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# THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION ON HUNGARIAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRATION

Attila NAGY and József DÚRÓ<sup>1</sup>

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*In recent years, immigration has become a focal point in political science, prompting a substantial body of literature. This study seeks to contribute to the discourse by investigating the impact of education (X) – an influential socio-demographic factor – on attitudes towards immigration (Y) in Hungary. To qualify the results, the influence of political alignment and key socio-demographic factors – including gender, age and religiosity –, are analysed as control variables. The study also considers how political alignment, and age may interact with education to shape these attitudes. Results from multiple linear regression models indicate that higher educational level correlates with more positive attitudes toward immigration; however, the association is conditional by political alignment and age. The study employs data from the European Social Survey (ESS), with a particular focus on Hungary during 2020-2022 (ESS-Round 10), to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between educational levels and attitudes towards immigration.*

**Key words:** migration; education; political polarization; generational gap; Hungary.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The European migration crisis of 2015 marked a pivotal moment in shaping public discourse on immigration across the continent, particularly in Hungary, a country situated at the crossroads of migratory routes in the Western Balkans. As a transit country experiencing unprecedented levels of immigration, Hungary recorded over 177,000 asylum applications in 2015 alone, surpassing the population of one of her major cities, Szeged. This surge, coupled with over 400,000 irregular border crossings reported by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), exerted immense pressure on Hungary's borders and significantly influenced the nation's political and social landscape.

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In response, the Hungarian government implemented a series of stringent measures, including the construction of a physical barrier on her southern borders and the introduction of legal frameworks that criminalized irregular border crossings. These measures, along with the controversial political rhetoric surrounding them, have sparked significant debate both domestically and internationally. The crisis, and the responses of the government to it, have brought immigration to the forefront of Hungarian political life, where it has remained a contentious issue ever since. This politicization of immigration has not only polarized public opinion but has also influenced how various socio-demographic groups, particularly those with different levels of education, perceive immigration.

This study examines the role of the level of education in shaping attitudes toward immigration in Hungary, drawing on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) conducted between 2020 and 2022<sup>2</sup>. Previous research (e.g. Quinley and Glock 1979; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Margaryan, Paul and Siedler 2018) indicates that education is a critical factor in forming attitudes towards immigrants, with higher educational attainment generally associated with more positive perceptions of immigration. However, in Hungary's polarized politics, where immigration has become a symbol of a broader ideological division, the relationship between education and attitudes towards immigration may be influenced by additional factors, including political polarization and socio-demographic variables such as age.

By examining the Hungarian context, this study aims to contribute to the broader literature on the socio-demographic determinants of immigration attitudes. It explores whether the general assumption that higher education correlates with more positive views on immigration is true in a country, where the political discourse around migration is particularly intense. Through this analysis, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding immigration perceptions in Hungary, offering insights that could inform both academic discourse and policy development in this area.

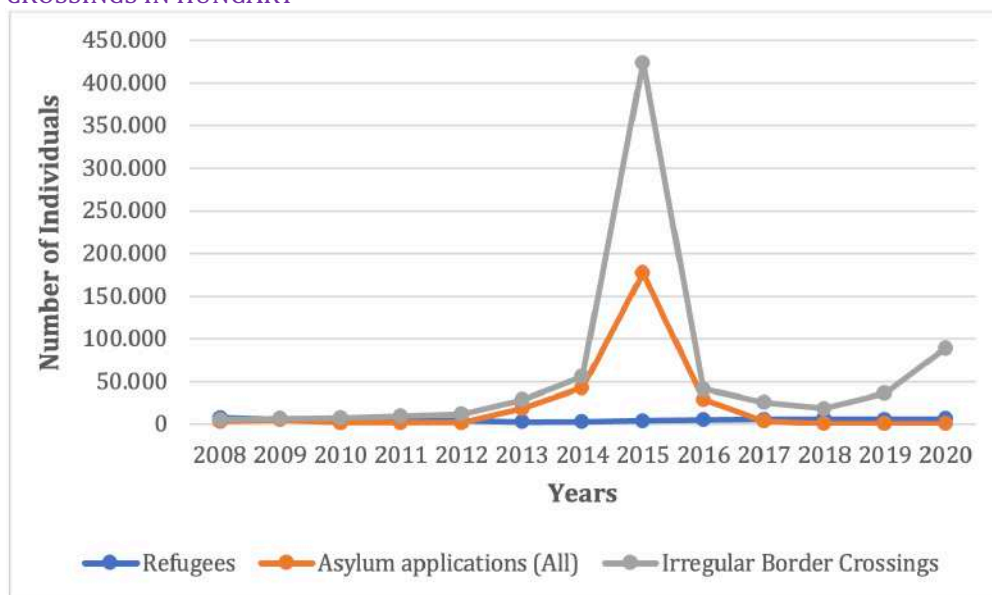
## 2 THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION CRISIS IN 2015

Concurrently with the 2015 of European immigration crisis, the issue of immigration became crucial in Hungary. Hungary as a transit country at the end of the Western Balkans migration route, experienced an extreme level of immigration. According to the United Nations, more than 177,000 asylum applications were registered in Hungary in 2015 alone. In addition, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) reported that more than 400,000 irregular border crossings were recorded this year, which is twice the second most populated Hungarian city, Debrecen (203,000 in 2015, KSH). Furthermore, Hungary was the second European country, behind Greece, to apprehend irregular migrants at her external borders (IOM 2024). The pressure on the Hungarian border increased significantly and the numbers of border crossing were skyrocketed.

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<sup>2</sup> The data were collected between June and October of 2021. Authors would like to thank Gábor Sugatagi for his valuable comments on the methodology.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND IRREGULAR BORDER CROSSINGS IN HUNGARY



Sources: Eurostat, Frontex, UNHCR.

