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ELECTIONS · DEMOCRACY · CRISIS

**BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

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## **BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

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**Łukasz Zamecki (University of Warsaw)**

**“Under-the-Radar Autocratization”: Non-Legislative Erosion of Democratic Accountability in Poland**

This paper examines the phenomenon of *autocratization by means under the radar* — a process of democratic erosion that proceeds not primarily through formal legislation but via non-statutory practices that undermine accountability and democratic culture. Drawing on the conceptual framework of autocratization developed by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), the study explores how informal mechanisms contribute to democratic decline in Poland after 2015. Although the Polish case has been widely analyzed in the literature, this paper focuses specifically on those *below-the-radar* actions that have received less scholarly attention despite their significant impact on democratic quality. While the country remains classified as a flawed democracy, it has experienced one of the world’s steepest declines in democratic performance. Using a case study approach, the paper analyzes three domains in which non-legislative instruments have been particularly consequential: public consultations, media governance, and the schooling system. Each case reveals how lawful yet manipulative practices have weakened diagonal accountability, distorted public deliberation, and fostered an illiberal political culture. The analysis suggests that such “below-the-radar” autocratization complements and reinforces statutory reforms, while remaining more difficult to detect and contest. The paper concludes that political culture and informal norms play a crucial role in sustaining democracy, and that institutional strengthening alone cannot effectively counter incremental, non-statutory forms of democratic backsliding.

**Christina Eva Griessler (NetPOL / Andrassy University Budapest)**

**The risk of elections and the threat of opposition: How to save democracies?**

To weaken democracy, only a slow, incremental undermining of the functionality of political institutions in certain situations is needed. If democratic resilience prevails, democracy can be maintained; however, if deficiencies in political systems are entrenched, this resilience might not be sufficient to avert autocratic tendencies. Barlai, Griessler, and Herbers (2025), in their comparative study on democratic backsliding in Europe—mainly in EU countries—demonstrated the importance of strong political institutions and an active civil society in hindering the strengthening of autocratic features in political systems. Even though elections may be manipulated, competition limited, and participation restricted, they remain a risk for autocratic regimes because the outcome is not entirely predictable. The accountability of political elites to their electorate is another mechanism of control: citizens can either demonstrate against certain policies or elect another candidate or party. This paper applies the arguments from the book *Democratic Backsliding in Europe* (Barlai, Griessler & Herbers, 2025) to the case studies of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, in order to highlight the specificity of these political systems and to identify their weaknesses. In the case of the Western Balkan countries, the process of delayed democratisation is analysed to better understand the challenges posed by strong political actors and weaker political institutions.

**Ksenija Marković (Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade)**

**Minority Representation in Times of Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Serbia**

Democratic backsliding has become a defining feature of political developments in Southeast Europe, with Serbia often cited as a paradigmatic case of long-term autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2020; Freedom House, 2025). In these conditions, national minorities often appear as collateral victims of the erosion of democracy: the "weakening" of national councils and limited parliamentary influence reduces their ability to effectively represent the interests of their communities. This ambivalence shows how backsliding reshapes both majority- minority relations and the incentives of minority elites. While the erosion of electoral integrity and institutional checks has been extensively documented, less attention has been paid to its impact on the political representation of national minorities. This paper addresses that gap by examining how democratic decline reshapes the role of minority parties in Serbia. The research combines quantitative and comparative analysis, reviews the electoral performance of minority parties and lists at the national and local levels from 2000 to 2024, with special emphasis on coalition arrangements and patterns of political activity. Case studies of the Hungarian and Bosniak minorities highlight these dynamics. The work contributes to the understanding of the relationship between democratic backsliding, the party system, and institutional transformations, through an ambivalent position of minority actors- between marginalization and co-optation.

**Robin Weisser (University of Basel)**

**Class dismissed? Descriptive representation and the politics of working class abstention**

While the working class remains underrepresented in Western European parliaments, little is known about their presence among electoral candidates — and even less about the consequences for political participation. Resource-based theories explain turnout gaps through inequalities in income, education, or civic skills, but struggle to account for the growing abstention of working-class voters in recent decades. This paper adopts a supply-side perspective, investigating how party strategies — candidate selection (descriptive representation) and policy platforms (substantive representation) — shape working-class engagement. Using an original dataset of all parliamentary candidates in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland from 1950 to today, I track the presence and profile of working-class candidates over time. I examine how this varies across countries, parties, and election cycles, and how it reflects broader changes in the class structure, such as the shift from industrial to service employment. I also link candidate presence to party positions on economic policy and class appeals using manifesto data. Finally, I connect these supply-side indicators to individual-level turnout data from post-election surveys. I argue that the absence of working-class candidates and class-based agendas helps explain rising class abstention. The paper contributes to debates on political inequality and representation in post-industrial democracies.

**Miloš Milovanović (Linköping University)**

**Demographic Aging and Shift in Voting Power Dynamic in Sweden, 1976-2022**

Demographic ageing is a relatively slow process compared to contemporary crises, yet its impact on democratic processes is profound and should be treated with the urgency of a crisis. Specifically, older voters participate in elections at higher rates than younger, increasing their influence as their numbers grow. Thus, using voting data from Sweden's parliamentary elections (1976–2022), this study examines the impact of demographic ageing on voting. The rolling decomposition technique was applied to analyse changes in the Elderly Power Index (EPI). This approach isolates the effects of demographic ageing and voting participation over time. The results confirmed that changes in age group size had a stronger effect on EPI in 6 of 13 elections. However, declining turnout among young voters was more decisive than their shrinking population in 9 of 13 elections. Although, ageing has shifted voting power toward older segments of the electorate; however, older voters in Sweden still have less voting power than younger voters.

