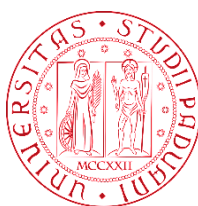


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**Master's degree in
Human Rights and Multi-level Governance**



RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT IN EUROPE AND THE EFFECT ON
DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING.
INSIGHTS FROM HUNGARY AND ITALY.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the efforts to foster democratic rules of governance, following the waves of democratization and several decades of transitioning and democratic consolidation, European democracies are now facing a prevalent threat of democratic backsliding. While being influenced by authoritarian rulers and populist narratives, European democracies are losing quality, transitioning to hybrid regimes, and experiencing an overall decline of democratic institutions. Combined, the young democracies' incomplete consolidation processes, and the expanding influence of the far right in the political scene, contribute to this multifaceted process. Contrary to the common perspective, older and well-established democracies do not remain immune to the growing issue of democratic backsliding. The existing literature does provide an insight into the impact of the far right in the subtle processes of democratic backsliding, however, this thesis allows for a more detailed observation of the role of the far right in these developments. Consequently, the present thesis will focus on the growing phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Europe, and on the rise of the far right in Europe, while especially considering the relation between the two. In addition, the thesis is devoted to examining the far right and democratic backsliding in Hungary and Italy, with a special focus on the negative effects on the two of the democratic pillars – the rule of law and freedom of the press.

Keywords: Democratic Erosion, Europe, Far right, Backsliding, Hungary and Italy

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INTRODUCTION

With the turn of the century, Europe became home to a novel process of democratic backsliding. Simultaneously, far right parties and movements have increased their influence as European democracies' electorates progressively opted for the right-oriented, radical and populist political options. Democratic backsliding, having replaced the well-known *coup d'état* regime overthrows, represents a multifaceted process, usually characterized as an erosion of democratic institutions and violations of checks and balances, as stressed by Bermeo. (2016) Unlike the previous democratic breakdowns, democratic backsliding threatens to lead a democracy to a hybrid, semi democratic regime through gradual and covert illiberal shifts. Rather than experiencing a rapid and radical transformation, one that is usually caused by external factors, a slow death is what awaits a democracy today, if its establishment turns to authoritarianism. (Schedler, 1998) On the other side of these developments lays the grip of the far right on European politics, and its mainstreamed narratives. Throughout the past couple of decades, the radical right, populist and anti-immigration parties multiplied their support among the voters and achieved surprising electoral success across Europe. Far right parties instrumentalise cultural and national identities, feelings of national pride and, as stressed by Mudde (2019c), utilize the discontent of the population with current political establishments for their own gain. Leading with matters concerning increased immigration, right-oriented parties capitalize on economic grievances, Euroscepticism, globalization concerns, cultural shifts and other.

In today's democracies, the beginning of this new mode of democratic backsliding is at the ballot box. (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) Decline of democracy mostly occurs after the party with authoritarian tendencies seizes power, enters a strong coalition, and gains significant influence in the decision-making processes. Once the populist, right-oriented party becomes a part of the establishment, as noted by Levitsky and Ziblatt, democracies face the threat of an illiberal turn, and it is the institutions, political parties, citizens, and democratic norms that represent a stronghold against this threat. But identifying autocrats is challenging, as far right frontrunners often preserve

the appearance of democratic tendencies, and then undermine a democracy once they are in office. Moreover, as highlighted by Levitsky and Ziblatt, illiberal actions of authoritarian establishments are not illegal, given that they are accompanied by legislative approval and court acceptance.

The developments of democratic erosion unfold under the veil of legality and a veneer of democratic governance. Democratic backsliding was previously considered as the issue most common in the third-wave, post-communist, and semi-consolidated democracies. This view, however, neglects specific contexts and leads to a generalization based on only one criterion – old vs new. The existing literature usually focuses on illiberal turns in third-wave democracies, and primarily in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. However, the rise of the far right appears to be a cross-cutting concern among Europe’s democracies, and the academia considers it accordingly. The modalities, instruments and narratives of the radical populist right are plentiful, overlapping, and overflowing into the mainstream, due to the constant efforts to normalize far right sentiments and incorporate them into contemporary European politics.

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the modalities of democratic backsliding, the rise of the far right in Europe and the relation between the two. In the book ‘How democracies die’, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) pointed out to what they defined as ‘four behavioral warning signs’ to be considered when assessing an authoritarian ruler: rejection of, or weak commitment to democratic rules of the game; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; toleration or encouragement of violence and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media. As further stressed by Bochsler and Juon (2019), the most significant marks of authoritarian rule were left on two democratic aspects – the rule of law and freedom of the press. Within this context, this paper also analyses the state of democracy in both Hungary and Italy with respect to the following indicators: 1 – the rule of law, as in the rejection of democratic rules (e.g. violating the Constitution, restricting civil and political rights, etc.) and 2 – the freedom of the press, as in the curtailment of civil liberties of opponents, especially media.

The objective of the thesis is as follows:

What is the correlation between the rise of the far right and democratic decay?

- How does the rise of the far right-wing parties influence the rule of law and freedom of the press?

- Following the Hungarian example, what is the aftermath we can anticipate in Italy when it comes to democratic backsliding?

A significant part of this paper is devoted to portraying a comprehensive picture of contemporary processes concerning democratic backsliding and the right in Europe. The causes, as well as the consequences of democratic erosion are considered through an analysis of the phenomena and its variants. The rise of the far right is considered through an outline of far right trends in contemporary Europe, along with far right modalities, the strategies and instruments of the far right party family, with a special focus on the effect of the far right on the decline of democracy. The thesis further offers analyses of the cases of Hungary and Italy, providing a comprehensive overview of the respective contexts, countries' ruling parties – Fidesz and Fratelli d'Italia, their programmes and strategies, as well as the state of democracy in both countries respectively.

In terms of literature, this paper draws on a broad literature analysis including books, research papers, articles, journals, reports, studies, and website articles. A qualitative approach to the analysis of the existing literature is undertaken to form a comprehensive overview of democratic backsliding and the far right in Europe, as well as the outline of the cases of Hungary and Italy. The information in regard to the state of democracy in Hungary and Italy is drawn for the period of six years (2017-2022) from the data bases and annual global and country specific reports of the Freedom House and the Human Rights Watch respectively.

The study is structured as follows. The first chapter aims to portray the core elements of democratic backsliding and far right trends in Europe. The chapter begins with an analysis of democratic backsliding, its definition and related terms/synonyms, elements, and variants, as well as a related concept of democratic consolidation. Next, the chapter offers an overview of preconditions and causes of democratic backsliding, the elements, characteristics, and developments of societies that are most likely to succumb to democratic erosion, including socio-economic elements, the age of a democracy, and important stakeholders. The first chapter also

contains an overview of the role of the international community and the European Union in the backsliding process. Finally, the chapter ends with an outline of waves of the far right in post-war Europe and their leading elements, as well as the overview of the post-materialist value system of this party family.

The second chapter is devoted to contemporary politics of the far right in Europe, and it begins with an analysis of the modern far right, its elements and party categorization, an outline of related terms/synonyms and a comparison and relation between mainstream and extreme parties. The chapter then provides an insight into the party systems and the positioning of parties, as well as the most prominent strategies and elements of far right politics in Europe, starting with the core anti-immigration narrative that significantly contributes to far right popularity, and including the instrumentalization of the youth and the digital sphere. The chapter concludes with an analysis of populism, a concept crucial to the success of the far right in Europe, along with the elements of populism, its effect and the strategies utilized by populists/the far right, including the concept of populist polarization and the negative effect it has on party and electoral systems and democracy.

The third chapter is mainly dedicated to an analysis of the far right and democratic backsliding in the contexts of Hungary and Italy. In the beginning, the chapter offers a short overview of far right and democratic erosion developments in two sets of European democracies: Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia for the CEE region and Austria, France, Germany, and Sweden beyond the CEE region. Then, the chapter provides an introduction of the political and party environment in Hungary, followed by an overview of the Orbán's Fidesz party and its history, and finalized with the analysis of Fidesz's narratives throughout the years, and with an analysis of the party's behavior in the government. Finally, an analysis of the state of democracy in Hungary over the past six years is provided, with a special focus on the rule of law and the freedom of the press. The same analysis is conducted for the Italian case, outlining the state of affairs and the political circumstances in Italy, Fratelli d'Italia's and Meloni's rise to power, the manifestos and narratives of the party and their behavior in office, and concluded with an analysis of the state of democracy in Italy in the past six years, with specific focus on the rule of law and the freedom of the press.

CHAPTER 1 – DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND THE FAR RIGHT IN EUROPE

1.1 Defining Democratic Backsliding

Often used to describe a gradual erosion, regression or weakening of democratic institutions, democratic backsliding is a term which has been increasingly used in scholarly articles referring to the political turns around the globe. Also characterized as autocratization, this decrease of democratic features of a political system, refers to a country or an economy which has previously been characterized as democratic. Suppression of civil liberties, erosion of the rule of law, restriction of freedom of the press, politicization of the judiciary, and manipulation of electoral processes are only some of the forms in which the nuanced democratic backsliding developments takes place.

Driven by various factors, democratic backsliding can be a result of different societal occurrences and individual actions, and while the authors have opposed opinions about the matter, there are a few patterns to be considered in relation to the emergence of the decline of democracy. When it comes to Europe, this trend has been taking place in countries which steadily and successfully transitioned to democracies by the early 2000s', and which were mainly considered as strong democracies. However, the phenomenon has also occurred in some of the Western Balkan countries, and some of democratic backsliding characteristics can also be seen in other, much older, and more firmly established democracies. The presence of democratic erosion in different settings, political systems and regions makes it challenging for those who work on the topic to define, analyse, and make conclusions about this matter. Consequently, there are various stands on democratic backsliding, making it a fruitful, and an important subject for discussion, given its role in the development of contemporary political systems and preservation of the pillars of democratic governance.

While democratic backsliding is often simply described as deterioration of democratic institutions, this is also a highly nuanced phenomenon, and a very common one. (Lust & Waldner, 2015) There are various instances and occasions in which democratic backsliding occurs, and the elements of this process appear on different levels of governance and vary in scope and complexity.

Undermining checks and balances which uphold a balanced system of a democracy is often attributed to populist parties, regimes, as well as individuals (see Vachudova, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Applebaum, 2020) and the process itself is a multifaceted one, including multiple and diverse agents and developments which act and occur on different governance levels. (Bermeo, 2016) In her essay 'On Democratic Backsliding', Nancy Bermeo looks back on the formerly much more common variants of democratic breakdowns such as the dramatic, executive '*coups d'état of the Cold War years*' and drastic frauds committed during election days and continues to introduce the concepts of promissory coups, executive aggrandizement and strategic election manipulation. The latter events are to be described as slow drifts towards authoritarianism, rather than sudden and drastic democratic breakdowns. (Bermeo, 2016) Aggrandizement refers to an increase in the concentration of political power (Bermeo, 2016), as it undermines the constitutional order and reduces checks and balances. (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017) Hungary and Poland, countries with governing systems which are often considered as pragmatic examples of democratic backsliding can also serve as an illustration of executive aggrandizement, having drifted from a democracy towards a form of a hybrid rule. (Cianetti et al., 2018)

This further testifies to the development of a more subtle backsliding process, one that can take different forms and take place in a wide range of institutions, leaving a mark which is both difficult to predict and very challenging to measure. A democratic system should be a system of adaptive institutions, responsive to different societal and economic changes (Berman, 2019), and of individual national and supranational actors which serve as checks and balances for upholding the strength of a democracy. The backsliding of institutions is therefore manifested across a wide scope of democratic and political entities, unfolding either rapidly or gradually, and causing both minor and major changes to the system it affects. Naturally, the issue which transpires from these observations is the *terms' extraordinary breadth* (Bermeo, 2016), making it difficult to reach a consensus about its meaning, as well as about using it to describe the same occurrences, or opting for one of its synonyms or the terms which resemble similar processes.

Building up on O'Donnell's 1980's formulation of democratic consolidation which branches out into *rapid deaths* and *slow deaths* of a democracy, Schedler was among the first authors to introduce a new distinction by defining *democratic breakdown* and *democratic erosion* in the essay dedicated to analysing the concept of democratic consolidation and its actual meaning.

(Schedler, 1998) The attention of the academia seems to be drawn closer to the quiet, gradual threat to democracies which was often overlooked, as Schedler implies that looking out for a democratic breakdown is kind of a diversion, which leads the spectator away from an equally significant threat – democratic erosion. While rapid conversions which lead straight to authoritarianism leave a traceable, obvious path behind, the continuous erosion will disconnect a democracy from its democratic governance steadily, and will do so in a much less evident way, resulting in its transformation into a ‘*fuzzy semidemocracy, a hybrid regime somewhere between liberal democracy and dictatorship*’. (Schedler, 1998)

Moreover, it is possible, and more common in the contemporary governing systems, for democracy’s traits to deteriorate well before a democracy breaks down. Democratic backsliding, conversely, implies a previously established democratic rule, and deterioration of democratic characteristics can occur in both democratic and non-democratic regimes, as it entails ‘*a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime*’. (Lust & Waldner, 2018) This is why Lührmann and Lindberg questioned the term *democratic backsliding*, and opted for three variations of the term autocratization instead – *democratic recession* as autocratization which occurs within democracies, *democratic breakdown* as a complete transition from a democracy to an autocracy, and *autocratic consolidation*, denoting deteriorations of democratic traits within authoritarian regimes. (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019)

What these efforts to properly interpret democratic backsliding and its variants have in common is the temporal dimension of the phenomenon. Whether the authors offered differentiations between the types of democratic breakdowns, described forms of more gradual democratic erosion, or introduced other, more nuanced novelties to better comprehend deterioration of democracies, the duration of the said erosions was the one of the leading means for categorizing them. Naturally, the volatility of democratic breakdowns is also taken into consideration, but given that drastic and violent overthrows are usually also described as *sudden*, *abrupt* and *expeditious*, they ought to be placed in the same category based on their temporal dimension which differs them from the slow erosion of democracies.

In the research paper *Two Modes of Democratic Breakdown: A Competing Risks Analysis of Democratic Durability*, Maeda argues that contemplating the manner in which democratic deterioration takes place should result in better understanding *democratic durability* and its

determinants. (Maeda, 2019) Maeda continues with introducing a new distinction, and classifies all forms of democratic breakdowns in two main groups - *exogenous termination* and *endogenous termination*. Exogenous termination represents an event in which an external factor, coming from outside of the government, such as military forces in most cases, terminates a democracy. On the other hand, endogenous termination occurs when a democratically elected leader contributes to the erosion of a democracy within the government itself. The latter is performed through typical acts of breaking down the rule of law, introducing restraints to the freedom of speech and media, committing electoral frauds, and more. Moreover, the author continues with arguing that endogenous terminations of democracies were as equally relevant in the second half of the 20th century, leading up to the year 2004, making up forty percent of all terminations in the said period. (Maeda, 2019) Though the drastic, executive *coups* were way more common in the past, they were not really the vastly predominant variant of backsliding in contemporary history, given that nearly a half of democratic deteriorations came from within the governments, and not from the outside.

Furthermore, previous differentiations of democratic breakdown were focused on distinguishing its variants based on the duration of the process and, consequently, its passive or active volatility – while the traditional *coups d'état* usually portray an open and violent unrest resulting in a takeover of power, the new, progressive autocratization represents much more subtle acts of aggression against the democratic system. Maeda, however, puts forward a new component in defining and differentiating variants of this phenomenon – the *source* of democratic backsliding. This novelty accentuates the role that political entities have in upholding a balanced and enduring democratic system or dismantling its checks and balances, whether it being a ruling party, an individual in power, or a political party with a place in a parliament.

Moreover, Tomini and Wagemann stress that, considering the broad representation of democratic backsliding in the world, a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon appears to be lacking in contemporary literature. (Tomini & Wagemann, 2017) Building up on Erdmann's differentiation between the loss of quality, hybridisation, and breakdown of democracy (Erdmann, 2007), the two proceed with distinguishing two different variants of democratic erosion – *democratic regression* and *democratic breakdown*. The first one being a conversion which happens within the democracy and lowers its quality, and the latter defining a transition from a democratic to a hybrid, or an authoritarian regime. (Tomini & Wagemann, 2017) When considering

democratic regression as something that develops within the democracy, it can also be said that the actors, the doers, responsible for this deterioration are also a part of the system and are coming from the inside rather than the outside. It is equally important to note that, along with those in power, the insiders are also the opposition to the ruling party, whose influence and popularity are grand enough to secure a spot in all decision-making processes.

In the past couple of decades, Europe has been facing an array of democratic backsliding cases, many of which are now clearly evident in countries other than Hungary and Poland, which were the first pragmatic examples of democratic decay. (Cianetti et al., 2018) Moreover, it is the gradual erosion that is taking its toll and converting some of Europe's democracies into hybrid and authoritarian regimes, rather than the classical *coup* politics and breakdowns from the past. When considering the correlations between these gradual democratic decays and the relevant actors who contribute and cause these regressions, it is important to bring the far right, radical right and populist parties and movements into the equation, given the evident rise in the support of this party family. (Vachudova, 2020)

1.2 Democratic Consolidation

Democratic backsliding represents alterations which impact various aspects of democratic quality, such as electoral competition, liberties, and accountability (Lust & Waldner, 2015), often leaving the citizens as the last stronghold resisting democratic deterioration perpetuated by elected leaders and parties (Schedler, 2019) who accumulate power and influence over institutions which were once independent. However, several considerations are to be made in order to perpetuate this gradual but persistent deterioration of democracy, and to confirm that it is taking place since merely tallying democracies and autocracies is no longer sufficient to accurately gauge the state of global democracy's well-being. (Lust & Waldner, 2015) Moreover, rather than focusing on the term and its meaning, some scholars turn to analysing the cause of democratic deterioration in order to better describe and understand it.

Both the second and third waves of democratization brought in a number of young democracies whose politics, institutions and governing systems were awaiting some sort of adjustments and reforms in order to comply with global trends of democratic rule. The collapse of

the communist regimes and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 further enhanced the democratisation spree, and the newly transitioned third wave democracies were yet to be fully institutionally established through the process of democratic consolidation, having recognized democracy as the '*only legitimate form of politics*'. (Huntington, 1991) Democratic consolidation should result in the establishment of a durable, legitimate and stable democracy with internalized democratic values that overreach into various political and societal actors. (Schmitter & Karl, 1991) Through this characterization, Schmitter and Karl accentuated the importance of the dispersion of democratic values and principles throughout the institutions, political actors and the whole of society. Emphasizing the *durability* of democratic consolidation, Diamond continues to stress that, along with ensuring consistent and legitimate democratic practices, limiting the power of the executive, protecting political and civil rights, and respecting the rule of law are some of the key instruments for achieving true democratic consolidation. (Diamond, 1996)

Furthermore, in his efforts to untangle the broad concept of democratic consolidation, Schedler points out that its classical connotation usually revolves around ensuring that there is a minimal probability of democratic breakdown and, therefore, significantly increasing the chances of a democracy's survival and resilience. (Schedler, 1998) Again, to secure a democracy and achieve its sustainability is to prevent any kind of authoritarian intrusion from the outside, as well as from the inside, and to get in line and functioning all relevant institutions, actors and the public. This preoccupation with maintaining a democracy has both a 'positive' and a 'negative' challenge – electoral democracies, the ones which maintain inclusive elections but struggle with upholding civil and political liberties, face the positive challenge of obtaining a democratic governance, while liberal democracies encounter a negative challenge of averting democratic backsliding. (Schedler, 1998) However, the concept should remain concentrated around the efforts of ensuring the survival of a democracy (Schedler, 1998), because to consider democratic consolidation as a process taking place in a transitioning, not yet completed democracies will only lead to the assumption that a democratic rule is already established when, in fact, it is not.

Moreover, certain authors have questioned the term *backsliding* in a similar way as well, stressing that the word is problematic because '*backsliding assumes a prior period of successful democratisation*'. (Cianetti et al., 2018) Third-wave democracies from Central and Eastern Europe were proclaimed as such based on the observations of institutional consolidation and quantitative,

institutional and legal check-lists. However, it is important to note that oftentimes the usual methodologies used to estimate and identify the level of democratic consolidation are grounded in institutional procedures and legal freedoms, hence overlooking democratic development in practice. (Dawson, 2018) Furthermore, many leaders of these young European democracies were more than ready to introduce changes in order to reach the goal of transitioning into liberal democracies, however, the implementation of different mechanisms appeared to be very different in practice (Dawson, 2018, as cited in Cianetti et al., 2018), as civil rights and freedoms, principles of transparency, accountability and participation and more, were still lacking.

Naturally, there are opposing takes on what constitutes the characteristics of a consolidated democracy and whether, or when, a democracy reaches the final stage of consolidation. A possible modality for observing and stipulating the level of democratic ‘completeness’ is mirrored in the amount of risk of democratic backsliding a country faces in the present moment. Similarly to Schedler, Svobik revolves his studies around the survival of a democracy, and more specifically – around the risk of an authoritarian reversal, faced by all transitional democracies. (Svobik, 2015) Once established, a democracy will most likely follow one of the three trajectories – sliding back into a dictatorship; surviving and consolidating, with a result of facing a very low risk of authoritarian reversal; and surviving but failing to consolidate, hence continuing to be at a high risk of authoritarian reversal. Svobik proceeds with stressing that ‘*whether or when a democracy that survives also consolidates cannot be directly observed and must be inferred*’ (Svobik, 2015), and he draws the conclusions regarding democratic consolidation from the level of risk of democratic erosion. The findings show that a significant decline in the risk of authoritarian reversals occurs seventeen to twenty years after the establishment of a democracy, given that 1 in 33 transitional democracies suffer from democratic breakdowns, while this ratio lowers significantly, to 1 in 200, for consolidated democracies. (Svobik, 2015) However, it is crucial to note that, according to Svobik’s findings, only 1 in 3 democracies will succeed in upholding a stable democratic rule long enough to achieve consolidation. Bearing that in mind, democratic consolidation can be observed as an absence of erosion or minimization of risk of democratic backsliding, but nonetheless it is a lengthy process, and one that is not often successfully completed.