In response to the crisis, the Hungarian government<sup>3</sup> constructed a physical barrier on her southern border with Croatia and Serbia and later, Hungary designated Serbia as a safe third country, which allowed expedited asylum determination and limited procedural safeguards. Furthermore, amendments were made to the Criminal Code. In this sense, actions such as irregular border crossings, damaging the border fence and obstructing construction work have been classified as criminal offenses, which are punishable by imprisonment and may also lead to expulsion. Furthermore, during debates within the institutions of the European Union, the Hungarian government argues in favour of supporting local communities in third countries to limit mass emigration to the EU. A key example of this approach is the Hungary Helps initiative, which provides aid and assistance in developing countries and crisis areas worldwide.

The initiatives, which were adopted by the Hungarian government have been the subject of considerable criticism. Contrary to the standpoint of the Hungarian government, the European Union qualified the migrants as people of refugees instead of economic immigrants. As a result, the European Union's primary aim has been to secure international protection for the refugees and to reduce the pressure on Italy and Greece (which, at that time, experienced the highest number of arrivals across the Mediterranean Sea) by an emergency relocation programme. Even though only a modest proportion of refugees were part of the programme, a temporary relocation mechanism (2019) and further voluntary relocation programmes were adopted (Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism in 2022). The European Commission (partly under the strong pressure of the European Parliament) initiated an infringement procedure against Hungary for the non-compliance of its asylum and return legislation with the EU law, which resulted that the European Court of Justice fined Hungary 200 million euro for breaking the EU's asylum laws (Starcevic 2024).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on the national policy discourse and government responses to the migration crisis in V4 countries (mid-2015 to the end of 2018), see Csanyi and Kucharčík (2023).

Besides the institutional bodies of the European Union, the left-liberal<sup>4</sup> opposition in Hungary also criticised the government. The issue of the migration crisis has been a key topic not only in the 2018 and 2022 national parliamentary and the 2019 and 2024 European Parliament elections campaign but also at the municipal elections (Tóth 2024). Besides the regular elections, the government initiated a national referendum against European relocation mechanism, which probably functioned as a nudge than a real referendum. While the opposition called on its voters to boycott the participation, the governing parties campaigned in favour of active participation and against the acceptance of immigrants. The results show an overwhelming majority of voters reject the EU's migration quotas; the turnout was below the required 50%. Therefore, in legal sense, the results were not considered as valid, but the referendum served as 'political jackpot', because the Fidesz-KDNP coalition could mobilize their voters and strengthen its legitimacy on issue (Bíró-Nagy 2021).

It is obvious that the migration crisis has led to a comprehensive and far-reaching change in Hungarian politics. Consequently, various studies have been conducted on this subject, covering areas such as positions of political parties or the relevance of socio-demographics factors for the perception of migration (e.g. Simonovits 2020; Gessler, Tóth and Wachs 2022; Bíró-Nagy 2021). The paper does not deal with the changes of attitudes due to the heavy anti-immigration communication of the governing parties conducting for years because this area has already been researched (e.g. Barna and Koltai 2019; Simonovits 2020; Bajomi-Lázár 2019). This study aims to focus on a specific aspect, namely, examining the impact of educational level on attitudes toward immigration. Several international publications have been released since the European migration crisis (e.g. Gallai 2020), which allows the integration of domestic results into international disciplines, thereby contributing to the advancement of future scientific understanding and the development of public policy programmes. In the following section, the main theories related to education will be presented, distinguishing between models based on economic perspectives and those grounded in cognitive thinking.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The general statement of economic theories is that individuals with lower level of qualifications are more likely to have negative attitudes toward immigration. The logical reasoning of the theory seems sensible: lower-qualified citizens usually experience the need to compete with immigrants on the labour market (Finseraas, Skorge and Strøm 2018). Consequently, immigrants are perceived as a potential economic threat rather than as a source of economic benefit for less educated respondents. This chain of thought correlates with the theory of dual labour market migration (Piore 1979), which argues that the labour market is segmented. In the sense of the segmentation, the primary labour market generally provides well-paid jobs for high-educated natives. In parallel, the secondary labour market which consist unpleasant and low-wage jobs for lower-educated individuals (King 2012) are preferred by immigrants, jeopardising the livelihood of natives with lower levels of education. Scheve and Slaughter's (2001) experienced that less skilled respondents are more likely to perceive immigrants as an economic risk. Furthermore, using cross-country data from the

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<sup>4</sup> In Hungary, since 2010 there has been a divided opposition. On the left of Fidesz, one can find several opposition parties with either left-wing or liberal profile, hence, we call them left-liberal opposition and/or left-wing parties. On the right of the government, however, there has always been a radical right party.



International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), Mayda (2006) and O'Rourke and Sinnott (2006) confirmed that individuals with higher level of qualifications are less likely to show anti-immigrant sentiments. Further value of the analysis is that the association seems more robust in the developed countries, where natives are more skilled than immigrants, than in less developed destinations.

In addition to economic related factors, the cognitive theories emphasize the relevance of the association between the level of education and an individual's cognitive abilities. Their fundamental thesis posits that higher levels of education presuppose greater tolerance and lower levels of prejudice (Quinley and Glock 1979; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Van der Waal et al. 2010; Margaryan, Paul and Siedler 2018). The main argumentation of these research seems logical: formal education able to provide more developed cognitive skills to detect, understand and reject prejudice (Quinley and Glock 1979). Furthermore, more educated people might identify and correct misperceptions and misinformation (Strabac 2011). Additionally, education may facilitate the development of egalitarian values (Lancee and Sarrasin 2015), including openness and tolerance (Hainmueller and Hopkings 2014), which increase the likelihood for positive attitudes toward immigration. Moreover, education can enhance cognitive and analytical, critical thinking to be less influenced by hate speeches (Mocan and Raschke 2016). In parallel, higher level educated respondents seem to be less racist and more likely to favour multicultural diversity (Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007). As Finseraas, Skorge and Strøm (2018) concluded, cognitive framework theorists suppose a positive association between education and liberal views of immigration.