**Gabriele Nicotra (University of Rome La Sapienza)**

**Youth Abstention: the Multidimensional Refractoriness at the Ballot Box**

Building on Coleman's (1990) rational choice framework, this contribution advances a methodological proposal for studying the generative mechanisms of youth electoral abstention, conceived both as an indicator of today's democratic crisis and as a denial of young people's political dignity (Fukuyama, 2018). From this perspective, younger cohorts of electors are understood as generationally distinct discursive formations (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2014).

This proposal addresses key gaps in the literature: investigate the multifactorial nature of abstention's generative mechanism through a mixed-methods approach; fostering conceptual convergence with young people on what counts as political; and enriching models by examining deviant cases. Youth abstention is conceptualised as behaviour co-shaped by three dimensions: (i) individual cognitive and emotional factors, (ii) processes of political socialisation, and (iii) available resources. Understanding individual mechanisms enables trace structural influences on (non-)voting and interpreting youth abstention as a systemic phenomenon. The interplay of these dimensions is analysed to identify different types of youth abstention.

Accordingly, the methodological approach takes the form of a survey research design, integrated in its pilot phase, pre-testing, and deviant case analysis with qualitative tools, in line with the Columbia School tradition (Lazarsfeld, 1944; Merton & Kendall, 1946). The overall design is flexible and context-sensitive, allowing adaptation across diverse (inter)national settings.

**Davit Totadze (University of Turku)**

**Electoral Clientelism on Demand: List Experiment Evidence from the Visegrad Group**

This study investigates the demand side of electoral clientelism in the Visegrad Group (V4) countries, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, by focusing on vote-selling during parliamentary elections. While existing literature predominantly emphasises the supply side of clientelism, this research addresses a critical gap by examining how voters demand clientelistic exchanges. Employing a list experiment technique administered via the Prolific platform, the study minimises social desirability bias while measuring the incidence of vote-selling. It explores how factors, such as electoral competitiveness, settlement type, partisanship, income level, and reward size, influence voter-selling. By conducting nationally representative surveys after each country's parliamentary elections (2025–2027), this research aims to generate a strong, comparative dataset. Ultimately, the study advances a bottom-up approach to understanding electoral clientelism; it offers a novel empirical contribution to the literature by providing cross-national, quantitative insights into voter incentives and behaviours within entrenched clientelistic systems.

**Jurijs Nikišins (University of Latvia)**

**Regime ambivalence and democratic legitimacy in Europe**

Recent research has highlighted that many citizens are not consistently democratic or authoritarian in their regime preferences. Rather, they simultaneously value democracy while also finding non-democratic alternatives attractive. Inspired by the recent Jones and Cowan's (2025) conceptualisation and findings, this paper applies their fourfold typology (pure democrats, pure authoritarians, ambivalents, and cynics) using the most recent European Values Study Wave 5 data. While existing studies have asked who the ambivalents are, less is known about whether and how their orientations matter for democracy.

This paper examines the legitimacy consequences of regime ambivalence focusing on three outcome dimensions central to debates on democratic crisis: perceived democraticness of governance, confidence in political institutions, and evaluations of electoral integrity. Multilevel models are employed, incorporating a random slope for ambivalence to capture whether its effect varies across contexts. Country-level variables, such as institutional quality, corruption perceptions, and economic development, are included to assess the conditions under which ambivalence is most consequential.

The study aims to contribute to discussions on democratic resilience and backsliding by showing how attitudinal ambivalence may carry implications for democratic legitimacy in contemporary Europe.

**Simbarashe Nzvere (University of Wroclaw)**

**Elections in Times of Crisis: Leadership and Democratic Backsliding in Nigeria and Zimbabwe**

In many of sub-Saharan Africa, elections remain the hallmark of political legitimacy, yet their democratic substance is increasingly undermined by systemic crises. This paper examines how leadership decisions in Nigeria and Zimbabwe influence electoral processes amid economic, security, and political pressures. Drawing on election observation reports, voter surveys, and elite discourse, the analysis demonstrates how ruling elites instrumentalize crises to justify electoral manipulation, constrain opposition, and consolidate power. In Nigeria, securitized justifications delay or restrict elections, while in Zimbabwe, narratives of economic siege and national sovereignty are leveraged to maintain incumbent dominance. Despite formally competitive multiparty systems, both cases reveal the fragility of democratic institutions under pressure and the role of leadership in sustaining hybridized electoral authoritarianism. By placing African cases in comparative perspective, this study highlights the global dimensions of democratic backsliding and challenges Eurocentric assumptions about resilience, offering insights into the interplay between leadership behavior and the survival of democratic processes in crisis contexts.

**Dejan Dragutinović (Technical University of Dortmund)**

**The Dark Side of Competence: Political Accountability and Rent-Extraction**

This paper develops a formal model of political accountability that challenges the common assumption that competence automatically produces socially beneficial outcomes. Leaders differ in competence—the probability of performing tasks effectively across different domains—and derive utility both from holding office and from extracting rents. Allowing competent leaders to appropriate resources expands their strategic options and shows that effectiveness can reinforce predatory behavior rather than constrain it. In equilibrium, competent leaders systematically extract rents whenever appropriation is not fully observable. Moreover, they abstain from rent-extraction only when faced with low economic output and strong institutional safeguards, in contrast to incompetent leaders. An extension incorporating costly signal manipulation demonstrates that competence further strengthens incumbents' ability to retain power despite diverting resources. These results complement the literature on “spin dictators,” who rely on information control rather than overt repression, with an important counterpoint: competence can make leaders more durable and more predatory. Comparative statics reveal that institutional safeguards, rather than personal traits, determine whether governance remains democratic or devolves into kleptocracy. The model provides a theoretical explanation for long tenures, wealth accumulation, and autocratization, highlighting the critical role of appropriate institutions in shaping the political consequences of leader competence.