1.3 Democratic Backsliding: Roots and Preconditions

The considerations regarding democratic consolidation, *the becoming* of a democracy and its durability, raise another question – if exhaustive and continuous attempts to build the regime, to preserve it and protect it are necessary in these countries, were they even established democracies to begin with? If the threats to democratic durability are so persistent and the changes to the regime are so harmful, then one may assume that the country in question was never truly a democracy in the first place. This issue was also raised by Vachudova in her essay ‘Ethnopolitism and democratic backsliding in Central Europe’, offering several explanations regarding what causes democratic backsliding and especially focusing on the examples of backsliding in Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic, countries which were once ‘*the standard bearers for political and economic reform*’. (Vachudova, 2020) The reason behind these swift and rather successful transitions to democracy is the existence of clear and persistent opposition to communism which was present in these countries, and which influenced the political will for establishing a democratic rule. (Vachudova, 2005) However, it was the new leaders of young democracies that were accused of ‘colluding with the communists’ three decades later by different opposition groups that use this populist narrative to appeal to voters, further arguing that ‘*the new incumbents must be given unprecedented power*’ to annul this wrongdoing and ‘*reconstruct the entire polity based on the ‘true’ version of history*’. (Vachudova, 2020) Apart from offering one of the causes of democratic backsliding, these considerations emphasize another valuable stakeholder of democratic erosion as well, outlining instances in which populist, far-right parties negatively affect a democratic rule.

The theories regarding the causes of democratic backsliding are not as abundant and are somewhat contradictory, and given that there are different understandings concerning the meaning of the phenomenon itself, it is important to consider the elements which may lead to or contribute to the ongoing processes of democratic erosion. It is often noted that the third-wave democracies which transitioned from communist and socialist regimes are now bearing the consequences of these regimes’ poor governance, however the challenges of low-quality democratic governance surpass the ‘*legacy of communist authoritarianism*’. (Cianetti et al., 2018) To better understand the cause of democratic erosion, many authors will look at and analyse the characteristics of the democracies facing autocratization or backsliding challenges and will base their findings on numbers and listings, providing a valuable baseline for further exploration. Some of the

circumstances, potential causes and elements which affect and contribute to democratic regression, such as the differences between old and young democracies, the levels of economic development and the role of political actors, are repeatedly considered throughout the respective literature.

1.3.1 The Age of a Democracy

More often than not, democratic erosion is associated with young democracies and their systems that are now '*displaying serious vulnerabilities*' (Habdank–Kończowska & Walker, 2012), even though most of them have transitioned from previous regimes and were established as democracies a couple of decades ago. Considering the inexperience in democratic governance and new and, therefore, presumably weak institutions, young democracies are thought to be more susceptible to the rise of authoritarian and populist leaders and overall democratic erosion. (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) Nonetheless, the practice shows that the decline in the quality of democracy affects old and established democracies as well. It was believed that well-established institutions in old democracies represent a stronghold against these regressions, but these countries are not immune to actors who accumulate power and influence and exploit the institutions while simultaneously harming democratic rule. (Gandhi, 2018)

In his work concerning the decline of democracy, Erdmann finds that the erosion of democratic quality does not only occur in third-wave democracies, and that it takes place in older and well-established democracies as well. (Erdmann, 2007) However, a distinction is made between backsliding which results with a change from a democratic into a non-democratic regime and a democratic decline which does not result in any kind of hybridisation. The first one is more frequent in the new, third-wave democracies, while the latter is mainly reserved for the established and developed democracies. (Erdmann, 2007)

Despite the fact that the age of a democracy certainly poses a valid and a viable condition, to some degree, it can be limiting as well. Often used by the academia, the distinctions are made in such a manner which '*restricts attention to a subsample of either 'new' or 'advanced' democracies*' (Svolik, 2015), further generalising what seems to be a very diverse representation of democratic governance. In an effort to recognize the pattern of the wide-spreading threat of democratic breakdown, the differentiations between 'new' and 'old' are occasionally based on '*ad*

hoc geographical or temporal criteria', such as only considering democracies established prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall as advanced (Svolik, 2015), and overlooking authentic contexts and examples.

1.3.2 Economic Development or Socio-economic Inequalities?

Erdmann finds that the negative changes in democracies can take place '*under all sorts of different economic conditions or levels of development*'. (Erdmann, 2007) However, the erosion of democracy that occurs in a high-income country will only appear as a loss of democratic quality, rather than a complete breakdown. It is further noted that as the level of a country's socio-economic and development conditions grows higher, the chances of an authoritarian decline will be lower, outlining the high-income democracies as significantly less prone to autocratization. (Erdmann, 2007) Though the socio-economic conditions are often considered as one of the crucial factors for democratic backsliding, as are the '*age*' and the level of establishment of the democratic system, these conditions are not absolute. The erosion of democratic governance can occur in any democracy, and given that it does not necessarily lead to a complete breakdown or hybridisation (Tomini & Wagemann, 2017), the decline can take place, affect the state of democracy to a certain extent, and cause no further harm to the rule. Consequently, a country might be affected by these negative developments, and still remain a stable democracy. However, '*democratic stability is not the same as democratic quality*' (Cianetti et al., 2018), and while the consequences of this subtle decline may not be as severe as high scale autocratization processes, if actions to reverse the decline are lacking, the quality of a democracy still deteriorates.

With an aim of offering a more structured explanation, Tomini and Wagemann conducted an analysis of different conditions and their effect on democratic backsliding, exploring economic development, economic inequality, the party system with a special focus on the fragmentation of the political offer, the duration of democracy, assuming it is a pre-condition for democratic consolidation, as well as the social condition of ethnolinguistic fractionalisation and a condition regarding external factors, focusing on the representation of democracy throughout the neighbouring countries. (Tomini & Wagemann, 2017) After undertaking a comparative analysis to better understand the democratic regression process, the authors found that these conditions,

observed individually, do not have a significant impact on the decline of democracy on their own, or even considered in combination with some of the other conditions. Moreover, Tomini and Wagemann further stress that unequal access to and distribution of political and socioeconomic resources are to be considered as viable preconditions for democratic erosion, as these inequalities over time transform into political inequalities and set a base for democratic decline. More importantly, the authors did note that the usual conditions do not necessarily act as symptoms of democratic backsliding, however they did not disregard them completely, as it is also noted that the analysed conditions do affect the stability and quality of a democracy, but that they are also followed and maybe even overpowered by other factors as well. (Tomini & Wagemann, 2017)

In addition, Tomini and Wagemann recognized the existence of two different models of democratic breakdown – a *crisis-based model* and an *opposition-based model*, and while the focus point of the first one is the presence of a crisis and various forms it can take, the latter represents a threat to democratic rule coming from the opposition. However, both of the democratic breakdown models, according to the authors, appear in such societal contexts that are dominated by ‘*a lack of socioeconomic development and an ethno-linguistically divided society, or, alternatively, high socioeconomic inequality*’. (Tomini & Wagemann, 2017) While there are different takes on whether the economic conditions of a country can influence democratic backsliding and to what extent, it can be concluded that the level of economic development is a factor worth considering, given that democratic breakdown poses a greater threat in countries that do not have a high income. However, both highly developed economies and those that are less well-off are being affected by democratic erosion, and while the decline in democratic values and practices is a complex and multi-faceted process, it is important to observe the sub-factors of backsliding conditions specific to different contexts, such as, and relevant to the aforementioned case, unequal distribution and access to socioeconomic resources and general economic inequalities.

Besides, in an effort to introduce a new model of democratic consolidation and untangle the phenomenon of democratic survival, Svobik also discusses different effects on democratic erosion and breakdown in both transitional and consolidated democracies. The level of economic development of a democracy is one of the identified effects, and it is one that does not parish once a democracy is consolidated. (Svobik, 2015) In more detail, the findings show that the presence of

authoritarianism in the neighbouring countries, the legacies of the Cold War, economic recessions, and a past of military authoritarianism all seize to cause authoritarian turnover once a democracy is consolidated. However, ‘*democracies never fully consolidate against the risk of breakdown that is associated with low levels of economic development*’, given that after completing the lengthy process of consolidation, democracies build resilience for all of the aforementioned factors but the one related to the levels of economic development – hence, the risk of democratic erosion in countries with higher economic development levels will be much lower than in those countries with low levels of economic development. (Svolik, 2015)

1.3.3 The Position, The Opposition, and The Military Forces

In addition to mapping out the conditions of democratic breakdown, Tomini and Wagemann’s considerations take into account the crucial role of the actors involved in the process, with a special regard to the part played by the opposition. More specifically, according to the authors, the threat to democracy in the *opposition-based model* of democratic breakdown can come both from the inside and outside of the government, given that the ruling party can take action to concentrate power and introduce autocratic practices when threatened by the opposition from the outside, and that the opposition can turn autocratic and diminish democratic practices once it succeeds in getting hold of the power. (Tomini & Wagemann, 2017) Although the newly elected incumbent can harm a democratic rule by turning authoritarian, the party in question may also aim to maintain the stability and quality of a democracy, but then fail once faced with difficulties which occur under the influence of other alternative parties and movements which cause further progressive democratic decline. Finally, while the conditions affecting democratic backsliding are proved to be complex and interconnected, rather than only focusing on the legacies of the previous regimes, political and socioeconomic factors and other, it is equally important to consider the actors of democratic erosion, and especially the far right parties that gain in both numbers and popularity throughout Europe. (See Enyedi, 2020; Bochsler & Juon, 2019; Jenne, 2018; Enyedi, 2016)

Even Svolik draws a line between the actors that influence democratic backsliding, pointing out that it is of utmost importance to differentiate between the actors that cause democratic

breakdowns. Presuming that authoritarian reversals occur either through military coups, incumbent takeovers in which the newly elected leaders subvert the democracy and during civil wars, the focus is on the former two, as analysing and comparing them introduces new findings regarding their interconnection with democratic consolidation as well. Although these are different events that occur in different contexts, military coups and incumbent takeovers appear to be the cause of over 90 percent of all authoritarian reversals. Once consolidated, democracies face almost no risk of military coups, however, even after upholding a stable democratic rule for a period long enough to reach democratic consolidation, the country is never immune to incumbent takeovers. (Svolik, 2015) While there is an evident change in the frequency of these processes, as mentioned previously, given that coups represent a lesser threat than the gradual democratic erosion (Bermeo, 2016), democracies' vulnerability in regard to systemic, subtle erosion committed by the newly elected leaders poses an even greater threat in contemporary politics. Accordingly, political parties and different movements can jeopardize both transitional, new democracies and the well-established, consolidated democracies as well, as *'accumulation of too much power in the hands of an incumbent seems to be a persistent threat to democratic stability'*. (Svolik, 2015)

1.4 The Response of the International Community and the EU

Whether by supporting institutional and political reforms and setting up a base for establishing democratic norms and standards, or by providing economic incentives, the EU is considered to contribute to the genuine consolidation of democracies. While a *'membership in international organizations may /.../ help to consolidate democratic reforms'* (Lust & Waldner, 2018), both member states and the candidates have developed their democratic rule through conditions and benefits the EU sets and offers. However, given the significant rise of autocratization throughout Europe, there is one viable way in which a democratic rule should be considered - as a process; a constant effort to maintain, to uphold, to control and monitor democratic governance. It is a never-ending process rather than something that has been checked out as completed and then left in the hands of incumbents responsible for the preservation of democratic quality.

While conceptualizing the process of Europeanization of the Central and Eastern Europe, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) point out that the international community has had a significant influence over economic and political transformations in the region. The most influential, however, is the EU, given the '*high volume and intrusiveness of the rules attached to membership*' which also imply certain leverage the EU has in the processes of domestic institution reform as well as the wide scope of public policy development in the CEE region. (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005) Moreover, the legislative processes in these countries included the implementation of a wide range of Acquis communautaire as a prerequisite of EU accession. As an example of an excessive influence the legislative alignment has had on these countries, the authors provide an example of the Hungary's 1999 parliamentary session during which 152 laws out of the 180 were passed without a public debate, on the grounds that these laws were part of the Acquis. (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005) Even though the EU, through its official documents, explicitly commits to safeguarding human rights, democracy, and rule of law (Meyerrose, 2020), some authors argue that the EU acquis does not adequately tackle the areas of rule of law, the fight against corruption and the issues of safeguarding a liberal democracy (Vachudova, 2020), thus unintentionally undermining the development of a democracy.

Although both direct and indirect EU contributions and influence held a significant role in the development and consolidation of new democracies, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier raise another point relevant both for the Europeanization process, and the processes of democratic consolidation. European Union policy for the Central and Eastern Europe is a policy of conditionality, and while the scope of EU conditionality may be comprehensive, its adequacy and usefulness might be limited in specific issue areas or countries. Moreover, policy development and implementation as well as different institutional changes which took place are not all to be attributed solely to the EU conditionality. The credibility of conditionality is questioned as well, and more precisely - the credibility of the European Union's '*threat of withholding rewards in the case of noncompliance*'. (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005)

Some of the reasons behind doubting the conditionality principle, according to the authors, are the monitoring challenges and incomplete information regarding the country being monitored, which affects the effectiveness of conditionality. More precisely, the credibility of conditionality is damaged in a situation when the EU is unable to monitor the target state, and when its agencies

on the ground deliver information irregularly, or when the target state retains compliance records from the monitoring team. (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005) Therefore, while new democracies, influenced by the EU, made significant progress in introducing new legislature, the practice appears to be somewhat different as the lack of capacity of the EU, among other factors such as the political will on the ground, and the influence of different internal and external political actors, allows for avoidance of compliance of target countries.

Bochsler and Juon (2019) continue to question the effectiveness of the conditionality principle in Central and Eastern Europe, while noting that the principle ‘vanished’ from all eleven countries of the region that have achieved EU membership. The reason behind this failure, according to the authors and similar to the opinion of Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, lies in the limited scope of sanctions the EU can impose, and in the fact that these punitive measures are difficult to activate, ineffective, politically costly, and because the procedure for their activation is very lengthy and requires a unanimous decision. (Bochsler & Juon, 2019) To illustrate this issue, the authors indicate that Hungary and Poland, both facing EU disciplinary proceedings since 2017 and 2018 and in regard to the rule of law issues in both countries, continue to support each other and therefore avoid the unanimous decision that would introduce more serious consequences. (Bochsler & Juon, 2019) However, the situation has changed in the recent period, given the approval and the adoption of the controversial Conditionality Regulation (Fisicaro, 2022; Baraggia & Bonelli, 2021), resulting with the EU withholding significant funds from both Hungary and Poland due to rule of law violations. So far, according to the annual EU Rule of Law Report, very little progress was made in both of these countries, despite the measures introduced by the EU. (European Commission, 2022)

In addition, Meyerrose goes further in considering the negative effects international organizations might possibly have in connection with democratic backsliding. While enhancing the importance of upholding strong institutions to safeguard a democracy, Meyerrose argues that international organizations have had a role in the deterioration of these institutions by neglecting them and setting their attention ‘*predominantly on elites and elections*’. (Meyerrose, 2020) The author argues that international organizations contribute to democratic erosion of young democracies by favouring powerful executives, with them most often being the sole intermediates between the international community and their countries, as well as by confining domestic policy

development and implementation, by insisting on different external policy requirements. Other than highlighting the poor side-effects of international organizations' influence predominantly focused on '*domestic executives' behaviour and incentives and providing election-related assistance*' (Donno, 2013; Pevehouse, 2005; Poast & Urpelainen, 2018), the issue of weakened institutions, easily manipulated by the countries' executives, and the lack of investment in their development are accentuated as well.

The response of the European Union to numerous democratic backsliding cases in Europe has not been adequate (Vachudova, 2020), and there are different qualitative studies which testify that the EU cannot prevent democratic decline or the erosion of its pillars – freedom of the press, of the academia and the rule of law, in some of the member states. (Kelemen, 2017, Enyedi, 2018, as cited in Bochsler & Juon, 2020) The academia criticizes EU's influence, or the lack thereof, as the EU does not only appear to be unwilling and unfit to face the challenge of democratic backsliding, but seems to contribute to further autocratization. The executives, and especially those in EU member states, were now able to accumulate power and remain immune to bearing the consequences of allowing and increasing corruption of financial markets (Johnson & Barnes, 2015, as cited in Vachudova, 2020), all the while having access to extensive EU funds, as well as the sole authority over its distribution which now favoured '*cronies*' and disfavoured the '*critics*'. (Kelemen, 2020) Moreover, it is not only the member states' executives that 'profit' from the EU's insufficient involvement in autocratization issues – the '*EU leaders prioritise stability in the Western Balkan region*' and therefore knowingly overlook the erosion of democracy in the hands of the executive strongmen who maintain this stability, but on the other hand accumulate power, restrict the freedom of the press and undermine the civil society. (Vachudova, 2020)

Different variants of democratic erosion occur at different stages of EU accession, and while some countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, face backsliding after being granted a membership status, others, with Association Agreements and with perspectives for future membership, experience the decline in democracy in an earlier stage. (Bochsler & Juon, 2020) However, Börzel and Schimmelfennig find that there are no considerable and systemic changes in the level of democracy which can testify to a trend of higher chance of democratic erosion in newly admitted EU member states. (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017) The issue here, however, is not the possible pattern of increase in democratic erosion after the EU membership is granted, but in the

possibility that EU member states, far from being immune to the phenomenon, do not receive an adequate response from the EU and the international community once the decline occurs. Unless there is a prospect of the European Union to allow for further integration as a reward for democratic progress, *‘once a new step of integration is reached, the EU instruments provide little leverage’*. (Bochsler & Juon, 2020) Moreover, Bochsler and Juon argue that the EU’s failure in avoiding and countering democratic backsliding in its member states and non-members as well, might encourage the authoritarian rulers to introduce measures that will harm democracies across Europe, spreading the backsliding trend and jeopardizing EU’s capacity to maintain democracy. (Bochsler & Juon, 2020)

Therefore, the notion that the international community, and especially the European Union, are behind the neglect that does not necessarily cause, but does contribute to a decline of democratic values, or to a previously rapid democratic progress becoming stagnant is a common one throughout respective literature. The political drives behind a speedy fulfilment and approval of membership conditions are many, and although the involvement of the EU and other international entities is often seen as pervasive by many commentators (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005), its scope, value and effectiveness are questioned by others. Not only are the authors debating over the approach that the EU and the international community have towards democratization processes, but they go to greater lengths and introduce their negative influence and argue that having election-related assistance and well-established electoral systems but weak and eroded institutions limits the potential for proper democratization (Flores & Nooruddin, 2016, as cited in Meyerrose, 2020), attributing these negative outcomes to international organizations.

1.5 Trends of the Far Right in Europe

The rise of the right-oriented politics in Europe is evident, and as worrying as these developments may be, they are now an indispensable component of political life in most of the countries across Europe. Be it inside the governments, in power-sharing structures or in securing a notable electoral success, the contemporary far right becomes more influential, and as such, it should be studied accordingly. (Davies & Jackson, 2008) Moreover, as the overbearing wave of different populist parties emerging throughout Europe is leaving a mark on the state of affected

democracies, the academia continues to connect the current circumstances with ongoing democratic decline. The democratic backsliding phenomenon used to characterize the economies of Central and Eastern Europe, and most commonly those which have transitioned from communist/socialist regimes of the region, such as Hungary and Poland, countries once applauded for the complex accomplishments achieved in the short period of time, which are now drawing the attention of scholars, as well as the public, for the opposite and rather negative developments which took over after the turn of the century, and in the hands of the Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland and the Fidesz party in Hungary, both of which gradually developed a more populist discourse over time.

Naturally, scholars dwelled over the concept and its cause, introducing multiple versions of how and why the backsliding occurred and continued to shape the politics of these countries. The emersion of strong political leaders, was one of the most agreeable causes of the negative developments in the state of democracies, as was the populist narrative and power of the newly established right-oriented parties, starting with the Central and Eastern European region. (Bochsler & Juon, 2019) Countries such as Austria, Croatia, Finland, Italy, Poland, Serbia, and Slovakia have all had the far right participating in coalition governments (Bustikova, 2014), while the far right has supported minority governments in other countries, such as Bulgaria, Denmark and Norway, and has been excessively influential in countries such as Belgium and France. (Golder, 2016)

In just over a decade, authors have gone from dismissing the reemergence of the radical right as a '*marginal electoral force in most European countries*' (Mudde, 2007) to admitting the undeniable influence these politics have. Radical right-oriented parties and narratives became a valid and wide-spread political option after a wave of its normalization and mainstreaming that reached its peak through the mainstreaming of immigration as a '*threat*'. (Mudde, 2021) The far right has taken a steady part in European politics, and has subsequently brought on a normalization of these developments, as populist parties secure more than a half of the votes in what sometimes seem to be manipulated elections in some of the EU member states, and as former and current neo-Nazi parties peak in popularity in others. (Mudde, 2019a)

Moreover, not only have the right-wing populist frontrunners marched into the political scene across Europe, but they have also influenced the political elites to embrace their narratives, and the left and the center to adopt their practices and rules of the game (Rodríguez-Aguilera,

2014), mainstreaming populism throughout the political scene and normalizing it amongst the public. (Mudde, 2019a) A wide-spread concern for handling the far right and, to some extent, the democratic decline it has an effect on, has grown bigger since the beginning of the 21st century. The 2015 refugee crisis, however, helped transform this concern into a more alarming one, as the center and the left were, and still are, aiming to put an end to the rise of the right across the west and appeal to voters by tackling the immigration issue. According to Mudde, the approach at hand is an inadequate one, but different academics belonging to the center and the right have raised this issue and influenced European leaders to play the *immigration* card over the last decade, in order to appeal to voters who shifted to the right, but with little result, as the decline of the center-left parties using this rhetoric was not prevented. (Mudde, 2019b)

In fact, increased immigration is often characterized by the academia as one of the driving forces behind the rise of the far right, and the force which is further enhanced by the sentiments of increased globalization and multiculturalism. In this climate, parties usually profit by selling narratives focused on isolating the threat to national identity, decisive anti-immigrant stances, promotion of traditional values and cultural heritage. Inglehart and Norris stress that a part of the population develops a sense of threat because of the increased immigration and rapid democratic shifts and that the cultural backlash against the contemporary social changes and values is mirrored in the increased support people give to the far right parties and movements. (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) Besides, what makes these political options more successful, other than promoting their strong anti-immigrant stances, is their ability to draw in the voters who are unable to identify and connect to the mainstream politics and socio-cultural climate influenced by globalization.

