EU funds, among other things. (Council of the European Union, 2022a).

On 27 June 2022, Hungary replied to the notification. This reply was amended by two letters, one written in June and another in July by the Hungarian Minister of Justice Judit Varga. Moreover, on 19 July 2022, Hungary also sent an additional letter proposing several remedial measures (seventeen exactly) to address the findings in the notification. Later in July, the Commission sent a letter to Hungary informing the Member State of its assessment and the proposed measures Hungary should take. Hungary was allowed to submit its observations, which it did in August 2022. Despite having contested the findings of the Commission and criticized the proportionality of the measures, Hungary promised further remedies to address the Commission's concerns (Council of the European Union, 2022a). The seventeen Hungarian remedial measures focused on correcting the illegalities and irregularities surrounding the implementation of EU funds by establishing several institutions focusing on decreasing fraud and corruption. Moreover, several measures were introduced to strengthen audit and control mechanisms and make the public procurement system more transparent and effective (Council of the European Union, 2022a).³

On 13 September 2022, Hungary sent the Commission a letter that included clarifications and further commitments under the proposed remedial measures. Although it was not part of this procedure, it needs to be mentioned that on 15 September, the European Parliament accepted a resolution 'on the proposal for a Council decision determining, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded' (European Parliament, 2022a). In this resolution, MEPs called on the Council to speed up Article 7 and initiate its next phase.

On 18 September, the Commission replied to Hungary's efforts in its 'Proposal for a Council implementing decision on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary' (European Commission, 2022a). The Commission found that the remedial measures proposed by Hungary were not fully adequate to address the findings set out in the Commission notification sent to Hungary

³ The seventeen remedial measures in detail are the following: reinforcing prevention, detection and correction of illegalities and irregularities concerning the implementation of Union funds through a newly established Integrity Authority; creating an Anti-Corruption Task Force (by December 2022); strengthening the Anti-Corruption Framework; ensuring the transparency of the use of Union support by public interest asset management foundations; introducing a specific procedure in the case of special crimes related to the exercise of public authority or the management of public property; strengthening audit and control mechanisms to guarantee the sound use of EU support; reducing the share of tender procedures with single bids financed from Union funds; reducing the share of tender procedures with single bids financed from the national budget; development of a single-bid reporting tool to monitor and report on public procurements closed with single-bids; developing the Electronic Public Procurement System (EPS) to increase transparency; developing a performance measurement framework for assessing the efficiency and cost effectiveness of public procurements; adopting an action plan to increase the level of competition in public procurement; training to be provided for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises on public procurement practices; setting up a support scheme for compensating the costs associated with participating in public procurement of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises; applying ARACHNE; strengthening cooperation with OLAF; and adopting a legislative act ensuring enhanced transparency of public spending.

on 27 April 2022. The Commission's proposal contained the suspension of EU funds: in Hungary's case, this amounts to suspending 65 per cent of EU funds (€7.5 billion) allocated until 2027. Moreover, it also prohibited entering legal commitments with public interest trusts for programs implemented in direct and indirect management. The proposal gave Budapest two months to effectively implement the measures it had promised for the suspension to be released/softened.

At this point, reactions to the dialogue (both the Commission's role and the Hungarian remedies) became quite frequent both from other EU bodies and experts from the broader academic community. On 17 November, a press conference was held by co-rapporteur MEPs who were part of the team negotiating the rule of law conditionality regulation with the Member States (European Parliament, 2022e). The MEPs argued that the Hungarian remedies were insufficient. Thus, they expected the Commission to reiterate its September proposal to the Council about suspending the funds. Several criticisms arose concerning the remedial measures as well. Mészáros and Scheppele criticized the Integrity Authority for not being structurally independent and for consisting of political appointees with no real investigatory capacity (Scheppele & Mészáros, 2022a). They also analyzed the prospects of the Anti-corruption Task Force and predicted that it would be able to do very little because its tasks are underdefined in the law (Scheppele & Mészáros, 2022b). The joint report of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Transparency International Hungary, and K-monitor evaluated the proposed Hungarian remedies as follows:

The absolute lack of transparency, public consultations and published impact assessments in the process that preceded the adoption of what was supposed to be the largest anti-corruption legislative package in Hungary in over a decade foreshadowed the contents of the changes. While in some of the above areas, it is possible to identify steps in the direction suggested by the European Union, the Government, when formulating remedial measures, was careful not to introduce changes that would shake the institutional and procedural fundamentals of the captured, illiberal state. (Hungarian Helsinki Committee et al., 2022)

These opinions suggest that the determinacy of conditions, as defined by Blauberger and van Hüllen, is a weak component of the conditionality regulation.

Some MEPs were largely disappointed by the restrictive approach of the Commission in its September recommendation. In a debate in a plenary session on 4 October 2022, the EPP, Greens, S&D, Renew, and GUE/NGL groups took the view that the Commission had not fulfilled its role as guardian of the Treaties. They warned the Commission not to compromise with Hungary and suggested that a stricter catalog of measures towards Hungary was desirable (European Parliament, 2022d). Nevertheless, I argue that the Commission has proven its credibility by remaining quite firm in its opinion about withdrawing money from Hungary, and it remained so as a monitoring institution of the completion of the Hungarian milestones even months after the Regulation was adopted against Hungary. This activism increases the perceived legitimacy of the conditionality mechanism.

On 21 November, MEPs from the EPP group, S&D, Renew, Verts/ALE Group, and the Left group issued a motion for a resolution on the assessment of Hungary's compliance with the rule of law conditions under the Conditionality Regulation and state of play of the Hungarian RRP. The motion argued that the seventeen measures were insufficient to

address the existing systemic risk to the EU's financial interests. Therefore, it called on the Commission to confirm its September proposal and state that the remedies are insufficient. Moreover, it called on the Council to adopt the measures under the Conditionality Regulation, as proposed by the Commission on 18 September 2022, and collect evidence on the effective implementation of the Hungarian remedies before lifting the adopted measures. It also called out the systemic abuse of the unanimity rule by the Hungarian authorities by blocking crucial decisions (see the case of the Ukrainian aid package and the global minimum corporate tax rate below). It called on the Council and Commission to ensure this pressure does not affect their decision regarding the RRF and the rule of law conditionality. Last, the MEPs also highlighted the importance of the fact that final recipients and beneficiaries of EU funds should not be deprived of their money due to deficiencies in the operation of the rule of law in Hungary (European Parliament, 2022b). The EP voted in favor of the motion three days later (European Parliament, 2022c).

On 30 November, the Commission found that Hungary had not progressed enough in its reforms and must meet essential milestones for its Recovery and Resilience funds.

While a number of reforms have been undertaken or were underway, Hungary failed to adequately implement central aspects of the necessary seventeen remedial measures agreed under the general conditionality mechanism by the deadline of 19 November, as it had committed to. These relate, in particular, to the effectiveness of the newly established Integrity Authority and the procedure for the judicial review of prosecutorial decisions. (European Commission, 2022b)

The body reaffirmed its initial proposal to suspend 65 per cent of Hungary's EU funds (€7.5 billion). It endorsed Hungary's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), provided the required milestones are fully and effectively implemented. These are the twenty-seven so-called super-milestones, including the original seventeen remedial measures, ten additional pledges that mainly concern strengthening judicial independence, and standard audit and control measures (European Commission, 2022b). This persistent approach from the Commission suggests that the EU has realized it is facing deliberate noncompliance from Hungary, which can no longer be addressed through prevention and dialogue.

The Economic and Financial Affairs Council scheduled for 6 December 2022 was highly anticipated because of several votes outlined for the day. The Council set out to decide on the proposal for a Council implementing decision on measures to protect the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary. Moreover, the implementing decision of the Hungarian RRP (if the Commission puts forward a proposal) was also expected to be made that day. A legislative package on financial support to Ukraine was also put on the table, as well as a vote on introducing a global minimum level of taxation. That there was such a 'voting package' suggested that the outcome of the budget conditionality mechanism would be subjected to political bargaining. Hungary was hoping for concessions if it did not halt important Council objectives: the Hungarian RRP would receive approval, and the amount of the suspended funds would be decreased, but in return, Hungary would have to support the legislative package against Ukraine and the global minimum level of taxation. Hungary was vocally unresponsive of the latter two initiatives in the weeks preceding the vote. Moreover, the Hungarian Parliament's vote on Finnish and Swedish NATO accession was scheduled for the day after the Ecofin, and

Hungary had refused to support the accession of these countries for a long time despite growing pressure from other European countries. Eventually, at the Ecofin, Hungary vetoed the financial aid for Ukraine, and as a result, the RRP was taken off the agenda (Council of the European Union, 2022b).

At last, the COREPER meeting of 12 December 2022 brought an end to the budget conditionality negotiations. A mega-deal was reached whereby Hungary supported the financial aid for Ukraine and the global minimum corporate tax; only €6.3 billion in EU funds were frozen. The country's RRP – worth €5.8 billion – got a formal green light. However, the money remains frozen until the twenty-seven super milestones are completed. In addition to the super milestones, several 'ordinary' milestones connected to the rule of law were defined, a significant part of which coincide with the seventeen measures required under the conditionality mechanism (Amnesty International et al., 2023, p. 2). Although the authorities are reportedly constantly working on implementing the necessary reforms (the judicial package was approved by the Hungarian parliament at the beginning of May), no formal green light has arrived from the Commission yet (Tamma, 2023).

The budget cuts for Hungary did not stop in the middle of December. On 22 December 2022, the Commission approved the partnership agreement with Hungary for Cohesion Policy 2021–2027 for almost €22 billion. However, the Commission has exerted additional conditionalities through the Partnership Agreements that it negotiates with all Member States at the start of each EU budget cycle, specifying how funds from the EU budget should be spent. The Commission found in its Implementing Decision of the Partnership Agreement with Hungary (European Commission, 2022c) that in relation to several operational programs, Hungary does not comply with the horizontal enabling condition 'Effective application and implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights' due to the lack of judicial independence, the violation of academic freedom, the faults in the Hungarian asylum system and the failure to implement related CJEU judgments, and the anti-LGBTQI+ law (Amnesty International et al., 2023, pp. 2–3). In order to receive these cohesion funds, the Hungarian government has to comply with the four milestones related to judicial independence (that are already a part of the twenty-seven super milestones). These reforms include strengthening the National Judicial Council concerning the powers of the President of the National Office for the Judiciary; strengthening the judicial independence of the Hungarian Supreme Court (Kúria); removing obstacles to references for preliminary rulings to the CJEU; and removing the possibility for public authorities to challenge final judicial decisions before the Constitutional Court (Hegedűs, 2023). Thus, the EU is withholding money from Hungary on three accounts (the conditionality mechanism, the RRP, and the horizontal principles) that cannot be completely separated from each other, and the aspect of the protection of the rule of law is present in all of them. The judicial reform package is already being evaluated by the Commission. If it gets approval, which seems likely at this point, then part of the frozen funds could be unlocked for Hungary at the beginning of 2024.⁴

⁴ The manuscript was closed in October 2023.

5. Is the rule of law conditionality mechanism effective in enforcement?

A certain way of evaluating the direct effects of the rule of law mechanism on the national rule of law violations of Hungary would be to analyze the newly introduced domestic procedures, institutions, and their functioning. At the time of writing, these institutions have only been in operation for a few months. However, certain NGOs have created a written evaluation of Hungary's compliance with the twenty-seven super milestones (Amnesty International et al., 2023). Amnesty International Hungary, the Eötvös Károly Institute, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, K-Monitor, and Transparency International Hungary analyzed the Hungarian government's actions and found that until the end of March 2023, the Hungarian government had fallen short of addressing all concerns related to the rule of law and human rights, thus failing to comply with most of the conditions set out by the EU. Of the twenty-seven super milestones, thirteen had been achieved, seven had been achieved only partly, and seven had not been achieved at that time. The main areas where the remedies seem unsatisfactory are related to the anti-corruption framework, competition in public procurement, judicial independence, the predictability, quality, and transparency of law-making, the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers, academic freedom and the rights of LGBTQI+ persons (Amnesty International et al., 2023). During the evaluation of the results, we should not forget that we are still in the early stages of the application of the reforms; moreover, Hungary is a special case as its status as a liberal democracy is seriously questionable (see, for example, Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; European Parliament, 2022a). This is why going back to our theoretical framework might be useful. For the sake of our analysis, let us take a step back and revisit Blauberger and van Hüllen's criteria, which might help us evaluate the effectiveness of the conditionality mechanism itself from a more general point of view.