Although the results indicate that the association between educational level and anti-immigrant sentiment is evident, some results have shown that the significance of education, as well as the underlying explanatory theories, are subject to debate. One of the remarkable findings that makes the associations questionable relates to the results of Dustmann and Preston (2007). The authors identified the welfare concerns, labour market concerns, and racial-cultural prejudices as factors that can influence attitudes toward immigration. The findings indicate that the consideration of welfare is the most significant factor in the formation of anti-immigration sentiments among those with higher levels of education. In contrast, racial and cultural prejudices appear to be the dominant influence among those with lower levels of education. These findings challenge the commonly held assumption that labour market concerns would be a more prominent factor among less educated respondents. Besides the already mentioned explanatory factors, d'Hombres and Nunziata (2016) highlighted the significance of spatial dimension. Using data from the ESS, they focused on 12 European countries<sup>5</sup>, and find that the positive effect of education on pro-immigration attitudes ranges from 6 to 11 percentage on average, which shows that the European countries differ significantly from each other. Based on the argumentation of spatial dimension, it seems logical to look at the level of education by country rather than in general terms. A similar conclusion was reached by Margaryan, Paul and Siedler (2018).

Some researchers have employed a comparative approach to assess the impact of the education system by examining the periods before and after of educational reforms (Finseraas, Skorge and Strøm 2018). However, these studies find no evidence of the effect of the education reforms on attitudes toward immigration, but the authors point out a useful assumption by drawing our attention to the

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<sup>5</sup> Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

effects that may vary according to the educational qualification. In methodological terms, the impact of education is gauged often by the number of years spent in formal education (e.g. Sík, Simonovits and Szeidl 2016; Margaryan, Paul and Siedler 2018). However, analysing the effect of educational level by qualifications seems more sensible than measuring it by years (Finseraas, Skorge and Strøm 2018). It can be reasonably assumed that years of education are an indicator of qualifications; however, they would serve as an extremely weak indicator. On the one hand, years in education can result in different qualifications from country to country – notwithstanding their efforts to harmonise their educational systems (see European education systems). On the other hand, qualifications are the real outcomes of education, whereas years are only the temporal dimension of the phenomena.

This research aims to answer the question of whether the educational level has an impact on attitudes toward immigration in Hungary. Based on the existing literature, we hypothesise that higher levels of education are associated with more positive attitudes, while lower levels are linked to more negative perceptions. However, given the different sociodemographic aspects and the high degree of political polarisation in Hungary, other explanatory variables may also moderate the effect of educational attainment. Furthermore, we assume that people with lower level of financial security will be less tolerant toward immigration, while financial stability assumes openness toward immigrants.

#### 4 DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

To examine the effect of educational level, the research uses the most recent data from the European Social Survey (ESS), covering the period of 2020-2022 (Round 10). The sample size of the Hungarian respondents is 1849 (N). The analysis employs multiple linear regression to find answer to the research question. The dependent variable is a scale (immigration), which was constructed on responses to attitudes towards immigrants from outside Europe, as well as opinions on the economic, cultural, and general aspects of immigration<sup>6</sup>. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy for the factor analysis is 0.799. According to Kaiser (1974), this value falls within the ‘middling’ range, indicating that the sample size and the partial correlations among variables are adequate for factor analysis. To measure the internal consistency of the scale variable, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated, yielding a result of 0.834. A Cronbach’s alpha of 0.834 indicates a high level of internal consistency, suggesting that the items comprising the scale variable are reliably measuring a single underlying construct (Taber 2017). The constructed scale is an approximately normally distributed variable (Mean: 0, Standard Deviation: 1, Skewness, 0,005, Kurtosis: -0,428). More positive values indicate more stronger acceptance.

The primary independent variable is the educational level. As we reflected in the literature review, we examine education not in terms of years spent in the educational system, but rather according to educational level. The ESS features a variable related to the highest educational level completed by the respondents (edlvdadu). The variable originally consists of 14 levels, however, to facilitate the

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<sup>6</sup> The scale is constructed from the following variables (ESS): (1) Should many or few immigrants of a different race/ethnic group from the majority be allowed (imdfetn)?; (2) Should many or few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe be allowed (impctr)?; (3) Is immigration bad or good for the country’s economy (imbgeco)?; (4) Does immigration undermine or enrich the country’s cultural life (imueclt)?; and (5) Do immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live (imwbcnt)?.

analysis, it has been reduced to four main categories. In this sense, educational levels are categorized as follows: primary school up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade (1), vocational education (2), secondary education (3) and tertiary education (4). To test the theories of economic models, the analysis includes economic related variables. Considering that, economic and financial well-being can have different measure based on individual consumption and needs, the research uses the variable related to feeling about the household's income of the respondents (*hincfel*). Besides that, we categorized respondents by their occupation (*isco08*), following the categorization of the European Union (Eurofound 2024). In this sense the levels of the variables are the following: high skilled white collar (ISCO codes 1-3), low skilled white collar (ISCO codes 4-5), high skilled blue collar (ISCO codes 6-7) and low skilled blue collar (ISCO codes 8-9). Because of the Hungarian elite's political polarization relating to immigration, we analyse the relevance of the political left-right scale as well (*lrscale*) and the effect of political interest level (*polintr*). Beside the independent variables, the research considers the influence of general sociodemographic factors as well, as a result religiosity (scale<sup>7</sup>), gender, age and domicile area also included. Because Roma people are the most remarkable ethnic minority in Hungary (KSH 2022) and their social integration is a recurrent feature of political parties' communication and strategies, we examined whether being Roma in Hungary could lead different results.