The far right frontrunners are efficient at utilizing the sense of national pride and cultural and national identity, that immigration, multiculturalism and globalization heightened in some segments of the population. But more importantly, they have been making the most of the dissatisfaction of parts of population regarding the mainstream political establishment and the inadequate approach of the traditional parties in addressing their concerns. (Mudde, 2019c) Naturally, there are numerous ways to capitalize this dissatisfaction, given that the rise of the far right is not only connected to increased immigration, and that underlying factors such as economic grievances, globalization, shifts in different cultural and political dynamics, Euroscepticism and overall opposition to the European Union, as well as the wide-spreading mistrust in institutions

and disapproval of traditional parties are also some of the main underlying factors contributing to the rise of far-right movements and parties. (Jay et al., 2019; Nourbakhsh et al., 2023; Hainsworth, 2008; Vasilopoulou, 2018)

Moreover, along with economic changes, the distrust in mainstream politics and globalization, the environment suitable for the mobilization of the far right is even more enhanced by the use of social media. Many authors have stressed that the role of traditional media, as well as of social media has been crucial in intensifying the messages of the far right and distributing them to a very broad audience. (Devries et al., 2021; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017) In addition, as the youth is considered to hold a significant share of far right supporters (Merina & Koroleva, 2015), the increasing role of social media and other networking channels is also evident when it comes to the rise of the far right. Namely, most young people use the online sphere as their main source of information and, naturally, it did not take long for the members of different political options to understand that the '*digital media are key not only to social lives but also to the practices of civic and political life*' (Middaugh et al., 2016).

Although the youth is increasingly engaged in the online political discourse, this new option for displaying allegiance to a certain movement by joining or supporting their online spaces was also embraced by varied demographic groups, such as both very old and very young men who belong to the working, lower and middle class and who have lower educational achievements. (Bartlett et al., 2011) Additionally, '*being female, middle-aged and a professional*' considerably decreases the probability of voting for a far right political option. (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006) Furthermore, what has massively contributed to the electoral success of the far right movements and parties in Europe is securing sympathies and, eventually, support of both skilled and unskilled members of the working class and of those belonging to the lower middle class. According to Goodwin, in the current state of affairs, these groups are most susceptible to feeling economically insecure, perceiving this insecurity as a cultural and economic consequence of immigration. (Goodwin, 2011, as cited in Bartlett et al., 2011) This narrow characterization of the supporters of the populist extremist parties, according to Goodwin, implies that these supporters are, in fact, protest voters or voters that represent an '*underclass of economically threatened workers*'. (Goodwin, 2011)

The far right is usually associated with the ideologies and politics of the right wing that are opposing democracy or liberal democracy. According to Mudde, the far right presumes and proposes that societal inequalities are to be considered as ‘natural’, and that there is no need for the state to make efforts to reduce them. Mudde continues with differentiating between the radical right and the extreme right, arguing that extreme right is against democracy per se and rejects preconditions and fundamental aspects of democracy such as majority rule, while the radical right submits to democracy while refusing the fundamentals of liberal democracy, such as pluralism, rule of law, minority rights and dissolution of power. Nonetheless, the author stresses that these distinctions are not as evident in the contemporary political scene. The frontrunners of the extreme right movements will usually conceal their true intentions and modify their messages in order to stay on the law-abiding side of the game, but this is not the only indicator of how complex and nuanced the differentiation between right-oriented actors and their ideologies actually is. (Mudde, 2020)

Mudde stresses that the far right has always been heterogenous, given the numerous differences in ideology, mobilisation, and organization of parties’ and movements’ politics, as well as the presence of very diverse stances parties take on different issues such as gender, economy, environment, and immigration. Moreover, the majority of today’s far right political options belong to the populist radical right, which utilizes authoritarianism, populism and nativism. Finally, even the politicians and right-oriented parties which do not belong to/identify as an extreme-right movement, still ‘*openly flirt with extreme-right ideas, like antisemitism, racism, and even military dictatorship*’. (Mudde, 2020) While there are extreme-right political parties that are being represented in national parliaments, it can be implied that parties with hidden agendas and politicians that lean into authoritarianism can pose an even greater threat to fundamental aspects of democracy. These nuances might lead to inaccurate assumptions and create false images about the actual state of affairs, as the actors and parties which proclaim as *democracy-oriented*, are, in fact, not.

1.5.1 The Waves of the Far Right

Similarly to democratic backsliding, the rise of the far right occurs in waves which were set in different socio-political contexts of the previous century. Although there are several takes among the academia on the number, length and the time periods during which these waves occurred, one of the basic divisions and classifications of the far right waves was suggested by a scientist Klaus von Beyme in 1998. The ‘*three waves of right-wing extremism in post-war Europe*’ were distinguished by von Beyme (von Beyme, 1998), while the fourth wave, the current one, was recently introduced by Mudde. The first wave occurred somewhere in the period between 1945 and 1955, during which neo-fascist groups, small in numbers, advocated for amnesty for wartime collaborators, while the second wave took place after the 1955 and up to 1980 and was characterised by populist right-wing parties, whose one-time electoral successes quickly evaporated, making them unknown on the political scene once again. (Mudde, 2020; von Beyme, 1998, as cited in Mudde, 2020) Hainsworth, however, argued that the image of the far right as a one-time vote scorer was reinvented in post-war Europe, given its almost continuous electoral success. (Hainsworth, 2008)

Finally, the time during which radical right, conservative parties first emerged, is considered as the third wave which started in the 1980s. The parties in question were new, led by new leaders without a questionable wartime past, and their politics revolved mainly around contemporary issues, such as immigration. Such were France’s National Rally party and the Freedom Party of Austria, both of which were founded during this time. However, the third wave’s far right parties were considered as the outsiders, trying to influence the establishment externally, and were not included in coalitions, with the exception of the Northern League which entered the national government in Italy (Mudde, 2020; von Beyme, 1998, as cited in Mudde, 2020), but it was not until the late 20th century that the far right received more attention and gain actual popularity. (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) Nonetheless, the electoral supporters of the far right were often considered as protest voters, but it is during the second and the third wave that this notion seems to be entirely true, as the support for the extreme right grows stronger throughout Europe. (Hainsworth, 2008)

According to Mudde, the incoming and the ongoing fourth wave of the far right started after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and it differed significantly from the previous three waves, both in numbers and in influence. Namely, electoral support for the far right grew from 1 percent in the 1980s up to 8 percent in the 2010s, and albeit their average electoral success are still moderate during the fourth wave, there are cases in which far right parties scored more than 25 percent of the vote. (Mudde, 2020) And as the resurgence of the far-right in the past couple of decades initiated debates about the impact of globalization, multiculturalism, and the role of the European Union, Eatwell and Goodwin also stress that, in the period after 2010, there is an evident rise of populist far right leaders who mainly capitalize on national identity, nativism, anti-immigration and anti-globalization sentiments, such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands' Party for Freedom and Marine Le Pen of the France's National Rally. (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018) The authors distinguish the time period in question as the third wave of the far right, but given the overlapping time frames, these events surely fall under the contemporary circumstances and developments which constitute the last, still ongoing wave of the far right.

The politics of the 21st century shifted from a socio-economic to a socio-cultural subject area after the somewhat synched and mainstream reaction to the 9/11 attacks. In addition, the far right gained the support while the established parties were losing it, which resulted in political systems becoming more fragmented. Consequently, the far right gained disproportionate power inside these systems, and was able to influence, and even establish a political agenda that can now become wide-accepted. Mudde suggests that these developments showcase that other parties are taking over and incorporating contemporary topics characteristic for the far right's agenda and even adopting the far right's frames as well. (Mudde, 2020) These practices culminated in light of the 2015 refugee crisis, when the issues of immigration, national identity, security, along with others, were not only discussed by a wide range of different political actors, but they were also cloaked in populist and authoritarian narratives, as these were the 'tools' welcomed by all politicians at the time, no matter where they fall on the political spectrum. The frames and favourite issues of the far right have now become a constant in the mainstream politics and media, as they are being '*propagated by mainstream parties*'. (Mudde, 2020) The aforementioned considerations once again underline the unclear cut between the far right, the extreme right, the individuals or parties that adopt populist and authoritarian practices but remain cloaked by the party's official

orientation, and those who lean into authoritarianism but tone their narratives down as to preserve their public image for the voters, the international community, or other stakeholders.

1.5.2 The Far Right's Post-materialism

In his book *The Extreme Right in Europe*, Hainsworth highlights that the post-war far right, while gaining significant success, suggested potential and often unrealistic solutions to the challenges caused by political, socio-economic, cultural and structural changes and developments in Europe. Moreover, in an effort to grasp the reasons behind the growing popularity of the extreme right, the academia often used post-materialist explanatory factors. (Hainsworth, 2008) While discussing the post-materialism theory and the shift from material to post-material value system, Inglehart mostly referred to a connection between economic, material security, access to mass media, higher education, mobility opportunities and the new value system, based in individual affirmation, quality of life, interpersonal relationships and equality and democratic participation. Nonetheless, Ignazi argues that the changes in the post-material value system are not necessarily tied to the '*left side of the political spectrum*', and that the same changes also influenced right-oriented attitudes and sentiments. (Inglehart, 1985; Ignazi, 1996)

As a consequence of the aforementioned value shifts, a change in political party systems took place as well, given that voting for a particular option was no longer considered as a declaration of 'belonging' to a certain social group, but an individual act, transforming the previous *party identification voter* with a new *issue voter*. In addition, other changes to the party system occurred as well and, once strong, the party-membership linkage became weaker, while the number of political parties grew with the rise of new, emerging parties, while the electoral volatility increased. (Ignazi, 1992) The post-materialist shifts affected a deconstruction of previously firm social structures and roots, and the growing sense of a decrease in solidarity and lack of belonging to structures such as community, unity or church has left individuals '*more atomised and individualised, more dealigned socially and politically, and 'available' for recruitment*'. (Hainsworth, 2008)

Furthermore, these contemporary developments, leading to isolation and alienation of people, also resulted with the development of the far right, authoritarian variant of post-

materialism, which consists of advocating for rigid moral standards, religious interference and presence, Euroscepticism and anti-globalization sentiments, national identity, and national pride promotion, and more. And as the post-materialism shifts in left wing, more precisely the left-libertarian and green movements, took place at the same time, pulling the left further from the agenda of traditional socialist parties, the right reacted with criticism of the fundamentals of contemporary life, including democratisation, commercialisation, political centralisation and more. (Ignazi, 1996) In light of these developments, the vast emergence of the far right at the time, which continued until today, could partially be considered as a response or, according to Ignazi, as *'the silent counter-revolution'* (Ignazi, 1992) which occurred as a result of the expanding leftist agenda. (Hainsworth, 2008)

In contrast, Halperin explores the circumstances behind the rise of the far right in Europe during the interwar period and in the last couple of decades in the Global North, and challenges the popular notion that characterizes the expansion of the far right as a response to the liberal international orders. (Halperin, 2023) In both the interwar period and in the period after the 1970s, extreme right-oriented movements occurred during the time of globalization trends that have, according to the author, turned anti-liberal. Over time, these counter-revolutionary and conservative globalization periods increased inequality and polarized the society by undermining local economies and increasing monopoly, thus restricting economic opportunities and local markets. Halperin stresses that the far right gained in numbers and popularity because it responded to the failure of the already established conservative parties to tackle these contemporary developments, and not to the growing liberal order. Together, these considerations showcase different, overlapping periods of complex societal, economic, political and cultural developments which allowed for a significant rise of the far right politics and its influence on already polarized societies.

CHAPTER 2 – FAR RIGHT POLITICS TODAY

2.1. The Far Right: Transformed

The growing presence of the far right and its mainstreaming throughout the past couple of decades introduced a range of issues and concepts which deserve the attention of the academia and the public. The mainstreaming of the far right and its politics influenced the political tides in Europe, including the manifestos and narratives of the center and the left and voter behaviour. (Catalano Weeks & Allen, 2022) The most common example that supports this claim is the crosscutting immigration issue which has been ‘picked up’ and exploited by Europe’s politicians. The programmes of far right parties are key in politicizing the immigration issue, and in highlighting the change of Western Europe’s political space is not caused only in reaction to the electorate’s will and demand, and are heavily dependent on the interaction of political parties and on different party behaviour. (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018)

The change the far right causes in the agendas of the center and the left is not characteristic only for the politics of the 21st century, but the adoption of far right’s positions by different stakeholders, such as advocating for severe anti-immigrant measures, has become more common in the recent years. (Mondon, 2022) Both the left and the right extreme introduce novel issues to the political sphere, and while these ‘*issue entrepreneurship*’ (de Vries & Hobolt, 2012) processes do create turmoil in political competition, it is often the issues introduced by the far right that are being taken over by the mainstream, while the issues raised by the left-oriented niche parties remain overlooked and deemphasized. (Abou-Chadi, 2016) Moreover, the growing influence of the far right incorporates these movements into the mainstream, and normalizes the narratives they advocate for, calling for a more comprehensive study of both the mainstream and the characteristics it adopts once influenced by the far right.

The mainstreaming of the far right is usually estimated based on electoral success and electoral politics overall, which limits the findings on voter behaviour and party strategies, rather than taking much wider and more complex societal discourse and impacts into consideration. There are many cases initiated and led by actors other than the extreme and radical right, that have

been supported by far right movements, and contributed to the mainstreaming of their agendas, such as the narratives from Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, which legitimized and operationalized immigration, national identity and race stances of the far right even though they were not directly, or indirectly, responsible for the said developments. (Brown et al., 2023) In most cases, the attention remains on the mainstreaming coming 'from within', being conducted by the far right itself, and other actors that contribute to the mainstreaming claim to do so on the request of the people and in response to the far right, avoiding accountability. (Brown et al., 2023; Mondon, 2022; Mondon & Winter, 2020)

In an effort to comprehend the success and failure of the radical right, Bustikova distinguishes the radical right based grid-group theoretical framework consisted of two ideological dimensions which represent two modes of social control – *grid and group*. Building up on the framework forming four ideal types of political parties, which was first set by Douglas, Bustikova defines a radical right party as both a high grid and high group party. Radical right parties score high on social authoritarianism and on nationalism, and are either highly socially conservative, and/or highly nationalistic. A party that scores low on both grid and group is an ethno-liberal political party and a *bilateral opposite* to the radical right, while parties that score high on one of these categories, such as nationalistic parties that support minority politics, are not categorized as radical right. (Bustikova, 2014; Thompson et al., 1990) Meanwhile, Golder and Mudde argue that radicalism and extremism are the two constituents of the far right, as the ideology of the far right is either radical or extremist. (Golder, 2016; Mudde, 2010)

While the radical right, or simply radicalism, stands for a thorough change of the political and economic system, it does not advocate for a complete dissolution of democracy, whilst extremism, on the other hand, calls for elimination of democracy. (Golder, 2016) Radicalism is present in both the left and the right, and radicalism, usually tolerated, as opposed to the often condemned extreme, is not a more moderate manifestation of extremism. According to Golder and Mudde, an aspiration to establish an authoritarian system, strictly structured around the 'natural' differences that exist in societies, coupled with a law-and-order enforcement system which penalizes deviant conduct severely is what is especially characteristic to most far right parties. (Mudde, 2007) Furthermore, Mudde identifies the populist radical right as a term which unifies the *radical right*, the *extreme right* and the *right-wing populist* terms. The issue with defining and

properly naming these movements arises from the fact that they will not usually identify themselves as radical right, populist, or extreme. The abundance of terms and definitions can be reduced to the *populist radical right* characterized by nativism, authoritarianism and populism as its core features, with additional values being adopted by different parties from the party family. (Mudde, 2007)

Surely, a wide range of terms have been used to distinguish the far right groups, and references such as ‘extreme right’ and ‘radical right’ are often used as synonyms, while, at other times, the differentiation between these political options is more clear-cut and populist parties are distanced from the fascist ones. (Eatwell & Mudde, 2004) For example, Mondon and Winter opt for the term *extreme right* when describing illiberally racist groups and movements, prone to volatile and violent (verbally or physically) actions. On the other hand, the authors consider the far right parties and actors as those that adopt a racist ideology indirectly and advocate it in codes, while staying in-between the extreme and the mainstream, the liberal and illiberal racisms. (Mondon & Winter, 2020) In the recent period, these contemporary phenomena are predominantly defined through two terms – the *extreme right* and *populism*. Extreme right was traditionally committed to the advancement of strong leadership, authoritarian politics and militarism, but only strong leadership remains common for contemporary extreme right. Extremists tend to reject different points of view, they condemn diversity, and are highly nationalistic – having nationalism, and not anti-democracy, as is commonly thought, be the essence of their actions, while they claim to protect the nation against outsiders. (Eatwell & Mudde, 2004)

The term *populism*, on the other hand, is becoming more popular amongst the academia, as scholars began using it more freely to describe different movements, and adopting it instead of the term *extreme right*, with a common justification that various movements termed as right-wing extremism do not truly exhibit extremism, and they lack any historical affiliation with the fascist lineage. According to Eatwell and Mudde, populists are anti-establishment and refer to their opponents as corrupt, they declare as representatives of ‘*the true will of the people*’, using common language of the streets and elevating strong, charismatic leaders. However, populism is more a style than a specific ideological framework, and is present in both the right and left oriented movements, but this does not lessen its significance, because what it lacks ideology-wise, populism

compensates through the considerable influence it has on mainstream parties, notably regarding immigration and other related issues. (Eatwell & Mudde, 2004)

It is this exact influence that populist and extremist right parties have on the mainstream that multiplies their effect, and more than that – it is the mainstream adopting far right practices that makes it more difficult to distinguish different actors and processes. The mainstream began frequently opting for forming coalitions with far right, radical parties, therefore additionally legitimizing the far right agenda and increasing the chances of radical right's electoral success in the consecutive elections. (Bustikova, 2014) The party systems in Europe are, therefore, being polarized, as the centrist and mainstream parties are losing their supporters to the extremes, or '*choosing to move toward the extremes*', with a difference between the leftist populists who become more typical democratic parties after entering governments, and *ethnopolitists* who keep their far right and populist sentiments. (Vachudova, 2021)

Moreover, drawing a line between different parties and movements and identifying their stances adequately has become more difficult, as the actors will often appear to be semi-moderate for the public eye, all the while embracing fascist sentiments in veiled language of accepting national history, revitalizing national pride and more. (Paxton, 2005) Political parties often tend to disguise their extremism to avoid potential legal consequences, and as they belong to and operate in wider European systems of liberal democracy (Golder, 2016), their radicalism and coded or evident radicalism must be considered on different levels and through various perspectives. These complex processes leave behind the remaining uncertainty – to what degree can a democracy be exposed to extremism before resorting to undemocratic actions, like restricting freedom of expression, limiting the right to association or prohibiting the formation of groups. (Eatwell & Mudde, 2004)

In conclusion, a lack of agreement regarding defining the constituents of this ideological and party family only suggests that these phenomena are to be considered across different political and historical contexts, as well as disciplines. (Mondon & Winter, 2020) Furthermore, it is clear that there are, in fact, different variants within the far right party family. (Golder, 2016) As mentioned before, far right parties can be either extremist or radical, but not all far right parties have nationalist and/or populist sentiments, which can be present among the mainstream parties as well. Moreover, the far right narratives and stances are not diametrically different than those of the

mainstream, but they are simply more radicalized. (Mudde, 2010) Finally, the ideology of the majority of the far right has transformed in the last two decades and it now falls under the new, ‘master frame’, as identified by Rydgren, which contains the following – radicalism, populism, and nationalism. (Rydgren, 2004, as cited in Golder, 2016) This further supports the claim that the sentiments of the far right are intertwined, and as the radical right, populist and extreme right parties are not easily distinguished, the vast majority of them fall under the far right party family.

2.1.1 The Mainstream and the Extreme

But it is important to answer the question of who belongs to the mainstream and who are the ‘extremes’ that remain outside, as identifying the aspects of the mainstream will further contribute to understanding the rise of the far right. From a sole electoral perspective, Meguid claims that the mainstream consists of ‘*electorally dominant actors in the center-left, center, and center-right*’, leaving the left-libertarian and right-authoritarian, populist parties outside. (Meguid, 2005) Grigore Pop-Eleches focuses on the ideological platform of a party and classifies the mainstream as parties with a moderate and familiar ideological platform, in comparison to the extremist rhetoric and strong personalities of the extreme parties’ frontrunners. While the ‘unorthodox’ party is considered to ‘*deviate from the mainstream party model*’ by adopting extremist political platforms or serving as its leaders’ instrument for personal gain, the mainstream falls within the spectrum of mainstream ideology of established Western democracies. (Pop-Eleches, 2010) Moreover, Pop-Eleches proposes the Western model as a most viable one, given that applying national references would eventually mean that the extreme parties with significant electoral success on a national level fall under the mainstream category and define the domestic political mainstream.

