ARE WE ON A SLIPPERY SLOPE? MAPPING DEMOCRACY THREATS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract. *The extremist and populistic forces are undeniably on the rise all over the Old Continent. However, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe seem to be more fragile, when it comes to maintain their democracy. Latest results of the elections in Slovakia, Austria or the Czech Republic, whether the continuing support for Viktor Orbán's policies, show the strength of Eurosceptic groupings and empower their leaders to take a firm stance on issues currently under discussion in the European Union. Lastly discovered election interference during the first round of the presidential elections in Romania raises concerns about the readiness of other countries to detect extraneous engagement in electoral process or governing. Finally, the great polarization of the societies, that can be spotted in numerous Central – Eastern European countries, significantly impedes achieving social consensus, which is necessary to maintain social cohesion as a pillar of democracy.*

The analysis of the current electoral trends in countries of Central-Eastern Europe and identification of factors influencing support for extremist or populistic options allows to indicate general and specific factors weakening democracy in the region.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, democracy, elections, electoral trends

Introduction

It is a weakness of democracy to allow within the functioning of the system changes that lead to its dismantling. Once gained power without proper balance may lead to attempts of sealing it, using different measures: controlling the judicial system, the media or through corruption. Every election is the test of trust for political parties, the voters giving the grades expressed in percentage points of support. Current political stage in Central and Eastern Europe is changing dynamically: parties considered populist and with similar goals gaining strength, rising question whether a pattern of political thinking in societies of the region is emerging? That change influences political narrative of all the parties, enforcing them to take stronger stance in political discourse to be noticeable in it. In result, centrist parties rallying most voters around them reach for more left or right-wing views or use current people's concerns to create a populist program. Thus,

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parties traditionally identified as left-wing or right-wing sharpen their rhetoric, becoming more radical. This process enforces polarization of the society, creating the favorable environment for extremism to grow.

This article identifies the factors behind the electoral performance of currently ruling parties in chosen countries of Central and Eastern Europe, answering the question if the factors shaping support polls are rather internal or external? Answer to that question combined with the analysis of the results of the recent parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria and Poland and the election polls showing support ahead of the next elections allow to state whether there is a pattern of thinking indeed.

The article is partly based on research conducted by the College of Eastern Europe (KEW) as part of the project "Protecting European Values - Mapping threats to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe" and should be treated as a brief overview, as the volume of the article does not allow to make the complete analysis. The choice of the countries to analyze is based on research already conducted by KEW.

Electoral trends in central and Eastern Europe

Czech Republic

The current government of the Czech Republic is formed by a coalition of four parties: the center-right SPOLU coalition (Občanská demokratická strana (ODS), Křesťanská a demokratická unie - Československá strana lidová (KDU-ČSL) and Tradice Odpovědnost Prosperita 09 (TOP 09)) and the center-right STAN party (Starostové a Nezávistli). The government is led by Petr Fiala. When the coalition took power after the 2021 parliamentary elections, the SPOLU coalition recorded the highest support in the country at 27.8%, followed by 27.1% recorded by the center-right ANO party, which became the largest and most important opposition party. Next, the liberal coalition of the Pirate Party and STAN (Mayors and Independents) received 15.6% of the vote and entered the government. Of the notable election results, the result of the populist, right-wing SPD (Svoboda a přímá demokracie) should also be noted, with 9.6% of the vote. The rest of the parties did not record a result exceeding 5% (the electoral threshold). Voter turnout was 65.4% (politpro.eu). The 2021 elections in the Czech Republic were overwhelmingly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The fight against the pandemic became a bargaining chip in the elections, eventually leading to a change in the prime minister's seat and the ruling party, but SPOLU's win proved minimal. In 2021, there was no left-wing party in the lower house of the Czech parliament. The aligned electoral results of the two largest political blocs in the Czech Republic, as well as events in early 2022, resulted in a vote of no confidence in the government, ultimately rejected as early as September 2022. On September 3, 2022, a protest was held in Prague against the government's policies, especially those related to high energy prices, the Fiala cabinet's pro-EU and pro-NATO policies, and sending military aid to Ukraine. About 60,000 people protested (Czarnecki, 2022). In March and April 2023, further protests have already gathered approximately 100 thousand people, demanding more effective fight against inflation and energy prices (Tatarenco, 2023). Support for the government of Petr Fiala in the Czech Republic throughout its term (the