**Adam Szymański (University of Warsaw)**

**The impact of participatory and political polarisation on quality of subnational democracy in Poland**

We observe the democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. The literature has focused mainly on the national tier but we should investigate also the subnational levels as well as the impact of the national politics on democracy at these levels.

The proposed paper is aimed at analysing the impact of participatory and political polarisation at the national level on subnational democracy. Poland has been chosen due to the presence of all aforementioned national processes. The analysis focuses on 2015-2025 – the period of the Law and Justice (PiS) ruling in 2015-2023 as well as governing of coalition government led by the Civic Coalition (KO) in 2023-2025. The key question will be about how the political conflict between the two major parties – PiS and KO and related political polarisation at the national level influences the quality of subnational democracy. Other related questions will be: Is there a difference between voivodeships and lower territorial tiers (cities?) in this regard? Does the time of the PiS ruling differ with the period of governing of the declaratively democratic political forces? The paper is a qualitative study based on the content analysis of subnational media as well as transcripts of 2 FGIs and 32 IDIs, presenting a part of findings within the 4-year project financed by the Polish National Science Centre.

**Severin Hornung, Thomas Höge and Christine Unterrainer (University of Innsbruck)**

**Polycrisis and political significance of neoliberal ideology**

Explored is the psychological and political significance of neoliberal ideological beliefs in the socio-ecological polycrisis. Research on political-economic ideologies and system-justification theory is reviewed, accentuating crisis dynamics. Polycrisis reflects a complex of compounding ecological, economic, political, and social predicaments, culminating in threats to European democracies by right-wing populist movements. Validated in Austria and Germany was the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire, including dimensions of individualism (self-reliance, self-interest), competition (outperforming others), and instrumentality (humans as resources). Confirmed were associations with group-based enmity, social dominance-orientation, political left-right self-placement, and endorsement of right-wing populist parties (Alternative for Germany, Austrian Freedom Party). Further results demonstrate that neoliberal beliefs erode active solidarity and civic engagement for human rights of refugees, mediated by moral disengagement from their treatment (e.g., push-backs, incarceration). In interviews, individuals in precarious economic situations endorsed neoliberal practices contradicting their social interests, alongside xenophobic stereotypes. Economic threats were projected onto migrants, scapegoated for lacking self-reliance (individualism), appropriating resources (competition), and insufficient contributions (instrumentality). Results demonstrate how social inequalities and tensions are reproduced in the belief systems of those deprived by the system. Amalgamation of free-market fundamentalism with authoritarian, crypto-fascist themes, explains electoral successes of right-wing populism in neoliberal societies in perpetual crisis.

## **Kamil Aksiuto (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin)**

### **Liberalism's wake? The case of John Gray**

John Gray first made a name for himself in the early 90s as one of the proponents of the so-called postliberalism. At the moment when the liberal West seemed to be enjoying its greatest historical triumph he trenchantly criticized the inadequacy of anthropological assumptions on which the liberal civilization is based. Consequently, he argued that it is heading towards an imminent collapse. 30 years later postliberalism once again is attracting a lot of interest, which also contributed to the renewed interest in Gray's thought.

The goals of my paper are twofold. First, to examine what brand of postliberalism Gray has been advocating for over the years. After all, his position in a postliberal camp is rather peculiar, since Gray, unlike his fellow travellers, identifies the Christian inheritance as the root cause of the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy, not an antidote to it. Second, I intend to focus on Gray's activity as a public intellectual. Drawing on the research concerning 'positioning' done by intellectuals, I want to analyse the manner in which he presents himself as a critic of liberalism and the means he employs towards that end.

## **Izolda Bokszczanin-Gołaś (University of Warsaw)**

### **Militant Democracy in Poland: Constitutional Tools, Citizens' Agency, and the Dilemmas of Defending Liberal Norms**

This paper investigates the role of militant democracy in Poland, situating it within the broader European debate on how democracies defend themselves against internal threats. Drawing on Karl Loewenstein's foundational theory of militant democracy, the paper examines Poland's recent trajectory of democratic backsliding and the constitutional tools available to safeguard democratic integrity. The study explores two interrelated dimensions: (1) the constitutional and legal mechanisms designed to limit the influence of anti-democratic actors, and (2) the role of civil society and citizens in sustaining democratic resilience. By analyzing judicial reforms, legislative changes, and executive practices in Poland, the paper highlights both the potential and pitfalls of militant democracy in practice. A comparative perspective—drawing on Germany and France—frames Poland's experience within a wider European constitutional tradition. The analysis demonstrates how militant democracy can act as a moderating force against authoritarian tendencies, but also underscores the risks of overreach, where protective measures may inadvertently erode liberal freedoms. Ultimately, the paper argues that the legitimacy and effectiveness of militant democracy depend on carefully balancing constitutional safeguards with citizen participation. It concludes by emphasizing the necessity of institutional checks, judicial independence, and civic agency to ensure that efforts to defend democracy do not undermine the very principles they aim to protect.

**Péter Kállai (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)**

**Beyond Diplomacy: Populism's Feedback Cycle Between International Conflict and Domestic Mobilization**

Scholarship on populism has extensively examined how domestic political dynamics shape foreign policy, showing how populist leaders redefine international alignments and deploy anti-elitist rhetoric abroad. Yet less attention has been paid to the two-way loop through which foreign relations are not only shaped by domestic populist logics but are also recycled back into the domestic arena as campaign narratives. This paper explores these mutually reinforcing dynamics through the case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán. It argues that the Hungarian government has strategically politicized conflicts with external actors—most prominently the European Union and Ukraine—by first framing foreign policy in a confrontational, sovereignty-centered mode, and then feeding these conflicts back into electoral campaigns. Issues such as migration, Brussels' rule-of-law mechanisms, and sovereignty discourses illustrate how foreign policy ceases to be a technocratic or elite-driven domain and instead becomes raw material for populist mobilization. The analysis contributes to debates on populism and international politics by showing that foreign policy is not merely an arena transformed by populism, but a vital resource subordinated to domestic electoral goals. The paper demonstrates how populist actors harness foreign policy not only as a diplomatic tool but as a central instrument of electoral strategy.