Nonetheless, Brown, Mondon and Winter made further efforts in redefining the mainstream, characterizing it as constructed, contingent and fluid, and stressing that the extremes belonging to the same system are being constructed as well, and are equally fluid and contingent. In addition to its contingency, the mainstream refers to various ‘*bodies and sites in society and politics*’, such as parties and governments, but the media, different policies and discourses as well, and is, naturally, susceptible to subjective interpretation of various commentators. In addition, and

more importantly, the authors underline that what constitutes the mainstream, or the extreme, at one point in time, does not have to remain a constituent at another. Furthermore, and contrary to the common public discourse in established liberal democracies, the mainstream does not necessarily have to be moderate, nor does it have to be good, or even rational. (Brown et al., 2023) In other words, the mainstream changes over time and the boundaries between the mainstream and the extreme are blurred. Defining the mainstream solely on the basis of ideology spectrum positionings, or electoral success, might not provide a credible image, as the mainstream and the extreme are not only in constant relation, but also belonging to and creating a largely overlapping and hybrid political space in between them. (Kallis, 2015)

These considerations support the notion that the far right politics can, in fact, be considered as a part of the new mainstream in Europe, and although Pop-Eleches argued that the mainstream is not to be associated with right-oriented party leaders' personalities and their extreme rhetoric (Pop-Eleches, 2010), it is often them influencing the public and not the other way around. The rise and the mainstreaming of the far right is often considered as a bottom-up process, during which it is either the public influencing greater shifts in political discourse, or this role belongs to the outsider, marginalized movements that somehow manage to '*break out of the margins*'. (Brown et al., 2023, Mondon, 2022) From this perspective, the one where it is the popular demand that causes the mainstream to turn to more extreme platforms, the elite agents in the process are eventually overlooked, and the responsibility of those in control gets minimized.

It is crucial to consider the mainstreaming and normalization of far right sentiments as a top-down process as well, holding those in control of much of the public discourse, and responsible for top-down agenda setting processes accountable. (Brown et al., 2023) Understandingly, the public still retains a good portion of power in influencing public policies and the discourse, but this power is often disproportionately distributed in established democracies. In this environment, the concept of 'the people' is being constructed to be held accountable and served as justification for the political decisions made by those in power (Mondon, 2022), and manipulated for further dissemination of different reactionary ideas – taking advantage of democratic principles for exclusive leaders' gains which often only '*re-enforce existing inequalities and divert us from real concerns*'. (Mondon & Winter, 2020)

Furthermore, in regard to the aforementioned developments, there are several processes taking place simultaneously across Europe. Firstly, the mainstreaming of the far right sentiments in Europe resulted with ideas which were once unacceptable and considered as radical becoming completely normalized, and even common and widespread throughout societies. (Krzyżanowski, 2020) In addition, whether the normalization of these sentiments is carried out by the mainstream or by the far right itself, *‘the widespread influence of radical right ideology on public discourse, policies, and positions of mainstream parties is clearly and continuously visible in the region’*. (Pytlas, 2016) Finally, most mainstream political parties in new and transitioning democracies of Central and Eastern Europe have undergone systemic changes to conform to one of the established Western ideological traditions, such as socialism/social democracy, liberalism, ecology parties (Pop-Eleches, 2010). Nonetheless, the footprints of far right politics were first noticeable in Europe’s young democracies, which raises the question whether parties’ conforming to common, desirable ideological traditions of the West was purely declarative. Both positive democratization developments and negative, backsliding ones, as well as the simultaneous rise of the far right, took place over short periods of time. This implies that much of the European democracies experiencing democratic backsliding and a rise in populist and far right narratives, have been a home to considerable shifts in public discourse and to changes of leaders’ and parties’ agendas.

2.2 Party Systems and Positionings

Vachudova explores the shifts in the party system and in political parties’ agendas in relation to EU accession and conditionality and finds that the majority of political parties conformed to EU leverage and adopted agendas that are compatible with membership requirements. (Vachudova, 2008) In fact, numerous political parties shifted from illiberal orientation to a more liberal, democratic one, on account of EU accession conditionality. After accession or once it is secured, however, the EU leverage related changes are often reversed, and especially within political parties which lean to a more nationalist, traditionalist and culturally conservative platform. The young democracies that had their regimes changed into hybrid and authoritarian ones due to democratic backsliding have gone through more significant shifts, and Vachudova highlights some of the examples from Europe, building up on the Chapel Hill dataset

on party positions. Namely, party politics in Poland and Hungary, and especially those of tan - traditionalist, authoritarian, nationalist – orientation, started opposing European integration, taking firmer far right stances and forming coalitions with movements and parties which were once unacceptable. Up to 2006, Fidezs party in Hungary, led by Viktor Orban, slowly occupied a more prominent role in the mainstream right, while the Polish Law and Justice Party - PiS, won the elections and formed a strongly traditionalist and authoritarian government.

Even during the first decade of the century, it was already clear that the center and right-oriented mainstream started applying a firmer authoritarian and nationalist narrative and adopting a more critical stance on European integration. Both the Law and Justice Party and Fidezs, as well as the Czech Civic Democratic Party - ODS, ‘*used the nationalist discourse of radical tan parties*’. (Vachudova, 2008) Now, although Vachudova argues that the shift toward traditionalist - authoritarian - nationalist orientations was not a considerable one and that the electoral success of these parties was very modest (Vachudova, 2008), the situation changed in the upcoming years. In Hungary, Fidezs not only came into power, but also continued with adopting even more of the far right sentiments, being repositioned from the conservative to the radical right party family in the 2019 Chapel Hill dataset. All the while, the Law and Justice party in Poland continued to hold the radical right party family position obtained in 2002, but steadily made progressive supporter gains, increased the vote share and eventually won both the 2015 and 2019 parliamentary elections. (Jolly et al., 2022; CHES Dataset) Looking beyond the Central and Eastern Europe testifies that these developments are not isolated and characteristic to third-wave democracies. For example, the openly anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats, with their programme based on xenophobia and ethno-nationalism (Rydgren, 2010), entered the mainstream politics, gained significant support and became the second biggest party in Sweden after securing over 20.5 percent of the vote in the 2022 general election.

A part of the academia has introduced a novel dimension for party positioning, in addition to the traditional, left, right and center one. More precisely, some scholars advocated that the left – right dimension is a dimension of governing the economy, while a new, socio-cultural dimension, is used for identity and values. The novel dimension is known as the GAL – TAN dimension, where GAL represents green – alternative – libertarian, and TAN represents traditional – authoritarian – nationalist. (Vachudova, 2021) The new dimension is used for party positioning in

the Chapel Hill dataset, and it confronts the socio-cultural universalistic and liberal values with traditional ones. While considering party positioning in Europe, the shift that occurred in party systems is the one from the economic issues to socio-cultural ones, and party competition has, therefore, shifted from the left – right, economic dimension to the cultural, GAL – TAN one. (Polk et al., 2017) Using the differentiations based on the new dimension, Vachudova further analyses the shifts in the party systems in Europe’s democracies, caused by the rise and influence of *ethnopolitist* parties and leaders.

Namely, the post war party systems across Europe were destabilized with the rise of both GAL and TAN positions and parties – long-term supporters of mainstream political options opted for more extreme ones, and while the educated and urban voters chose GAL parties, the far right TAN parties rose exponentially and attracted the less educated, working-class and rural voters. (Ford & Jennings, 2020) Those responsible for intensifying party competition concerning socio-cultural issues are populist parties, whose growing influence over the past two decades caused the decrease in the support for the mainstream, increased party polarization and eventually contributed to the erosion of democracies. Interestingly enough, populism is utilized by both GAL and TAN positioned parties, and by parties established long before they turned to using populism, such as the British Conservative Party whose antiestablishment appeals and ‘us versus them’ narratives, mostly in regard to Brexit politics, drew the attention of the working class. (Vachudova, 2021)

Moreover, the biggest responsibility for the shift in party system and competition lies with well-established conservative and far right parties ‘*remodelled using ethnopolitism*’, whose actions aim to accumulate power and prevent turnover and eventually result in the decline of democratic institutions. (Vachudova, 2021) In this way, through a wide-spread populism spree in Europe, one of the pillars of democratic governance – fair competition among political options, is jeopardized, and not only in the hands of the extreme parties but in the mainstream, center parties that are taking on extreme characteristics. In addition, populism, an apparatus shown to be more electorally successful than the usual far right rhetoric, is utilized by the left as well, but with a crucial difference – once the left profits from using populism and enters governments, it transforms into a simpler version of itself and often even sheds away its strong sentiments, while the far right, or *ethnopolitist* parties, according to Vachudova, continue to strongly undermine democracies. (Vachudova, 2021) In summary, the party system of Europe’s democracies experienced several

significant shifts in the past couple of decades, becoming a platform for predominantly socio-cultural issues and party positioning turmoil, given the move of the center toward the extreme and the general decline of the mainstream (Wagner & Meyer, 2017), and witnessing the successful use of mostly harmful populist methods.

2.3 Anti-Immigration Sentiments

A turn towards anti-immigration issues in mainstream politics, and more expansively, towards issues aligned with right-wing and far right agendas is a well-known development in Europe. As previously stated, this topic was and still is effectively mainstreamed, given that the center and the left adopted some anti-immigrant narratives, claiming that they are only obeying to the will of the people. (Mondon, 2022) According to Lucassen and Lubbers, anti-immigrant and anti-immigration stances are '*the unique selling point of far-right parties*', and, consequently, the standpoints political parties have on immigration and immigrants can also serve as valuable predictors of far right's electoral success. (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012) While analyzing the state of affairs in Europe, Lewis and Sumit found a strong connection between the share of the immigrant population and the probability that the electorate will opt for a far right political party. Furthermore, their research shows that the correlation between voting for the far right and immigration varies notably among clearly outlined population subgroups and between national cultures and macroeconomic situations of different countries. For example, the unemployed, rural and population subgroups with lower educational levels are more likely to vote for far right parties because of the shifts in the immigrant population. (Lewis & Sumit, 2017)

The common perception is that the negative sentiments towards immigrants and/or immigration are the result of an economic, as well as a cultural threat that immigrants supposedly pose. However, it is further argued that the anticipated threats to cultural identity play a much bigger role in enhancing unfavourable attitudes towards immigrants than the threats to economic stability. (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012) Factors such as continued dissatisfaction of the electorate, authoritarian governance, as well as nationalistic narratives all influence the rise of the far right, however, Lucassen and Lubbers still claim that grievances related to ethnic and cultural threats are still the most significant predictor of far right success, and therefore the greatest influence on the

rise of these parties as well. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the British National Party (BNP) and the Britain National Front (NF), the France National Front (FN), the Italy Northern League (LN) and the Brothers of Italy (FdI), the New Democrats (NyD) and the Sweden Democrats (SD) are all examples of *anti-immigrant and anti-immigration parties* in Europe, whose narratives affect not only the right-center mainstream parties, but the entire party systems as well. (Spanje, 2010)

Mondon argues that the shifts in the mainstream political debate occur because of a wide misuse of public opinion surveys that represent immigration related topics as the primary concern of the public. The author claims that opinion surveys are, in most cases, subjective and biased, but play a significant role in reshaping public and political discourses regarding immigration topics, thus contributing to further legitimization of anti-immigration sentiments. Consequently, far right and elitist politics are being legitimized as well, and leads to an even further marginalization and neglect of minorities, given that political participation, through both voting and opinion surveys, is altogether unequal. (Mondon, 2022) Bustikova, on the other hand, argues that the actions of the left and the left-center mainstream aiming to accommodate minorities cause a serious backlash from the radical right. Namely, electoral efforts of the far right are triggered by the electoral strength of ethno-liberal parties, their bilateral opposites, and by their opposite and ideologically strong narratives. (Bustikova, 2014)

Wide-spread anti-immigrant narratives in Europe are causing changes to party competition patterns and electoral processes in three main ways according to the contemporary literature. (Pardos-Prado et al., 2014) Initially, the left oriented mainstream parties moved closer to center – right parties along the ideological center, and began adopting liberal stances within novel cosmopolitan-authoritarian issue domains, depriving the original working class and population with lower education of their traditional political representation, and making room for parties that advocate anti-immigrant sentiments. Secondly, traditional right-oriented voters supporting conservatism and authoritarianism are among the most stable subgroups within the electorate, making room for a steady success of the radical right, and contrasting the original protest voters supporting the far right. Finally, ‘*politically alienated individuals /.../ with high levels of perceived ethnic threat*’ are now the new supporters of the far right and their anti-immigrant quests, because of their populist strategies and charismatic leadership. (Pardos-Prado et al., 2014)

In support of Mudde's view of radical right's success as a product of pathological normalcy within the Western value system, Pardos-Prado et al. argue that anti-immigration sentiments and radical right values are not alien to the mainstream and reserved only for the far right parties. (Mudde, 2010; Pardos-Prado et al., 2014) Moreover, the authors find that the immigration issue, in most cases, lures the center and center-right into supporting the far right, and a much smaller number of voters who previously supported the center-left and left parties. And given that the mainstream opposes anti-immigration stances in some cases and adopts them in others, the authors stress that keeping the immigration topic in the public and political debate will only further decrease the electoral success of the left and the center. It appears that the mainstream is better off turning to different convergent strategies and staying away from further immigration related debates which would only 'reinforce the right-wing ownership of the issue'. (Pardos-Prado et al., 2014)

As two of the most significant developments in Western democracies over the past couple of decades have been the emergence and the rise of far right parties and restrictive immigration policies, the terminology used to describe these party categories is often diverse. (Spanje, 2011) Parties are being defined based on both their ideology and policy, and various labels are being used to categorize them in 'far right' or 'anti-immigration' party groups, and even though scholars consider the same set of parties when discussing the far right, as well as the anti-immigration movements, Spanje argues that these parties are not exactly identical. Based on the data on 109 political parties from more than fifteen Western Europe's countries and in the time period from 1990 to 2004, Spanje finds that 36 percent of far right parties did not have anti-immigration sentiments during this time. Moreover, around a quarter of all anti-immigration political parties did not belong to the far right family. Nonetheless, although there are political parties that are semi-exclusively one or the other, a large portion of these parties have had both far right and anti-immigration sentiments.

Additionally, Spanje stresses the fact that parties change their agendas and stances over time, and shift their positions on the left - right axis. Such is the example of the Danish People's party that always remained anti-immigrant but has toned down its far right stances over time, which is why the author believes that these party categories should be considered separately. (Spanje, 2011) Spanje's research, however, was conducted prior to the 2015 refugee crisis, and does not

include the developments which took place in Europe since. Furthermore, it is also important to note that anti-immigration sentiments are used as a tool for electoral gain by numerous far right parties that are not essentially anti-immigration parties as well. They, however, are not only ‘passive beneficiaries of anti-immigrant sentiment’, but its active source as well, advocating for restricting the intake of immigrants, specifically those from specific religious, racial and ethnic groups, and restricting existing immigrants’ cultural and economic rights. (Cochrane & Nevitte, 2014)

In this way, the far right parties not only put a focus on matters concerning immigration and diversity in order to utilize them during elections, but they also notably influence the public opinion in regards to this topic. Additionally, in response to far right’s strong anti-immigration narratives, the left and left-center political parties are politicizing the issue when it aligns with their respective interests. (Meguid, 2008) The actions of the far right, however, do not exist in a vacuum and should be considered as a part of the bigger picture. The electoral performance of the far right, the sentiments they portray during electoral processes and counteracting their electoral success are only one part of their influence. The other one concerns the influence of the far right that usually ‘*extends well beyond election days*’, as the political and social consequences of far right’s agenda and anti-immigration stances proceed to leave a mark after the elections as well. (Cochrane & Nevitte, 2014)

2.4 The New Frontline: The Far Right Utilizing Social Media and Youth

2.4.1 Digital Mobilization

The success of the far right in Europe was followed, and significantly influenced by online activity, which accelerated party visibility, supporter mobilization and message dissemination across various platforms in the past two decades. The importance of social media as a tool of the far right is unquestionable, and reaching supporters and potential electorate through user-generated content allowed for a speedy mobilization and legitimization of the far right narrative. (Albrecht et al., 2019) Although the online sphere has been utilized by the center and the left as well, the far right is known to be the most successful in using the advantages of the digital networks to reach

their political gains in European democracies. The digital world enables far right parties to enter both private and public lives of the electorate, and the apolitical, and to use the surface net, as well as the deep web, and online spaces such as multi-player gaming environments or public chat rooms, all to accomplish their goals. (Albrecht et al., 2019)

In the contemporary post-digital world, radical right and populist parties are now demonstrating a proficiency in leveraging social media to magnify their message, recruit supporters and organise activities. In fact, the far right's successful utilization of the online sphere is also showcased in the online presence and membership which encompasses thousands of supporters and often surpasses their official membership numbers. To illustrate, the British National Party had less than 15 thousand members in 2021, but their membership on Facebook was more than five times the offline one, and counted 80 thousand fans. In the same year, the Austrian Freedom Party counted around 40 thousand formal members and approximately 80 thousand Facebook fans. (Bartlett et al., 2021)

As the far right parties and far right activism transitioned to the world wide web, they underwent a transformation from the previously popular street marches and protest movements, and adopted novel distinct features – becoming more anonymized, individualized and geographically scattered. (Bennett, 2012) Moreover, the online sphere allows these movements to get around the usual governmental and editorial oversight while still disseminating their content on a global level and reaching both established supporters and undecided ones. This somewhat unlimited form of communication not only goes beyond the traditional borders, but it also enables and encourages reciprocal information sharing and creation of unique online communities. The clear boundary separating online and offline campaigning practices does not longer exist, with progressive shifts among micro and macro-level campaigning strategies, enabling the online and offline sphere to become intertwined and signifying that contemporary protest politics has fundamentally transitioned into a post-digital era. In fact, scholars argue that, at a micro level, a connection between the organization of anti-migrant protests and acts of vigilantism, as well the formation of anti-Muslim groups, and active campaigns on social media are consistent. (Albrecht et al., 2019)

The digital sphere became a safe haven for the supporters of the far right, and the far right itself, to openly voice their opinions. However, with the controversies regarding free speech in liberal democracies, it also became very challenging identifying and enforcing what constitutes

hate within the legal frameworks of individual countries. (Albrecht et al., 2019) By utilizing the social media and various other channels of online communication, such as the dark web channels (Bartlett, 2015), the far right now gains substantial support by understanding the market of audience attention and carefully curating online campaigns in order to manage it, usually by designing and simultaneously disseminating a wide range of content formats. (Albrecht et al., 2019) Albrecht et al. argue that this array of content and variety of multiple communication channels used by the far right results with a steady mainstreaming of narratives, ideas, and expressions that would have formerly been categorized as a part of the extreme agenda. Moreover, the authors stress that the processes initiated by far right parties and the implementation of their agendas do not necessarily have to be completed for them to have influence over contemporary politics and party systems.

In addition, the mainstreaming of far right sentiments brought on a ‘*gradual rightwards shift in the frame of what is normal*’ and caused other developments as well, such as the occurrence of different subgroups as anonymous sections in the deep web. (Albrecht et al., 2019) And as the online communication between the far right and its potential electorate and amongst the supporters evolved and communication methods were modernised, the rhetoric of party leadership was evolving as well, with their vocabularies and outreach agendas being adapted to new developments. (Mammone, 2009) The influence of far right’s online activity is unquestionable, and Karl showcases this by analysing the mainstreaming processes in Hungary, occurring both online and offline. (Karl, 2019) The author analyses the influence Jobbik - Conservatives, a far right political party, had on the mainstream in Hungary, especially through campaigns conducted online. According to the author, the party contributed to the creation of a setting in which radical right ideologies thrived within large segments of society. The nationalistic and far right sentiments portrayed by Jobbik gained acceptance throughout the political spectrum in Hungary and the party further influenced Fidesz’ and Orbán’s policies over the recent years.

Bartlett et al. conducted a research on digital populists, more specifically – the far right supporters on Facebook, and pointed out to several distinguishments characteristic for these groups. In summary, the greatest percent of Facebook supporters of populist and radical right parties are male – 75 percent of them. (Bartlett et al., 2021) And although the difference between male and female supporters is more drastic in the online world, it still remains very significant in

the offline too. Furthermore, far right supporters also younger, nearly a half of them have a high school diploma, while 53 percent of them declared as college or university graduates. It is interesting to note that the online supporters did not always identify as ‘formal’ members of far right movements and parties. In fact, only a small portion of them considered themselves as official members, however, a large portion of these online supporters actually votes for the far right during elections, suggesting that the popularity of these political options is on the rise. In addition, more than a third of far right supporters on Facebook consider immigration as the most crucial issue, while a quarter identifies Islamic extremism as the most important concern, followed by around 17 percent of supporters that cited crime and crime rates as the most relevant issue. (Bartlett et al., 2021)

2.4.2 The Young Electorate

Western democracies are undergoing a process of deconsolidation, and citizens are showcasing their growing distrust in democratic institutions, which are being delegitimized and, therefore, destabilized. (Foa & Mounk, 2017) The youth are playing a crucial role in some of these processes, given that they often carry social change and are, consequently, one of the target groups of political elites. (Kwak et al., 2020) Politicians wish to get the attention of young people and influence their political opinions and values, but the far right has been specifically successful in luring the youth in and keeping them engaged. And the youth, having doubts in regards to the institutions and authorities, became susceptible to accepting the far right sentiments and supporting alternative movements and parties. (Kwak et al., 2020)

While analyzing the effect of youth’s distrust in institutions on democratic backsliding in over countries, Kwak et al. confirmed that this effect is significant, and that it can hint the direction of political developments in the future. (Kwak et al., 2020) Of course, the effect on the level of democracy depends on the proportion of young population in relation to the older one. The authors stress that as the distrust of young people in political institutions – political parties, parliaments and legal systems – grew, the erosion of democracy increased. Moreover, authors’ results also imply that the values and attitudes of the youth in the present moment can imply the shifts in the political sphere in the future, supporting the arguments of Foa and Mounk, who also stressed that

young people, progressively opting for radical parties, contribute to the mainstreaming of the far right, moving them from the electoral to the parliamentary realm. (Foa & Mounk, 2016)

Multiple prior studies support the claim that the youth, together with those aged 65 or older, exhibit a higher likelihood of supporting far right political parties in Europe. (Arzheimer, 2009) But who are young people who vote for and adopt far rights sentiments, and what is triggering this support? Mieriņa and Koroļeva explored this phenomenon in 30 locations across Europe, and introduced results which showcased different negative attitudes youth have towards minorities, exclusionism towards migrants, as well as xenophobia and welfare chauvinism. (Mieriņa & Koroļeva, 2015) Again, their research confirms that one of the reasons for the increase in the support for the far right is the growing distrust in institutions and authorities. Apart from political distrust being a precondition for far right support, young people who have little or no interest and knowledge of politics are more likely to develop xenophobic and chauvinistic sentiments, as well as antimigration and antimigrant sentiments.