term ends in September 2025) was and remains one of the lowest in the EU. In August 2022, it stood at 28% (www.ies.lublin.pl). Currently, according to the Global Leader Approval Rating Tracker, the government is supported by 17% of citizens, while as many as 75% oppose its actions (Morning Consult). What is worth mentioning, the unpopular Fiala's government is working towards bettering the condition of independent media: in 2022, despite protests of far-right and populists, the bill tightening the conflict-of-interests rules passed, which resulted in the leader of ANO, Andrej Babiš, selling one of the biggest media groups (MAFRA Group) which served as a tube for his political views.

The European Parliament elections were held in June 2024. Public support of the two springing forces of Czech politics was distributed almost equally: 25% of the vote was gathered by ANO, 22% by the SPOLU coalition. The election campaign focused on migration and regulation of the European Green Deal (www.kew.org.pl). What is worth noting, members of the EP from ANO party joined the new Patriots for Europe group, considered being an alliance of nationalists.

In the coming months, we can expect an acceleration of the election campaign in the Czech Republic. The first test of the Czech parties' readiness for elections came as early as September 2024, when partial elections to the Senate and local elections were held. These were won by the ANO party, with 35.38% of all votes. The highest percentage of voters for Andrej Babiš's movement was recorded in Olomouc (40.42%) and Silesia-Moravia (47.22%), which were most affected by the autumn floods. Although voter turnout was only 30.47% of eligible voters (Czarnecki, Tatarenko, 2024), ANO's victory confirmed its strongest position on the Czech political scene. The Pirate Party's defeat in the local elections, on the other hand, led to a breakout in the government coalition, when the Pirates exited coalition with STAN and left Petr Fiala's government. Current election polls indicate that the ANO movement can count on 33.9% of the vote, while the other political force, the SPOLU coalition, can only count on 19.1%. Third place in the poll is held by STAN (10.6%), and fourth place is held by the far-right SPD with 7.5% support. The Pirates record support at 6.2%. Above the electoral threshold, the poll also places the KSČM Communists (5.7%) and the right-wing Auto (5.3%) (www.politpro.eu). According to current polling data, ANO does not have the absolute majority to govern on its own. For a right-wing governing coalition to form, ANO would have to cooperate with the SPD and Auto parties.

The Czech political scene has shifted to the right of the political spectrum since the last parliamentary elections. The initial consensus among parliamentary groups related to unequivocal condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the transfer of military and humanitarian support to Ukraine has now become a topic of lively debate, primarily due to Czech fatigue with the consequences of the ongoing conflict. The rapid decline in support for the government has been linked to the deterioration of the economic situation, especially inflation and rising energy prices, because of the inclusion of Russia in EU sanctions. Already in 2022, 63% of citizens were dissatisfied with the political situation in the country (ies.lublin.pl). Currently, 68% of Czechs are dissatisfied (ies.lublin.pl).

The current Czech government has taken a pro-EU stance since the beginning of its tenure, supporting EU actions against Russia and Ukraine. Recent Eurobarometer

surveys indicate that only 43% of Czechs trust EU institutions. There is much more support for helping Ukraine: 78% of Czechs believe the Czech Rep. should provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine, while 63% support sanctions on the Russian government, companies and individual citizens. Czechs, on the other hand, are rather opposed to financially supporting Ukraine, with 54% surveyed against; guaranteeing Ukraine's status as an EU candidate, with 60% surveyed against. 56% of Czechs also oppose the purchase and transfer of arms to Ukraine (ies.lublin.pl).