As foreseen by the authors, one of the weakest aspects of the rule of law conditionality mechanism is the vague determinacy of conditions. Even though there are extensive references to the rule of law in the regulation, the deficiencies and breaches are not defined. The legal actions a Member State has to take to complete a milestone are clear, but whether those legal remedies will repair the rule of law issues at the national level is not. It is entirely up to the EU institutions to define whether the given country has done enough in a certain policy area. Even though the operation of the budget conditionality mechanism is in its early stages, it seems that the nature of the procedure enables the Member State to react quickly by introducing new institutions and mechanisms, even though many of those might not work properly or have a little tangible effect on the rule of law. Although the conditionality mechanism requires certain modifications within the Hungarian legal system that might decrease corruption or make the public procurement system more transparent, other important areas of the rule of law are not touched by the measures.

It appears Blauberger and van Hüllen were right regarding the speed of the process, but they misjudged the deterring nature of the amount of money that can be frozen under the mechanism. Even though a part of Hungary's EU funds were frozen in December 2022, the government refused to tighten its belt and emphasized that the Commission owes

money to Hungary (Hungary Today, 2023), so they expect the money to come as soon as the country has fulfilled its obligations through the remedies offered. At the same time, the government also belittled the importance of EU funds in its rhetoric, saying it considered them replaceable with FDI (HVG, 2023). It seems that by October 2023, the Hungarian government had accepted that it would have to operate without at least a certain amount of EU funds because even though they are willing to introduce reforms in some areas (such as the judicial system) which will unlock some money for the country, there will certainly be other issues where the Hungarian leadership will not be willing to comply with the conditions set out by the Commission (such as the anti-LGBTQI+ law or academic freedom). Among the authors' criteria, the likelihood of application proved to be greater in the case of this rule of law mechanism than in others, and what is observable during the two-year-long process resonates with the authors' projections. The process seems more straightforward and, thus, easier to apply. Blauburger and van Hüllen were not so optimistic about the perceived legitimacy of the tool due to the lack of systemic monitoring procedures, the problem of targetedness, and the vulnerability of Member States. Even though it is the governments that are sanctioned by the EU withholding funds, in practice, the EU citizens of the given country are indirectly deprived as a result. One example is the freezing of Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe funds for Hungarian universities managed by public interest trusts (Ceran & Guerra, 2023). Nevertheless, the Commission has the potential to strengthen the aspect of legitimacy by focusing thoroughly on monitoring the completion of the milestones. Given how determined it was to enforce the application of the regulation against Hungary, one can hope that it will continue to do so at the monitoring stage of the mechanism as well.

Blauburger and van Hüllen had mixed anticipations about the application context, particularly if the procedure targets 'anti-democratic' governments that are nevertheless members of the EU. They expected a shared EU identity, common institutions, and procedures to increase the EU's direct leverage. So far, it seems that financial punishment has not had the same deterring effect as the prospect of losing the possibility of membership in the pre-accession years. Table 3 shows this mixed picture based on the criteria (see Annex). It reveals that the rule of law conditionality mechanism became less successful during its test run than was foreseen based on the original budget proposal from 2019. However, even though there are still questions surrounding the outcome of the regulation and the direct effects it might have on the rule of law at a national level, what the Commission and EU Member States have achieved in 2022 regarding their willingness to target a particular Member State for its various breaches of EU law and values, is unprecedented. The aspects where the conditionality mechanism undoubtedly proved to be more effective than other rule of law protecting methods are the speed of the procedure (thirteen months have passed between the Commission's first notification to Hungary and the final Council decision), the simple nature of the process (no need for Council unanimity) and the increased credibility of the Commission.

Undoubtedly, the year 2022 has initiated a new practice on the EU's part: using different financial tools as leverage to achieve results in the area of the rule of law. Hungary thus represents a certain kind of 'textbook case' of the EU employing the different types of conditionality at its disposal in an over-encompassing and complementary way.

6 Conclusion

The EU has expanded its rule of law protection toolkit in recent years. Tying the rule of law concerns to the budget has been a bold step forward, and it surely has potential. However, it is early to conclude that the rule of law conditionality mechanism means a breakthrough in the post-accession effectiveness of the EU conditionality so far. It indeed increased the activism and the legitimacy of the Commission, and it also proved that there is room for swift, quicker action within the bloc and that procedures can move forward more quickly when the burden of a qualified majority is not present. However, the EU institutions still struggle to handle rogue Member States, some of which are not classic liberal democracies, and only time will tell whether the quick remedies Hungary introduced under the Commission's pressure will significantly impact the Hungarian rule of law conditions.

The complementary way of applying different conditionality methods could mean a way forward for effective enforcement. If Hungary loses a significant amount of money from the RRF or the cohesion funds due to rule of law concerns, this may have a deterring effect on other Member States in the future. However, rogue governments still have the means of disregarding certain EU commitments that do not fall under the scope of these ongoing procedures. The way forward for the Commission could be to find a balance between economic and legal dimensions in the area of conditionality, step away from its management-oriented, preventive dialogue-focused approach, and identify a firm way to make enforcement more effective. This means that this new type of conditionality should not stop at the stage of withholding money, but the reforms of Member States should be closely monitored by EU institutions to make sure they comply with EU law and respect the rule of law. The EU has a diverse toolkit for the protection of the rule of law in the form of its conditionalities, and it is the long-term, strategically crucial task of EU institutions to ensure their effectiveness.

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Annex

Table 1 Evaluation of the Commission's 2018 proposal for fiscal conditionality

Scope condition	Operationalization
Determinacy of conditions -	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rule of law (precise) vs. 'generalized deficiencies' (vague) definitions backed by references to other sources, but no clear operationalization (→ political discretion)
Size and speed of sanctions+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> non-negligible share of GDP (structural and investment funds) clear timeframe
Likelihood of application +	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> voting rules, majority requirements (number of) actors involved (veto-players) responsiveness (gradual approach)
Perceived legitimacy -	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> possibility of proportional sanctions, but problem of targetedness lack of systematic monitoring procedures de facto unequal affectedness/vulnerability of Member States
Context of application +-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> anti-democratic government, but (still) competitive democracy extremely close bilateral relationship

Source: Blauberger & van Hüllen (2021, p. 13).

Table 2 Timeline of rule of law conditionality negotiations in respect of the EU and Hungary dialogue

Date	Event
27 April 2022	Commission sends a written notification to Hungary pursuant to Article 6(1) of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092
27 June 2022	First reply by Hungary to the Commission's notification
30 June 2022	Hungary submits further information complementing the first reply in the form of a letter
5 July 2022	Hungary submits further information complementing the first reply in the form of another letter
19 July 2022	A third letter from Hungary to the Commission proposing remedial measures to address the findings in the notification
20 July 2022	Intention letter sent by the Commission to Hungary: informing Hungary of its assessment and of the proposed measures Hungary should take
22 August 2022	Second reply from Hungary: certain remedial measures proposed

Table 2 (continued)

Date	Event
13 September 2022	Another letter from Hungary to the Commission: clarifications and further commitments relevant to the remedial measures proposed
18 September 2022	Commission's proposal for a Council implementing decision on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary
24 November 2022	European Parliament resolution on the assessment of Hungary's compliance with the rule of law conditions under the Conditionality Regulation and state of play of the Hungarian RRP
30 November 2022	Commission proposal for an implementing Decision of the Council on the approval of the assessment of the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Hungary
6 December 2022	Economic and Financial Affairs Council - no decision reached
12 December 2022	COREPER meeting - mega-deal
15 December 2022	Council implementing decision (EU) 2022/2506 of 15 December 2022 on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary.

Table 3 Evaluation of the rule of law conditionality mechanism as adopted against Hungary in 2022

Scope condition	Operationalization
Determinacy of conditions +/-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rule of law is defined in the regulation, but too much discretion to the Commission difficult to measure the results of the Hungarian government's remedies
Size and speed of sanctions +/-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> clearer timeframe shorter procedure threat of freezing a huge amount of money – is it deterring?
Likelihood of application +	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lower decision-making hurdles fewer actors to be involved more power to the Commission
Perceived legitimacy +/-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> possibility of proportional sanctions, but problem of targetedness Commission as leader of monitoring procedures de facto unequal affectedness/vulnerability of Member States
Context of application –	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> anti-democratic government, but (still) competitive democracy EU promoting its identity within its own bloc does not help no extra motivation (of membership)

ERZSÉBET CSATLÓS

Hungarian administrative processes in the digital age: An attempt to a comprehensive examination

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Abstract

In a world of sustainable development where digitalisation is among the priorities of all states, the question arises how digital Hungarian public administrative procedure is. The study aims to give an overall insight into the state of affairs in Hungary in individual cases and explore the level of digitalisation by exploring statistics on the clients' habits on the usage of the available digital public service on one hand, just to see how it appears in their everyday, and the level of automatisisation in decision-making on the other, from the aspect of the authority. As a result, when assessing the extent of digital public services in Hungary, the focus tends to concentrate on levels 1–3, and possibly level 4, of digital public services according to a five-stages chart settled as a goal by the European Union in 2002 and also used as reference in the Hungarian Act on e-public administrative services. Numbers demonstrate that the utilization of digital public services, despite their availability, is not as widespread among people as it could be. Also, the study enumerates the emergence of automated decision-making by establishing categories based on the examples found in the very few normative regulations to offer a picture of the status of digitalisation of the Hungarian administrative proceedings. While complete automation is still a distant goal, rapid technological advancements and innovations are pushing the legal framework to keep up.

Keywords: digitalisation; automated decision-making; administration; authority procedure

1 Introduction

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) are concepts that have recently permeated all areas of life. Digitalisation, being an inherent facet of the modern age, can be assessed through various perspectives. The discourse regarding its advantages and disadvantages, as well as its impact on simplifying or complicating our world, remains open for debate (Karajz, 2020). Nonetheless, it remains a factual reality that digitization introduces a plethora of innovations that, to fully reap their evident benefits, unavoidably present challenges not solely to society but also to our legal system and the realm of public adminis-

tration. Under the *Digital Europe programme's* umbrella, the European Commission further advocates for the integration of IT devices and artificial intelligence within public administration. It posits that such integration not only holds exceptional advantages but also yields positive impacts on the environment, as stated in terms of environmental impact (EU's Strategic Agenda 2019–2024). To strengthen the single market, a digital transformation that increases the availability of online public services is therefore necessary, and for this, member states have been invited to redouble their efforts to further digitize public services (Sokol, 2023). Changes are necessary and at the same time inescapable factors in public administration. Technical and social development, such as the emergence of digitization and artificial intelligence, enable or, on the contrary, has already required the use of terms like *sustainability* in the field of public administration for a while (Leuenberger, 2006) and people now use them without really knowing them like digital state, digital administration while States including Hungary are having digital strategies (National Digitalisation Strategy 2022–2023). The state indeed has had a larger data set than ever before during decision-making, and technical development. The online available public services urge the question: How digitalised the Hungarian public administrative procedure? But how precisely such a question can be answered at all?