**Maciej Skrzypek (University of Wrocław)**

**Bias of paramilitary organization in political competition. Experience from electoral campaigns in Czech Republic and Poland 2025**

The paper aims to present the role of paramilitary organizations (PmOs) in political competition in crisis-ridden post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, PmOs proposal entered the mainstream and significantly shaped public discourse. Alongside calls to strengthen defense capabilities, some of them demanded an end to support for Ukraine and its citizens. The latter became significant themes in electoral campaigns in Poland and the Czech Republic, where some candidates adopted these proposals. The research question is: *What is the relationship between the profile of PmOs and their involvement in the campaigns of selected candidates?* The hypothesis is that the more illiberal, Eurosceptic, and antidemocratic the character of a PmO, the greater its support for selected candidates.

The methodology is a qualitative analysis of sources consisting of: (1) official documents and statements on organizational missions, and (2) Facebook posts published during electoral campaigns (January 15 – May 30 in Poland; May 13 – October 2 in the Czech Republic). The analyzed profiles are: *Patrole Obywatelskie*, *Ruch Obrony Granic* (Poland), *Branné oddíly ČR* and *Československá obec legionářská* (Czech Republic). The paper explores the role of PmOs in promoting candidates opposed to supporting Ukraine and its citizens, shaping public debate in CEE states, and mainstreaming illiberal slogans.

**Firat Efe (Corvinus University of Budapest)**

**We Are One Big Family? The Distinctiveness of Ethnoregionalist Party Family in Central and Eastern Europe**

Ethnoregional parties (ERPs), being parties that advocate for decision making on behalf of a more particular segment of the society and thus more directly, are now more important than ever thanks to European Integration. However the differences of their competitive behavior are not fully explored. In this article, I argue that there are significant differences between ERPs of Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, and hypothesize that ERPs of Central and Eastern Europe have a more distinct role in party competition. To that end, the study presents a comparison of ethnoregional parties in 10 Western European (WE) and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) party systems between the years 1990 and 2023 using the Manifesto Project. Said distinct role is operationalized using Meyer and Miller's nicheness measure. The impact of region on nicheness is predicted by multiple regression models controlling for party age, party size and government participation. The findings show that ERPs demonstrate a significantly distinct profile in CEE compared to WE, and future research should be cautious when considering ethnoregional parties as a single party family.

**Jelena Lončar (University of Belgrade)**

**Strategic repression in hybrid regimes: State responses to student protests in Serbia**

Protests pose a significant threat to regime legitimacy in nondemocratic contexts. Regimes in between democracy and autocracy are particularly cautious in their responses to challenges from below, as they seek to maintain at least the appearance of democratic credibility. Existing research shows that Serbia's competitive-authoritarian regime has, until recently, largely ignored protests, responding primarily by framing protest organizers as enemies of the state. However, during the most recent ten-month wave of student-led protests, the regime deployed a broader repertoire of strategies aimed at delegitimizing and suppressing dissent, including the use of police violence—a tactic less commonly associated with new competitive-authoritarian settings. This paper examines the Serbian case to identify and classify these evolving strategies and understand under what conditions hybrid regimes escalate to the use of coercive force. It also investigates how such regimes seek to justify repressive measures while continuing to cultivate a favourable self-image. Methodologically, the study combines process tracing with discourse analysis of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's press conferences during the 2024–2025 protest cycle. Process tracing illuminates the contextual factors shaping regime responses, while discourse analysis helps to understand the discursive legitimation of these actions.

**Diana-Nicoleta Mirancea (University of Bucharest)**

**Abort the Ban: Poland’s Hybrid Feminist Mobilization in Times of Crisis**

This paper explores the hybrid mobilization strategies employed by the Polish feminist movement during the abortion rights crisis, emphasizing the relationship between offline protests and digital activism. The focus of this analysis is the aftermath of the 2020 decision of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal that imposed tighter regulations towards the access to abortion for Polish women. Therefore, feminist movements such as Strajk Kobiet (Women’s Strike) adopted a dual strategy, combining large-scale street demonstrations with highly visible online campaigns (#StrajkKobiet, #AborcjaBezGranic). This feminist mobilization is an illustrative example of what Trere (2019) called “hybrid media activism”, which blurs the line between online and offline spheres. The present research argues that the societal context constrained mobilization, but also created now windows of opportunity for feminist resistance by situating the Polish case within the framework of political opportunity theory (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and feminist digital activism (Milan, 2013). While physical protests met state repression and COVID-19 restrictions, online activists helped with mobilizing people in a transnational solidarity and accelerated coordination for the streets. The analysis contributes to understanding how hybrid mobilization become a central strategy for sustaining resistance in times of crisis.

**Zuzana Šmilňáková and Vladimír Vučković (Masaryk University, Brno)**

**Contesting the EU from an environmental perspective: narrative analysis of the Serbian anti-mining protest movements**

This study examines how the EU is constructed in the narratives of Serbian environmental movements opposing lithium mining in the Jadar region. It employs narrative analysis to explore textual data obtained from the social media accounts and websites of the environmental groups and green political parties, in addition to individual interviews with their members. The findings indicate that, within the narratives of these movements, the EU predominantly appears as a supporter of the current Serbian government, which is widely seen as corrupt and suppressing democratic processes in regard to the lithium mining. The EU is perceived as hypocritical within the Serbian context, as it promotes the values of democracy and the rule of law but is regarded as failing to apply them consistently when it comes to securing access to Serbia’s natural resources. The analysis points to the fact that the effects of the stabilitocracy are experienced by citizens even in the context of environmental policy and can serve as a mobilising narrative within social movements. Thus, stabilitocracy emerges not only as a political condition connected with the democratic decline, but also as a narrative element that protest movements draw upon to frame their democratic resistance.