The current analysis is built up by three different explanatory models: the first model focuses on the explanatory effect of different educational level of respondents. However, we assume that the relevance of education level may moderated by the different level of political polarization and age. To capture the combined effects, the two further explanatory models are introduced. While the second model combines the effect of educational level and the political polarization (*lrscale*), the third one focuses on the interaction between educational level and age (*agea*). All the three models take general socio-demographic aspects into account. This approach helps to identify how the impact of educational attainment varies depending on political alignment and age, providing a more nuanced understanding of the data. Furthermore, during the evaluation, it is crucial to note that for ordinal variables (*domicil*, education and occupation), different references values were designated. In this sense the smallest domicile (village), the highest educational level (tertiary) and low-qualified blue-collar workers represents the reference values, so the results of the given variable effect must be interpreted by the deviations from these attributes. This is also applied to the interaction variables, where the reference value is the highest level of educational attainment.

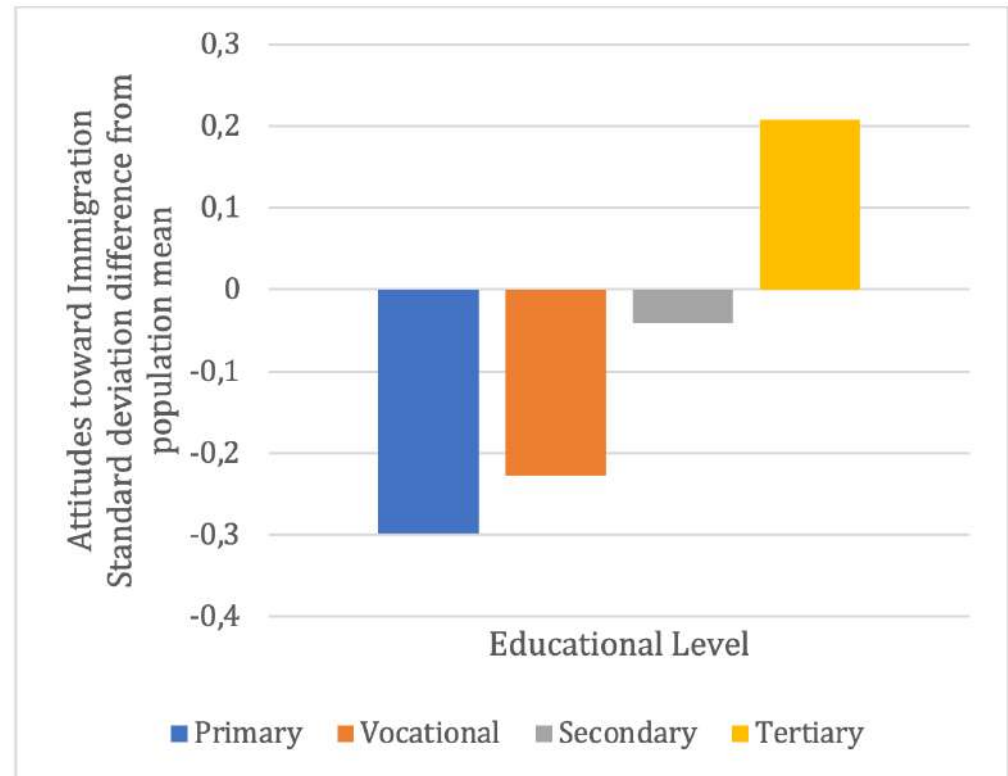
## 5 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of the analysis indicate that responses of the Hungarian participants align with the international results. In this sense, people with higher level of education tend to have a more positive attitude towards immigration. While those with primary or vocational education were the most likely to reject immigration, respondents with a secondary education tended to hold neutral views, and those with higher education predominantly showed a positive stance. The results show a high level of significance ( $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ).

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<sup>7</sup> Chronbach's Alpha: ,807; KMO: ,729, Mean: 0, Standard Deviation: 1, Skewness, 0,404, Kurtosis: 0,117. Approximately normally distributed variable. The more religious the respondent, the higher the value.

FIGURE 2: THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION LEVEL ON ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION



Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

Regarding the general socio-demographic factors, religiosity, age and the type of domicile showed significance. The more religious the respondents claimed to be, the more likely they were less tolerant toward immigration. Similarly, older respondents tended to show less tolerance. Regarding the settlement type, those living in small rural areas and suburban regions exhibited a more negative attitude towards immigration, whereas respondents from small towns and larger cities had a more positive stance. The results presumably related to the fact that people living in larger cities are more likely to have experience with people from other cultures in their everyday lives.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, voters of the anti-immigration Fidesz are overrepresented in rural and suburban regions compared to the national average. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that gender, ethnicity and feelings about household's financial stability do not show significance. Latter finding seems particularly interesting, because it does not support the theory that individuals who feel financially insecure their everyday life more likely to oppose immigration. Besides that, the control variable that includes occupations shows that high skilled white-collar workers are less tolerant toward immigration at all, than people with lower skilled occupation.

<sup>8</sup> The analysis does not show significant interaction between place of residence, level of education and attitudes towards immigration.