This study aims to delve into the significance of digitization and the emergence of artificial intelligence, as well as to assess the extent of digitalization within Hungarian public administrative procedures. This will be achieved by initially outlining the fundamental prerequisites for administrative decisions. Subsequently, the study endeavours to elucidate terminology-related issues and, through the analysis of statistical reports and legislative framework, seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of digitalization within Hungarian administrative services.

2 Theoretical frameworks

Under the code of administrative procedures (Act CL of 2016 on General Public Administration Procedures, GPAP), an administrative action is a process when the authority brings a decision either *ex officio* or by request of the client to define a client's right or obligation, to settle certain clients' disputes, to establish a client's infringement of the law, and to verify a fact, status or data, or to keep records, and where it moves to enforce such decisions. Through this process, in respect of, the authority synthesizes its findings and the applicable legal framework to arrive at a resolution and conclusion for the given case, based on the established and substantiated facts (GPAP Section 3). With abundant information available, individuals may form futuristic expectations about implementing a 21st-century digital public administration. To grasp a comprehensive understanding, it is crucial to clarify concepts. Despite the prevalence of familiar terms, literature and legislation lack consistency and occasionally omit these matters. This study relies on the concept of *electronic public administration* as defined in the work of Balázs Budai as it refers to the knowledge-based transformation and rationalized reorganization of the public sector's relationship system, where the use of information communication technology applications, resembling utilities, plays a dominant role in shaping the image of the service provider state and the efficient state (Budai, 2017). *E-government* often used interchangeably with electronic public administration, is a broader concept that encompasses electronic public

administration. However, it also extends to areas that, by their nature, may not fall within the realm of public administration but can be seen as the outcome of the interaction between administration and information communication technologies (Csáki-Hatalovics & Czékmann, 2019; Nagy, 2022) Therefore, e-government aligns with the concept of the *Hungarian digital ecosystem* used in the National Digital Strategy 2014–2020. Electronic public administration is thus a complex domain that, inter alia, includes *electronic public services* towards citizens ensured via *electronic authority procedures*. In Hungary, as Baranyi notes, the milestones of digitalization were established when Act XXXV of 2001 on electronic signatures declared the equivalence of electronic documents to traditional paper formats (Baranyi, 2023). Later, Act CCXXII of 2015 on the General Rules for Trust Services and Electronic Transactions, seems to establish a legal framework for electronic authority procedures but the Act goes beyond addressing individual cases of citizens (*e-administrative authority procedure or external procedure*) and also encompasses areas falling within the responsibilities and competencies of entities involved in electronic administration including the interaction among administrative bodies and authorities (*e-administrative procedures or internal procedures*) (Act CCXXII of 2015 Section 1, Point 17a); Gov. Decree 451/2016 (XII. 19.) Section 1) and regulates the statements, procedural acts and the fulfilment of other obligations in the online sphere as a part of public services provided by the administration (Act CCXXII of 2015 Section 10). However, the Act fails to address the absence of legal definitions.¹ Instead, following the provisions of the 2002 EU strategy, the legislative comments attached to the Act on e-procedures quote the action plan on how to improve the availability of online public services for citizens and also on the rethinking of internal organisation and electronic exchanges between institutions (eEurope, 2002).

The Hungarian legal literature, but mostly because of Act CCXXII of 2015, the fundamental legislation on e-public services also relies on and uses the five-level stages development chart to measure the Hungarian public services from the view of digitalisation (Molnár, 2007; Péterfalvi, 2014) The first and initial step involves the (1) *display of information electronically*, typically through a website. The next stage means (2) a *one-way connection* as citizens can download the necessary administrative forms electronically, but they cannot yet submit them electronically. When documents can be filled out online, checked, and returned electronically with proper identification (Veszprémi, 2018), it is already a (3) *two-way interaction* and interactivity. While personal appearances are not required to initiate a case, clients may still need to visit the authority at least once, often for payment purposes or document collection. The (4) *transaction level* of public services already aims to minimize the citizens' physical contact with the authority; however, human interaction is maintained on the authority's side, and the cases are handled and decided by the human workforce. When no human interaction on either the side of the citizen or the side of the authority is needed because the IT solutions can replace all, (5) *complete automation* is achieved. This is the highest level of e-authority procedures. All levels have sights in the Hungarian public administrative services, although this latter is still relatively rare now. This level corresponds to what is known as an automatic decision-making procedure

¹ The English translation of the Act is based on the unofficial translation found in the Hungarian Legal Database. The trouble with the terms and definition is also reflected in the translation, which was modified by the author of this manuscript to maintain coherency throughout the paper.

in Hungarian authority procedure law which has existed since 1 January 2017 by Section 40 of the GPAP and Section 11 of Act CCXXII of 2015. The term *digitalization* can encompass various meanings, and in the absence of legal guidelines, the boundaries of its usage when associated with public administration are primarily defined by the author's discretion, so it is worth defining what meaning it carries in this study. However, when considering the impact of digitalization on activities and work processes, especially within the context of authority proceedings, it can be characterized by three key elements. First, the level of *work automation*, the substitution of human labour with automated machine tasks. Then, the *digital data transformation* which encompasses the conversion of all data into digital information and vice versa, and the *platform-based coordination*. This aspect involves the utilization of digital networks for algorithmic coordination of economic transactions (Fernández-Macías, 2018). Following a similar concept, the *Hungarian Digital Welfare Programme* highlights the cost efficiency and the availability for citizens as main features of digital administration. Digital administration reaches its pinnacle in the form of digital public service, and its most advanced stage is achieved when human interaction is eliminated on both sides (automated decision-making process). However, it is important to note that this interpretation provides a narrower definition. If any intervention is required, such as citizens submitting additional documents or information, it would extend beyond the scope of automated decision-making but can still be considered a digital administrative procedure under the terms of Sections 40–41 of GPAP, as other relevant phases of the procedure remain in the digital realm. In the context of automation and digitalization, *artificial intelligence* (AI) can be viewed as a process for addressing tasks that typically demand human intelligence, utilizing information communication tools (Kovács et al., 2020; Czékmann et al., 2021). However, a more focused perspective highlights its pivotal role in decision-making, encompassing predictions, recommendations, and decision rendering related to human-defined objectives affecting both real-world and virtual environments (Futó, 2022). This characteristic effectively links AI to the complete automation of administrative authority procedures.

Since 2020, Hungary has also implemented an AI strategy for the period of 2020–2030, with one of its key principles being the 'data-driven service state'. Among its objectives is the advancement of automatic decision-making capabilities. As a result, it becomes crucial to investigate the role of artificial intelligence in official procedures conducted in the digital space and to what extent it influences the merits of decisions. Therefore, the primary objective of this study from now is to get a closer look to assess the level of digitalisation within the Hungarian public administrative authority procedures, meaning the emergence of digitalisation throughout the decision-making process from the start of the procedure till the communication of the decision on the merits to the client.

3 Methods and discussion: Digitalisation in the view of numbers

The digital revolution is seen in the pace of technological change in the economy, driven by a massive expansion of our capacity to store, process and communicate information using electronic devices. The widespread use of digital technologies implies a profound transformation of social, economic and political systems, in the same way as the steam

engine or electricity transformed past societies (Fernández-Macías, 2018). However, this development is based on complex elements and does not transform from zero to a service level of perfection. Indeed, from March 2000, the results of the implementation of the e-Europe programme are measured in the Member States through so-called *benchmarking activities*. The essence of the method is that the results and shortcomings of the Member States are compared with each other using standardized quantitative and qualitative indicators. The examined services are classified on a scale from 1 to 4, on which the highest value, 4 points, is given to the service that makes the entire administration possible online. If the points obtained in this way for each service we added up and compared to the maximum possible score, we get the percentage of the level of development of public services available online (Snijkers, Rothier & Janssen, 2007). Digitalisation is one of the major challenges of our time which has required a reorganisation of both the public administration's approach to citizens and its infrastructure. (Bencsik et al., 2023) Regarding its effective nature, Balázs, Gajduschek and Hoffmann (2020) highlight that despite the extensive amount of literature, there is no generally accepted methodology for measuring the *effectiveness* of public administration. Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), for instance, ranks the countries of the Central and Eastern European Union including Hungary in the bottom third of the scale, particularly in terms of the efficiency of public services (Bencsik & Karpiuk, 2023), although the question arises of what exactly it means in a given country. There are various measurement methods such as DESI, EUROSTAT, GapGemini, etc. (Orbán, 2021). However, for an ordinary citizen, what truly matters is whether official affairs can be handled quickly and easily. Aligning with the concept that a well-functioning state aims to serve its citizens by streamlining their interactions with authorities and minimizing administrative costs (Nagy-Gál, 2014; Józsa, 2016; Fábíán & Stankovics, 2022), the study broadly aims to evaluate effectiveness from the citizens' perspective. The primary focus is their access to information *inter alia* the ability to manage their affairs online, bearing in mind that electronic administration is a right even if it is not an absolute unlimited one (Act CCXXII of 2015 Section 8(1); Baranyi, Homoki & Kovács, 2018). It is essential to note that, in contrast, legal entities within the business sector, as well as public bodies and authorities, are obligated to manage their official affairs electronically unless the law specifies otherwise (Act CCXXII of 2015 Section 9). These entities fall outside the scope of this study due to the distinct nature of their approach. In individual authority proceedings, on the authorities' side, effectiveness is interpreted in the level of reduction of human intervention in favour of IT solutions in decision-making processes.

The first and foremost task after identifying some terms, is to see the numbers on the level of digitalisation. To that end, the official (domestic) statistics seems to be helpful, however, the problems of the lack of clear definitions and the usage of overlapping and unclear terms make it difficult to explore the full picture. Given the absence of a uniform definition for these terms and the dynamic nature of e-administration development, coupled with rapid changes in the five-step public service e-development chart, obtaining precise statistical data on the current state of Hungarian public administration and administrative proceedings is challenging.

Nonetheless, a partial image can be seen below, drawn from the biannual comparative tracking conducted by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office on the percentage change in levels of the digital public services chart established by the 2022 EU action plan (see Figure 1).

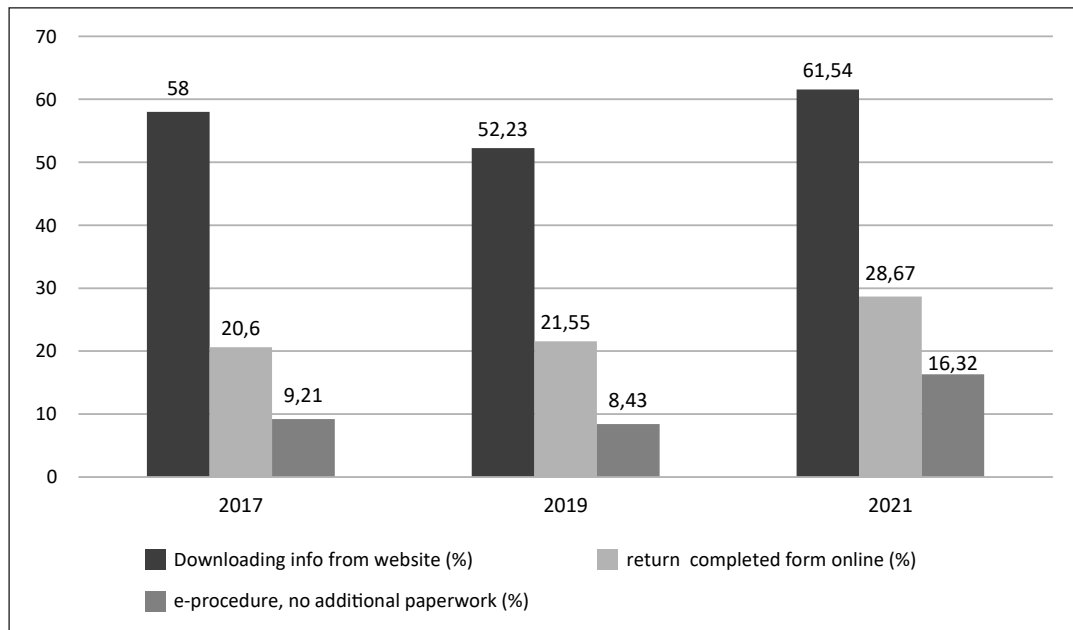


Fig 1 Habits of relying on digital public service over in-person when both are available

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office. <https://statinfo.ksh.hu/Stainfo/haViewer.jsp> (author's edition)

As of 2021, all public bodies have their websites available. However, it is important to note that the availability of their online services may not necessarily match the level of public service they are competent to provide through online procedures. The information provided on these websites is diverse, ranging from local community news and tourist information to organisational details. Additionally, users may also find electronic authority procedure-related information and legal materials.² It is impossible to list all types of legal cases and consider which parts of the process, from the initiation of the authority procedure to the communication of the decision, can be supported or replaced by IT-related solutions. Nonetheless, as depicted in Figure 1, the mere possibility does not necessarily translate into people fully utilizing the available level of digital public services.