**Milan Veselica (Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade)**

**Rituals of Resistance: Civil Religion in the Student-led Protests in Serbia (2024–2025)**

The contemporary understanding of civil religion is primarily related to the American project, which, despite its numerous internal divisions, provides unifying elements. Over time, these elements have acquired the status of religious reverence and concern common symbols, political practices, and republican sacred places. Scholars have long recognized the possibility of applying the concept of civil religion outside the American context. However, the most common approach to civil religion emphasizes the role of state authorities in its encouragement and promotion. This paper examines whether civil religion can arise from below, particularly in cases of political resistance, and explores the elements that may manifest in such cases. The student-led protests in Serbia (2024–2025) are used as a case study, with particular focus on the largest protest gatherings to date (January 27, March 15, and June 28, 2025). Using discourse analysis of events and symbols, the paper offers one possible interpretation of its bottom-up emergence – despite the state’s long-standing attempts to establish civil religion as a unifying force in Serbia.

**Markus Pollak and Peter Verpoorten (Central European University)**

**How to contest an election: Partisan Poll Watchers and Lawfare in the United States**

Poll watchers are expected to enhance electoral integrity and transparency by monitoring polling stations and reporting misconduct. In the United States, however, partisan poll watchers have increasingly acted in "bad faith", leveraging their perceived authority not to strengthen, but to undermine, electoral processes. This paper examines how the practices of partisan poll watchers, together with electoral lawyers, have transformed observation into a tool of lawfare and electoral contestation, producing both legal challenges and public narratives of fraud that destabilize confidence in elections.

Empirically, we draw on original qualitative data, combining semi-structured interviews with electoral lawyers and partisan poll watchers with an analysis of high-profile U.S. court cases rooted in poll-watching claims. This approach allows us to trace how local observation practices are strategically translated into national-level disputes over electoral legitimacy. We show how the partisan observation of electoral ‘truth’ can be weaponized to delegitimize elections.

We find that the massive increase and transformation of partisan poll watching practices - particularly on the Republican side - has amplified electoral litigation, generated hostile dynamics in polling stations, and fostered narratives of systemic fraud. Our analysis demonstrates how poll watching, once a mechanism of democratic accountability, has become central to the politics of electoral contestation.

**Meral Gezici Yalçın and Elif Sandal Önal (Bielefeld University)**

**Citizenship in Contest: Residential Attitudes toward Transnational Voting in Turkey’s Democratic Struggle**

Authoritarian states often invest heavily in diaspora-making strategies and seek to mobilize their non-resident citizens in “homeland” elections. Yet these efforts do not always align with the attitudes of residential citizens in the country of origin, who may view emigrants’ participation with ambivalence or skepticism. Although suffrage is a fundamental democratic right, external voting remains contested and is often framed as a privilege rather than an obligation of citizenship. The 2023 elections in Turkey marked a historic turning point, seen by opposition parties as a decisive struggle against the authoritarian regime that has consolidated power in recent years. The contest polarized the country into two alliances: one promoting a “New Century” of Islamic-conservative rule, the other defending a “Second Century” grounded in republican principles. Against this backdrop, the study explores how residential citizens in Turkey perceive emigrants’ voting rights. Drawing on 60 interviews (30 women, aged 23–60 years) with members and supporters of diverse political parties, we show how external voting is interpreted in relation to belonging, loyalty, and legitimacy. While some regard it as a rightful extension of citizenship, many reject it as illegitimate, arguing that emigrants are shielded from the everyday consequences of their votes. These findings highlight how emigrant mobilization sharpens contested definitions of citizenship and democracy in authoritarian contexts.

**Ivan Stefanovski (Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje)**

**Legally Obstructing the Citizens’ Alternative: A Case Study from the Macedonian Local Elections in 2025**

Since its independence in 1991, Macedonia’s political party landscape has largely been shaped around the traditional ideological (left/right) and ethnic (Macedonian/Albanian) axis, resulting in post electoral coalitions that have ruled the country for over three decades. The largest ethnic Macedonian parties VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, amplified by their smaller coalition partners, have interchangeably swapped smaller ethnic Albanian parties in inter-ethnic coalitions in order to govern. Along the way, they have also managed to absorb any aspiring “third option/way” with potential to generate fundamental change. However, following the several waves of contention since 2012, the political and social movement bases have provided fertile soil for emerging grassroots initiatives willing to enter the electoral arena. The 2021 local elections promoted the independent citizens’ lists as the “third political power” in the municipal councils around the country. This pushed traditional party actors to abruptly amend the Electoral Code on the eve of the 2025 local elections, trying to limit participation of independent candidates, and undermine their relative success. This paper bridges political party (Bliznakovski 2017, Casal Bertoa & Taleski 2016) and social movements (Pollozhani and Bieber 2025; Stefanovski 2025) literature in order to underline patterns of competitive authoritarianism amid societal challenges such as polarization, decrease of living standards democratic backsliding. Lastly, the paper will assess the relative success of independent lists following the 2025 local elections.

**Ian Parenteau (Royal Military College Saint-Jean, Canada)**

**Declining Voter Turnout: Why Have Most Mobilization Efforts Failed?**

For over twenty-five years, political commentators have voiced concern over declining voter turnout, often interpreting it as a symptom of a broader democratic crisis. In response, a substantial body of research has emerged, prompting Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to implement (re)mobilization campaigns aimed at reversing this trend. Despite these efforts, voter participation continues to decline, raising a critical question: why have these initiatives fallen short?