Similarly to previous studies, their research confirms that the majority of far right supporters among youth are young men. (Mieriņa & Koroļeva, 2015) Furthermore, ethnic nationalism is another key factor of increased far right support among young people, along with economic insecurity and financial challenges, that represent main sources of group conflicts in Europe. The youth in less advantageous economic positions, those on lower educational levels, and those who are experiencing or only witnessing poverty are more prone to adopt far right's sentiments. Interestingly enough, the authors find that young people who are also former immigrants, or who belong to different minority groups, still have little or no empathy towards current or potential future immigrants. Strong nationalistic attitudes and negative antimigration sentiments are generally most prevalent among young people in East and Central Europe and Greece, however, this prevalence is not the aftermath of socialist governance in some of these countries, but it is a result of economic grievances, political and social distrust and general lack of contact with population of different ethnic background. (Mieriņa & Koroļeva, 2015) On the other hand, the authors stress that liberal welfare regimes, such as the one in the UK, are more prone to generate xenophobic sentiments compared to all other forms of welfare regimes.

It is also important to note that even though youth with no understanding and interest of politics are more likely to support the far right, the results show that young people who are aiming

to stay informed are actually more, and lot less, prone to adopt far right sentiments. (Mieriņa & Koroļeva, 2015) According to Mieriņa and Koroļeva, young people who follow various media portals on a regular basis are more likely to have exclusionist, xenophobic and negative attitudes towards minorities and immigrants. This finding indicates that the role of the media in contributing to the rise of the far right is, expectedly, very significant, and that media outlets are disseminating information which encourages stereotypes, prejudice and intolerance, instead of dismantling these constructs and educating the public. Additionally, although traditional and online media influence the general public opinion, the youth predominantly spends their time online, on different social media platforms and groups, and is therefore even more targeted by far right parties in movements who recognize young people as new potential supporters. (Nilan, 2021)

The far right aims to capture the attention of the youth in the digital sphere and its conspiracy theories and fake news go beyond the *‘traditional political models to infiltrate digital subcultures where millions of young users spend time’*. (Nilan, 2021) Nilan argues that far right promotes its discourse through symbols and myths, advocates nationalistic sentiments and validates feelings of entitlement young people have, directing them towards the ‘outsiders’. In this way, the far right utilizes contemporary issues to trigger feelings of uncertainty among the youth who distrust the authorities, have concerns regarding their future, and who already live in a somewhat unstable climate. And in this climate of uncertainty, the youth are susceptible to the tactics of the far right that claims to act based on the will of the people, promises personal and political recognition and that offers a membership which provides new high-status identity, support and a feeling of belonging. (Nilan, 2021)

Nilan further considers several strategies far right parties use to get the attention of potential new supporters. The far right attracts the undecided young electorate and encourages them to explore themselves by searching for information online, creating a feeling of pride and unity as they are capable of seeing beyond the governmental bodies’ reports and mainstream media. (Nilan, 2021) Moreover, the ‘foot-in-the-door’ tactic ensures that the supporters adopt a less extreme proposition first, before introducing a forceful proposition afterwards. Given that people are more likely to accept a forceful measure once they have already agreed with a milder one (Weatherby & Scoggins, 2005, as cited in Nilan, 2021), the far right uses this tactic to introduce its agenda smoothly. For instance, prior to introducing policies regarding expulsion of

immigrants, the far right will first put forward its narratives concerning demographics and immigration. Another tactic of the far right is concealing information and disseminating incomplete information to the electorate, presenting a moderate discourse to the public. Finally, in order to get the attention of young people, the far right uses a ‘pique’ tactic, using online content hooks such as shocking footage, humorous memes and online click baits. (Nilan, 2021)

Lastly, while the academia has repeatedly discussed the decrease in knowledge and overall political engagement among youth in Western democracies over the recent years, the disappointment and distrust in democratic institutions has further developed into a more troubling issue. More and more, youth’s apathy towards politics is transforming into a new support for right-oriented populist parties, and in smaller proportions for the populist situated on the other side of the left-right axis, given that populists in Europe gain a big proportion of their support from younger voters. Furthermore, along with the indecisiveness of the youth, the far right proceeds with utilizing their online presence as well. The digital sphere and social media particularly represent crucial factors in amplifying far-right messages, expanding their reach to a wider audience and especially among youth, given their growing engagement in the online political discourse. (de Lange, 2019)

2.5 Europe’s Populism Spree

The developments that took place in Europe over the past couple of decades led to the resurgence of populist parties and party leaders which are now in the centre of contemporary European politics. Moreover, economic and security grievances, the immigration waves of the past decade and dissatisfaction with the response of the EU, have particularly contributed to creating an adequate climate for the rise of the right-wing populists. (Mudde, 2016) But populism remains a vaguely defined phenomenon, as scholars and journalists use this term to describe different occurrences and characterize diverse groups. While all attempts to define populism include some form of the appeal to ‘the people’, in relation to ‘the elite’ (Mudde, 2017a), one of the earlier ways to define this term was characterizing it as a ‘*positive force for the mobilization of the (common) people*’. (Goodwyn, 1978, as cited in Mudde, 2017) Later attempts underline that populism includes the rise of a powerful and charismatic leader, and represent populism as strategy utilized

by these leaders, who aim to govern through direct backing from their supporters. (Mudde, 2017) More recently, populism is considered as a style of politics, employed by parties and leaders in order to gain and influence supporters, mainly through utilizing major media attention and growing support of the public.

Different literature will often offer a definition of populism describing the phenomenon as a simple but very emotional discourse which offers seemingly simplistic solutions to important issues, or as a concept centered around opportunistic politics based on pleasing the electorate with quick solutions. (Mudde, 2004) Mudde defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that occurs as a part of, or assimilated to another ideology, and views society as fundamentally divided into distinct, opposed groups – ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, while promoting politics as a reflection of the general will of the people. (Mudde, 2017; Mudde, 2016a) According to Mudde, populism consists of three core concepts – the people, the elite, and the general will. However, these constructions are susceptible to manipulation. Consequently, political actors can shape their views of these concepts in line with their current interests and, for example, re-define the elite they once accused of putting the interests of ‘foreign actors’ before those of ‘the nation’, once they are the ones in power and considered as the elite. Most political actors and parties will never self-identify as populist, as the term has a negative connotation, but they still adopt and use the strategies of populism to concentrate power. Additionally, Mudde stresses that, although populism has been considered as a democratizing force that encourages political participation, its negative sides can cause an increase in authoritarianism (Mudde, 2017), and the current state of affairs in Europe implies that the negative effects of populism largely overpowered the positive ones.

Populism can either jeopardize or contribute to democracy, depending on the context, and it is essentially aligned with democracy but at odds with liberal democracy, as it acts on behalf of the ‘will of the people’ and therefore rejects the concepts of pluralism and, consequently, the rights of minorities and institutional safeguards designed to uphold them. (Mudde, 2017) On one side, populism can contribute to active political participation, given that populist parties mobilize diverse social groups. On the other side, Europe’s populist radical right parties also exclude minorities, the biggest concern of their electorate (Mudde, 2018), thus limiting genuine political participation. Moreover, one of populists’ main instruments for concentrating power and increasing their influence is through complete media control, as they convert national media outlets

into government propaganda channels that suppress and intimidate other, independent media. (Mudde, 2017) This transformation of the media landscape took place in some of Europe's democracies, such as Hungary and Serbia, where the strongmen in power caused both media blackouts and the decline of freedom of the press.

However, it is of utmost importance to consider populism through the political power of populist actors, given that whether a part of the opposition or in the government, populists will have a different impact on the democratization process. (Mudde, 2017) When a part of the opposition, populist actors advocate for transparency and participatory policies in order to jeopardize the ruling majority, or 'the elite'. Once they are in the government, however, populists tend to develop a more perplexing relation with democratic governance, often shaping electoral processes in their favor, facing very little opposition once they form majority coalitions and contributing to further democratic erosion. To better illustrate this process, the author highlights the developments in Hungary and Orbán's actions as an example. Namely, the Fidezs party adopted a more volatile approach to politics after the 2002 electoral defeat, and, after the 2010's win and return to power, utilized its electoral majority to carry out constitutional reforms forcefully. The reforms, introduced without a counterbalancing action from the opposition, allowed for the electoral system shifts in favor of the ruling party, and erased the checks and balances, enabling Orbán and his governing party to accumulate power without being challenged. In conclusion, populist parties and leaders utilize the processes of democratic governance to fulfill their goals, whether by condemning its efficiency or by advocating for a transformation of current democratic procedures. (Mudde, 2017)

The academia is repeatedly stressing the importance of populist political parties for the contemporary political scene in Europe, but Mudde concentrates on the entities he defines as the *populist radical right parties* (PRRPs), and analyzes their influence over time. These parties are right-wing when it comes to their rejection of social and individual equality, they have radical stances on issues complimenting their ideology, while they are populist in their '*appeal to the common man and his allegedly superior common sense*'. (Betz, 1994, as cited in Akkerman et al., 2016; Akkerman et al., 2016) Despite the growing presence and integration of populist parties, the author argues that it is the mainstream right-wing parties, and not the PRRPs, that are responsible for the move to the right that European politics has taken. (Mudde, 2013) Both the mainstream and

populist parties adopted anti-immigration sentiments, but the mainstream right both adopted a more strict anti-immigration stance, but also put into effect more rigorous immigration policies. He argues that mainstream right actors, such as the Kaczynski brothers in Poland, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Victor Orbán in Hungary, have done more damage to liberal democracy than the PRRPs.

Nonetheless, the influence of the PRRPs is not disregarded by Mudde either, as he stresses that they can pose a greater threat in the future, primarily due to the evolution of mass media and the common issues they share, leading to the '*tabloidization of political discourse in the past decades*' and because of their growing electoral success and integration into the national political systems. (Mudde, 2013) According to Rydgren, populism is not the most prominent feature of the radical right family, and radical right parties should not be characterized solely as populist, even though they do have populist features, along with other characteristics. (Rydgren, 2017) But other scholars still accentuate the growing influence of populism, especially in Europe. Lührmann et al.'s research shows that democracies are facing major autocratization developments, along with the rise of populism. The authors argue that populist parties and leaders have a significant responsibility in the decline of democratic pillars – freedom of expression and the media, and the rule of law, contributing to *toxic polarization* of societies – division into binary opposites within the population. (Lührmann et al., 2019)

Moreover, Erin Jenne even introduces a novel term – ethnopopulism – to describe the concept of populism that usually occurs on the right, once political actors portray 'the people', belonging to a culture, nation, ethnicity, race, religion and/or civilisation, as a group that is facing a threat coming from the outside. (Jenne, 2018) Naturally, populists cast themselves as a solution to this challenge, as the defenders of 'the people', further justifying assaults on independent institutions that counter the alleged majority's will. This populist strategy can foster profound political polarization that tolerates democratic regression and opportunistic behaviour, and it is validated by the fundamental ethnopopulist narrative that the party safeguards the concerns of the "real" people against rival parties that advocate for the interests of culturally detrimental outsiders. (Vachudova, 2020; Vachudova, 2021) Vachudova argues that political systems across Europe have been challenged by the wave of populism, and that populists in power contribute to the erosion of institutional safeguards.

For numerous far right parties, populism represents a pivotal component of their ideological appeal. (Golder, 2016) Populism stands in direct opposition to elitism and pluralism, and its sentiments are directed to a differentiation between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. Far right parties, in their populist rhetoric, position themselves as representatives of the "common people" against what they perceive as an entrenched and out-of-touch elite, challenging the prevailing liberal values upheld by this elite. Within the European context the elite usually encompasses established political parties, the economic upper class, the academia, and the media, and these subgroups are often singled out for their promotion of liberal values associated with individualism, multiculturalism, and internationalism. (Golder, 2016) Nonetheless, once in power, populists tend to redefine ‘the elite’, utilize the mass media influence and turn to sensationalism and media control to conform their interests and accumulate power. (Mudde, 2013)

2.5.1 Populist Polarization

While studying the Hungarian case, Enyedi identified a configuration which encompassed the interplay of relative stability of party politics, high polarization and the utilization of populist strategies, intertwined concepts common in Europe’s democracies. (Enyedi, 2016) The author hence introduced the term *populist polarization*, arguing that the joint influence of the aforementioned developments is very strong, negative, and harmful to the state of democracies. Populist polarization stands for a combination of volatile party bloc competition, a party system that is stable and strong in most part, a rejection of power division and the concept of ‘the people’ being a focal point of parties’ narratives. (Enyedi, 2016) Polarization constitutes a simplification of social pluralism into two broad opposites, and it forms the ideology of people into a less inclusive one compared to democratic citizenship. (Urbinati, 2013) Populism, in addition, constitutes the politics of exclusion, rather than inclusion, and further complements polarization processes.

Stable and strong, coherent political parties should guarantee for representative and transparent democratic governance. The role of parties is to articulate the interests of the electorate and transform them into comprehensive platforms and governmental policies, to encourage political participation and citizenship based on competitive politics, and to disseminate relevant information

to the public, while also mitigating the work of executives, as well as the legislatures. (Enyedi, 2016) But Enyedi argues that, in the systems of populist polarization, the competition is not restricted only to the elite confrontations among the parties, but it encompasses ideological differences of the population as well. Moreover, populism itself is anti-political and über-political at the same time, given that populists reject legitimate opposition, but they still subject all their politics and agendas to the will of the people (Mudde, 2021), or at least claim to do so and present themselves as the representatives of people's interests. This excessive parliamentary fragmentation impedes forming a stable majority and represents a significant challenge for good governance and a threat to democratic consolidation, a process particularly apparent in Eastern Europe. (Enyedi, 2016) What characterizes this region, according to Enyedi, are unrepresentative and fragmented parties and party systems which are also weakly institutionalized, allowing for notably volatile electoral processes.

The concept of populist polarization combines populism which condemns pluralism of interests and simplifies interests and ideas down to a few opposing stances, and polarization, which thrives in this realm of simplified and binary opposite stances, providing the people with an opportunity to easily judge, take sides and unify in bigger masses. (Urbinati, 2013) Moreover, a tactic populists use to further contribute to polarization is a strong leadership, someone people will consider as an image of the movement, who embodies an '*organic narrative*' which represents the core values of the party. (Urbinati, 2013) If pursued, these and many other populist parties' strategies, which can be based on independent leaders, social movements, or even politicized religious organizations, eventually lead to a change in the dynamics among political parties, and to a shift in the relation between the electorate and the party system as well. (Enyedi, 2016)

Finally, populist polarization should not be connected to policy-based polarization, as the sentiments of the latter are much more transparent in their intention to transform politics. As illustrated on the Hungarian example, Fidesz's manifesto of 2010 elections did not enclose any of the radical governmental reforms which were implemented by the party after the elections, and the party chose not to issue a manifesto at all during the following 2014 elections. (Enyedi, 2016) It is important to note that, according to Enyedi, the potential of populist polarization can be partly contained by possible restrictions associated with preparation of political parties for governing.

Nonetheless, populist parties and their leaders have at their disposal, if securing significant electoral advance, a wide range of instruments that essentially come with state power.

CHAPTER 3 – DEMOCRACY AT RISK? INSIGHTS FROM HUNGARY AND ITALY

3.1 The Developments in Europe

3.1.1 Introducing the CEE Region

The Central and Eastern European (CEE) region has a complex history that played a crucial role in the formation of its current state. Coming from the former Soviet bloc, the CEE countries, including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania and others, underwent a transformation process subsequent to the fall of communism in the late 20th century. The period encompassed a transition from planned economies to market-driven systems and the beginning of enshrining democratic principles into governance. The region's integration with Western Europe through EU memberships also had an impact on the national economies, as well as the overall shift towards a more democratic society. Nevertheless, longstanding challenges, including economic inequality and political polarization persevere in various degrees across the countries of the CEE region. The past couple of decades in Europe were marked by the increase in the number of far right political parties, and in their popularity among the electorate, as at the turn of the century these radical right parties were already represented in national politics of Western Europe's democracies such as Austria, Denmark, Italy, France, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands. (Fennema, 2005) One of the determinants of the challenges is the volatility of the election process in these countries, as well as the widespread corruption (Engler, 2016). According to Engler, the increase in perceived corruption above the usual corruption level leads to a loss of trust in the political stance and subsequently, in the democratic values that it represents. Today, the systems of CEE countries continue to change, progress or decline while seeking a balance between their historical legacies and aspirations for an interconnected future within the broader European framework.

Poland

Poland has undergone a steady democratic backslide in recent years, although it was once considered a stellar representative of democracy in the Eastern Europe bloc consequent to the fall of the Iron Curtain. This downfall can best be noted by analyzing the debatable reforms to the judiciary system as well as the politicization of the media and violations of the freedom of the press, both of which led to raised questions about the erosion of the rule of law and the independence of key democratic institutions. The ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) has been at the forefront of these changes, with measures such as the politicization of the Constitutional Tribunal and the public media system. (Scheppelle et al., 2020) According to Scheppelle et al., the independence of the judiciary system in Poland is threatened by a series of legal 'reforms' that have a direct impact on EU secondary law related to criminal justice. Moreover, the existing flaws concerning the independence of the judiciary within the state could jeopardize various other fundamental rights and freedoms safeguarded by the Charter of Fundamental Rights. These freedoms, such as speech, association, data protection, and many others, are imperative to upholding the integrity of the wider European legal framework. Many international organizations including the European Union have openly and repeatedly expressed their concern regarding these developments, citing threats to the separation of powers and media freedom. This democratic erosion in Poland follows the current global trend of democratic backsliding and the rise of populism, which continues to pose significant challenges for the safekeeping of democratic concepts and values within the country. (Benasaglio Berlucci & Kellam, 2023)

The rise of the far-right in Poland has been a notable political occurrence in recent years, although the roots of this phenomenon can be traced far back into the political past of the country. Populist parties such as the Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja) and organizations like the National Radical Camp (ONR) have gained momentum, pushing nationalist and conservative agendas most visible in the issues of immigration and social conservatism, promoting stricter border controls and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights. Considering that the populist stance is that the people are a homogeneous group, it is doubtful that populists will stand for values like pluralism, minority rights, and party democracy. (Pintsch et al., 2022) This rise can be attributed to several factors, including economic instability, concerns over immigration, and a broader global shift towards right-wing populism, as well as the rise of Euro-skepticism.

(Krzyżanowski, 2018) Finally, the decline of democracy in Poland, as in other countries, has a profoundly debilitating effect on the global spread and stability of democratic values. It is essential to note that the far-right's rise in Poland has started debates about the nation's trajectory on the political spectrum, with many expressing concerns about the potential further erosion of democratic values and principles and the implications it may have on the global democratic community.

Czech Republic

Although the erosion of democracy in Czech Republic may not be as openly visible as it is in Poland or France, it is still there. The Czech Republic, like several other European countries, saw a rise in populism narratives following the migrant crisis in 2015, which some political leaders and factions used to gain political influence and public support. This resulted in a shift regarding the public view on immigration, minorities and human rights. According to Bello, the Council of Europe, where decisions are made unanimously, is uncannily influenced by some of those EU destination and transit countries, whose societies are strongly prejudiced towards migrants, and in particular Cyprus, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy and Hungary. (Bello, 2022) Political parties like the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and even certain factions of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) called for stricter immigration control and border security and expressed scepticism towards refugee quotas presented by the European Union. Traditionally viewed as a stable young democracy, the Czech Republic holds one of the highest rates of uncontested elections compared to the countries of the world, according to Karel Kouba and Jakub Lysek. In some Czech municipalities, the execution of silent elections is slowly becoming informally institutionalized, which in turn could have a negative impact on the freedom of speech and media. One of the gravest consequences of uncontested elections is the decline of citizen participation, which further erodes the democratic values in the country. (Kouba & Lysek, 2023)

Vachudova argues that *ethnopolitism* was one of the main strategies used by former Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the ANO party used for gaining more political influence while simultaneously declining the democracy level, as well as the vilification of civic activism and civic groups whose work revolves around minorities, human rights or corruption.