The renewed Magyarország.hu portal, a national one-stop shop, launched in February 2020, is gaining increasing popularity. As of January 2022, over 3000 services were published online, including more than 400 fully integrated services using the portal's intelligent online form solution. Since July 2021, the portal's English language interface has been publicly available, and as per the Single Digital Gateway Regulation, 183 service descriptions were accessible in English. (DPA HU, 2022) As of September 2023, more than 4600 types of cases were on display; the development is palpable.³ Accurate comparative

² Public authorities with a website; services available on websites of public authorities; e-government services available on public administration websites: <https://statinfo.ksh.hu/Stainfo/haViewer.jsp?lang=en> (14. 11. 2023).

³ See *Ügyintézés szabadon*. https://magyarorszag.hu/szuf_osszes_szolg_lista (14. 11. 2023).

data is not available, but percentages and ratios on the habits of Internet users people may be seen below and a certain picture can be drawn from the digital nature of public administrative procedures. From this perspective, in 2021, the use of digital public services, despite their availability, is not as widespread among people as it could be as seen in Figure 1.

Between 2006 and 2021, the Hungarian Central Statistical Office measured the use of e-public administration portals according to the number of Internet users (Figure 2), to see how often Internet users use the available e-options in cases when there is an e-alternative to contact the public administrative bodies online, use the website to gain information on procedures, use it to download forms established to initiate a new procedure or use the available portal to submit the filled in forms online.

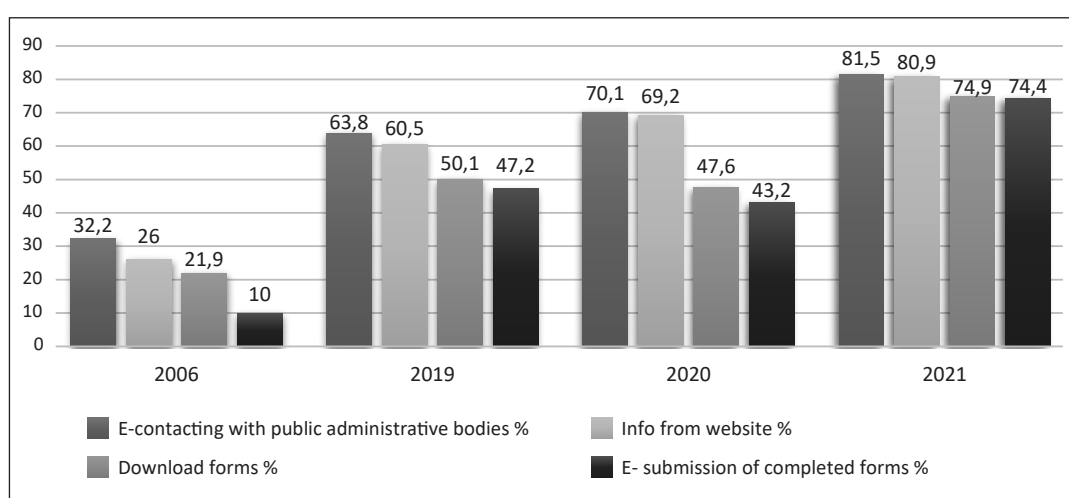


Fig 2 Habits of using e-public administration with the percentage of all Internet users

Source of data: Hungarian Central Statistical Office https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/ikt/hu/ikt0020.html (author's edition)

When including the first year of measurement in the comparison with the most recent data, a clear increase is evident in the figures, with a slightly more significant growth rate observed from 2020, attributed to the rapid challenges of the Covid era. Due to the lockdown and curfew era, along with moving to telework to minimise exposure of public servants to the virus and to ensure the continuity of public services in many places of the world (SIGMA 2020), the significance of e-services, enabling individuals to handle affairs from the comfort of their homes, has increased. Necessity has underscored that the most common administrative services have become efficiently addressed online, and claims can be submitted electronically (Ritó & Szabó, 2021) It is worth noting that when analysing the Visegrad Group (V4) countries, this group including Hungary outperformed the EU average during the COVID era. Therefore, it is expected that they will continue to make rapid progress in their digitalisation efforts (Esses et al., 2021). On the other hand, in the context of the entire EU, Hungary ranks below the EU average in all areas when assessing Member States' levels of digitalisation in 2022 (DESI HU, 2022).

In 2022, data related to specific usage levels and complex activities that characterise the use of e-public administration portals cannot be directly compared to data from previous years. This is due to a change in the subject of the measurements. The most significant change is the individual column of the tax declaration. It is a procedure that is obligatory for everyone with a taxable income each year. Based on the regularly reported data by the employers, the tax authority automatically, without special request, prepares the draft tax declarations and with the help of an Online Form Filling Application (ONYA) since 2019 for those who have client portal identification,⁴ tax declarations can be submitted online, and as can be seen, the majority of the tax declarations were submitted online in 2022⁵ (Figure 3). Taxation is, indeed, a success story, particularly in areas of law (Act CXVII of 1995 Sections 12/C and 48; cf. Nagy, 2006) where AI is already aiding processes, especially in situations where the numerical nature of the data is prominent. In this context, digitalisation, especially AI, currently serves as a complement rather than a substitute for human intervention in general (Futó, 2020).

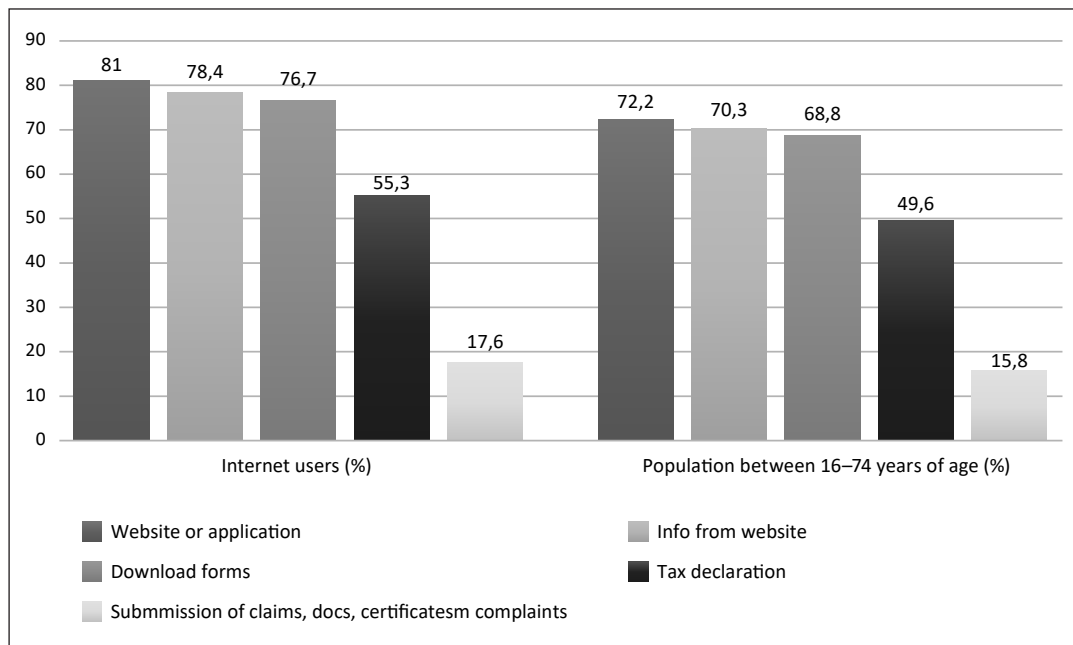


Fig 3 Habits of using e-public administration with the percentage of Internet users and the main age group (17-64) in 2022

Source of data: Hungarian Central Statistical Office https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/ikt/hu/ikt0020.html (author's edition)

⁴ English language website is available at <https://ugyfelkapu.gov.hu/registracio?lang=en> (14. 11. 2023).

⁵ It is also possible to request the paper format to be sent as a regular mail. Only Hungarian language website is available at <https://onya.nav.gov.hu/#!/login> (14. 11. 2023).

The European Commission has been monitoring the digital development of Member States since 2014. It publishes evaluations based on the Digital Economy and Society Development Indicators (DESI) established in 2015, which include measuring the level of digital public services (Decision (EU) 2022/2481). According to the surveys, significant progress has been made in the field of digital public services in Hungary on the demand side of e-government: in 2021, 81 per cent of the internet users had already tried to access online public administration services at some point, compared to 64 per cent in 2019, and thus exceeded the 2021 figure EU average of 65 per cent. However, the quality and completeness of the services provided to citizens is still relatively low. It is also notable that even though Hungary performs well in terms of broadband connectivity, there is a notable weakness in human capital; as for basic digital skills, Hungary falls below the EU average. (DESI HU, 2022; Budai, 2022) However, recent data from Eurostat Information Society indicators in 2022 reveal a significant increase in the percentage of individuals in Hungary using the Internet to download official forms from public authorities and to send in filled in forms (DPA HU, 2022; Soós, 2023).

What is not covered and lacks measurable information is the automated decision-making process, which represents the highest level of digitalisation. Therefore, the study delves deeper into decision-making processes that involve reduced or eliminated human intervention. This experience is often more pronounced from the perspective of the administration rather than that of the citizen whose individual case is dealt with. Currently, there are no available statistical data like those mentioned earlier. Consequently, the study is constrained to the examination of specific legal provisions. To explore this dimension of the digital landscape, textual empiricism is applied using the current legal framework (National Legal Database) to analyse and discern the characteristics of Hungary's level 5 digital public services.

4 Full automation of the authority procedure

In Hungarian legal practice, the method of decision-making without human intervention has been in place since 1 January 2017. This procedure represents the highest level of development in electronic administration. It can be applied both on request and in cases of *ex officio* procedures (Act CCXXII of 2015, commentaries to Section 11). The authority conducting e-administrative procedures is required to publish the methodology and essential rules of the applied decision-making procedure on its website and personalised administration interface. With this information, after electronic identification, the client can submit their request through the electronic form provided by the electronic administration body. In cases of automatic decision-making, the electronic administration body makes its decision based on available data and data obtained through automatic information transfer, all without human intervention, and communicates the decision to the client. The legal requirements for fully automated decision-making, much like the dynamic evolution of technology, have undergone multiple changes, expansions and clarifications. Departing from previous uniform regulations, as of July 2023 by Act LX of 2023, legal provisions now differentiate between two types of automatic decision-making procedures initiated on request, contingent on whether the request was submitted electronically or through other means.