TABLE 1: STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS ACROSS MODELS WITH INTERACTIONS FOR LEFT/RIGHT-WING ALIGNMENT, AGE, AND EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

	Model I.		Model II. (Interaction: Left/Right-wing alignment and Level of Education)		Model III. (Interaction: Age and Level of Education)	
	Standardized Coefficients, Beta	Sig.	Standardized Coefficients, Beta	Sig.	Standardized Coefficients, Beta	Sig.
(Constant)	1,728		1,887		2,274	
Religiosity	-0,124	***	-0,129	***	-0,125	***
Placement on left right scale	-0,186	***	-0,265	***	-0,184	***
How interested in politics	-0,092	***	-0,089	***	-0,095	***
Gender	0,021	-	0,017	-	0,017	-
Age	-0,399	**	-0,400	**	-0,620	***
Age^2	0,329	-	0,331	-	0,377	**
Big city (ref: village)	0,144	***	0,144	***	0,148	***
Suburbs or outskirts of big city (ref.: village)	-0,036	-	-0,038	-	-0,036	-
Town or small city (ref.: village)	0,112	***	0,112	***	0,113	***
Ethnicity (Roma)	-0,041	-	-0,041	-	-0,043	-
Educational Level: Primary (ref.: tertiary)	-0,194	-	-0,340	***	-0,327	***
Educational Level: Vocational (ref.: tertiary)	-0,216	***	-0,372	***	-0,539	***
Educational Level: Secondary (ref.: tertiary)	-0,127	***	-0,164	-	-0,425	***
Financial stability	-0,041	-	-0,037	-	-0,044	-
Occupation: High-educated, white collar (ref.: low-educated, blue collar)	-0,119	***	-0,120	***	-0,116	***
Occupation: Low-educated, white collar (ref.: low-educated, blue collar)	-0,055	-	-0,054	-	-0,055	-
Occupation: High-educated, blue collar (ref.: low-educated, blue collar)	-0,004	-	-0,006	-	-0,005	-
Interaction: primary school * Left/Right-wing alignment			0,159	-	-	
Interaction: vocational * Left/Right-wing alignment			0,176	*	-	
Interaction: secondary school* Left/Right alignment			0,042	-	-	
Interaction: primary school * Age			-		0,206	*
Interaction: vocational * Age			-		0,374	-
Interaction: secondary school* Age			-		0,327	-
p-value: * p < 0,1 ** p < 0,05 *** p < 0,01						

Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

We do not argue that economic theories are failed in Hungary, but they seem less relevant than political identities and other socio-demographic factors. However, due to the strict governmental restrictions, the number of accepted asylum applications (refugee status) were relatively low in Hungary (see Figure 1), which indicates that most workers have not had any direct experience with the economic effects of immigration. The direct economic impact could not develop even by the undetected irregular border crossings, as most immigrants consider Hungary a transit country. Thus, workers did not experience any wage pressure or did not lose their job in wide range, which explains the lack of strong correlation between economic factors (financial security, occupation) and opinions about immigration.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the presented data were collected between June and October of 2021. Since then, because of the increasing labour shortage, the Hungarian government has changed its immigration policy and signed strategic partnership with foreign governments, which caused that approximately 120 thousand (blue-collar) foreign workers had been registered primarily from the Western Balkan and the Far-East countries in Hungary that by early 2024. The new



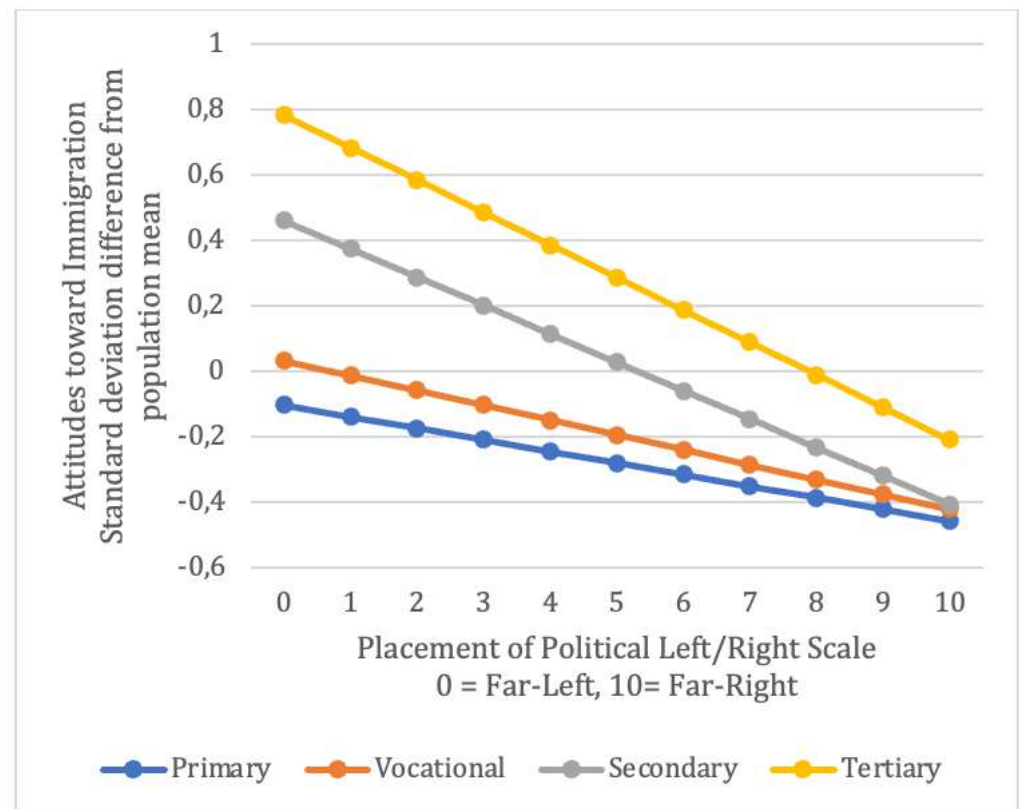
The immigration-related political discourse has become a constant part of everyday life. As the Hungarian society is politically polarised (Enyedi 2016), we assume that the association between educational level and attitudes toward immigration is significantly influenced by political aspects, instead of economic considerations. Traditionally, the Hungarian political left symbolises the cultural openness and tolerance toward globalism, while political right emphasizes the relevance of national based paradigm. The political elite also demonstrates a clear divide on the issue. While the political left, led by the Democratic Coalition, advocates for joining the refugee quota system and urges to dismantling both legal and physical border barriers, the political right—including the right-wing opposition parties and movements — collectively rejects the acceptance of irregular, mass immigrants.