(Vachudova, 2020) The narrative used by Andrej Babiš and the ANO 2011 leadership may not be as polarizing to the public as the one in Poland, but it still includes technocratic populism, which utilizes the idea of national technocratic competence and the idea of economic and leadership excellence referring to the political position in power, as opposed to the corrupted and incompetent „other“ politicians who obstruct the work and lives of ordinary people (Smekal et al., 2022). The ramifications of this narrative have a notably adverse impact on safekeeping of democratic values, as they contribute to the wider European rise of populism and democratic backsliding.

Slovakia

Ever since the "Velvet Revolution" in 1998, Slovakia was regarded as a nation that strived for political reform, democratic values and more civic freedoms. The event itself and the subsequent peaceful formation of Slovakia and Czech Republic through peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience remains a triumph of traditional democratic values and public participation, (Bútorá et al., 2007) However, recent rise of far-right ideologies in Slovakia remains a concern, especially if viewed adjacent to its neighbouring countries. The People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) increased its popularity and political impact under the leadership of Marian Kotleba. Kotleba's political career has been marked by controversies regarding the party's open anti-migrant and anti-minorities attitudes followed by the agenda focusing on the traditional family values, which didn't prevent the ĽSNS from winning the seats in the parliamentary elections of 2016. and 2020. It should be noted that ĽSNS had the most success in rural areas of the country, along with the areas with traditional high unemployment rate. As well as the party ideology, Kotleba's personal statements regarding the Jewish people were rendered as Neo-Nazi. (Drábik, 2023) In 2020, Marian Kotleba was convicted under the charges of extremism, and in 2022 he lost his parliamentary mandate under suspension for supporting extremism. (Kevický, 2022)

The negative effects of this populist and ethno-centrist narrative could be analysed through the position of the Roma people in Slovakia, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Slovakia, along with other states like Romania and Bulgaria, took harsh and even militarized measures to ensure the quarantine in some Roma towns and settlements during the pandemic. (Matache & Bhabha, 2020) It could be argued that the general rise of anti-Roma narrative in Slovakia prior to the pandemic had a magnifying effect on the public perception of the Roma people during the

pandemic and after, which in turn prompted a negative media campaign and drastic measures. The current political climate in Slovakia could be giving more space to the increase of corruption and erosion of the rule of law, which is a continuing threat to the established democratic values.

3.1.2 Looking Beyond the CEE Region

Austria

Similar to many other European countries, Austria was intensely affected by the 2015 immigration crisis, an event that also proliferated the development of populist right-wing narratives, the consequences of which can still be felt today. The continuous influx of refugees posed an enormous challenge for the establishment, who, in an attempt to regain political control, shifted their standpoint from the original welcoming one to a reserved and protective one. The public was flooded with stories about ‘bogus refugees’, crimes and violence done predominately by male Muslims, and the narrative of ‘threat to the safety of seemingly defenceless Austria’, further playing into the portrayal of refugees as dangerous and calling for protective measures. (Scheibelhofer, 2017) Scheibelhofer also points out that in 2016, Minister Kurz advocated for a ban on Burqa as a symbol of ‘counterculture’, when just two years earlier, when the FPÖ demanded the same thing, he dismissed it as non-relevant.

The migrant crisis only multiplied the long existing feelings of displeasure and mistrust already present in the public, caused by decade-long globalization and internal issues, and the populists in Austria monetized on those feelings. (Heinischa et al., 2020) The FPÖ continued to construct security warnings and press on the representation of refugees as importers of criminal behaviour and non-Austrian values, even calling for surveillance of asylum-seekers mobile data to discern ‘where they really come from’ (Thiele et al., 2021). The measures that were debated can be considered anti-democratic and unconstitutional if done without evidence upon an EU citizen. The specific standpoint of Austrian populists consists in the duality of blame – most of the problems in the country are caused by refugees, so they are at fault, but also, the ‘corrupt elite’ in power is responsible for the situation in the first place. It is interesting to note that the FPÖ was in the ruling coalition only twice, and those years were marked by unparalleled levels of high

corruption and nepotism for which the FPO members were under prosecution up to 2019. (Wodak & Rheindorf, 2019)

Another step towards democratic backsliding in Austria was the expansion of ‘welfare chauvinism’, which gained the public attention and support. The far-right were stating that the refugees are draining the welfare system in Austria by not contributing to it and being ‘lazy free-riders’. The FPO justified their anti-immigration views by rationalizing that Austria is a very attractive destination for refugees because of the welfare policy, which in turn demotivates the refugees from working. They also questioned the skill levels and earning potential of refugees in light of possible contribution to the country. (Rathgeb, 2021) These statements, laced with racism, are normalizing this discourse in public and discouraging general social cohesion. At the same time, Minister Kurz demanded the launch of mandatory ‘One-Euro Jobs’ for unemployed refugees, stating that failure to comply would lead to financial repercussions. The government employed a study by the allegedly independent group of social experts which stated that migrants should only receive full Mindestsicherung (minimum allowance for people with little or no income) if they agreed to a compulsory integration program, which would include lessons in Austrian cultural values, language etc. The state’s change in perspective, heavily influenced by the far-right movements, ultimately reflected on the public and the support and solidarity with the refugees was all but gone. (Scheibelhofer, 2017) The dangers of these measures regarding democratic and multicultural values are vast, particularly if viewed through the prism of basic human rights such as health and safety.

France

France was one of the first countries in Europe that has seen the surfacing and growth of populist parties, both left and right oriented. In the 2017 elections, between the right-wing Front National and the left-wing La France Insoumise, populist parties captured over 45% of the vote. (Ivaldi, 2018) The former National Front, now the Rassemblement National – National Rally, was founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen as a way of uniting various and diffuse far-right movements in France. During the following decades, the FN was fairly stable on the political scene, advancing slowly forward. That changed in 2011, when the party leader became Marine Le Pen, succeeding her father Jean-Marie. Marine Le Pen employed new populist strategies and attempted to

ideologically reconstruct the party and public perception of right-wing populism. One of the most significant strategies was the so-called de-demonization, by which she strived to cleanse the party of the members who were too radical and presented a threat to the public image, as well as to change the racist and homophobic verbiage surrounding the party. This move was very effective in securing new votes from previously less represented groups, like the women and Jewish religious minority. In the spirit of reform and true populism, Marine even expelled her on father from the party in 2015. (Surel, 2019)

Similar to the situation in Germany and Austria, the 2015 migrant crisis was used by the FN for propagating anti-Islam and anti-immigration rhetoric, with Le Pen asking for the primate of native citizens when it comes to health care, welfare and housing, as well as the job market. This rhetoric resonated with the people on multiple levels, which can be seen in a survey showing that France is the country with the highest public perception of the number of Muslim citizens, around 31% of the population, when the real percentage is around 7%. (Surel, 2019) The right-wing standpoints on multiculturalism and immigration are an important element of democratic erosion, especially in France, with its long history of accepting immigrants from former colonies.

Recent developments have contributed even more to the strengthening of Rassemblement National. In the parliamentary election of 2022, the centrist bloc led by president Macron's Ensemble! did not win the majority of the votes, and more importantly, the RN won a astonishing 89 deputy places, a great success compared to the 8 places won in 2017. (Hewletta & Kuhn, 2022) The current political scenario in France could give more room to the far-right ideologies and policies to grow and prosper, supported by the media under the guise of free speech and expression. The rise of RN as the main representative of the far-right suggests that France is ever more divided as a society, with rising number of voters prepared to support potentially racist and xenophobic candidates in the hopes of closing the gap between left and right.

Germany

Although the democratic values are considered to be unwavering in Germany, over the recent years the populist AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party has gained more public support and attention. The AfD was founded in 2013 and it is the embodiment of the new right-wing

fraction in Germany. Greve et al. points out that the early narrative of AfD was significantly more moderate and center-oriented, although still firm on immigration, until the migrant crisis of 2015. With the influx of predominantly Muslim migrants into the country, the party's verbiage shifted towards an openly anti-Muslim and anti-immigration position. (Greve et al., 2022) Another contributing factor to party's radicalization was the leadership change in the midst of the immigration crisis – in 2015, Frauke Petry was elected as leader of the party, replacing the party's founder Bernd Lucke. Under Petry's leadership, the party's positions on social issues, immigration and Islam became notably more conservative and negative, as she encouraged the closing the EU borders and construction of migrant camps in the Mediterranean area to fend off refugees who intended to travel to Germany. Another questionable move of the AfD was the accentuating of German cultural primacy and subsequently, representation of Islam as an unwelcome part of German society, going as far as advocating for the banning of minarets. (Greve et al., 2022)

Moreover, research of regional voting representation in Germany shows that voters from regions undergoing long-term economic deterioration are more expected to vote for populist right-wing parties. These regions are predominantly located in the eastern Germany, further supporting the fact that there are still debilitating differences between the east and west part of Germany. The AfD benefited significantly by exploiting the socio-economic disparities which in return brought them twice as much support in the east, compared to the west of Germany. (Weisskircher, 2020) The radicalization of the AfD became even more apparent with the 2023 election of Maximilian Krah as the party's top candidate for the European elections. Krah is a part of the AfD's far-right fraction, and he delivers very direct political messages – he is a supporter of deportation for immigrants and a firm defender of the “great replacement theory”, which indulges the idea that non-German immigrants are “replacing” ethnic Germans in public and private life. (Morris & Brady, 2023) The future concerns regarding democratic backsliding in Germany are tied to the normalization of the right-wing vocabulary in public life under the umbrella of free speech, the growing support of the people and finally, the absence of strategic solutions that could be implemented by the liberal left to contain the effects of right-wing populism in Germany.

Sweden

For the better part of the 20th century, Sweden did not have a political option that would significantly represent the far-right movement. This changed with the founding of The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) which was a direct successor to the Sweden Party. This political party received 1.4% of the votes in the 2002 election, 2.9% in 2006, 5.7% in 2010, 12.9% in 2014 and finally, in recent years reaching the electoral support of almost 20% to 22% in the polls. (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019) According to Rydgren, the analysis of the Sweden Democrats political manifesto and program shows a large presence of nationalism followed by the goal of lowering immigration to accomplish a more ethnically uniform Sweden. Further studies suggest that the average voters of Swedish Democrats display a low level of trust in the media and in political parties, as well as that over 90% of these voters support the Swedish Democrats on the grounds of the immigration matter. (Rydgren & Tyrberg, 2020)

The SD has made significant effort to distance themselves from the problematic origins of the party, which possibly comes from extremist groups and radical right movements of the 1980s and 1990s. The recent narrative of the party is that racism and extremism are not tolerated amongst its members, yet, some of their representatives have been forced to leave the party due to racist statements made mainly online. (Hien & Norman, 2023) Öztürka et al. gives an interesting example of the growing segmentation of the public in Sweden over the issue of the veil. In 2004, the Swedish Democrats moved to ban veils through organized media campaigns and a number of motions in the city council, all in the name of the oppressed immigrant women, while in 2010, they campaigned using a short movie that depicted veiled women as villains. (Öztürka et al., 2022) This example further proves that the concept of gender equality is being used by the populist and far-right movements to further divide the society and promote their own narrative.

In further analysis of the party manifest, Elgenius and Rydgren find that the idea of the SD is that Sweden's current immigration policy and subsequent multiculturalism present a threat to the ethnic and cultural identity of the Swedish nation, so ethno-nationalism is presented as the solution for achieving true social solidarity and homogeneity. Some concrete proposals can also be found in the party program, specifically regarding expelling convicted individuals of non-Swedish nationality, criminalizing begging and establishing financial endowment to any immigrant who wishes to leave Sweden. (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019) These propositions are

controversial and potentially problematic as they pose further questions about the current positions of political power in Sweden and their effect on the erosion of democracy.

3.2 The Hungarian Trajectory

The aftermath of three-decade long post-communist governance in the CEE region varies from country to country, and the influence of the rise of the far right manifests differently throughout Europe. Countries experienced different levels of democratic decline over the past couple of decades, but the Hungarian example illustrates a clear illiberal turn, as the country's hybrid regime of democracy is now characterized as 'partly free' by the Freedom House, and as Orbán's electoral system reform, along with Fidesz's transformation of public institutions further testify that the ruling party instrumentalises its power to pursue its interests. (Maškarinec & Charvát, 2023) Since 1989, Hungary was praised for the efforts made to contribute to transitioning and democratic consolidation, which included introducing an array of measures, regulating competitive elections and the political party system, and provisions aimed at distribution of powers characteristic for the liberal conception of democracy, all of which resulted with Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004. (Fumarola, 2016)

During the early 2000s, the center-left social democratic Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) took the majority both in the 2002 elections and in the 2006 elections. Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance, led by Viktor Orbán, had more than 40 percent during both of these elections. However, the political environment changed after the 2010 parliamentary elections, during which Fidesz formed an alliance and ran the electoral campaign with the right-wing Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), eventually securing a constitutional majority of seats – over 67% of seats in the parliament with nearly 53 percent of the votes. (Maškarinec & Charvát, 2023) Since then and during the past decade, Hungary has been repeatedly criticized for the illiberal developments orchestrated by Orbán and the Fidesz party, including the erosion of democratic institutional safeguards, utilizing the self-created supermajority in the parliament for party's own interest, reduction of media and academia's freedoms, pressuring the opposition, the non-governmental, and private sector, the courts and more. (Bakke & Sitter, 2022)

Far right politics in Hungary entered a new phase with the beginning of the century, and, more specifically, with the creation of the Movement for a Better Hungary – Jobbik party. (Stevenson, 2015) Descriptively, the party's name *jobbik* can be translated as both 'better' and 'further to the right'. Jobbik, however, did not achieve significant electoral success during the first decade of the century. But the situation shifted, and in 2010 Jobbik secured 17% of the vote, and their popularity increased over the course of the years and during the following 2014 elections, especially among young people. Stevenson argues that the environment of transition, which included adopting liberal principles, encouraged the rise of the far right, and caused Fidesz to turn toward the right as well. Both Jobbik and Fidesz aimed to gain from criticizing the legitimacy of liberal principles and capitalism from the far right stance. (Stevenson, 2015) Nonetheless, the leading position on the right was assumed, and since remained the one reserved for Fidesz. (Maškarinec & Charvát, 2023)

Again, with opposition being fragmented and resistant to cooperation (Kovarek & Littvay, 2022), in the 2018 parliamentary elections, Fidesz won two thirds of the seats in the parliament for the third time in a row. As Tóka argues, what these results illustrate is an unprecedented power, the one in which Fidesz has a majority of this size in the only chamber of the parliament, allowing for any law to be changed, or a clause of the constitution amended, through a one-off decision. Interestingly, compared to the usually low turnout characteristic to Hungarian elections, the 2018 elections witnessed a record high turnout, perhaps because of the immigration issue being central to the Fidesz's electoral campaign. (Tóka, 2019) During the 2019 municipal elections, the dominance Fidesz established was challenged in several more urban localities in Hungary, as the opposition beat Fidesz's candidate for the mayor of Budapest and defeated the ruling party in 56 different municipalities, as well as in 14 out of 23 districts in Budapest. (Kovarek & Littvay, 2022) However, the 2022 parliamentary elections brought yet another convincing victory for Orbán's Fidezs – over 54% of the vote and another two-thirds in the parliament with 135 out of the 199 seats. (Csanyi, 2022) The main opposition to Fidesz during the 2022's elections was the United for Hungary coalition, which defeated Orbán and his party in Budapest. The coalition was established among six political parties, one of which is Jobbik, a party Csanyi stresses turned more mainstream in the recent past, and whose support decreased – possibly due to its shift towards the center or because of its many coalition allies.

3.2.1 Fidesz: Programmes and Narratives

By large, the ideologies of Fidesz have been referred to as belonging to populist, radical right or far right party family. The party was established in 1988, during Hungary's transition to democracy as a liberal youth movement that later transformed into a nationalistic and conservative party that once again took over the power in 2010 and remained dominant in the political scene in Hungary since. Fidesz was established as an anti-communist movement that embraced human rights western values of the market economy. (Szabó, 2022) In 1992, under Orbán's popular leadership, the party revoked the 35-year age limit for membership and reoriented into a right-wing party, prioritising youth and student mobilization. (Mudde & Kopecky, 2003, as cited in Szabó, 2022) The party left the protest politics and sought after alliances with nationalist parties, and 'evolved' from an alternative to a liberal party from 1988 to 1992, until becoming a centre-right, populist. Christian party by 1998, seeking out an ally among the right-wing bloc. (Szabó, 2022)

Over the following years, Szabó stresses, Fidesz opted for a more populist narrative, and as Fidesz in coalition with the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) won the 2002 parliamentary elections, Orbán portrayed himself as a 'popular leader', working in the interest of the people. (Szabó, 2022) In preparation for the 2006 elections, Fidesz put an end to its coalition with MDF and formed a new coalition, still active today, with the Hungarian Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). Populist and far right concepts of Fidesz's programmes include anti-establishment and anti-elite sentiments and acting on behalf of the people, especially the rural population and civil society, while accusing the institutions of manipulating the 'popular will'. (Szabó, 2022) According to Szabó, the party opted for novel modes of organizing such as the "Citizens' Alliance" formed to utilize the efforts of the civic society for connecting the sphere of cultural, political and social. Interestingly, as Fidesz turned more towards nationalism, its organizational structure took over a more leftist character, as Orbán introduced networks of affiliate organizations with large bases of activists, a strategy usually characteristic for the '*with mass oriented left-wing parties*'. In this way, Fidesz's membership and network expanded further as they became more integrated into the civil society. (Enyedi & Linek, 2008)

Fidesz's manifesto for the 2010 elections, titled *The politics of national affairs*, offered somewhat vague policy development proposals, and its chapters were written by individual Fidesz politicians, a choice that raised a question on whether the party's programmes were actual electoral pledges or personal opinion expressions. (Batory, 2010) The manifesto contained ambiguous remarks and pledges such as provision of '*honest jobs and honest wages*', but it lacked an explanation as to how these provisions would actually be achieved. (Batory, 2010) Although electoral programmes in Hungary are sometimes considered as purely 'ceremonial', aimed to provide internal and external credibility, Fidesz's manifestos were influenced by the political situation and electoral prospects as well, and drafted to either justify their readiness to govern or when caving in on the pressure from the media and the public. (Soós & Dobos, 2014)

It is important to note that lengthy and detailed manifestos which include basic principles and policies are not characteristic in the Hungarian electoral scene, where manifestos, or election programs in Hungary, are published a month or two before the election day. (Soós & Dobos, 2014) This leaves room for vague, non-transparent election processes and disables the principles of accountability, while the political parties in Hungary rely on other strategies during election campaigns. In 2010, Fidesz's electoral strategy involved highlighting the negatives of the previous 8-year rule of the Hungarian Socialist Party, describing them as corrupt and incompetent, rather than focusing on its own plan for governing once in the office. (Batory, 2010) To illustrate, Orbán made a statement declaring that the party will implement a large scale tax cut, however, the specifics of the plan were not communicated further through the party's manifesto or by any of the Fidesz politicians.

Batory argues that this tactic of making no specific plans and pledges was also beneficial for Fidesz as their main competitors were not given the opportunity to introduce a contrasting proposal or to simply challenge Fidesz's agenda, while the party would also avoid being held accountable for its promises once in the government. For example, Fidesz in no way announced the radical changes it introduced and implemented once in the office, such as the major constitutional and electoral reforms from the 2011 and 2012. (Enyedi, 2016) Four years later, in 2014, the party did not even issue a manifesto before the parliamentary elections. This is what Enyedi characterises as populist polarization, compared to policy-based polarization, arguing that,

in the Hungarian case, the differences among parties were not represented through specific policy matters, but through disagreements in regards to cultural issues instead.

During the 2014 election campaign and prior to Fidesz winning another unprecedented majority of seats in the Parliament, the party did not publish a manifesto, while its leader refused to participate in any public debates, just as he did in the 2010 elections as well. (Batory, 2014) Batory argues that the electoral campaign was once again based on '*mutual accusations of corruption*' instead of the policy development issues. One of Fidesz's main points during the campaign was the popular utility rate cuts measure, because to high oil and gas prices and low GDP per capita results in higher utility costs in the Visegrád four compared to Western Europe. (Deak & Weiner, 2019) Orbán politicized the issue and campaigned with the 'cheaper gas' slogan, eventually almost doubling the electoral support by 2014.

In the following years, Orbán's rhetoric remained similar, while he and the party instrumentalised other occurring issues for their interest. Previously more reserved and moderate in relation to the EU, committed to EU membership, Fidesz took a more radical turn and expressed anti-EU sentiments in the recent years (Batory, 2014), a turn followed by a more consistent cooperation with regional and global authoritarian powers. (Buzogány & Varga, 2019) With the 2015 'refugee crisis', Orbán began politicizing the issue and Fidesz repositioned itself as an anti-immigrant party. (Tóka, 2019) Consequently, Tóka argues that the sharp anti-immigrant stances of Fidesz caused a significant rise in their popularity, including the rise in the support of Fidesz among Jobbik's supporters. The 2015 immigration crisis came in at the time during which the popularity of Fidesz started decreasing, but the party utilized this issue to raise its support and appeal to voters, consequently influencing growing negative perception about migrants among the public (Barna & Koltai, 2019), and continued to develop this narrative ever since.

Orbán's Fidesz wins and rules under the concepts of populist paternalism, economic nationalism and national sovereignty (Buzogány & Varga, 2019), claiming to act in the best interest and on behalf of the people, protecting and prioritizing national economy and industry, and working in the greater interest of the country, compared to the 'others', outsiders and 'Soros-agents'. (Kerpel, 2017) In 2014, during a speech held at the summer university in Transylvania, Orbán declared that Hungary has to turn away from the governance and society organization characteristic to liberal democracies, proclaiming the Western economic model dead and

glorifying 'illiberal democracy', declaring that Hungary should be rebuilt as an illiberal/non-liberal state. (Buzogány & Varga, 2019) Buzogány & Varga stress that Orbán, in fact, called for a strong, centralized and paternalist country, as he criticized Western liberalism, proclaiming it as something foreign to Hungary, a country with an authoritarian past and present.