A *fully automatic procedure* is established under the scope of Act CCXXII of 2015 when the claim is submitted online, the decision-making requires no deliberation, and the data essential for handling the case are either readily available to the system in a format suitable for automated processing or acquired through automatic information transfer. In such a procedure, the elucidation of facts, the formulation of a position on the merits of the decision, and other decisions pertinent to the administration of the procedure occur without human intervention, culminating in the closure of the procedure. Following this, the system is responsible for communicating with the client. It is worth noting that due to a recent legislative amendment, the administering body must inform the client if the decision was made through an automatic decision-making procedure. This supplements the existing information-sharing obligation on the part of the authority, which was previously associated with designating the legal provision establishing the authority for the procedure. Additionally, the responsible body that ensures the IT framework for electronic administration must continue to publish the methodology and essential rules of the automatic decision-making process on the personalised administration interface and the administration interface used in the case of providing the electronic route. This is a crucial provision for safeguarding the client's procedural guarantees. This type of (absolute) automatic decision-making procedure is precluded if it is prohibited by law or government decree in the given case. However, other decisions and notifications necessary for administration can be made without human intervention even if the procedure is not executed through automatic decision-making by the electronic administration body (Act CCXXII of 2015 Sections 10 (3)–(4)). The application condition for this type of procedure, in this case, is set by the GPAP, with the subjunctive requirement being the absence of an adverse client.

On the other hand, GPAP allows the procedure regulated by the law to direct the case to an automatic decision-making procedure even if the claim was not submitted electronically. The conditions for this include the provision by law or government decree, the availability of all data to the authority on application submission, the decision not requiring consideration and the absence of a client with an adverse interest (GPAP Section 104 (6)). In such cases, there is an evident form of human interaction concerning the acceptance of the application, creating a link between the *fully automatic procedure* and the *summary procedure*. The distinction lies primarily in the complexity or simplicity of the case, as well as the timeframe available for administration. Examples of registrative acts generated in the case of personally submitted applications can illustrate this type of procedure, as highlighted in the legislative commentaries, such as the applicant for a residential address card issued at the *government window*, a general authority that, among others, ensures a *one-stop-shop* forum for clients (Veszprémi & Barta, 2019).

Following the legislation in force, the vast majority of cases are procedures *relying on data provided from authentic public records*.

4.1 Automated decision-making procedures relying on data provided by public records

Registering or changing data in authentic public records or the issuance of any sort of data confirmation, even though atypical in the form of a decision-like document requires authority proceedings, including all the necessary procedural safeguards (GPAP Section 7).

The public credibility of these records necessitates the presence of thorough and *reliable facts* that can be treated quality data (Hofmann, 2023) upon which data changes in the record are based. Public records play a crucial role in confirming rights and obligations. Furthermore, the electronic nature of these registers makes it inevitable that the advantages of digitalisation are exploited to enhance their completeness and ease their maintenance and updates (Kovács, 2021).

In situations where data are readily available or obtained by the authority through automatic information transfer, the authority is legally bound, and the decision is reached through a data comparison process. This typically entails the client applying for a certificate and providing the necessary identification and application data through an online interface. The decision can then be based on a data match with the authentic information stored in the public records. Public records are deemed authentic, and the data they contain hold legal status as factual information (GPAP Section 97(2)). The option of automatic decision-making in cases like applying for an official certificate of social security status during the authority procedure when the certificate is a precondition to the application for certain aid appears to be a notably customer-friendly solution (Gov. Decree 44/2019. (III. 12.) Section 3). Nonetheless, an intriguing development related to certain official certificates is the necessity of submitting applications in person (e.g. Gov. Decree 301/2009 (XII. 22.) Sections 2(8) and 118/C; Gov. Decree 384/2016 (XII. 2.) Sections 17/A and 27(1), (4), Gov. Decree 331/2006 (XII. 23.) Section 20/A; Gov. Decree 327/2011 (XII. 29.) Section 10(4)), even in shocking cases like claiming for a parking card for disabled persons (Gov. Decree 218/2003. (XII. 11.) Section 10/A). In the case of certificates, this requirement is understandable due to their specific content elements, such as photographs (Gov. Decree 326/2011 (XII. 28.) 10(1a)). However, there are instances where it might be justified to move away from in-person procedures in favour of a more client-friendly approach. Notably, Hungarian jurisprudence provides an example where automatic decision-making procedures for official certificates were briefly allowed but subsequently repealed by the legislator.⁶

4.2 Simple data changes in public records by automated decision-making

In certain cases, the concept of automatisisation becomes truly evident, where data changes in one database can automatically initiate changes in another database due to their inherent interconnectedness. This practical approach is exemplified by the upcoming real estate registration procedure law. The new rules provide the possibility to remove from the register any right or fact whose enforcement is subject to a legal deadline if that deadline has elapsed. Additionally, if the parties can determine the termination deadline based on the law and the deadline set by the parties and indicate in the registration has already passed, or if it can be established beyond doubt that the holder of rights like usufructuary, widow-

⁶ E.g. Gov. Decree 19/2009. (I. 30.) on the implementation of the provisions of Act XL of 2008 on natural gas supply, Section 106/A [until 31. 08. 2021]; Act CXXXIII of 2005 on the rules of personal and property protection, as well as private detective activity, Section 8(2b) [until 03. 12. 2020]; Gov. Decree 72/1996. (V. 22.) on the exercise of water management authority, Section 5(13a) [until 31. 12. 2019].

hood, maintenance, life annuity, or care rights, as well as the right of use, has passed away, the law allows for their removal from the real estate register or the personal data and address register, based on the data extracted from it. On the contrary, as in the case of ownership data, such automatic modification will have resulted from *ex officio* automatic decision-making only in very few issues (Gov. Decree 179/2023 (V. 15.) Sections 154(6) and 135(4)).

In other cases, the client is either required to initiate the process in person, and then the case is decided in an automatic decision-making process (Gov. Decree 304/2009 (XII. 22.), 2§ (1), (3); Gov. Decree 326/2011 (XII. 28.) Section 1/D(5); Gov. Decree 146/1993 (X. 26.) Section 18(3a)), or they can submit their claim online to modify a married name for instance (Act I of 2010 Section 63(11)), or they can do both as in the case of claiming a Covid vaccination certificate (Gov. Decree 244/2023 (VI. 22.), Section 7(1)).

4.3 Automated decision-making in simple cases

In cases that meet the conditions of the so-called summary procedure, where there is only one possible legal solution and no fact-finding or evidentiary actions are required based on available information, the decision-making and communication of the decision must be completed within eight days. Technology now enables the substitution of human labour for certain basic jurisprudential tasks like these. In the case of maternity aid, for example, as it is granted to every mother as a basic allowance, the application submitted electronically is processed by the requested body through automatic decision-making (Gov. Decree 223/1998 (XII. 30.) Section 24(5a)).

However, it is more illustrative to see the difference in the application for travel reimbursement support related to specific health services. Prior, to visiting the specialist, the patient had to then pay another visit to the family doctor with the travel tickets to get the certificate to have the reimbursement done by the health insurance authority. Instead, one simply needs to inform the specialist of the support request, which the doctor records in the system. The electronic request for travel reimbursement support is processed by the health insurance authority through an automated decision-making procedure. This procedure takes into account the distance between the place of residence or stay and the location of the healthcare provider, as well as the established fee rates, as defined in the matrix. The assessment considers whether the journey was made by car or public passenger transport. If public transport was used, the travel discount applied during the trip must be declared when the claimant applied for the support. The health insurance authority verifies the entitled discounts based on available records. If the data in the register and the insured's declaration contradict each other, the health insurance body will consider the higher discount rate to which the insured is entitled according to the provisions of the law (Act LXXXIII of 1997 Section 61(6); Gov. Decree 217/1997 (XII. 1.) Section 11).

It can be considered one of the most automated procedures, particularly in more complex cases such as the *ex officio* procedure for imposing an administrative fine for violations of the Road Traffic Act. This procedure is triggered by violations documented through recordings made and transmitted with a technical device as specified in a separate law (Act I of 1988 Section 21). In 2016, the Intelligent Road Camera Network, consist-

ing of both variable and fixed complex traffic control points, and an associated data processing system, was introduced (Ritó et al., 2018) This network is capable of documenting various violations of traffic rules (Act I of 1988 Section 21(1) a)–c); e–g)), through an electronically deployed, automatically operating road inspection system and inspection equipment that does not require continuous operator supervision. Essentially, they create records by capturing what occurred in the form of a series of digital still images with an adjustable image recording frequency. Since these devices are certified measuring instruments, they should be considered error-free affecting the measurement results until proven otherwise (Act XLV of 1991 Section 13(3)). The log (record) includes the following information: equipment identifier (quasi-executive authority), person handling the equipment identifier, log-in and log-out start and stop times, recording location (encoded, in text, or with GPS coordinates, recorded on the image recording for determining the inspection location), as well as the identifier and date of the photo recording(s) that provide evidence of the violation of the legal provision. Within 12 hours after being electronically recorded, all images captured by the control equipment used to document violations are subject to administrative fines, along with the relevant parameters (such as control device settings) and are transmitted electronically to the data transmission system linked to the IT system of the police department responsible for control tasks. Furthermore, the technical configuration of the system must adhere to several criteria to ensure that it provides accurate data that can be considered proven facts. (Decree of Minister of Economy and Transport 18/2008 (IV. 30.) Section 5(1)). This, in turn, ensures that the authority has legally obtained the evidence available and that procedural guarantees are upheld in the technical solution, mapping to the rules governing procedural actions.

In cases involving violations related to toll payments, a similar principle is applied. Recordings that serve as the basis for determining the legal consequences are obtained from the electronic system (UD system as of Act LXVII of 2013 Section 2(17)), which facilitates toll declaration, assessment, and collection, as well as the monitoring of legal usage of elementary road sections subject to tolls. The authority enforces violations of rules concerning toll payments for the use of toll road sections, proportionate to the distance travelled (Act I of 1988 Sections 21(1) h) and 21/A(3a)). The National Axle Weight Measurement System uses its data capabilities to not only support inspection tasks related to compliance with regulations on the maximum permissible total weight and axle load of road vehicles but also to offer comprehensive support for road traffic inspections. Additionally, it provides data for the inspection activities carried out by state tax and customs authorities and is integrated with the UD system. Through a direct data connection, the UD system forwards relevant data to the National Weighing System. This includes images captured of the vehicle in question, along with its official markings, vehicle registration number, nationality, detection location, and time. These data form the basis for subsequent procedures. The traffic authority may initiate *ex officio* actions, such as removing a vehicle from traffic, if, for instance, the National Axle Weight Measurement System identifies a vehicle operating without the mandatory motor vehicle liability insurance coverage mandated by law. If the conditions outlined in general administrative regulations are met, this removal from traffic occurs through an automated decision-making process (Act I of 1988 Section 21/K and commentaries).

In such procedures, the synergy of multiple factors can be observed. Various procedural actions and evidentiary facts come together to complete the fact-finding and decision-making processes in the digital realm. This marks the inception of a new sub-chapter, particularly regarding atypical decisions. Although to a minimal extent, the exercise of discretion can also be noted, especially when determining the amount of the fine. The content of the notes obtained through data transfer can be attributed to the source of evidentiary acts for clarifying the facts, but the key question pertains to the description of the logical operations leading to the decision. In all cases, the application of the automated decision-making procedure hinges on the condition that the authority has no discretion. In other words, a legal decision is what can conclusively resolve the case on its merits. It can be said that the formula is quite straightforward: based on the available data and the subsequent alignment with legal provisions, there is a single solution to each case. The decision-making process relies on a linear logical model.