The course of Czech politics coincides with that of Poland, making the neighboring countries good allies and advocates of the Ukrainian cause in the EU. However, an analysis of election polls points to a coming political change. Inferring from the policies Andrej Babiš has already pursued while serving as prime minister, a change in the ruling team would bring the Czech Republic a cooling of relations with Poland and a renewal of ties with Slovakia and Austria, as well as the return of Andrej Babiš's partnership with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Slovakia

Slovakia's last parliamentary elections were held in September 2023. As a result, a coalition of the left-wing parties SMER-SSD (22.94% of the vote) and Hlas-SD (14.70%) and the national party Slovenská národná strana (SNS, 5.62%) took power and the government was once again headed by Robert Fico. Thus ended the period of political crisis surrounding the government. The opposition, which eventually seized power in 2023, sought early elections almost from the beginning of Igor Matovič's term in government. The first request for a referendum on this issue was submitted in 2021 (it was rejected with the charge of unconstitutionality), the next one in mid-2022 (referendum on amending the constitution in terms of the possibility of holding early elections, ultimately invalid). The cabinets of successively Igor Matovič, Eduard Heger and Ludovit Ódor had to face the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis caused by it, and then the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and growing disinformation. Accelerated elections brought the expected defeat of the previous ruling team. The liberal Progressive Slovakia (17.97%) became the largest opposition party in the Slovak parliament (Lewkowicz, 2023).

Slovak society has remained sharply divided for years. The main axes of division are attitudes toward cooperation with the United States, Russia, and now also Slovakia's involvement in aid to Ukraine, with specific political circles bringing together voters with views. Even before the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, a clear division became apparent between supporters of the government option seeking closer cooperation with NATO and the EU, which also involved broad support for Ukraine, and opponents of interference in the escalating conflict in the East gathered around opposition parties of both the right and left. After February 24, 2022, the Slovak government joined in humanitarian, economic and military assistance to Ukraine. Sending military equipment and ammunition, as well as allowing the stationing of foreign troops (on behalf of NATO), was sharply criticized by the left-wing SMER-SD and Hlas-SD, as well as the far-right SNS and L'SNS. The Slovak public was also rather opposed to the transfer of armaments to Ukraine (Lewkowicz, 2023).

Disinformation, especially from pro-Russian media, is also contributing to the polarization of Slovakia's political scene. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Slovak government closed several webpages linked to Russia. A 2022 Globsec Trends survey showed that as many as 48% of Slovaks believe that the United States, Western European societies, migrants and liberal democracy are the biggest threats to their country. 49% of those surveyed in 2022 said they would like to have a strong political leader who doesn't care about elections and parliament. The survey results show a positive view of authoritarian power. 51% of the public did not see Slovakia as a Western European country but located “between” the West and the East. Although support for NATO as a guarantor of security in the region increased, 56% of Slovaks believed that the conflict in Ukraine was caused by the United States (Globsec Trends, Slovakia, 2022). The outbreak of war in Ukraine has failed to erase Russophile sentiment in Slovakia, associated with the pan-Slavist movement, liberation from Nazism by the Red Army and a general lack of bad associations with Russia. Robert Fico's current narrative indicates an ambivalent attitude toward the war. This is a tactical move, aimed primarily at SMER voters with pro-Russian sympathies or negative attitudes toward cooperation with the United States and NATO, and Eurosceptic voters. For, the Slovak prime minister's policies do not indicate a pro-Kremlin orientation. The Slovak government continues to provide political and humanitarian support to Ukraine, and the reduction of military aid has taken place only at the governmental level: private companies producing military equipment and ammunition, as well as state-owned companies, can continue to sell their products to the Ukrainian side. The pro-Russian element of Robert Fico's policy may include opposing further sanctions packages imposed on Russia, as well as maintaining open relations with both sides of the conflict. After the April 2024 presidential election, which was won by Peter Pellegrini, leader of the coalition party Hlas-SD, there was talk of Slovaks confirming their support for such government policies. However, in the June 2024 elections to the European Parliament, Progressive Slovakia emerged as the strongest political option (28% of the vote), three percentage points ahead of SMER-SSD (www.kew.org.pl).