We propose two primary hypotheses. First, much of the research relies on voter surveys to explain abstention. While informative, these surveys are prone to biases—particularly social desirability bias—which obscure deeper patterns of civic disengagement. We argue that electoral absenteeism is a symptom, not the root cause, of a larger problem: the declining involvement of citizens in democratic processes worldwide. Second, most mobilization strategies focus on reducing the “cost” of voting, assuming that time constraints—intensified by changes in work patterns and family life—are the main barrier. As a result, EMBs have introduced convenience voting methods. However, evidence shows these are primarily used by habitual voters. Rather than encouraging former or new voters, these measures only change the behaviour of those who are already likely to vote, and do not address the underlying reasons for voter apathy.

**Sara Kallis (University of Zurich)**

**Surveillance Technology and Political Participation: Evidence from Serbia**

As digital governance technologies expand across Europe and institutional challenges mount, understanding how surveillance practices affect citizen participation becomes increasingly important for democratic resilience. This paper examines whether and how different forms of surveillance create deterrent effects on political expression and mobilization. While previous research on state-society relations and participation yields mixed findings, I argue that the targeting of surveillance—whether diffuse or targeted—matters more than its modality—whether digital or physical. Through a 2x2 factorial survey experiment conducted in Serbia, a country with expanding digital governance infrastructure and active protest movements, I test how exposure to different surveillance scenarios affects willingness to engage in political expression and contentious mobilization. The experimental design manipulates both surveillance targeting (mass versus targeted) and modality (physical versus digital), allowing me to isolate the effects of each dimension. I hypothesize that targeted surveillance creates stronger deterrent effects than diffuse surveillance, and that this targeting effect exceeds any differences between digital and physical methods. Overall, this research contributes to our understanding of how innovations in digital governance reshape the landscape of contentious politics in contemporary hybrid regimes, with implications for civil liberties and civic engagement in an era of expanding state capacity.

**Luka Glušac (University of Belgrade)**

**From Watchdog to Captive: The Rise and Decline of the Serbian Ombudsman in Intelligence Oversight**

This paper examines the role of the Serbian Ombudsman as a “fourth branch” institution crucial for accountability, rule of law, and human rights protection, with particular attention to its performance in overseeing the intelligence and security sector. Between 2007 and 2017, the Serbian Ombudsman was internationally praised as a rare example of effective civilian oversight of intelligence agencies in not only Central and Eastern Europe, but the entire continent. However, following the appointment of a new ombudsman in 2017, intelligence oversight almost completely ceased. This shift coincided with democratic backsliding and the entrenchment of authoritarian tendencies in Serbia, where the intelligence and security sector has been increasingly misused in processes of state capture. At the same time, these agencies have acquired new powers, making the absence of stringent external control particularly alarming. The Serbian case illustrates how institutional capture by party elites can rapidly undermine accountability mechanisms. It argues that the leadership of centralized oversight bodies is decisive for their performance, but also renders them more vulnerable to capture than decentralized or more robust institutional arrangements. This highlights the unfinished and reversible nature of security sector reform and the fragility of democratic accountability institutions in hybrid regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Alíz Nagy (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)**

**Becoming a 'Good Citizen': Digital Governance in Hungary**

This paper examines the construction of digital citizenship in Hungary, a country undergoing democratic backsliding under increasingly authoritarian rule. With Hungary aiming to establish its digital citizenry by 2026, the project analyzes how digital governance is being developed and deployed as part of a broader political agenda. The research investigates governmental practices that produce, target and regulate digital citizens, and identifies which forms of participation are being encouraged, discouraged, or rendered obsolete in the process. In this context, the paper explores the evolving norms and expectations of good citizens in the digital age in a country by authoritarian rule. It asks: What does it mean to be a "good" digital citizen in Hungary under conditions of the new technopolitical governance? Which behaviors, values, or loyalties are promoted and which are penalized?

By embedding the Hungarian case within broader debates on democratic participation and civic virtue, the project aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of the digital citizen as a political subject shaped by normative frameworks as much as by institutional arrangements. The case study of Hungary illustrates how digital citizenship is not merely a technical adaptation but a normative and political project. It offers a compelling site to observe how state-led digitalization programs define and enforce ideals of belonging, participation, and 'good' citizenship in a technologically mediated polity, in a country characterized by democratic and rule of law backsliding in the year of the national elections of 2026.

**Vanja Rokvić and Ivan Dimitrijević (University of Belgrade)**

**Requiem for Democratic Oversight: Security Sector and Democratic Backsliding in Serbia**

Since the 2000 political transition, Serbia has embarked on reforms in its security sector, with democratic and civilian oversight conceived as essential pillars. While the 1990s left a legacy of politicization and abuse, new legal and institutional frameworks subsequently aligned the sector with European democratic norms, enabling policy and scholarly debates. Throughout the following decade, domestic and international initiatives supported by actors such as the DCAF and the OSCE, advanced oversight mechanisms, marking significant progress in democratic governance.

However, over the past decade, a notable shift has occurred - democratic control has eroded as authoritarian tendencies have surged. Security bodies increasingly serve as instruments of political power, a pattern that has been revealed during civic and student protests. Moving away from their formerly established role as neutral guarantors of public order (police) and impartial guardians of national security (intelligence services), these institutions increasingly acted under partisan influence, engaging in selective enforcement and legitimizing repression with official rhetoric. Senior officeholders publicly labeled protesters as "terrorists" or "traitors," justifying harsher interventions against them. Reports also suggest misuse of invasive digital tools against activists and journalists, while citizens were summoned for intimidating "friendly talks."

Meanwhile, institutional oversight remains weak, as parliamentary committees and independent bodies, such as the Ombudsman, often exhibit passivity or subservience to ruling majorities. This paper demonstrates how these recent developments reflect broader patterns of democratic backsliding and institutional crisis in Serbia, highlighting their implications for the future of democracy.

**Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse (University of Warsaw)**

**The Effect of European Crises – Governance and Democracy in the European Union**

The aim of the paper is to present the effects of European crises in terms of governance and democracy in the European Union. The most important changes in EU governance will be presented using selected examples of European crises, and the effects of this governance on democracy in the Member States and more broadly – democracy in the European Union will be discussed. Crisis management aimed to increase centralization, strengthen leadership, stronger coercion to enforce decisions and strengthen the pro-European idea and so-called European values. The aforementioned changes in governance result in a number of negative phenomena for democracy in Europe, which will be discussed in more detail using examples.

**Tara Tepavac and Ivana Milićević (University of Belgrade)**

**Enlargement Debates: Discourses of Europeanness in the EU and the Western Balkans**

The research examines how discourses of Europeanness are constructed and questioned in debates on EU enlargement, in the light of its contested transformative approach centered around democratisation and emerging geopolitical paradigm. It investigates how enlargement is framed discursively in the European Parliament and in the national parliaments of Serbia and Montenegro, two Western Balkan candidates marked by contrasting trajectories in recent years, with Montenegro forging ahead in EU accession negotiations, while Serbia experiences stagnation in the accession along amidst authoritarian drift. Using thematic analysis, the research identifies patterns in argumentation, value frameworks, and political narratives through which Europe and European identity are represented and redefined. We link our research to broader debates on different approaches to the enlargement policy and the role of enlargement discourses in both the EU and the candidate countries. By uncovering tensions between the EU's normative self-representation as a democratising actor and the pragmatic approach to the enlargement, we shed a light on the contested meanings of Europeanness. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the political discourse surrounding Western Balkan integration and offer insights into both the obstacles and opportunities shaping the future of the EU enlargement.

**Lubomira Popova (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski)**

**The Reversed Logic of Europeanisation: From Enlargement Practice to Conceptualisation through the Bulgarian Experience**

This paper advances a conceptual rethink of Europeanisation by showing how its meaning in academic debates has shifted in parallel with changes in the EU's enlargement practice. We trace how the term has circulated in Bulgarian scholarship, evolving from a normative ideal of modernization into a procedural shorthand for compliance. The argument is tested against Bulgaria's experience with pre-accession assistance, drawing on empirical analysis of interview data with participants in the accession process.

The analysis identifies two reversals. Europeanisation itself has been inverted—from a prerequisite for European integration to a tool for achieving membership through formal rule compliance. At the same time, academic debate has mirrored this logic rather than critically interrogating it, thus limiting the potential of academic research to inform policy-making. By bridging conceptual debates and empirical evidence, the paper revitalises the dialogue between scholarship and policy-making, reclaiming Europeanisation as a critical lens for assessing the depth of change in EU enlargement.

**Pongrác Dús (Kodolanyi University, Szekesfehervar)**

**Pro-Government Troll Armies and Authentic Opposition Mobilization – Contrasting Online Political Participation in Hungary**

My paper examines the contrasting forms of online-based political support in Hungary, highlighting the difference between government-orchestrated initiatives and civic mobilization. In 2025, Fidesz party launched the so-called Fighters' Club and later the network of Digital Civic Circles to mobilize its supporters, also recruiting well-known public figures and presenting the project as evidence of broad societal endorsement to project legitimacy. The official goal of Fighters' Club is to engage in meaningful discussions on social media with opposition supporters and convince them. The real activity is to follow commands, liking and cheering posts of Fidesz politicians and comment insults under posts of opposition figures.

At the same time, opposition-aligned citizens have mobilized voluntarily, without incentives and despite significant personal and political risks. Their engagement ranges from viral campaigns to organizing large-scale protests. Unlike the government's elite-driven spectacle, these movements demonstrate both numerical strength and genuine commitment, reflecting frustration with democratic backsliding and limited access to traditional channels of influence.

My paper argues that the coexistence of manufactured and authentic forms of digital activism reveals fundamental tensions in Hungary's politics and public life, contributing to broader debates on legitimacy and democratic resilience under hybrid regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Agnieszka Bejma (University of Warsaw)**

**Digital Disinformation, Polarization, and Civil Society in Poland's 2025 Presidential Election**

The 2025 Polish presidential campaign was marked by intense political polarization and disinformation as an instrument in electoral competition. This paper explores how false or misleading information was disseminated through digital platforms and media networks to influence public opinion, discredit political opponents, and manipulate voter behavior. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of online content, campaign materials, and media reports, the study investigates the scope, patterns, and actors behind the disinformation efforts observed during the campaign period. The paper aims to answer the following research questions: What types of disinformation narratives emerged during the 2025 presidential campaign in Poland, and how were they constructed? How did disinformation influence public perception and the dynamics of electoral competition? What was the role of the civil society organizations in countering disinformation? The findings contribute to the broader literature on political communication, digital manipulation, and democratic resilience. The study also reflects on the effectiveness of institutional and civil society responses to electoral disinformation, offering insights into the challenges of safeguarding democratic processes in the digital age.

**Cristina Matiuta (University of Oradea)**

**TikTok and the Affective Politics of Digital Populism. Case study: Romanian Presidential Elections (2024-2025)**

On December 6, 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of presidential elections in a step that shook democratic polities worldwide: citing the presentation of evidence of aggressive promotion and coordinated manipulation through TikTok that had elevated far-right candidate Călin Georgescu from relative unknown to front-runner status. This dramatic judicial intervention—the first annulment of elections in country's post-communist history—illuminates a seismic shift in the ways in which online media impact elections and political mobilization. The re-run election in May 2025 that saw reformist candidate Nicușor Dan win had a very different pattern, demonstrating awareness of how algorithms had been used to affect the elections, altering campaigning and the mechanisms through which individuals voted.