4.4 Automated decision-making with profiling

The decisions discussed thus far have relied on exact facts from public records or electronic evidence that can be deemed authentic. However, there is an area of automation where the system itself predicts future behaviour based on specific characteristics and makes decisions based on assumptions in this regard. Profiling essentially constitutes a form of risk assessment, involving the automated identification of correlations within databases and their interpretation to group or categorise specific individuals or entities based on shared characteristics. This categorisation then allows for the identification of other similar individuals or entities (Pataki et al., 2017). Profiling aims to provide a reliable prediction based on data, often indirectly linked to the individual. However, it typically relies on statistical data to draw correlations between databases and data. These conclusions can then be projected onto an individual or identified as a member of a group (Gäckle, 2020). It is important to note that profiling does not address the ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ of these conclusions (Hildebrandt, 2008) as they are technical questions related to the algorithms used. As a result, the outcomes of profiling should be treated as rebuttable presumptions rather than facts. The factual accuracy and truthfulness of these conclusions are highly debatable. In our current legal system, there are no examples of decisions being made solely through profiling in an automatic decision-making procedure, within the conceptual framework of this study. AI is mainly used for communication and information sharing to replace public servants (Marsovszki, 2022; DPA HU, 2022). In 2022, nearly half of the 354,693 chat conversations initiated on the *Government Customer Line* interface were successfully concluded by customers using the artificial intelligence-supported system. The *AI-assisted communication assistant* (chatbot) addressed 38.5 per cent of the questions posed on this channel (600,366 in total). Additionally, it facilitated the tasks of public servants in 59.5 per cent of cases by offering answer suggestions. Only 2 per cent of the remaining questions necessitated full responses from public servants (Ministry of Interior Statistics, 2022)

5 Results

In summary, based on the available information and after clarification of terms and investing efforts to see a picture, when assessing the extent of digital public services in Hungary, the focus tends to concentrate on levels 1–3, and possibly level 4, of digital public services and numbers demonstrate that the use of digital public services, despite their availability, is not as widespread among people as it could be. Generally, digitalisation currently complements rather than replaces human interaction, offering significant relief, particularly in individual procedural acts, but not yet dominating the overall official procedures resulting in public services. Full automation is not widespread unless it constitutes a separate measurement level. Among the priorities of the national digitalisation strategy for achieving a digital state is the continuous improvement of the quality and scope of digital public services, both domestically and internationally. This includes the incorporation of artificial intelligence-based solutions and automatic decision-making to achieve the most accurate digital understanding of customer intentions, ultimately aiming for the automation of processing and decision-making in the medium and long term, with minimal or no human intervention. However, at the moment automated decision-making is only available in simple cases and mostly relies on pure data matches with authentic public records.

The central concept in the automated decision-making system is *data* (Kiss, 2021), accessible in the form of databases and generated in connection with the procedure and this focal point makes it possible to avoid the presence of the client as well as the non-necessity of human intervention in the majority of the cases. It undergoes a series of diverse operations, shaping it in a manner that leads to a substantive decision within the legislative environment that upholds procedural guarantees in line with the rule of law – similar to human decision-making. The pursuit of simplicity must not compromise the legality of decisions and the decision-making process. Additionally, safeguarding citizen data and information, especially in terms of cybersecurity, should be re-evaluated. Furthermore, as Hoffmann describes, the utilization of IT development should not become an Achilles' heel for the system (Hoffmann, 2023). As the current state of affairs, the legal remedy against an automated decision is a relatively neglected area of legislation (GDAP Section 42; Czékmann & Czibrik, 2023). This assumption likely stems from the belief that, at this level of exploiting automatisations, the need to apply for a review is not significant. For instance, upcoming changes in the Real Estate Registration Act provide the opportunity to register a change of ownership within the framework of an automatic decision-making procedure, contingent upon meeting numerous conditions. However, this is not applicable if one of the affected persons is a minor under guardianship, or if the person in question is no longer legally competent at the time of submitting a claim (Gov. Decree 179/2023 (V. 15.) Section 235 (4); (7) from 1. 2. 2024).

6 Conclusions

The study aimed to provide an understanding of what digitalisation and the emergence of artificial intelligence mean in the context of authority decisions made in individual cases

and the level of digitalisation in Hungarian public administration. While complete automation is still a distant goal, rapid technological advancements and innovations are pushing the legal framework to keep up.

The study began by clarifying the interpretation of digitalisation in official procedures, emphasising that there is no universally accepted dogmatic background or conceptual system in legislation or the legal literature. It provided a comprehensive overview of the digitalisation level of administrative authority procedures in Hungarian public administration at present, emphasising that customer-oriented services are primarily measured by information availability, electronic contact options and electronic request submission, rather than the automation of the procedure itself.

Next, the study examined automatic official procedures as the highest degree of digitalisation and e-administration. It delved into the capabilities of automation in decision-making mechanisms but noted the absence of statistical data for drawing general conclusions. While automation has been a legal option in Hungary since 2017, its dominance in official procedures is not significant compared to other case types. Automation is most commonly used in case groups where decisions rely on data from authentic public records. Regarding more complex decision-making mechanisms that involve electronic fact production without human intervention, the study noted their limited current scope but anticipated future growth.

Overall, the study provided insight into the state of digitalisation and automation in the procedures of Hungarian public administration.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe: De-homogenising the abstract category of ‘migrant’

Melegh, A. (2023). *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe: A Global Historical Sociological Analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i1.1274>

Racial, and all social categorisation for that matter, bears a ‘risk of reification, of reducing and distorting the plurality and diversity of a person’ (Kurzweily & Escobedo, 2021b, p. 2). This process, which we describe as having a violent nature (Kurzweily & Escobedo, 2021b), has material consequences (Jenkins, 1983; 2000). It constructs and shapes people (Simmel, 1971/1908; Hacking, 1992); it makes them recognizable (Butler, 1997). During a study on social categorisation in the migration process in present-day South Africa, we observed that the words ‘migrant’ or ‘foreigner’ are as abstract as any other category such as ‘black,’ ‘white,’ ‘European,’ or ‘Portuguese’ (Kurzweily & Escobedo, 2021a). They are constructed contextually, situationally, and through people’s interactions and transactions (Barth, 1998; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2000; Brubaker, 2004). However, we also observed that when given the actual opportunity to tell their stories and be listened to (Watts, 2008), those coded as ‘migrants’ or ‘foreigners’ can ‘oppose reductive categories and negotiate the interpretation of themselves as complex individuals’ (Escobedo et al., 2021, p. 19). After publishing our study in South Africa in 2021, I started engaging with my own life story and migration experiences, only to realise that, like categories, stories also vary across space and time. Herewith I employ *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe* (Melegh, 2023, hereon *The Migration Turn*) to retell my own experience, ‘on the ground,’ as someone ascribed the abstract category of ‘migrant.’ In other words, I apply the ideas proposed by this book to illustrate how the ‘migration turn,’ as understood here, has restructured my life and experience, while at the same time, although only to a certain extent, de-homogenise said category.

I was born in Peru in the 1980s, during the initial phase of the migration turn. As a child, I witnessed what a political, economic, and social crisis meant. I remember the armed conflict between a failed state and the subsequent authoritarian one, and those organisations that the state classified as terrorist. It was in the 1988–1991 transition to Fujimori’s neoliberal project when my father experienced a bomb attack that, as far as we know, only resulted in his present hearing impairment. It was during this same period that his brother, a former military officer, got shot as a result of three different clashes with the Shining Path group in Huanta, an Andean town among those with the highest

number of casualties (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2003). Blackouts, shootouts, car bombings, the cholera epidemic, and more bad news were rapidly encroaching upon us. *Zona roja*, or 'red zone,' became a common way to refer to Peru, or at least to parts of the country. Despite this dire situation, my parents, at the time underpaid (US\$ 80/month each, as they recall) young medical doctors employed in exploitative occupations, made sure that we enjoyed the occasional family trip in my father's old Volkswagen beetle through an Andean 'red zone' of outstanding landscapes. We had a happy childhood. Others, unfortunately, were not as lucky.

Only in my adulthood have I been able to truly grasp the dimensions of the crisis and conflict we lived through. However, I have not yet been able to fully comprehend how much more pernicious this had been for the various ethnic and linguistic populations with pre-colonial roots, as they continued to be othered in their own land (Portocarrero, 2010; De la Cadena, 2012; Drinot, 2014; Escobedo, 2016). Ever since, generations of Peruvians have crowded migration offices, flights to the United States, Spain, Italy, and Japan, and bus rides to Chile and Argentina. That was the beginning of Peruvian mass migration.

The early 2000s would be the stage of a more intense migration wave. By 2009, almost a quarter of a million of Peruvians would leave every year not to come back (INEI et al., 2018, p. 23). It was in 1999 when, still a teenager, I left, first to the United States, then to Germany, Poland, Mexico, South Africa, and Romania, where I currently live. Abroad, I did not witness the gradual inflow of Peruvian returnees that began in 2010. Neither did I see the first steady, and then hastened, arrival of more than a million Venezuelan immigrants and asylum seekers in major Peruvian cities. Nor am I taking part in the most recent departure of more than 415,000 Peruvians (Pighi Bel, 2023), more than in the 2006–2009 peak (interestingly also the period when, according to Melegh, globalisation peaked), or in the debate developing around this phenomenon. What I did see, and experience was what it was like to be a non-white (or brown, as I say today) Peruvian, or 'non-white immigrant,' as I am now labelled both abroad and in Peru, for a little over half of the forty years of the global migration turn. Our situation today is certainly not that which followed 9/11, or before 2016, when the EU, the Schengen space, the UK, and several other territories started granting Peruvians visa-free movement.

Melegh understands 'migration turn' as the substantial increase in the intensity of emigration and immigration because of globalisation, as the wheel that enables the further marketisation of societies, and as the effect of the dynamism of migration as a discourse and category, one that, as we said before, actively changes meanings across time and space. One of his key ideas is that during the migration turn discursive blocs were formed within different states: Those that portray themselves as open to migration, those that support strict border measures, and those that call into question marketisation and market relations due to their perceived cultural and social consequences. Following this, I now compare my migration experiences in Germany, Poland, and Romania, in relation to these blocs, to expose how abstract the category 'migrant' can be – one of Melegh's intentions – when engaging with the individuality, complexity, and humanity of those categorised as such.

I moved to Germany in August 2001, two weeks before 9/11, and four years before Merkel started making proper institutional and discursive changes to increase tolerance towards migration, what would later develop into *Willkommenskultur* and mark the begin-

ning of what Melegh (2023, p. 217) describes as ‘a historical-political bloc that made use of migration as a demographic and market tool’ since the 2010s. Preceding Merkel, the private university I attended had integrated ‘international’ into their name and promoted itself as a symbol of internationality, inter-disciplinarity, and private and elite higher education. Re-evaluating it through Melegh’s lens, however, this institution may as well be seen as part of a network of market institutions that used migration as a demographic and market tool, and in this way reproduced global inequalities.

Most of the students were from Bulgaria and Romania – both joined the European Union in 2007. To my admiration, many of them had high performance and results, were highly proficient in German and other Western European languages and had good knowledge of the channels of labour mobility in Germany and across transnational academic and non-academic institutions. At the same time, and to my surprise, most of them would often articulate a dichotomic narrative where their countries of origin were ranked lower and as unpreferred destinations. Melegh would tie a case like this one to the idea of unequal exchange resulting from the larger gains of having generations of highly qualified human resources move westwards as compared to the low social redistribution of the benefits of foreign capital moving eastwards. Something similar occurred with other, coincidentally almost always, non-Western representations on campus. After reading *The Migration Turn*, I started wondering whether whenever the cigarette or snack vending machines were vandalised on campus and no German name appeared on the list of student-suspects this would not have been the work of someone challenging unequal exchange rather than an isolated event. However, a realisation I did have after reading the book is that my choice to sidestep ‘migration’ and the globalised labour market by trying to ‘live my life’ in Germany after university had challenged said concepts more than the vandalism of a vending machine ever did. Hence the subsequent series of ‘punishments’ I had to endure at the hands of police and migration officers, security personnel at night clubs, and a public in continuous denial. Surveillance, the denial of entry, arbitrary interrogations, false accusations, and the like became routine in what I could now describe as their way to restore what was ‘out of order’ (Berry et al., 2017, p. 546).