The division of political elite reflects on the respondents' attitudes as well. As the Table 1 shows, those who identify themselves on the political left shows higher level of acceptance toward immigration, while respondents on the political right reject more the immigration. However, the political polarization modifies the degree of explanatory effects. As Figure 3 shows, the previously presented association between educational level and attitudes toward immigration is conditional, as it is intersected by the political polarization (and the respondents' place on the left-right scale). In this context, belonging to the political left enhances the higher acceptance levels among those with higher educational level (secondary, tertiary), and reduces the degree of anti-immigrant sentiment among those with lower education (primary, vocational), nearly neutralizing the previously presented negative attitudes. Nevertheless, the results can be observed primarily among those with higher education levels, as the effect appears to be less pronounced among those with lower education levels, presumably because they interpret the left-right scale less consciously. However, as one moves toward the right end of the political spectrum, it becomes increasingly evident that anti-immigration sentiment intensifies. On the political spectrum, support for immigration decreases as one move from left to right. Notably, the reduction in support is the most significant among those with high education (tertiary), where a shift can be observed from a high level of support to strong rejection. Besides that, those who identify themselves as political right-wing and possess lower educational qualifications (vocational or at most primary education) exhibit the highest level of rejection. On the left end of the political spectrum, the highest level of support is observed among individuals with the highest education (tertiary), indicating that the most significant shifts in attitudes occur among the highly educated.

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labour policy rose political tension, and the Hungarian radical right party, Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk) launched a campaign to 'protect' the Hungarians workplaces. These chains of changes could serve as steady base for increasing relevance of economic factors in the future, which might be observed in the following ESS rounds.

FIGURE 3: THE IMPACT OF THE LEFT-RIGHT SCALE AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION ON ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION



Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

By analysing party preferences<sup>10</sup>, a similar pattern can be observed at the voters' level. As illustrated in Table 2, there are notable differences among the supporters of various parties, particularly between those who align with right-wing parties (e.g., Fidesz-KDNP, Our Homeland) and those who are engaged to left-wing parties (e.g., DK, MSZP, Momentum). Respondents who identified with the political right primarily expressed support for right-wing parties, whereas those identifying with the left predominantly aligned with left-wing parties. Examining the responses it can be observed that Fidesz-KDNP has the most right-leaning voter base, followed by Our Homeland and Jobbik. In contrast, voters of the Democratic Coalition, the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Momentum identify themselves as more left-leaning. Meanwhile, the eco-political parties, such as the Dialogue for Hungary and the Politics Can Be Different, the communist Hungarian Workers' Party, and the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party—which has been labelled a “joke party”—are positioned more towards the centre of the political spectrum.

<sup>10</sup> Party affiliation is measured by ESS through participation in the most recent election (prvtgghu for Hungarian respondents, N=1034). However, this question in ESS10 refers to the parliamentary elections held in April 2018, while the survey was conducted between June and October 2021. Between the 2018 election and the survey period, party preferences may have shifted. Consequently, it seems logical to take into consideration an alternative variable that also captures respondents' party affiliation. In 2021, ESS measured party affiliation by asking the respondents, which party felt closest to (prtclhhu for Hungarian respondents, N=660). To increase the sample size and improve power, the analysis combined responses from both variable (N=1103). In this approach, the primer variable is measured by party proximity (prtclhhu). However, in cases of missing responses, the analysis assumes that party affiliation remained unchanged, and thus, votes in the last election (prvtgghu, 2018) became applied.

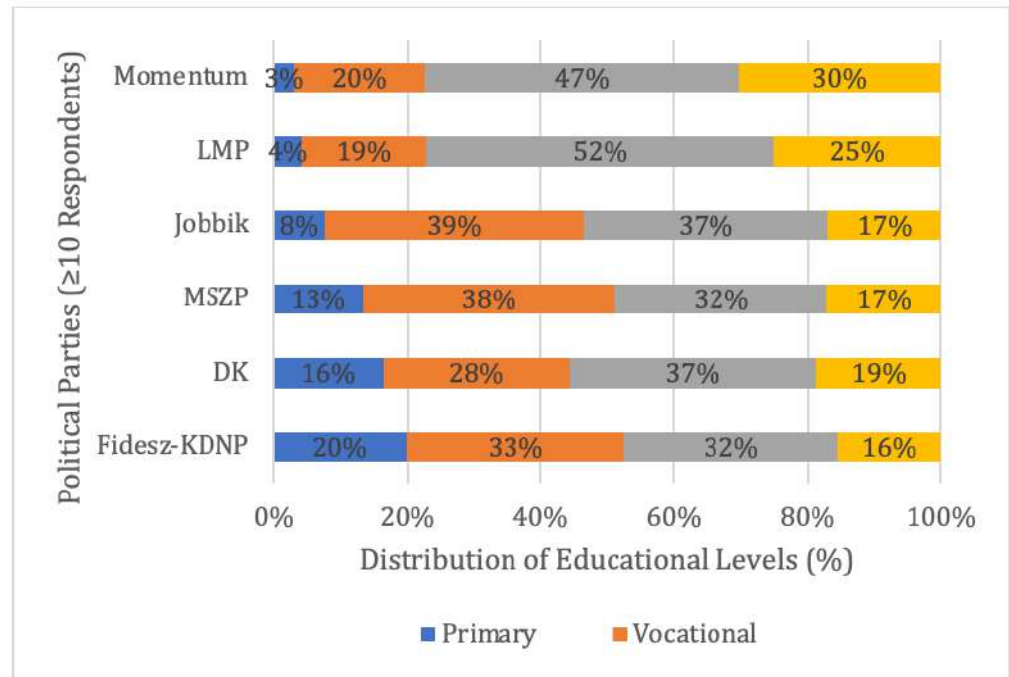
TABLE 2: ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION BY PARTY AFFILIATION AND LEFT-RIGHT IDEOLOGICAL POSITION