3.2.2 Fidesz: When in Office

Shortly after the 2010 elections, Fidesz enacted a 'Declaration of National Cooperation', asserting that, following 46 years of occupation and dictatorship and a long period of transition, the country had reclaimed its right to self-determination, which it will instrumentalise through the System of National Cooperation – an array of political and cultural institutions closely connected to Orbán and his party. (Seongcheol, 2023) Under the post-communism reform pretext, Fidesz significantly harmed the rule of law by implementing a major constitutional reform, appointing its own individuals as key state institutions and constraining the power and independency of the constitutional court. (Bakke & Sitter, 2022) In 2011, Orbán's government introduced a new Constitution and pushed it through with the use of Fidesz's two-third majority, and the new Fundamental Law raised new concerns, as scholars suggested that a once strong Hungarian constitutional system is being jeopardized, and the safeguards for the rule of law and human rights weakened. (Chronowski, 2019) The government formed under Orbán proceeded with changing the compulsory retirement age from 70 to 62 which, consequently, led to 274 new appointments, which were now, through new regulation for the allocation of cases and the appointment of judges, under the responsibility of an individual close to Fidesz leadership. (Bakke & Sitter, 2022)

Furthermore, Orbán introduced the infamous electoral system reform. Hungary's electoral system was considered as the most stable one in the post-communist Europe, and scholars argue that there were no genuine reasons behind this reform, Still, Fidesz imposed the change of the electoral system unilaterally in 2011. (Maškarinec & Charvát, 2023) In short, as a part of the Constitutional reform carried out in 2012, the electoral system in Hungary underwent the following changes: the number of seats in the Parliament was decreased from 286 to 199, and the former two-round system for single-member constituencies was replaced with a system in which a 106 of seats are determined by the first-past-the-post system while the remaining 93 seats are allocated

through proportional representation. (Fumarola, 2016) Consequently, the reform undermines the equality and impartiality of the vote and has a negative effect on the representation, as the unused votes from the majoritarian system can be allocated to the winning candidates as well, and not only to the smaller parties.

In addition, Orbán and his right-wing party introduced another major policy reform quickly into their mandate after the 2010 elections. By changing the Penal Code, Orbán established a so-called ‘three strikes’ (as in the baseball rule – *three strikes and out*) principle and incorporated it into the Hungarian penal policy, a concept often also characterized as *penal populism*. (Boda et al., 2022) The concept represents a punishment policy ‘*developed primarily for its anticipated popularity*’, that utilizes the public atmosphere of fear of crime and uses populist rhetoric to appeal to the voters. Boda et al. argue that the principle introduced by Orbán binds the judges to impose the most severe penalties with no consideration in case of recidivists. Moreover, Orbán’s government is also infamous because of its practices aimed at limiting the freedom of the press, while Fidesz instrumentalises state-owned and state-run media outlets as its propaganda apparatus. (Bakke & Sitter, 2022) The government further decreases participatory debate and scrutiny during the introduction of new legislation, such as the major 2011 constitutional reform which was barely followed by any debate or scrutiny, while being passed as a private member bill. (Bakke & Sitter, 2022)

Both through the landslide victories and through accompanying radical reforms Fidesz was enabled to implement, Orbán uses the time in the office to achieve the goals envisioned and move the country towards a hybrid, non-liberal regime. Fidesz severely harmed democratic checks and balances, carried out a radical constitutional reform, including a major and questionable reform of the electoral system, altering the organization of the parliament, violating the independence of the judiciary, establishing full control over the media, and more. (Buzogány & Varga, 2019) Buzogány & Varga stress that Fidesz represents a market-oriented government as harmful to Hungarian society, as it allegedly only serves the interests of foreign businesses and therefore puts its efforts into establishing a centralized government, controlled by Fidesz and its loyalists. Although many of the newly introduced measures of Fidesz, when considered individually, are not completely alien to established democracies, all of them in force together are what makes Hungary a

Frankenstate – Scheppelle's take on a hybrid regime. (Scheppelle, 2013, as cited in Buzogány & Varga, 2019)

3.2.3 The State of Democracy: Hungary

After 1989, Hungary was considered as one of the good examples of democratic transition and consolidation, having secured EU membership in 2004, after establishing a stable party system and a strong government. However, Orbán's victory in 2010 introduced a new era for Hungarian democracy, shifting *'the initially consensual system toward a strongly majoritarian one'*, (Buzogány & Varga, 2019) a transformation played under the Fidesz government and highly criticized by the European Parliament, as a move toward an authoritarian regime. (Tavares, 2013, as cited in Buzogány & Varga, 2019) Hungary is now often described as an autocracy, with the executives accumulating both judicative and executive power, and limiting the decision-making processes to a small circle of Fidesz leadership and loyalists – a 'political family'. (Kerpel, 2017) Fidesz's Hungary can maybe even be described as a democracy, but it is far from a good democracy, and far from a good governance system which entails a *'moderate/liberal rule by democratically elected polity'* (Szelenyi & Csillag, 2015), elements diminished in Hungary's current establishment.

By developing a network of mechanisms for system control, Fidesz projected its populist, right-wing, national-conservative, anti-immigration and anti-culture diversity sentiments (Li et al., 2021) onto the state. The illiberal turn in Hungary encompasses constitutional and administration reforms harming political participation, representativeness and principles of equality and severe media control, politicization of media and repression of free and independent expression. The information offered below represents an overview of the state of democracy in Hungary in the period 2017 - 2022, as per the data base and reports from the Freedom House and Human Rights Watch. The information is provided with an aim to identify the trends or patterns in the illiberal developments in Hungary, showcasing a possible regress/progress in democratic values and principles under the influence of populist/far right parties and under Fidesz government particularly. A special focus is on the elements of the rule of law and the freedom of the press as two of the elemental democratic pillars.

Freedom House

In a 2018 Freedom House Freedom in the World report for the year 2017, Hungary received an overall score of 72/100, and scored 28/40 in the area of Political Rights and 44/60 in the area of Civil Liberties, and was characterised as a free democracy. Under the Freedom of Expression and Belief, Hungary received a 2/4 mark regarding the existence of free and independent media. As the main challenges in this area, Freedom House lists Fidesz's control of the media and politization of media regulation through complex media legislation, as well as monopolization and domination of different local, regional and national outlets used as governmental tools to 'smear political opponents'. Additional issues are also the closure of an independent media outlet Népszabadság, progovernment media favouring Fidesz initiatives and banning journalists from the parliament. Regarding rule of law, Hungary scores 2/4 for the segment of independent judiciary; 3/4 for the due process prevailing in civil and criminal matters; 3/4 for the protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies; 2/4 for laws, policies and practices guaranteeing equal treatment of various segments of the population. As challenges, Freedom House lists lack of independent judiciary, as all Constitutional Court judges from 2010 to 2014 were appointed by Fidesz; the rulings being in favour of government interests; low quality of lawyers being appointed for defendants without legal counsel; interrogation being conducted without the presence of a lawyer; poor conditions in prisons and detention centers; revoking cooperation with the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and barring the organization from accessing detention facilities; constant violation of refugee and asylum seeker's rights with harmful changes to asylum policy and building barriers at the southern border of the country; poor conditions in 'transit zones' where asylum seekers are detained; training special police units for removing migrants from the country; widespread discrimination of Roma people; segregation of Roma children. (Freedom House, 2018a)

In the 2019 report for the year 2018, Hungary was characterized as a partly free democracy, and scored an overall score of 70/100, and a 27/40 mark for Political Rights, as well as 43/60 mark for Civil Liberties. Again, Hungary scored 2/4 for the free and independent media, with the same reoccurring challenges as in 2017, with an addition – several more independent media outlets shut down after the elections, while one of them was taken over by Fidesz loyalists; owners of a

majority of progovernment media announced a creation of a massive media conglomerate while the government exempted the transactions for the creation of this conglomerate foundation from the antitrust review. Concerning the rule of law, Hungary received the same scores for all 4 categories and previous years' issues pertained, with additional concerns – a close ally of Orbán, Tünde Handó, is appointed as head of the National Judiciary Office (OBH), establishing great authority and control over the courts, court finances and disciplinary proceedings. The European Parliament triggered Article 7 proceedings against Hungary, citing attacks on the judiciary. The challenges with refugees and asylum seekers persisted and became greater; European Court of Human Rights judgement from 2018 compels Hungarian government to change the policy of denying food to migrants in transit zones. (Freedom House, 2019a)

In the 2020 Freedom House report, Hungary received the same general scores (70/100; 27/40; 43/60). The 2/4 score for the free and independent media was followed by the same challenges and with several other negative developments – a number of independent media outlets shut down because of financial losses caused by government choosing progovernment media only for advertisement and sponsorship; a major independent media website was sold to Orbán's allies; the pressure on independent media grew and two major media outlets were donated, despite their worth, to Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), a new governing body. Hungary's scores for the rule of law remained the same as in the previous years, and the same issues persisted with several additions – the government interference in the judicial branch increased; Tünde Handó, president of the National Judicial Office aimed to interfere with the work of the supreme administrative body for the judicial branch, the National Judicial Council; a new administrative court system which gives the Ministry of Justice power to adopt/promote judges and restricts judicial interpretation of existing case law allowing the members of the Constitutional Court to sit on the Supreme Court was, despite the opposition from the European Parliament, implemented in 2019 by an omnibus bill. The violations of refugee and asylum seeker rights increased; ECHR ruled that the removal/return of asylum seekers to Serbia is a human rights violation; the government prolonged the state of emergency aiming to implement further migration policy; under Fidesz, the country is less welcoming of LGBT+ rights. (Freedom House, 2020a)

In the 2021 report for the year 2020, Hungary scored the general freedom mark of 69/100, a 26/40 mark for Political Rights, and 43/60 score for Civil Liberties. The 2/4 media freedom score

was followed by the same problems, while another formerly independent media outlet was bought out by a Fidesz loyalist; a law to allegedly fight disinformation concerning COVID-19 caused auto-censoring of independent journalists. The same scores were given under the rule of law segment, and the same problems were listed by Freedom House with a couple additional challenges such as police brutality, EU courts criticizing Hungarian asylum procedures as incompatible with EU law, sometimes characterizing them as human rights violations; growing discrimination against women, LGBT+ and Roma people. (Freedom House, 2021a)

The same 69/100, 26/40 and 43/60 scores were given to the partly free Hungarian democracy in the 2022 Freedom House report. The freedom of the media was scored 2/4, and the usual media domination and blackout was followed by another major independent media outlet, *Index*, being sold to progovernment actors, while the largest independent radio station, Klubrádió, lost the broadcasting licence, and independent journalists were under surveillance of Hungarian authorities. Concerning the rule of law, the marks were the same as in the previous years, and the same troubles persisted. In 2021 the Equal Treatment Authority that served as an apparatus to tackle discrimination was abolished and its duties transferred to the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, a body with questionable independence. Hungary continues to control the courts, the judiciary branch, and fails to address growing discrimination against all minority groups. (Freedom House, 2022a)

2023 Freedom House report granted Hungary with its all-time-low 66/100 freedom score, 24/40 Political Rights mark and a 42/60 Civil Liberties mark. The country received a 2/4 score for the freedom of the press once again, with the same challenges of media buy-outs, control and intimidation being listed by Freedom House. The same scores were given to Hungary for the rule of law segments of independent judiciary, due process efficiency, illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies and equal treatment under law, policies and practices. The problems of previous years persisted, as the establishment continued to violate the principles of rule of law through major control of the judiciary branch, manipulation of public functions, violation of human rights of refugees and asylum seekers, discrimination of minority groups and more. (Freedom House, 2023a)

Human Rights Watch

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) World Reports offer the information on human rights violations in Hungary, along with violations of the rule of law and the freedom of the press. The 2018-2023 reports continue to address the reoccurring problems in Hungary, including the poor treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, media control and blackout, attack on the independent institutions, NGOs and the judiciary branch, introduction of policies allowing for poor administration and governance. 2018's HRW report for the year 2017 states that Fidesz's government implemented a smearing campaign against 'foreign paid traitors' and aimed to discredit the non-governmental and civil society sector, with a special focus on organizations funded by George Soros, while a pro-government media outlet published a list targeting independent journalists as being pro-Soros. (Human Rights Watch, 2018) A similar smear campaign was also run during the next year, and amendments to the constitution and other legislation which criminalized support, advice and services provided to asylum seekers and migrants were approved, as well as an amendment that further restricted access to asylum. (Human Rights Watch, 2019)

The 2020 HRW report states that the denial of access to refugee center to a journalist from 2015 was ruled as a violation of media freedom by the European Court of Human Rights in 2019, as Fidesz efforts to establish complete media politization and control over the judiciary branch persisted. Due to the breach of European People's Party's rule of law and fundamental rights values, Fidesz's membership to the party was suspended. (Human Rights Watch, 2020) In 2020. Fidesz used the Covid-19 pandemic to further erode democratic institutions and the rule of law, passed an Authorization Act, allowing the government an indefinite rule by decree with no oversight by the Parliament. Fidesz declared a state emergency and adopted numerous decrees, some of which were unrelated to health, including those that decreased the funds provided to municipalities, especially targeting those run by the opposition. (Human Rights Watch, 2021) The same trends continued throughout 2021, as the establishment prolonged the state of emergency due to Covid-19 and continued to undermine the rule of law and freedom of the press. To replace the state of emergency and continue ruling by decree, Fidesz's government declared a 'state of danger' due to the war in Ukraine, after another landslide win in the April elections in 2022. The legal order was passed without public consultation. European Commission's report on the rule of

law highlighted its concerns regarding the system of democratic checks and balances, the independence of the judiciary branch, media independence, pluralism and pressure on journalists and the civil society. The OSCE election observation commission's preliminary conclusions showcased that the voters' ability to make informed choices is significantly jeopardized by disproportionate news coverage. (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

3.3 The Italian Case

The political space in Italy has witnessed several dynamic developments in the past couple of decades, which were often considered as a result of the economic turmoil and as the response of the 2015 'migration crisis', showcasing the country's complex and unstable party system. Following the shifts in Italy's party and political system chronologically, was the rise and the decline of Berlusconi's Forza Italia and its influence in the government. (Karremans et al., 2019) Italy's political sphere underwent a radical change in the aftermath of the 2013 general election, having the party system transformed, once again, into a fragmented multipolar system. The 2006 and 2008 elections were considered as an alleged end of a two-decade long transition from the First Republic to the Second Republic which mostly represented a transformation of a multipolar system into a bipolar one. (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2007, as cited in Karremans et al., 2019) However, this configuration did not last, as the 2013 elections also marked an emergence of new parties and movements, such as the Five Star Movement - Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) and the Civic Choice - Scelta Civica (SC). (Karremans et al., 2019)

Although often welcomed, the viewpoint that the downfall of the bipolar party system in Italy is a major legacy of the economic crisis (Bull and Pasqino, 2018, as cited in Karremans et al., 2019) disregards other factors that contributed to these changes. Karremans et al. argue that other important factors which contributed to the transformation of the political system are the lack of reformation among the ruling class and a widespread perception of systemic corruption in Italy's politics. The authors go as far as stressing that economic grievances had very little influence over the political processes during the 2006 and 2008 elections, given that the electoral campaigns largely revolved around cultural issues instead. This trend continued throughout the following

elections as well, and the issues driving the competition at the time revolved around democratic reform, such as the M5S' stance on the change of the political system. (Karremans et al., 2019)

The fragmented party system in Italy poses a challenge for adequately conceptualizing party families and connecting them to specific ideology groups. (Dennison & Geddes, 2022) During the 2013 elections, a coalition was formed between the Christian democrat *Unione di Centro* and *Scelta Civica*, parties that could be characterized as the center-right. The 2018 election's coalition considered as the center-right group consisted of *Lega*, *Forza Italia*, *Fratelli d'Italia*, *Noi con Italia* (former *Scelta Civica*) and *Unione di Centro*, along with a large number of other minor and regional parties. Again, the coalition in question was often considered as center-right. Nonetheless, the Manifesto Project identified *Noi con Italia* and *Civica Popolare* as Christian democrat parties, and *Forza Italia* and *Fratelli d'Italia* as conservative. (Volkens et al., 2020, as cited in Dennison & Geddes, 2022) *Fratelli d'Italia*, a party formed in 2012 by Berlusconi's critics, also had a claim to identifying as center-right, although a weaker one, as it is often characterized as far right (Piccolino & Puleo, 2022), radical right (Donà, 2022), extreme right and populist (Garzia, 2019). According to Dennison and Geddes, the Brothers of Italy combine the 'post-fascist' sentiments from *Movimento Sociale Italiano/Alleanza Nazionale* and the Christian democrat and liberal tendencies from *Forza Italia*.

The influence of the right-oriented parties grew exponentially in the aftermath of the 2015 'migration crises' during which the migration policies in Italy became much more repressive, mostly due to the efforts of parties such as *Lega Norde* and, consequently, the demands in the public opinion. (Dennison & Geddes, 2022) During 2017 and before the 2018 parliamentary elections, Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, Matteo Salvini's *North League* and Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* joined their forces for the upcoming elections. The parties formed a center-right coalition, and their frontrunning agendas included, again, the issues of immigration and security, along with taxation and pensions and the relation towards the European Union. (De Giorgi & Tronconi, 2018) According to De Giorgi and Tronconi, as the positionings of the three parties grew closer and they took very similar stances on relevant matters, the coalition entered the electoral process with a more moderate sentiments towards the EU and a more radical sentiment concerning security and immigration and taxation and pensions.

The 2018 general elections witnessed the lowest turnout of the electorate in Italy so far, and a win of the center-right coalition which secured 37 percent of the vote, and was comprised of Forza Italia, Northern League, Brothers of Italy and Us with Italy – UDC, forming the ‘*first full-fledged populist government in Europe*’. (Garzia, 2019) Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni, won 4.35 percent of the vote and 32 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Garzia also argues that these results should be considered as a part of the wider European context, stressing that parties of same ideological orientation have already entered the governments of some Western European democracies. In the following years, stricter measures on immigration were introduced and implemented through the *Security Decrees*, along with the reduction of the pension age and with the controversial approval of the basic citizenship income. (Chiaramonte et al., 2022) The government then had to face the challenges related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by a new crisis and economic consequences of the war in Ukraine. The main issue of debate during this time was not the management of the pandemic, but the management of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan – PNRR, as well as the energy cost related economic grievances. In the meantime, the popularity and influence of the Brothers of Italy, and its leader Giorgia Meloni grew. (Chiaramonte et al., 2022)

Chiaramonte et al. argue that the victory of Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d’Italia did not come as a surprise in the 2022 general elections. The elections held in September 2022 had the lowest turnout in the Republican era, and the unified coalition consisting of the Brothers of Italy, Northern League, Forza Italia and a fourth list composed of different centrist parties – Noi Moderati (Us Moderates), won the majority of votes, and 237 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Moreover, Meloni’s FdI won 25.98 percent of the vote and 119 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. For the first time in the history of the Republic, the formed government is genuinely right-wing, rather than center-right. (Chiaramonte et al., 2022) According to Chiaramonte et al., the success of the coalition showcases that Italy’s political system is undergoing a long-term change in an unstable environment, in which political parties are structurally weak and incapable of forming lasting political alliances. Meanwhile, the electorate, dissatisfied with the government, or enchanted by various political options, changes previously secured votes, turns to protest voting or abstains from voting. The authors conclude that these developments create a deinstitutionalised political and party system, consistent in its unpredictability and instability, with a risk of becoming illegitimate.

3.3.1 Fratelli d'Italia: Manifestos

In 2022, a right-wing government was formed in Italy, under the leadership of far right FdI's Giorgia Meloni, previously characterised as similar to leaders such as Hungary's Orbán or Spain's Abascal, although Meloni put an effort in portraying herself and the party as more moderate, rather than radical, most likely as a part of a strategy. (Chiaromonte et al., 2022) First established in 2012, FdI was formed by three former members of Popolo della Libertà - The People of Freedom, Giorgia Meloni, former youth policy minister in Berlusconi's 4th government, along with Guido Crosetto, undersecretary in the Ministry of Defence, as well as Ignazio La Russa, minister of defence. In the beginning, FdI's full title included an addition to the current one - Fratelli d'Italia – Alleanza Nazionale, thus underlining its connection with Italian Social Movement – National Right and National Alliance, past neo-fascist and white supremacist parties. (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022)

Although the Northern League and the Five Star Movement received more attention from the scholars as the leading populist parties of the past decade, the Brothers of Italy represented the leading opposition in the Italian Parliament ever since it was established. (Donà, 2022) Led by Giorgia Meloni, the electoral appeal of the FdI grew exponentially over the years, both during the general elections in Italy and in general elections to the 2019 European Parliament, and Meloni's popularity grew as well, as she became one of the most highly ranked leaders of Italy. (Donà, 2022) Ideology wise, the Brothers of Italy are often described as a unification of two party families. On one side, FdI carries a legacy of a long-standing political tradition of the conservative and post-fascist Italian right. On the other side, FdI resembles the new, populist, or populist radical right, anti-establishment movements and parties, and a political orientation characterized as '*sovereignist*' among the academia. (Vampa, 2023; Basile & Borr, 2022)

Nevertheless, the FdI has a well-defined identity, and some of its main programme points include referring to the national pride and often leaning towards nationalism, advocating for state participation in the economy, and sensitivity towards issues related to social rights and the challenges of Southern Italy. (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022) Brothers of Italy identify as a national conservative and a sovereign party, referring to the concepts of national sovereignty, democracy,

freedom, social solidarity and justice, along with a strong focus on the national tradition. The party's identity is also defined by strong leadership, while its logo showcases the neo-fascist legacies, given the three-colour torch which resembles the historical symbol of the Italian Social Movement - National Right (MSI). (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022) During the past decade, FdI underwent a major radicalization process, while creating a populist platform based on anti-establishment sentiments, and radicalizing its programme, adopting a far right platform and its nativist and authoritarian stances. (Puleo & Piccolino, 2022; Donà, 2022) According to Puleo and Piccolino, however, during this time of radicalization the party remained consistent in terms of its political elites, with a majority of them originating from the MSI and post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale.