Lately, the Slovak political debate has been oscillating around topics including tightening government control over public media and culture. The opposition is also concerned about restrictions on the independence of media currently in private ownership (Lewkowicz, 2024). The latest major protests in Slovakia were sparked by Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová's decision to dismiss the directors of the Slovak National Theater and the National Gallery. The personnel changes in these positions took place in an atmosphere indicating that the reason for the dismissals was criticism of the culture ministry's policies. Some 30,000 people took to the streets in protest to the policies pursued by Minister Šimkovičová (Lewkowicz, 161/2024) |).

Current electoral trends in Slovakia reflect the complexity of the country's political situation and the division within the society. A Polit Pro poll indicates that Progressive Slovakia enjoys the greatest support (22.9%), with SMER-SSD losing only 2.7 percentage points to it. In succession, the Hlas-SD party is supported by 12.5% of voters. It is worth noting that the far-right Republic party came in fourth in the tally, with 8.5% support. If elections to the Slovak parliament were held soon, the KDH (6.3%), Slovensko (5.7%) and SaS (5.6%) parties would also find a seat in the National Council.

One of the ruling coalition partners would not be in parliament - SNS currently enjoys the support of 3.3% of Slovaks (politpro.eu).

Election trends in Slovakia less than two years before the elections are anything but clear. Political developments in the region and in Slovakia itself are very dynamic, and polarization in society remains strong. The narrative placing Robert Fico and his government among pro-Russian politicians is based primarily on the emotional perception of the politician and narration created by him. In fact, the declared objection to EU's actions does not translate into concrete activities taken by the current Slovak prime minister. However, the changes being made to public media and cultural institutions raise objections to the democratic course set by the EU.

Hungary

The April 2022 parliamentary elections were won without surprise by the Fidesz-KDNP coalition with 54.1% support, extending its rule, which had lasted continuously since 2010. The ruling coalition also achieved its electoral goal of a constitutional majority (133 seats). Of the 199 seats in the National Assembly, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition won 135 seats. The united opposition scored 34.46%. The far-right Mi Hazánk also entered parliament with 5.88% support (Héjj, 2022). The election campaign fell during the first phase of the conflict in Ukraine. The outbreak of the war did not affect the electorate of either the ruling coalition or the opposition alone; the views of either side toward Russia or Ukraine had already been known to the Hungarian public much earlier, hence the government's reaction to the outbreak of the war did not translate into a change in the electoral outcome. Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, the Hungarian government has pursued a policy of "staying out of the war." Hungary does not send armaments to Ukraine, nor does it agree to the transit of weapons through its territory. At the same time, statements on Russia's actions in the conflict remain very balanced.

The result of the 2022 parliamentary elections was the most favorable ever for Fidesz. The ruling party quickly capitalized on the potential flowing from its constitutional majority, introducing an amendment to the Constitution as early as May 2022. The amendment dealt with the possibility of imposing a state of emergency in the event of a war taking place in the country's neighborhood. The amendment to the Constitution has yielded, after the introduction of a state of war emergency in Hungary from May 24, 2022, to governing the state by means of ordinances bypassing parliament (1 Héjj, 180/2022). Such a procedure has already been used in Hungary in recent years. Indeed, the state of emergency was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the constitutional amendment introducing the new form of emergency was intended to extend the possibility of using rule by decree when the legitimacy of such action related to the pandemic began to expire.

In the Hungarian government's maintenance of a single narrative reaching the public, the nationalization and politicization of most media outlets has prevailed. On the other hand, the opposition has little opportunity to reach citizens with its demands in the public media. What is more, the Office for the Protection of Sovereignty, whose head is appointed by the prime minister, was established in December 2023. The premise of the office is to counter threats to Hungary's sovereignty. To this end, the office can analyze the documents of private entities, including the media and NGOs, detecting those that

undermine the official government and party line (Kew, 2025). In Reporters Without Borders' "Press Freedom" ranking, Hungary is placed 56th. By comparison, the Czech Republic is ranked 16th, Poland 22nd and Slovakia -23rd (www.rsf.org). It is worth noting that Hungary also has strong private independent media centers operating primarily on the Internet. However, their government funding is significantly limited.