Drawing on theories of digital populism, populist communication, youth political engagement, and affective polarization, the study develops an integrative framework for analyzing how TikTok's algorithmic design promotes emotionally charged, influencer-driven political content. It argues that TikTok functions as an incubator of affective nationalism by amplifying far-right narratives and mobilizing youth through emotionally resonant media. The article calls for a hybrid methodology combining discourse analysis of platform content and survey data to assess how nationalist narratives circulate and gain traction among young voters.

**Małgorzata Kaczorowska (University of Warsaw)**

**Who did we Elect Exactly: President or Prime Minister? Candidates and Their Programs in the 2025 Polish Presidential Elections in Comparative Perspective**

In the end, 13 people stood in the first round of the election of the head of state in Poland in 2025. Among them were candidates representing both the largest and smaller political parties and those not associated with any grouping. Election campaigns for the office of president are governed by their own rules and are highly personalized. It is a battle of personality, charisma, idea, competition for surprise, but also, and perhaps above all, for the idea and program of the presidency. This year, one may have the impression that many of the candidates in the presented political proposals go beyond the competences of the head of state provided for in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. Are we not dealing with 'prime minister' programs of candidates in the presidential elections, the implementation of which may be difficult? Is this a sign of potential crisis and conflict between the 'new' president and the 'old' prime minister? To what extent is the situation in 2025 exceptional in this respect? The aim of the article is to answer the indicated scientific questions, and it will be preceded by a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the programs of the candidates in the Polish presidential elections of 2025 in the context of previous as well as other recent European presidential elections.

**Mihaela Ivănescu (Ovidius University of Constanta)**

**Romania and the Delayed Crisis of Political Radicalism: Sovereignist Discourses, Annulled Elections and the “Infamous” 2024 Electoral Year**

The Romanian political landscape has long been characterized by the tension between democratic consolidation and recurrent populist mobilizations. Yet, while much of Central and Eastern Europe has grappled for over a decade with waves of populist mobilization and democratic backsliding, Romania appeared to stand apart: though characterized by political fragmentation and weakly institutionalized movements, the absence of a consolidated radical pole made it an outlier in the region and in the European Union overall. This paper explores Romania’s crisis of radicalism that began to manifest itself in recent years compared to the neighboring states and which became a catalyst for the contested electoral cycle of 2024. Methodologically, the paper draws on discourse analysis of party manifestos and campaign rhetorics, debates and media narratives, complemented by a review of electoral results of the 2024 electoral contests. The analysis will show how sovereigntist discourses gained traction by highlighting Romania’s democratic vulnerabilities. These narratives provided fertile ground for right-wing radical actors to position themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against both domestic and international adversaries. At the same time, the annulled presidential elections became both a trigger and a symbol of eroding democratic legitimacy. The paper argues that Romania’s delayed crisis of radicalism reflects a structural paradox: institutional weakness postponed the crystallization of illiberal projects and, at the same time, once mobilized, made their eventual impact more intense and more challenging for the political establishment to address. The analysis demonstrates how the interplay between institutional fragility and discursive strategies can define the trajectory and legitimacy of radical movements, contributing to the comparative debates on illiberal politics in Europe, in light of the regional crisis of democracy impacting Europe today.

**Jacek Wojnicki (University of Warsaw)**

**Flawed elections in the Balkan states – premises and consequences**

The topic of the speech corresponds to the issue of imperfect general elections (both parliamentary and presidential) in the Balkan countries. According to numerous political science classifications, they belong to belated or hybrid democracies. The presented paper is a summary of the research conducted over the last few years in Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania. A methodology characteristic of the discipline of political science was used – the comparative method, historical-descriptive and institutional-legal analysis, and the systemic method. The limitations of the democratic process in the discussed countries, which are manifested in the functioning of party systems and electoral procedures, are presented. The discussed processes have serious consequences for the functioning of democratic political institutions, limiting the level of competition in general elections and influencing the factor – the alternation of power in the state by means of a ballot paper.

**Anna Unger (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)**

**Towards a new party-state: electoral manipulations and party-state-fusion in Hungary after 2010**

A characteristic feature of modern electoral autocracies is that they seek democratic legitimacy for their autocratic exercise of power, i.e., authoritarian regimes come to power and remain in power through electoral mandates. The fundamental characteristics of democratic elections are only partially fulfilled: suffrage is generally universal and equal, but elections are not fair, voting is not always secret, and it is not entirely free. During elections, those in power employ a wide range of manipulative tactics (Schedler 2002, Birch 2011, Seeberg 2018, Cheeseman & Klaas 2018). An important feature of these manipulations is that the competing party and the government are intertwined, with government campaigns and government politicians actively participating in the election race, exploiting their governmental opportunities. This problem is not only one of electoral autocracies, but also of democracies, which developed democracies try to control and counteract partly through campaign financing and partly through electoral rules.

This entanglement between the Hungarian ruling party and the government has been evident for a long time and has been repeatedly mentioned in the reports of the OSCE-ODIHR election observation missions. However, the problem is even more serious than that: there have been a number of developments that suggest that we are no longer talking about the intertwining of the party and the government, but rather the intertwining of the party and the state, a kind of party-state-state party operation. Traces of this party-state character were already visible before 2010, but Fidesz, the government, and the state all strove to ensure that this separation of powers and the neutrality of the state in electoral competition were not openly questioned. In 2010, however, this changed radically after Prime Minister Viktor Orbán himself made it clear on several occasions that the Hungarian state, as an administrative system, was subordinate to party goals in order to win elections.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ways, techniques, and procedures through which the modern party state and state party become visible, and how its existence and operation distort and manipulate elections. The significance of the analysis is, on the one hand, that it provides an analytical framework that can also be applied in election research in other countries, enabling comparative analyses. On the other hand, as Hungary is a member of the EU, the analysis also indirectly points out how little guarantee the EU has over the purity and fairness of elections – that is, how far outside the EU's capabilities it is to ensure the values set out in Article 2 of the TEU in this very fundamental matter.