My first year in Poland was completed in 2008, a period when Peruvian migration and globalisation both peaked. By the year 2014, when I left that country after completing two master’s and one doctoral degree, I had also endured a series of physical xenophobic attacks, one of which had impacted my income, social relations, and sport performance (for more, see Escobedo, 2022). After reading Melegh and revisiting the seven years I spent in Warsaw, I, however, have come to a striking realisation. Before therapy, which I started in 2022, I would have mostly described my experiences there in a victim-perpetrator dichotomy. After therapy, I simply dropped that discourse. However, after *The Migration Turn*, yet another dimension was added to my perspective, allowing me to see that my former aggressors and I were both somehow victims and we were simultaneously fighting the same thing, rather than each other. In Germany, I was primarily injured by epistemic injustice and institutional racism. In Poland, my aggressors and I were both targeted by this injustice at a transnational level: for very different reasons, neither of us was following ‘the plan’ to remain within the structures of ‘migration’ and the ‘globalised labour market.’ Instead, we were, once again, falling ‘out of order’ (Berry et al., 2017, p. 546). My aggressors’ racism, manifested in their attitudes and behaviours, was what they adopted

in the absence of a more hospitable state-guided cultural and narrative repertoire in the face of ‘migrants’ and ‘migration,’ fuelled by the perception of loss of social and job security, the increase of marketisation, and the decline of non-market-related social institutions.

Like in Germany and other states where the pro-migrant discursive bloc has taken precedence in the past decades, Romania’s elites, and mostly the urban middle classes approach migration from a utilitarian perspective, and from this stance they support market transformation and open borders. In the face of a labour shortage, and other demographic challenges, they conceive immigration as cost-efficient and advantageous in fulfilling a necessity while making the country wealthier. When starting our research at the Transylvanian Hungarian town of Gyergyóditró/Ditrău, notorious due to an incident where two Sri Lankan workers were expelled in 2020, we realised that the Hungarian majority government’s narrative pointing at an ‘external enemy’ had been deeply enrooted. This case epitomised a clash between the pro-migration and the anti-migration discursive blocs, which in the examples above prevailed with more clarity in the contexts of Germany and Poland, respectively, and led us, as researchers, to pursue, on the basis of Melegh’s ideas, a third discourse, one requiring a more thorough analysis of the cultural and social consequences of the marketisation of migration.

As Melegh’s work portrays, a migration turn is not something that happens in a particular space and at a particular time. While its effects could be local, it is global. And, while our experiences occur in a particular moment and place, they are also part of the *longue durée* of globalisation. Maybe it was about the time when I lived in one place or the other. Maybe about who I was, in which stage of my career I was, or who or how those around me were at a particular time. However, one thing of which I am sure is that I and many like me were being treated as an abstract category, for better or for worse. We were given ‘a mythological status,’ in Melegh’s own words. Once navigating the global migration turn, our diligence would suddenly define our worth. Our lack of it would make us unworthy. And so, our lives, experiences, and even bodies have been and continue to be shaped by market institutions at a global level. Melegh’s work has allowed me to reassess and rewrite my own story, and revise my own critical lens towards my future as a non-‘migrant.’

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BOOK REVIEW

Szűcs, Z. G. (2023). *Political Ethics in Illiberal Regimes: A Realist Interpretation*. Manchester University Press

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Gábor Zoltán Szűcs's latest book is a remarkable work. This is of course not surprising for a scholar who has already brought numerous noteworthy works to the table. Szűcs has edited several multi-authored volumes and authored two monographs. One of the latter (Szűcs, 2010) has been highly acclaimed in Hungarian political science,¹ while the other (Szűcs, 2017) has tended to receive positive feedback only from a rather narrow domestic professional circle.² *Political Ethics in Illiberal Regimes* has all the qualities to become a major resonant work, even a resounding success with a much wider international audience.

Like all books, this book might be read in many different ways, from many different perspectives. In this review, three reading perspectives that seem relevant are used. First, I attempt to place and evaluate the work in the context of the author's academic work (1), second, in the context of domestic political science (2), and third, in the context of international political science (3).

(1) In the course of his academic career, which has now spanned two decades, Szűcs has brought out more than a hundred publications. However, there has been a perceptible turnaround in his prolific output. Earlier analyses of a history of political thought or a political discourse theory approach were gradually being relegated to the background. At the same time, normative political theory increasingly came to the fore and then, especially in the last five years, became the exclusive focus of his publishing activity.³ This new creative era has already been marked by prestigious journal articles (Szűcs, 2019; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a; 2022; 2023). *Political Ethics in Illiberal Regimes* can be understood as a synthesis and elaboration of and a further reflection on the findings of his shorter political

¹ The book was awarded the Aurél Kolnai Prize for the best political science publication of the year.

² Gábor Illés' book review deserves special mention here (Illés, 2019).

³ In a very personal preface-like text (Acknowledgments) at the very beginning of the book, the author explicitly justifies the turn of events in his scientific work. "Living in and studying a post-truth world made me realize that it is much less intellectually fruitful to ask how to do things with words than to ask how to do things with things," he writes.

theory writings.⁴ Or, in other words, it is an extended and further developed version of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological repertoire outlined in those papers, with an intensive application to the study of a particular topic. Yet it is a work that offers a number of novelties, a work that stands on its own merits, and which, regardless of its predecessors, should in its own right be of interest to the reader.

As this is a comprehensive, summarising, synthesising work on a subject of great importance both to the public and, it is felt, to the author personally, and as it is the culmination of a creative period spanning several years, the question arises: is this 'The' *Magnum Opus*? It is by no means easy to answer this question. If we consider the book's scientific value, its intellectual strength, its conceptual clarity and the quality of its argumentation, we can only conclude that it is an outstanding work. But, as I have already mentioned, the author's previous monographs are also of considerable scientific significance. Moreover, given Szűcs's productivity, it can be assumed that the work under review here will be followed by further monographs in the not too distant future. It follows that, placing this volume in the context of his oeuvre, it can best be said to be one of his *magnum opuses* (or *magna opera*).

By playing with words, more precisely with the meaning of the term '*magnum*', we can try to answer the question in quantitative terms. The book is no larger in scope than his earlier two works. The length of the monograph – 180 pages including the Introduction and Conclusion – is not conspicuously great, but rather reasonable, appropriate and proportionate to the subject matter. This means that it provides exactly enough space for the train of thought. The text does not become overcrowded with insufficiently developed statements. But at the same time it does not remain too airy; there are no argumentative gaps or blanks. The exposition is sufficiently tight, and the content perfectly fills the space allotted to it. The 'greatness' of the work is therefore certainly not to be sought in the number of pages or statements per page, but rather in the originality, coherence and plausibility of the concept.

Adding another layer to the meaning of the term *magnum opus*, we can speak of the work's execution – its form, which testifies to a high level of textual construction. It is striking how deliberately the text (and the argument itself) is structured. As a reader, one can almost feel that the volume is as well composed as a fine piece of music. The body text of the book is divided into two major sections of roughly seventy pages. Each part contains three chapters of 20–25 pages. There is a clear, definite arc to the way the ideas are expressed. The train of thought moves from a discussion of problems of a theoretical level, purpose and nature (Part I), to a discussion of practical political-ethical issues (Part II). Chapter 1 gives an overview of contemporary realist political theory and puts in the conceptual framework for the later political-ethical inquiry. Chapter 2 offers a definition of illiberal regimes that is deemed workable (it does so, among others, by limiting the scope of the term) and applies an idiosyncratic neo-Aristotelian regime theoretical framework. Chapter 3 attempts to formulate the most valid questions of everyday political-ethical experiences of living in illiberal regimes. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 concentrate on three main groups of political actors (elected officials, non-elected public actors, citizens), as they

⁴ This connection is explicitly addressed and reflected in the Acknowledgments section of the book.

illustrate, analyse and model the political-ethical challenges in illiberal regimes through schematised yet realistic practical examples. From the first reading, it is immediately apparent that the structural units of the text are closely interlinked. The high level of professional mastery is also evident in the fact that the text does not become redundant or pleonastic, despite the frequent use of rhetorical procedures (anticipation/foreshadowing, retrospection/recursion, repetition) which ensure the strong coherence and consistency of the argument.

Going beyond the difficult question of the *magnum opus*, the point of comparison with his previous monograph (Szűcs, 2017) can still be made in the context of the author's academic work. *A Politika Lelke* (The Soul of Politics) is a relevant point of reference because it is representative of the new era of political theory-oriented research in terms of its thematic focus, its literature base and its approach.⁵ It may be noted that, as in his second book six years earlier, Szűcs has engaged in a productive and in-depth dialogue with ancient thinkers in his new *Political Ethics*. However, it is as if the number, weight and significance of the ancient Greek authors within the text and their influence on the thought process has been somewhat diminished in comparison with that of modern (e.g. Weber) and specifically contemporary scholars (primarily Mark Philp, Andrew Sabl, and Bernard Williams, and to a lesser extent Raymond Geuss, Enzo Rossi, Judith Shklar and Matt Sleat). Aristotle, whose 'updated' and further developed regime typology is prominent in the book, is of course an exception. In addition, it seems as if Szűcs no longer conceives of theorizing (from his own moderate-liberal realist point of view) as a tragic, futile attempt, despite its necessity. He seems to enter into it with more courage, more enthusiasm, and less scepticism/dubious self-reflexivity than in the earlier work (though still with a perceptible degree of it). And last but not least, the new monograph is hardly concerned at all with the analysis of fictional discourses that has long been a defining feature of his research. Fiction or fictionality is present in the pages of the most recent book only in illustrations of the political-ethical challenges of people living in illiberal regimes. The author does this through fictional (or semi-fictional?) case studies, through fictional (semi-fictional?) but exemplary stories of fictional (semi-fictional?) people with fictional/initial names (Governor Delta, Policy Expert Aleph, Civil Activist Ha etc.).

(2) Let us now turn to the second reading perspective, situating and evaluating the work in the context of Hungarian political science. Although the book is not (at least in a direct or dedicated way) about Hungary and not written in Hungarian (it was not even published by a Hungarian publisher), it is clearly a product and a significant achievement of contemporary Hungarian political science. Since Hungarian political science has recently undergone a profound transformation, becoming essentially bilingual and internationally embedded, the above-mentioned peculiarities of the work might be considered as part of the normal course of business. This is fully compatible with the fact that the author himself was socialised in and is still active in the domestic academic milieu. His book is not only stimulated intellectually by authors, forums, works and concepts that are representative of the international scene, but also by specific domestic impulses, experiences,

⁵ Since my impressions as a reader coincide with those of the reviewer, and since I find his formulations particularly apt, I will base my analysis on the main points of Gábor Illés' book review (see Illés, 2019).

theoretical propositions and debates. Moreover, since it has become quite common in Hungarian political science for researchers not only to communicate in English with their foreign colleagues in an international context, but also to read and discuss each other's works in English, it seems reasonable to assume that one of the primary target groups of the book is Hungarian scholars. Let us see what Szűcs's work has to offer to the domestic professional community.

In Szűcs's current volume (as in the previous normative political theory writings), due to disciplinary and genre standards, the status of the literature is quite different from the way it is treated in mainstream empirical political science. The use of the literature is not limited to a list providing an overview, nor is it merely a prelude for the primary empirical findings but is in fact an integral part of the narrative. Since the argument is developed in the form of a dialogue with several thinkers at several key points in the text, it is not only the concepts, assumptions and typologies that the author adopts from them that are important, but also with whom he engages in dialogue. The researcher's own judgement of who he or she considers to be intellectually sufficiently influential and inspiring, and the researcher's decision with whom to enter into dialogue, is itself a kind of scientific contribution. In Szűcs's previous writings on political theory in Hungarian (as in his previous monograph), the acts of translation, familiarisation and adaptation have been the most prominent in relation to authors found worthy of common reflection. In the case of his new work, however, we can already talk about canon creation – or at least canon re-creation, canon remodification.