Hungary has been pursuing a policy of so-called "opening to the East" since 2011, meaning maintaining good relations with Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and the East Asian region, including China. As part of this policy, energy cooperation with Russia, which is Hungary's main supplier of natural gas, is constantly being developed. Russia's Rosatom is also responsible for the expansion of the Packs nuclear power plant. This makes Hungary the most dependent member of the EU on Russia. The Hungarian government has criticized EU sanctions on Russia, seeing them as the cause of the country's high inflation, economic and fuel crisis. The message that EU sanctions are more harmful to the Community itself than to Russia is spread in the pro-government media. Interestingly, Eurobarometer surveys do not indicate as bad an attitude among Hungarians themselves toward the EU as one would expect from the government narrative. Although as many as 60% of Hungarians consider the EU's economic situation to be bad, 50% trust the EU institutions. In addition, 66% of those surveyed indicated a sense of attachment to the EU, which was higher than the EU average (63%) (Eurobarometer survey, 2024).

A sign of slow change in Hungary's Fidesz-dominated political scene came in the June 2024 elections to the European Parliament. Although the ruling party continued to enjoy the highest support (45%), it achieved its lowest result in two decades. 30% of the vote went to the right-wing TISZA party, led by Peter Magyar. This is the best result for an opposition party in years. The importance of TISZA's result is all the greater because the Hungarian right-wing, excluding fringe groups, was monopolized by Fidesz (://www.kew.org.pl, 2024). TISZA's success is attributed to its charismatic leader, but for the party to realistically challenge Fidesz's power, it is necessary to refine its political program and win over a certain electorate. According to College of Eastern Europe expert Zsuzsanna Végh, behind Peter Magyar's party's success in the European elections was its campaigning on social media, giving direct access to voters, which allowed it to bypass the official political and media spheres dominated by Fidesz (politpro.eu).

Just over a year remains until Hungary's next general election. PolitPro's data on Hungarian electoral trends shows the opposition TISZA as the current leader (39.5%), but Fidesz is losing only 0.2 percentage points to it. The advantage of these two parties over the others is clear. The third on the list, Demokratikus Koalició, enjoys the support of 6.3% of voters. Above the electoral threshold (5%) is still only the far-right Mi Hazánk with 5.7% support (politpro.eu). Electoral trends clearly indicate the dominance of the right in Hungary. With trends shaping up this way, the next election may prove to be a test of the loyalty of the ruling party's electorate.

The dominance of Fidesz in Hungary at present is certain, but not unassailable. Although Viktor Orbán's policies remain unpredictable from a European perspective, the politician is guided by pragmatism, remaining within the orbit of Euro-Atlantic influence and interests. At the same time, Hungary is the country that, of all EU members, has moved furthest away from the liberal democracy model. Despite the existence of relevant

laws, the EU is not prepared to function with a country that undermines its liberal order, hence Hungary is more of a problem for the EU than the EU is for Hungary.