Party	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Left/Right Scale (0=Left, 10=Right)
<b>Our Homeland</b>	-0,2181	8	0,4859	7,00
<b>Fidesz-KDNP</b>	-0,1122	546	0,9520	7,40
<b>Jobbik</b>	-0,0586	137	1,0153	6,93
<b>PM</b>	0,0798	5	0,6578	6,00
<b>LMP</b>	0,1978	47	1,0108	3,90
<b>DK</b>	0,2693	130	0,8597	3,11
<b>MSZP</b>	0,3484	76	0,6542	2,60
<b>Workers' Party</b>	0,4074	4	0,7894	4,60
<b>Momentum</b>	0,4635	61	0,9081	3,53
<b>MKKP</b>	0,7770	5	0,3599	5,33
<b>Other</b>	0,2795	5	1,0623	3,40
<b>Total</b>	0,0345	1024	0,9445	5,99

Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

Based on the mean values, respondents' party preferences show a correlation with their attitudes toward immigration. Those individuals who express sympathy for left-wing parties tend to exhibit a more positive stance towards immigration, whereas those who are aligned with right-wing parties generally adopt a more negative perspective. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted with caution for parties that have a low response rate. By focusing on parties with a minimum of 10 respondents, the association demonstrates more reliable findings. According to the average values, voters of Fidesz-KDNP assess immigration negatively (-0.1122). Controversially, voters from DK (+0,2693), MSZP (+0,3484) and Momentum (+0,4635) demonstrate greater support for immigration. Overall, based on the average values, it can be concluded that voters who sympathize with left-wing parties tend to support immigration, whereas individuals associated with right-wing parties are more likely to oppose it.

By examining the level of education of respondents, Figure 4 shows that the lowest educational level can be observed among those who preferred the governing Fidesz-KDNP. According to the analysis, one in five respondents, who are affiliated with Fidesz-KDNP stated that their highest educational level is primary school. However, most supporters of the party have completed either vocational (33%) or secondary (32%) education. In parallel, the proportion of individuals with tertiary education is relatively low (16%). Meanwhile, supporters of DK, MSZP and Jobbik are more likely to obtained vocational (28-39%) or secondary (32-37%) educational level. In their cases. comparing to the governing Fidesz-KDNP, the proportion of individuals with primary educational level is notably lower (8-16%), but the percentage of those with higher education is slightly higher (17-19%). In contrast, in the case of Momentum, the highest proportion of individuals with tertiary education can be observed (30%), while the percentage of those with at most a primary qualification is the lowest (only 3%). Beside Momentum, LMP also has a significantly higher support among individuals with tertiary educational level (25%). In the case of LMP, the proportion of respondents with only primary educational level is also low, (4%) while the numbers for those with vocational (19%) or secondary (52%) qualification are higher.

FIGURE 4: EDUCATIONAL DISTRIBUTION BY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION (%)<sup>11</sup>

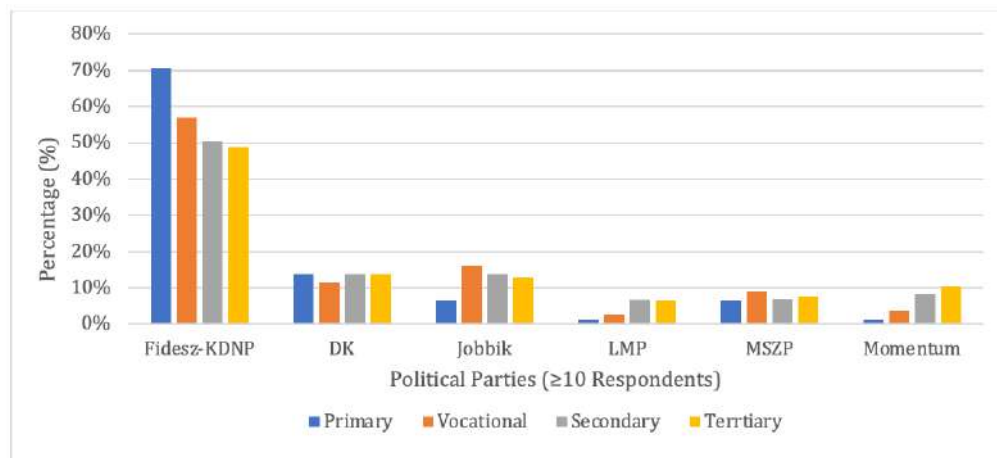
Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

However, as Figure 5 shows, the distribution of educational levels by parties is asymmetric. It seems evident that regardless of educational level, the governing Fidesz-KDNP receives the highest support. The parties' popularity is most pronounced among individuals with lower educational qualifications: 71% of respondents with primary educational level indicate their support for Fidesz-KDNP. The extent of popularity for the governing parties within this subpopulation is further illustrated by the fact that the remaining 30% of support is distributed among the five other parties. Furthermore, a similar pattern can be observed among respondents with vocational (57%), secondary (50%) or tertiary qualification. Besides that, support for the other parties does not reach the 20% within any educational subgroup. However, the most balanced distribution is observed in the case of DK, while Momentum demonstrates a stronger inclination towards supporters with a tertiary educational level.