It is striking to what extent the theoretical canon of *Political Ethics* is different from the canon embraced by the majority of the self-defined realist scholars (political scientists, researchers, philosophers, analysts, thinkers) in the country. Weber is not at all central in this canon; the work of Machiavelli and Schumpeter appears only as marginal mentions; Hobbes is best used as a brand name to identify the ideas and trends inspired by him (e.g. Hobbesian problem, Hobbesian concerns, Hobbesian terms, Hobbesian reasons, Hobbesian undertone, Hobbesian political outlook); and Carl Schmitt, a favourite author of so many domestic political scientists, is not given any role, does not feature in the book at all. It is rare to encounter – especially in today's Hungarian context – such a characteristically and consistently *a-Schmittian* (or Schmitt-free), and at the same time clearly realist, conception of political theory. And that, frankly, is in itself refreshing and invigorating. In the canon developed by Szűcs, the protagonists are quite different. Among the ancient Greek authors, Aristotle and Thucydides are the most prominent, while among the thinkers of contemporary political theory, moderate-liberal realists such as Mark Philp, Andrew Sabl, and Bernard Williams. The influence and authority of Renaissance, early modern, modern and twentieth century thinkers is much less. One of the major contributions of the volume to the domestic political science discourse is to demonstrate that, instead of the established, well-known, even worn-out names, it is possible to say valid things about the deeper drivers of the real functioning of politics in a theoretically nuanced and sophisticated way, drawing on a very different authorial base.

But, and this is not really surprising, from (neo)Aristotelian starting points and the notions of contemporary moderate-liberal realist authors, a quite different conception of public life can be derived than from the theses of Hobbes or Schmitt. In this way, the creation of an alternative canon also means that the volume offers the domestic audience a

distinctive conceptualisation of politics. An open, flexible, and close-to-life conceptualisation based primarily on the terms of *circumstances of politics* (and responses to them), *political rule* and *political regime* (as ethical and structural contexts for political action), *political agency*, and the *ethical seriousness* that pervades the drama of politics. An important feature of this interpretation of politics is that it does not inherently include a component of conflict. Untangling the concepts of politics and conflict is a very important step, because for a large part of the domestic professional community, the close link between the two seems to be the *sine qua non* of realist political thought. Indeed, to take the thesis forward is an almost subversive gesture from an academic point of view. Szűcs does not see the concept of ‘politics as (playing) hardball’ as something that a realist should accept, as a constant, periodically recurring, and regime-neutral phenomenon that follows from the inherent nature of politics. For the author of *Political Ethics*, this is not the important, definitive, identity-forming insight of the realist school, but the distinctive logic of *illiberal regimes*, which is embedded in the contextual framework and becomes an almost obligatory pattern of behaviour for the actors of such regimes.

The former statement leads us on to a discussion of the further input that the book provides to the intellectual work of Hungarian political science. Indeed, Szűcs’s new monograph indirectly contributes to the long-running regime debate in the domestic community, offering a sufficiently specific but not endemic theoretical framework to facilitate deeper understanding and explanation. The volume, as I have already mentioned, is not specifically and primarily about Hungary. However, since it treats the country as a typical example of illiberal regimes, the author’s interpretative framework developed for a somewhat broader range of political regimes is also applicable to Hungary. The analysis offers a seemingly paradoxical, yet overall nuanced, plausible and elegant solution to the debate around the question of ‘democracy or autocracy’, in order to approach it from a new perspective and, in a sense, to transcend it. In line with neo-Aristotelian regime theory, Szűcs describes illiberal regimes (including Hungary) as mixed political systems with multiple operating principles, which, although they have elitist (aristocratic or oligarchic) patterns, can be described as *tyrannical democracies*.

In these regimes ‘political power should be ascribed to those who earn it through political competition’ (aristocratic/competitive principle); ‘political competition is predominantly (but by no means exclusively) conducted through electoral politics’ (additional aristocratic – or electoral – principle); ‘those who have larger economic resources’ have ‘larger informal political influence’ (oligarchic principle) (74–75). However, the relationship between the two other principles that give the regime its name and allow it to be classified is complex and not entirely symmetrical. According to the author, the democratic (or egalitarian) principle in these regimes is mainly (or only) to be found in the fact that ‘the final source of political authority is the support of the larger number’ (74). While, at the same time, the tyrannical principle defines the political-ethical operational framework of the regime much more strongly and much more profoundly. In fact, that is what imposes and/or creates the actual political-ethical context for the actual actions of political actors. This tyrannical – or self-preservative – principle implies that ‘political self-preservation generally does not allow political competitors to play nice or strictly by the book’ (75.) This is how ‘hardball politics’ becomes a fundamental, everyday experience for ‘hundreds of millions of people’ living in illiberal regimes. And this is how the perception,

insight, understanding, interpretation, treatment and coping with the ‘ethics for playing hardball’ becomes a practical challenge for political actors (elected officials, MPs, mayors, policy experts, journalists, political commentators, political advisors, civil servants, civil activists and citizens) and a theoretical challenge for political scientists living in illiberal regimes. Acknowledging the author’s ambition, we can say that Szűcs perceives, undertakes, and in his monograph carries out this scholarly task, filling an important hiatus in the Hungarian political science discourse.

However, his study not only sets an example for his colleagues in terms of shifting the thematic focus and assuming the special scholarly responsibility that arises from the specific political-ethical context, but also presents innovative methodological practices. His analysis, which is essentially phenomenological in character but with a certain critical-genealogical edge, brilliantly bridges the gap between the claims that move at the level of high abstractions, theoretical generalisations and typologies, and the everyday experiences and problems of ordinary people.

(3) And, to briefly highlight the third reading perspective, let us look at what *Political Ethics* has to offer an international political science audience. On the one hand, everything that it offers to the domestic political science community, and in some respects even more. A specific, authentic analysis from an insider’s perspective, legitimated and validated not only by lived experience, by the position of ‘eyewitness’, but also by a high level of theoretical preparation and professional knowledge. A monograph that discusses its subject in a personal and non-self-colonising way, with a convincingly elegant Englishness, in a style that is both analytical and disciplined, and also smooth and enjoyable. It also provides feedback and critical reflection on a number of internationally established concepts, theories, interpretive schemes and measurement systems (e.g. the problematic nature of certain assumptions in comparative political science, the one-dimensional/scalar conception of political regimes, the conceptualisation and operationalisation problems of the V-dem project, or the explanatory power of ambition theory). And, last but by no means least, a serious and weighty alternative, one might say rival, concept to the notion of plebiscitary leader democracy articulated in Körösesnyei and his co-author’s book (Körösesnyei et al., 2020).

I have one serious problem with the book, however. It really could be longer.

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BOOK REVIEW

Shokhin, S. O. & Kudryashova, E. V. (2022). *The Legal Framework for Strategic Planning in contemporary Russia*. MGIMO

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Comparative public governance is challenging researchers in a turbulent world. There is a whole variety of approaches, disagreements, and controversies in the views on political life and governance standards. Social sciences in the 21st century sought for a greater comparability of research findings, however, it remained unattainable, and more questions were provoked rather than common orientations for compatibilities were found. Still the dynamics of social processes encouraged studies which lead to better understanding of political institutions and public administration in different parts of the world (Joyce, 2022). The leading think tanks and academic institutions around the world are directing their attention to research in comparative politics, administration, and their legal aspects. This is also true of the leading Russian think tanks including the Moscow Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

In 2022 the MGIMO Publishing house released valuable research on strategic governance in Russia – the monograph by S. O. Shokhin and E. V. Kudryashova, *The Legal Framework for strategic planning in contemporary Russia*. The book presents insights into the nature of strategic vision in the Russian Federation with a special focus on the legal aspects of strategic planning on the federal level.

The research is published in English and appeals to the international academic audience. A great deal of evidence and facts about the development of the strategic planning system in the Russian Federation during the past twenty years are outlined in the book. The facts and their analysis provide a solid basis for further discussion. However, this is not a mere accumulation of facts about strategic planning.

The analysis of the past two decades is underpinned by an investigation of the roots of the contemporary trends which go back to the soviet times. The authors demonstrate that the contemporary system of strategic planning has its roots in previous experience of Russia when it was a Russian Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR. Planning was mentioned in the soviet constitutions among the principles for the economy and later for all social life paradigms. The influence of the soviet concept keeps on manifesting itself in the current public governance concepts of the Russian Federation. For example, the Federal

law N 172-FZ of 28.06.2014 'On strategic planning in the Russian Federation' gives a definition of public governance. The law makes it clear that public governance is subservient to the top strategic planning goals. Giving priority to planning over other aspects of public governance is assumed by the authors to derive from the previous concept of planning as a constitutional principle.

As implied by its title, the book deals with the legal aspects of the strategies in Russia. The legal framework is mainly formed by the Federal law 'On strategic planning in the Russian Federation' and, therefore, it is the focus of the reviewed book. At the same time, it is not a pure commentary on the law. The speculations in the text cover the ongoing political processes that finally received legal status. The book highlights the social and political consensus on the configuration of the strategic vision formalised in the law. This consensus is clearly articulated in the main goals of the system of strategic planning in Russia. The sustainable social-economic development and ensuring national security are the core of the strategic planning system. This setting provoked some discussions as to whether there is a dualistic but unique goal or whether there are two autonomous goals. The outcome of this discussion affects the general understanding of strategic planning in Russia. Once these goals are merged into one then all the efforts in the security field can be attributed to the social-economic development. This is widely used for presenting the achievements in the economy currently. The social economic growth looks more impressive once the results of industry working only for national security are merged with other sectors of the economy. There are also studies rightly suggesting that the state policy of ensuring national security is crucial for maintaining the sustainable social-economic development of Russia and increasing its competitiveness (Nazarov & Afinogenov, 2022). This is not the only example of the important outcomes of the discussion on one dualistic or two separate strategic goals in Russia. This illustrates how the authors identified and revealed the most important and acute issues that go beyond just legal regulation and its interpretation. While the book deals with the law, it offers speculation on its context considering the law to be the art of possible.

Internal strategies influence international relations (Verlaine et al., 2020a; 2020b) and vice versa the external context influences domestic strategic planning. The authors look at the opportunities for strategic planning in current politics and international relations as well as at the historical experience. The first chapter reviews the experience of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (abbreviated as Comecon or CMEA). Shortly after the creation of CMEA in 1949 there was an attempt to create supranational bodies including an authority for central planning. This attempt failed, nevertheless, later a coordinating body – the CMEA: Committee on cooperation of planning activity – was founded and that succeeded. It is suggested in the book that the experience of the CMEA could be valuable for the current international integration processes. The Eurasian integration processes and the role of coordinating supranational strategies are discussed in the book. Several provisions in the Eurasian Economic Union documents on the coordination allow a development of strategies and their implementation. According to the book, the strategic documents of the Eurasian Economic Union have an impact on the process of strategic planning in Russia and in other member-states as an important contextual factor.

This book is a part of an extended discussion initiated by the authors in the academic journals (Kudryashova, 2019; Shokhin & Kudryashova, 2019; 2020). Perhaps this is the

reason that the book is not a thick folio. It seems that the authors have sought to expose the essence of their ideas and concepts in a concentrated manner for the international reader. Still, some of the findings could be further outlined and evaluated in more detail with more facts and evidence. Despite this comment the authors managed to present their vision in a systematic and coherent way.

The book under review facilitates the understanding of strategic governance and long-term vision in Russia displaying the issues that are worth attention and discourse. The book offers a thought-provoking exercise and undoubtedly situates itself as core research on strategic planning best practices. It is a great contribution to the comparability of research in public governance providing a basis for the exchange of ideas between academics from around the world and for the appreciation of the development of strategic planning in Russia internationally.

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