Austria

The current political situation in Austria differs from other countries in the region, not least because Austria is officially a neutral country. The last parliamentary elections were held in Austria in September 2024. They were won by the far-right Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), thus achieving the best electoral result in the party's history - 28.8%. The second-best result was achieved by the center-right Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) with 26.3% support, followed by the center-left Socialdemokratische Partei Österreich (SPÖ) with 21.1% of the vote. Also in parliament were the Liberals of das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum (NEOS), supported by 9.1% of voters, and the Green Party with 8.2% support. Comparing the results of the 2024 and 2019 elections, one notices a change primarily in the electorate of the SPÖ and FPÖ: in 2019, the SPÖ was the largest party in the Austrian parliament (38.3%) - the result recorded in the last election is 12% worse. In contrast, support for the far right increased by 12% (www.politico.eu). The electoral fluctuations of the other parties were not as significant. The coincidence of the decline in support for the SPÖ and the increase for the FPÖ cannot be explained solely by the radicalization of some of the SPÖ's supporters, but it must be assumed that some of the People's Party voters were attracted by the far right. The FPÖ is currently the strongest player on the Austrian political scene. This was reflected in the assignment of party leader Herbert Kickl to form a government. Austrian President Alexander van der Bellen decided this on January 5, 2025, after the failure of coalition negotiations between the ÖVP, SPÖ AND NEOS. The libertarians do not have enough seats in parliament to govern on their own, so Herbert Kickl wants to hold coalition talks with the center-right ÖVP. The problem in coalition negotiations is bound to prove to be the resentment the FPÖ has for the other groups in parliament. After the announcement of the election results, after which it became clear that forming a government without the far right would require a broad coalition of the People's Democrats, Social Democrats and Liberals, these parties strongly denied any desire to build a government with the FPÖ (Jędruchów, 2025). If coalition talks between the FPÖ and ÖVP fail, early elections will have to be held in Austria.

The FPÖ's political dominance and the party's very good electoral result came as no surprise. The libertarians also won the European Parliament elections held less than four months earlier with 25.4% of the vote. The advantage of the far right, however, was not yet so apparent. The ÖVP, the party of former chancellor Karl Nehammer, got the second result (24.5%), only 0.9% worse. The SPÖ also got a good result with 23.2% of the vote. The Liberals and Greens received 10.1% and 11.1% of the vote, respectively (Tatarenco, 2023), indicating their secondary importance on the Austrian political scene. FPÖ deputies joined the new Patriots for Europe grouping in the European Parliament.

The FPÖ's demands, with which the party ran in both European and national elections, include the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia, an end to sending arms to Ukraine - currently Austria, despite its neutrality status, allows the transit of arms destined for Ukraine through its territory, a reduction in the EU's powers and budget, and a more radical migration policy leading to a halt in the migration of non-EU

populations to its territory. Noteworthy is the convergence of most of the FPÖ's demands with the party line of Hungary's Fidesz. An expression of Viktor Orbán's sympathy for the Austrian far right was the Hungarian prime minister's unofficial visit, officially to take part in a debate on peace in Europe, organized by the Swiss magazine Weltwoche. During his visit to Austria, Viktor Orbán was also invited to the Austrian parliament, but only met with FPÖ representatives there. During the visit, a Vienna Declaration was also signed, treating of cooperation between Fidesz and the FPÖ, especially on issues of limiting migration from outside the EU and combating "left-wing educational experiments" (www.ots.at). The Hungarian prime minister's visit, as well as the FPÖ's actions, were assessed unequivocally negatively by the rest of the Austrian political community. Despite its unofficial nature, it clearly favored one political option in Austria. Also, the Vienna Declaration can be read as a declaration of cooperation between Austria and Hungary on the issues taken up therein, although the document has no such legal force.

There is a fear of "orbanization" of Austrian politics. The point of common ground between the FPÖ and Fidesz programs is, first and foremost, the restriction of migration. In Austria, the narrative around this topic, which remains one of the most divisive in society, takes on neo-Nazi overtones through the FPÖ. In the context of migration, it is primarily about the term "Festung Europa," which the Nazis used to refer to the entirety of the lands occupied by Third Reich troops and fortified to repel Allied attacks. Now, by contrast, it's about strengthening the EU's external borders so that immigrants can't get in. The reference to the propaganda fortress is unfortunately not the only reference to Nazi ideology. Just before the parliamentary elections, a recording hit the internet showing three FPÖ politicians singing a song common in the Third Reich during the funeral of a former party member (DW, 2024). Experts, interviewed during a study visit to Vienna in October 2024, pointed to the public's indifference to the progressive normalization of Nazi jargon, which is increasingly appearing in the political and social spheres. The acceptance of increasingly extreme behavior is due to the ineffective actions of the opposition and too little influence from the public, who, after protests that have no effect, are discouraged from continuing to act against extreme attitudes and the groups promoting them. Sympathy for the extreme right in Austria is also not as stigmatized as it is in Germany. According to Philipp Ther, an Austrian social historian, the highest percentage of votes cast for the FPÖ was recorded in regions where families supporting the NSDAP party settled after its collapse. Economic stagnation and then an economic crisis triggered by a pandemic and war in Ukraine deepened public discontent, which resulted in the results of the recent elections.