Based on the content of FdI's manifestos and the key speeches of Meloni over the past decade, Donà analysed the programme of the party, and grouped them into two segments, based on the two FdI major events – the 2014 and 2017 congresses. In the aftermath of the technocratic Monti government and in the context of the economic crisis and the consequent EU measures, the FdI 2013 'The challenges ahead of Italy' programme opposes the technocratic government with a claim that it is clashing with the popular sovereignty, and it further advocates for a reform of both the Italian and the EU political system. (Donà, 2022) In the 2013 programme, FdI further calls for constitutional reforms, allowing a direct election of the President of the Republic, and for a fight against corruption and washing of public resources, reduction of public debt, support for entrepreneurship, an effective welfare system, the promotion of natality and the introduction of measures to tackle illegal immigration. (FdI, 2013, as cited in Donà, 2022) The programme, however, did not contain elements of authoritarianism, nationalism or nativism, nor did it have strong anti-immigration or xenophobic sentiments. (Donà, 2022)

Nonetheless, sentiments of authoritarianism and nationalism, along with Euro-scepticism, were showcased during the Meloni's 2014 party congress speech, which was based on the congress' slogan – In the name of the sovereign people, and referred to the necessity to defend the national cultural identity and heritage and to promote the national historical memory, to the need to defend the Italian economy, and the shared cultural and religious roots of Europe, the need to fight against illegal immigration and defending the traditional values, such as the life sacrality and the '*natural family based on marriage*'. (Meloni, 2014, as cited in Donà, 2022) Thus, the

radicalization introduced during 2014 was continued with the 2017 adoption of the Thesis of *Trieste for the movement of the Patriots* document which encompassed the FdI's ideological platform for the future elections, and again emphasised the FdI's focus on the national identity, the concept of a homogenous community with a common history, traditional values and cultural heritage, and contrasting the harmful changes of the progressive culture. (Donà, 2022)

According to Donà, Brothers of Italy display all traits characteristic for populist and radical right parties, including authoritarianism, nativism, sovereignism and Euro-scepticism. The following years' election programmes were mostly based on the congress' manifesto. The 2018 programme set out 15 priorities addressing the issues such as the 'defence of the natural family', 'defence of the national sovereignty' from the EU, 'fight against illegal immigration', 'identity defence from Islamization' and 'law and order priority'. (The vote uniting Italy, FdI, 2018, as cited in Donà, 2022) The programme for the 2019's European Parliament election further illustrated FdI's Euro-scepticism and conservatism, containing notions that identify the EU as governed by the unselected and technocratic elite that impose their decisions on the people, and referring to forming a confederal Europe and independent states, arguing for the supremacy of the national law and the reversal of the EU's austerity measures, advocating for the support for the natural family and opposing abortion, calling for the defence of the Christian identity from the threat of Islam, and for the control of European borders through military forces, and other. (Donà, 2022; Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022) It is also important to note that, in a somewhat authoritarian fashion, one of the points in FdI's programmes concerns the restoration of the authority of the state and simplifying the administrative apparatus while reducing bureaucracy. (Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022) The party calls for the introduction of a strong central executive, and for the recreation of a presidential republic that ensures national unity and preserves local autonomy, with direct elections and stronger powers in the hands of the executive. (Donà, 2022; Sondel-Cedarmas, 2022)

3.3.2 The Moderated Radicalism

In the following years, however, Giorgia Meloni's FdI underwent yet another shift. Namely, compared to its past radical positions, and the period of major radicalization after 2017, the party started taking a more moderate stance in the recent period, particularly after the 2022

elections. (Chiaramonte et al., 2022) Chiaramonte predicts that, due to a change of FdI's supporters, or more precisely, a significant influx of new ones from the last elections, the party and its leader would most likely make additional adjustments in their agenda and policies. Much like other populist and radical right parties, the Brothers of Italy will have had to face the dilemma of either following through with its radical programmes or adopting a new, more moderate agenda once the government is formed. (Heinisch, 2003) Once parties enter the government, they can opt for one of the three scenarios: radicalisation, moderation, and continuity. (Berman, 2008, as cited in Griffini, 2023) When considering the FdI, Griffini suggests that the party might opt for moderation, in order to present themselves as adequate and responsible administrators, and to secure further support from the broader electorate.

The changes in FdI's programmes for the 2022 general elections in Italy testify that the party chose to adopt a more nuanced and acceptable approach in the political campaign, and introduced a more concrete policy plan compared to the idealisations in the previous manifestos. (Piccolino & Leonardo, 2022) Concerning the issue of economy, FdI abandons the welfare agenda from the 2018 programmes, and proposes more particular and substantive policies which were also resembling policy stances of FdI's allies, and included measures such as the non-proportional tax scheme, such as the flat tax rate, along with supporting entrepreneurship and establishment of a small state. (Piccolino & Leonardo, 2022) Once FdI entered the government, its stances concerning the economy remained moderate, in line with the 2022 manifesto, but contrasting party's earlier positions. Moreover, Brothers of Italy appear to be consistent with the previous regime's economic policies and with Draghi's moderate agenda. (Griffini, 2023)

FdI continues to emphasise the protection of security and legality, law and order, while Meloni continuously pledges to defend the rule of law. (Griffini, 2023) Considering the attitude of the party towards the EU, the 2022 election programme demonstrates a more moderate stance compared to FdI's position in the previous years. (Piccolino & Leonardo, 2022) Regarding immigration, FdI's 2022 manifesto illustrated an explicit intent of the party to control illegal immigration by the means of stopping the influx of migrants, establishing a naval blockade and, jointly with the EU member states, establishing hot-spots in North Africa in order to ensure a uniform allocation of regular migrants. Although FdI might have moderated the radical stances it openly represented in the previous years, and claimed to be committed to the promotion of '*social*

and working inclusion of foreigners' (Piccolino & Leonardo, 2022), the party and Meloni remain consistent with their strong anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, while securing the borders or contrasting the non-governmental organizations that aid the migrants. (Griffini, 2023) However, Griffini further argues that this emphasis on security and creation of a state of emergency is often instrumentalised by populist radical right parties that utilize the feeling of fear and uncertainty to '*make shows of strength and bypass the regular parliamentary route of law-mak-ing*'. (Griffini, 2023)

In conclusion, both the FdI's 2022 manifesto and their behaviour once they entered the government suggest that the party is navigating the fine line between moderate and extreme ideological elements, while Meloni continues to make both radical and moderate statements, creating a 'strategic ambivalence'. (Wodak, 2015, as cited in Griffini, 2023) In this way, Meloni and FdI aim to attract both the core radical supporters and the moderate, undecided electorate. Griffini argues that the effect of this approach of intertwined ideology elements is further enhanced by a thought-through communication and public relations strategy, that appeals to the users through various channels including traditional media outlets and social media as well. Still, the party is often associated with its fascist legacy, despite Meloni's attempts to disregard these claims and to portray herself as an ordinary woman, close to the people – a practice common among Europe's populist leaders who often hide their true authoritarian intent behind a civic façade. (Griffini, 2023) Nonetheless, the party's popularity is on a stable trajectory, and Meloni remains a highly ranked leader, marked 6th out of the 22 European countries taken into consideration by The Morning Consult. (The Morning Consult, 2023, as cited in Griffini, 2023)

3.3.3 The State of Democracy: Italy

After the 2022 election and considering Fratelli d'Italia's agenda, and its radical right and populist orientation, concerns have been raised on whether the party will attempt to transform Italy's political system and thus cause democratic backsliding. (Newell, 2022) Considering the usual outcomes in similarly formed governments, Zulianello argues that a majorly populist radical right government, led by the FdI and Lega's authoritarian and nationalistic influence, is likely to have negative consequences on the quality of democracy. However, it is not likely that Italy will

witness the same developments as the ones that took place in Hungary, partly because Italy was an uninterrupted and well-established democracy since the end of the WWII (Zulianello, 2022), and partly because of the constitutional structure and safeguards against democratic decline and illiberal turns. (Baraggia, 2023)

Meloni's government's measures and attitudes towards the EU and the international community will most likely be moderate, partly because of the funds EU transferred towards the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Still, Zulianello stresses that the developments of domestic policies may be somewhat different, given that Meloni expressed her commitment to her vision of a conservative Italy, and to a constitutional reform aimed at transforming the country's system into a presidential one, with a differentiated regional autonomy. (Zulianello, 2022) Like a majority of populist parties in governments, FdI might jeopardize democratic values of pluralism and of checks and balances. (Zulianello, 2019) In practice, the scholars assume that Meloni might advocate against the citizenship income, a monetary benefit provided to the socially and financially excluded, as the FdI argued that the measure in question is ineffective. When it comes to civil rights issues, Meloni's positions regarding the right to abortion, building up on her familiar notions regarding *true family values* and her opposition to 'gender ideology', are more than questionable, as she gave statements such as declaring that she will 'fully enforce' the law which safeguards access to abortion (Law 194) or that she will provide women '*the right to not have an abortion*'. (Zulianello, 2022)

All things considered, Italy remained a stable and consistent democracy throughout the past, but the influence of the far right is not to be exclusively tied to third wave and transitioning democracies. With a right-wing, radical majority in the government, Italy's democratic pillars might become susceptible to the illiberal influence, coming from the party that is openly fond of Viktor Orban (Zulianello, 2022), carries a post-fascist legacy and nourishes authoritarian and nationalistic tendencies. The success of Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia should not have come as a surprise and should be interpreted with respect to a wider European context. FdI's recent victory is not the only indicator of its influence, as this far right party grew over time, following the evolving trend of the rise of far right parties in Europe. (Baraggia, 2023) With that in mind, the concerns about the '*possible democratic backsliding in Italy, a rule of law crisis, and a potential anti-European attitude*' (Baraggia, 2023) are not uncalled for. The information below is an

overview of the state of democracy in Italy in the period from 2017 to 2022, based on the databases and reports from the Freedom House and the Human Rights Watch. This overview should contribute to indicating a possible downward/upward trend of democratic values and practices, under the alleged influence of the radical right and Fratelli d'Italia's establishment particularly, and with a special focus on the freedom of the press and the rule of law.

Freedom House

In 2018, Italy, a free democracy according to Freedom House, scored 89/100 points on Freedom House's Global Freedom Score, and 36/40 on Political Rights, along with the 53/60 on Civil Liberties for the year 2017. Under the Freedom of Expression and Belief segment, Italy scored 3/4 concerning the existence of free and independent media. As main challenges, Freedom House lists the issue of media ownership concentration and threats against journalists as a reoccurring problem and points out that threats are mostly coming from actors involved in organized crime. Regarding rule of law, Italy scores 3/4 for all of the following segments: an independent judiciary; the due process prevailing in civil and criminal matters; the protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies; laws, policies and practices guaranteeing equal treatment of various segments of the population. As challenges, Freedom House lists judicial corruption, lengthy judicial processes and denying migrants access to lawyers, excessive use of force by police, especially against illegal migrants, refugees and undocumented migrants being held in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, inadequate services and aid provided to the large influx of migrants, social discrimination of LGBT. (Freedom House, 2018)

In 2019, and for the year 2018, Italy scored 89/100 on the Global Freedom Score, with 36/40 on Political Rights and 53/60 on Civil Liberties. Again, the country receives a 3/4 score on the freedom of the media, with challenges concerning threats against journalists coming from organized crime and extremist groups. When it comes to the rule of law, Italy again scored 3/4 in the categories of independent judiciary, due process prevailing in civil and criminal matters; the protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies and laws, policies and practices guaranteeing equal treatment of various segments of the population.

The challenges pointed out are identical to the challenges from 2017, with an addition of unequal access to housing for members of the Romany minority, lack of long-term services for migrants, the government pressuring NGOs engaged in search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean. (Freedom House, 2019)

For the year 2019, Italy received the same scores (89/100 overall, 36/40 Political Rights, 53/60 Civil Liberties). The score 3/4 was again granted for the state of media freedom. The similar challenges persisted, mostly concerning threats against journalists coming from far right extremists or organized crime. The 3/4 scores were provided for the same Rule of law categories, with persisting challenges in this domain. (Freedom House, 2020)

In 2021's report for the year 2020, Italy's general scores improved to 90/100 on the Global Freedom Score, and 36/40 for Political Rights and 54/60 for Civil Liberties. The 3/4 score is again granted for the freedom of the media, and along with the issues from previous years, Freedom House points out to a negative trend of lawmakers failing to address the use of frivolous lawsuits aimed at deterring factual reporting. Additionally, the threats against journalists have increased exponentially – from 87 cases recorded in 2019 to 163 cases recorded in 2020. Italy receives a 4/4 grade for independent judiciary, and 3/4 for the remaining three categories under the rule of law. The independent judiciary score improved because of the decline in both the efforts to intimidate judges and in judicial corruption. All other challenges prevailed, along with an increase in poor treatment and regulation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. (Freedom House, 2021)

For the year 2021, Italy received the same general score as for the year 2020 (90/100; 36/40; 54/60). However, the country received a 3/4 score for the freedom of the media, with a record 232 cases of intimidation against journalists, representing a 42 percent increase from the previous year. The scores for the rule of law remained the same, with one additional challenge occurring: an increase in threats by organized crime networks against judges and prosecutors, although with functioning state protection combatting threats. (Freedom House, 2022)

In the 2023 report for the year 2022, Italy again receives the same general scores as a free democracy (90/100; 36/40; 54/60). Under the 3/4 score for the freedom of the media, Freedom House notes that an increase in strategic lawsuits against public participation, intimidating and silencing journalists and others who publicize matters of public interest, are a threat to investigative

journalism. The data remains the same regarding the state of the rule of law in Italy, with the same reoccurring issues. (Freedom House, 2023)

Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch records the state of affairs in Italy, providing information concerning alleged human rights violations or threats to the state of democracy in the country. Most of the issues in Italy throughout the 2017-2023 period were related to the influx of migrants and asylum seekers. Due to a large influx of migrants and asylum seekers (over 114,000) the government adopted stricter policies during a tough political debate regarding migration. (Human Rights Watch, 2018) The immigration issue remained the most important concern in the case of Italy, as democracy-harming developments in the country mostly included measures for migrants and asylum seekers regulation, while no concerns regarding the rule of law and freedom of the media were raised by HRW in the following years' reports. (Human Rights Watch, 2019a; Human Rights Watch, 2020a)

The 2021 HRW report for Italy provides information on human rights concerns regarding Covid-19, migrants and asylum seekers, racism and intolerance, women's rights and sexual orientation and gender identity. The report does, however, highlight concerns raised in the European Commission's report on the rule of law, questioning the efficiency of justice and political independence of media and condemning the smear campaigns implemented against the civil society, especially organizations working on migration. (Human Rights Watch, 2021a) The same concerns regarding the freedom of media and the rule of law were raised in the report of the European Commission in the following year as well, when the Commission stressed the issues with lengthy proceedings, the lack of law regulating conflicts of interest in the media, political influence over media and intimidation of journalists. During the same year, it was discovered that more than 15 journalists and civil society representatives working on migration were under surveillance of prosecutors in Sicily. (Human Rights Watch, 2022a) After the 2022 formation of a government led by far right's Meloni, 2023 HRW report raises the concern on possible harsher migration and reproductive rights policies. Earlier in 2022, reforms for restructuring the justice system were adopted by the Parliament, and the European Commission's report on the rule of law

noted that new legislation should ensure judicial independence in line with European standards. A new decree of the Interior Ministry limits the access to documents concerning migration/border policies under the freedom of information procedures. (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the past decade's major events, including the economic crisis, the 2015 immigration crisis and the outbreak of Covid-19 and the following pandemic, the grievances in Europe's democracies provided a fruitful environment for change. Right-oriented, populist parties and movements seized the moment and capitalized on the discontent of the electorate. The emergence of the far right and its surprising electoral success meant that the former extreme became a part of the mainstream in most countries across Europe. Simultaneously, democratic erosion has become a point of discussion amongst the academia, as a number of European democracies, including the well-established and consolidated ones, have experienced some kind of democratic decline, be it a range of illiberal processes or only a couple of autocratic elements. In general, the relation between the rise of the right-oriented parties and democratic backsliding in Europe is indisputable. The role of parties and their frontrunners in maintaining or eroding a democracy is a crucial one, and the efforts of the far right are the ones that leave a negative effect on democratic institutions.

Democratic backsliding does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it a concept easily recognized. The illiberal turns across Europe are to be analysed as a part of a wider context, including the contemporary political, socio-economic, and cultural developments. It should also be noted that the current concept of democratic decline represents an erosion coming from within, initiated and systemically implemented by populist far right parties that became a part of the establishment. During the electoral processes, the far right's growing popularity affects the competition, and the center and center-left parties are adopting the harming narratives and stances of the right, starting with policy positionings such as anti-immigration standpoints widely accepted by various political parties in Europe, and ending with left and center parties' frontrunners opting for populist tactics during election campaigns. Right-wing parties often also create a hostile environment in the party and electoral systems and construct volatile polarizations amongst the population as well. Once it gains major influence in a parliament or eventually wins the majority of the votes, the far right party sets out on a mission to accumulate power and establish control over the administration and institutions, usually jeopardizing democratic checks and balances.

Another conclusion drawn from the literature is that the lack of consensus regarding the constituents of the far right ideological and party family testifies that the usual left – center – right, far right – far left, extreme – mainstream differentiations are insufficient in the present context. The right-oriented party family that gained momentum over the past couple of decades encompasses most of the terms used by the academia. It is, at the same time, far right, populist, radical right, and simply right. However, it is not extreme, partly because all its narratives are being rapidly normalized and mainstreamed through the society, and partly because its members present themselves in a more moderate light to better appeal to the voters and to the international community. No matter the term, what far right party family members have in common is a combination of nationalistic sentiments, anti-immigrant positionings, opposition to globalization and the ‘far too liberal’ norms of the West, euroscepticism and narratives of ‘defending the nation’ and acting on behalf of the people and in their best interest.

Additionally, the right makes use of contemporary turmoil, and sees the potential in instrumentalising different political issues and utilizing diverse methods. The far right prospered through its anti-immigration stances, and managed to appeal to the undecided voter, and to attract the youth, a population subgroup often neglected by the rest of the competition. Far right’s frontrunners capitalized on the use of online communication channels, and social media platforms, constructing a virtual safe space for wide groups of supporters. Furthermore, democratic erosion comes into force in relation with the sentiments of the right, and while the parties advocate for harsher immigration policies, they tend to adopt them once in power. However, they also tend to manipulate the once independent judiciary branches and establish full control over the media. As stressed by Lührmann et al. (2018), although democracy is the most widespread regime in the world, the processes of autocratization are still affecting countries in Europe, while the rule of law and the freedom of the press are most threatened by these negative developments, as is the growing polarization among the public. To a certain extent, it can also be indicated that the negative trends in the fields of the freedom of the press and the rule of law can be expected in the CEE and non-CEE countries represented in this paper as well.

The analysis of Hungary and Italy provides further insight into the correlation of the rise of the far right and democratic decline. In the Hungarian example, it can be seen that the Fidesz rule unquestionably lead to a radical illiberal shift and a negative development of the rule of law

and the freedom of the press. The data and the reports of the Freedom House and the Human Rights Watch repeatedly stressed the negative developments in the area of the rule of law, including the lack of an independent judiciary, implementing the infamous constitutional and electoral reforms, manipulation and control over the judiciary branch and more. In the area of the freedom of the press, Fidesz steadily established full media control, sabotaged independent outlets, conducted independent media buy-outs and intimidated independent journalists. None of the negative developments were neutralized, and most of them increased over the years. This, however, could not have been foreseen through party programmes Fidesz had in the past. For example, Fidesz in no way announced the radical constitutional reforms conducted after the 2010 elections, and did not even issue an electoral programme in 2014.

In the case of Italy, there are several negative remarks regarding the rule of law and the freedom of the press, but none of them as radical or severe as the Hungarian ones. Moreover, the issues raised in both Freedom House and Human Rights Watch reports mostly involve the matters regarding the influx of migrants and asylum seekers, including the issue of intimidation of journalists and civil society representatives working on migration. No consistent or clear attempts of the government to manipulate the media or threaten the rule of law were recorded in these reports. The narratives of Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia manifestos and electoral strategies also proved to be more radical and populist during the election campaign, compared to the more moderate behaviour of the party in the government.

These findings in the study suggest once again that the populist far right party can choose to present itself in a more radical light during the election campaign and then take more moderate actions once in the government. Contrastingly, the party can also filter its radical tendencies prior to the elections, not present its genuine plan, and then severely undermine the democracy once in power. Party programmes are, therefore, not the most reliable predictors of party behaviour. Furthermore, based on the analysis of the two countries' democracy levels, the predictions for democratic backsliding in Italy still remains on the level of a vague concern, as no significant downward trend can be detected concerning the rule of law and the freedom of the press. Still, democratic decline is a steady process of slow deterioration, and not all Europe's democracies with formed right-wing governments are expected to follow similar trajectories. The developments at hand are to be considered in a wider European, and even global context, as to fully comprehend

the realities and possibilities of the two phenomena and their interconnection. As stressed by Levitsky and Ziblatt, '*history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes*', and as the democratic backsliding paradigm is considered as ungrounded by some, the evident far right grip on contemporary European politics is a concept worthy of study.

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