Current election trends recorded by PolitPro give the Freedom Party of Austria 36.8% support. Support for the Conservatives and Social Democrats is nearly equal at 19.7% and 19.4%, respectively. Support for the Liberals is set at 10.5% and the Green Party at 8.7% (politpro.eu). This means that in the four months following the election, the FPÖ has managed to increase its lead over the other parties by almost 8%, mainly at the expense of the ÖVP, to a lesser extent the SPÖ. If this trend continues, and the Conservatives do not agree to form a government with the far right, there is a possibility that early elections could allow the FPÖ to govern on its own. If that happens, it would be Austria's first far-right government since the end of World War II.

Poland

Poland's last parliamentary elections were held in October 2023. The ruling right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party received the most votes, with 35.38%, but this was insufficient to govern on its own, in the absence of potential coalition partners. The centrist Civic Coalition (KO) came in second with 30.7% of the vote, followed by a coalition of center-right parties Trzecia Droga - Polska 2050 and the Polish People's Party (PSL), receiving 14.4% of the vote. The New Left also entered parliament with 8.61% support and the right-wing Freedom and Independence Confederation with 7.16% of the vote (sejmsenat2023.pkw.gov.pl). The government was formed from a coalition of KO, Poland 2050-PSL and the Left. The change that has taken place in Polish politics has been widely described as pro-EU and liberal. Nevertheless, the election result of PiS, which removal from power required a broad coalition of three parties, still indicates the party's strength on the Polish political scene.

Among the most important issues in the Polish political debate are the Russian-Ukrainian war, migration, inflation, but also the current government's efforts to reverse legal changes, particularly in the judiciary and media, introduced by the previous ruling team. Changes to the judiciary introduced by the previous government led to a conflict with the European Commission, which froze part of the Reconstruction Fund in 2021 due to challenges to the rule of law in Poland. The funds were not paid to Poland until after changes made by the current government.

Another big change was the replacement of the staff of public television, which had been the propaganda tube of PiS. However, with this change, television lost most of its audience, which was primarily reached by information messages that coincided with the policies of the previous government. As the Fall 2024 Eurobarometer survey indicates, television is the dominant medium from which Poles get their information on European politics - for 60% of citizens it is the primary source of information. Internet portals (37%), radio (22%) or social networks (21%) scored much lower. The press (9%) is also doing poorly in Poland (Eurobarometer survey, 2024). The Reporters without Borders ranking places Poland 47th in terms of media freedom. The 2024 score is ten positions better than the previous year (rsf.org), which indicates a positive assessment of the changes taking place in the Polish media. It should be noted, however, that the private media in Poland, which during the PiS government was a platform for political opposition to speak out, is now engaged in holding the previous government accountable, which does not favorably affect the quality of current political discourse, reducing media control over the current government.

In the case of Poland, the change of government has not changed the policy pursued towards the war in Ukraine. In view of the ongoing conflict, there is a rare consensus on the Polish political scene. Poland has been and remains one of Ukraine's biggest allies in the EU, providing humanitarian aid, but most importantly also supporting the sending of financial and military aid by the EU. The Polish government's action in this matter is widely supported by the public: 86% support sending humanitarian aid, 80% support sending military aid, 79% support sending financial aid. In addition, 86% of Poles believe that the EU should maintain sanctions against the Russian government and companies, and 75% believe that Ukraine should be guaranteed EU candidate status (Eurobarometer survey, 2024). The voice for reducing aid to

Ukraine, especially military and financial aid, and seeking to improve relations with Russia comes only from the right-wing Confederation, but this party has too small electorate to significantly influence current policy.

The June 2024 elections to the European Parliament once again showed that Poland has developed an unofficial two-party system: the two strongest parties, KO and PiS, collected a total of almost 75% of all votes: KO won the election with 37.06%, while PiS received 36.16% of the vote. It is worth noting the good result of the Confederation (12.08%), which was not indicated by the results of the parliamentary elections in October a year earlier. The center-right Third Way- PSL (6.91%) and the Left Party (6.3%) did poorly (wybory.gov.pl). The results of the EP elections compared to the 2023 parliamentary elections show a strengthening of the KO and the Confederation. This signifies a progressive polarization of society: a simultaneous increase in liberal and pro-European sentiment, as well as Euroscepticism. The driving force behind the political divisions, however, are the KO and PiS parties, gathering the most voters and the media sympathetic to them. Paradoxically, the programmatic differences between the two parties are minor, and it is only the narrative run by them that creates them into completely opposite political blocs.

Election trends in Poland have changed minimally relative to the support expressed in the EP elections. PolitPro data show a leading position for KO with 35.3% support, followed by PiS with 32.4% of the vote. The support of the right-wing Confederation is at 11.4%, Third Way-PSL at 10.4%. The Left is the worst performer with 9.5% support (politpro.eu). The test for the current government will certainly be the presidential elections, which will be held in the second half of May 2025. The election date falls a year and a half after the parliamentary elections; hence the election of the president will also express an opinion on government policy. The election of the president in Poland will also determine the shape of the political scene: currently the government and the president are in opposition to each other.

Conclusions

The outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has highlighted the pressing issue of the need for greater security in Central and Eastern Europe. The sense of insecurity created by the war, as well as the economic and political impact of the war in the region, has increased support for political options advocating a reduction in military aid to Ukraine and normalization of relations with Russia in the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovakia. In addition, in Slovakia, the desire to satisfy the need for security has led to a sense of the possibility of abandoning democracy in favor of the power of a charismatic leader. In Hungary, a further step can be observed: it is precisely such a charismatic leader who has created the vouchsafed authority to govern on his own, bypassing an already subordinate parliament. In contrast, the government's position and actions toward the war and the various parties to the conflict did not affect the political scene in Poland and Hungary. The reason for this behavior in the case of Poland lies in the broad consensus on the need to help Ukraine. In Hungary's case, it is the dominance of the government option on the political scene and in society.

Groups enjoying high voter support in Poland (Law and Justice) the Czech Republic (ANO), Slovakia (SMER) and Hungary (Fidesz) have sought or are deepening

the partisanship of the media. The lack of pluralism, in turn, fosters the spread of disinformation and negatively affects freedom of speech and opinion, thereby limiting the opposition's options, forcing it to use private media.

The polarization of society, particularly evident in election polls in Poland and Slovakia, is also leading to an expansion of the spectrum of political narrative. There is a normalization of terms previously considered extreme. In this regard, the state of political debate in Austria, where terms from Nazi jargon are being used, is alarming.

Of particular interest are the results of the European Parliament elections and the interest in the Patriots for Europe grouping among the countries analysed. In the end, this grouping included representatives from Austria (FPÖ), Hungary (Fidesz), the Czech Republic (ANO) and Poland (Ruch Narodowy). It should be noted that the FPÖ, ANO and Fidesz play a leading role in national politics, which may indicate that governments formed from representatives of these parties will be inclined to cooperate, both on a regional and European level.

In conclusion, threats to democracy are both internal and external in Central and Eastern European countries. The ongoing war in Ukraine and EU policies related to it are shaping the political discourse around the issue of security. Faced with an external threat, societies tend toward accepting authoritarian power. On the other hand, internal factors, such as the politicization of the judiciary or the media, allow for the control of the message to the public and the creation of a level of insecurity. Ultimately, the ineffectiveness of democratic forms of resistance to the actions of the authorities or the actions of parts of the political scene leads to indifference and weakening of civil society, on which democracy is based. Despite the similarities of the political scenes of the analyzed countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the internal conditions affecting political developments make it impossible to create a uniform model for the development of threats to democracy typical for Central and Eastern Europe.

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