As the results show, an association between educational level and party identification can also be observed at the level of party affiliation. Although not the primary focus of this research, it is important to emphasize that the casual relationship between party preferences and attitudes toward immigration is a widely debated topic. Based on the presented findings, the question arises as to whether education has a direct effect on both party affiliation and attitudes toward immigration independently, or whether education influences party affiliation, which indirectly shapes respondent's view on immigration. While the current findings confirm former research, which argues that the support for anti-immigrant Fidesz-KDNP is strongly associated with individuals of lower educational level, the casual link between party preferences and attitudes toward immigration across educational levels cannot be examined based on the survey utilized.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Figures might not equal 100% due to rounding.

<sup>12</sup> Besides educational level, party affiliation and attitudes toward immigration, content consumption may also serve as a further explanatory factor. Although ESS examines respondents' political content consumption in terms of extent (nwspol), it does not address the question of what specific news content is consumed by the respondents for political information purposes. To conduct a reliable analysis of the casual relationship among party preferences, media

FIGURE 5: DISTRIBUTION OF EDUCATIONAL LEVELS AMONG POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATES<sup>13</sup>

Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

Besides the intersecting effect of political polarization, we observed a non-linear, U-shaped association between age and attitudes toward immigration. The results confirmed the key role of educational levels in shaping attitudes toward immigration: higher qualifications generally correlating with more positive attitudes. However, as the Figure 6. shows, this is mostly evident in younger age groups, where the disparity between tertiary education individuals and other is most observed. As age increases, the influence of educational level diminishes, but attitudes converging across different educational levels. In parallel, individuals with primary education show the most negative attitudes, and this sentiment intensifies with age, reaching the lowest point around 60. Those whose highest qualification is vocational or secondary are relatively neutral compared to the primary and tertiary groups. The positive attitudes decline with age, although the decline is less steep compared to the tertiary group. Notably, the trend changes and vocational education tends to show a small uptick in positive attitudes after 60, suggesting an age-related shift in perspectives<sup>14</sup>. Among other factors, this can be explained by retirement: respondents may perceive immigrants less as a labour market risk, which could lead to an improvement in attitudes toward them.

The effect of age can be explained by several factors. Different generations may have received varying levels of education, which could influence their views. According to Eurostat (2024), working-age people have sharply different educational qualifications. As Figure 7. shows there is a clear generational shift in educational attainment. In this sense, younger groups more likely to achieved higher levels of education, while older age groups predominantly possess vocational one. For instance, 18% of individuals of aged 25-34 have tertiary qualification, compared to only 8.3% of those aged 55-64. In contrast, vocational attainment is the highest in the oldest group (52.7%). This difference might be explained by changes in educational policies, economic demands, or technological developments that have increased the relevance of higher education in recent decades. In general, older people have lower educational level, which can be explained by the changes in social norms: while vocational

consumption, socio-demographic factors and attitudes toward immigration, a more topic specific survey would be required.

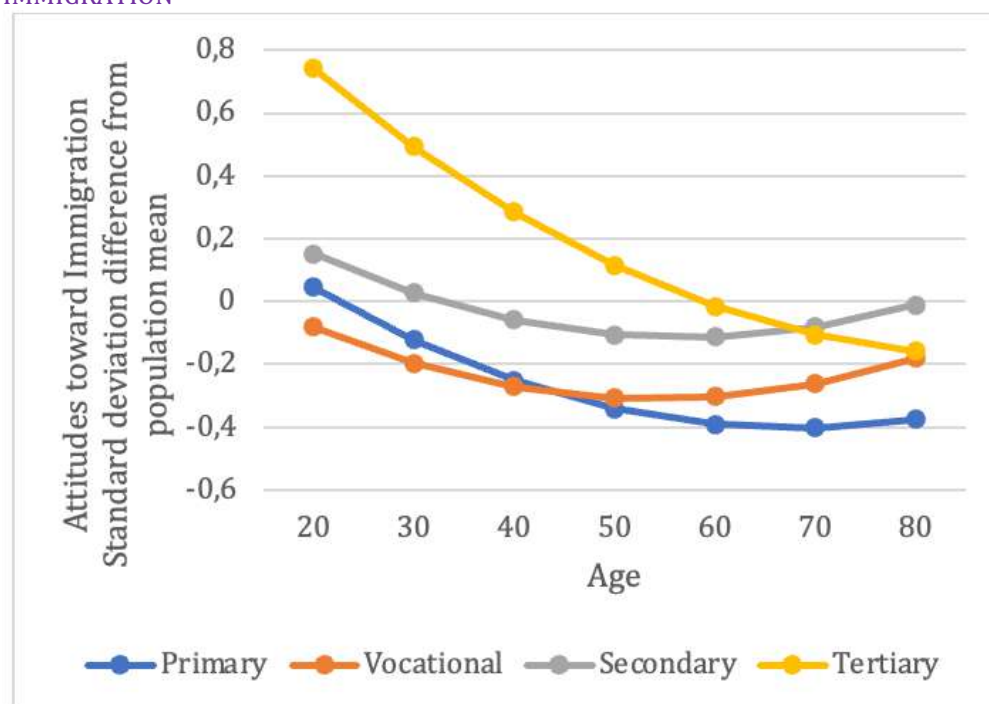
<sup>13</sup> Figures might not equal 100% due to rounding.

<sup>14</sup> For comparison, the healthy life expectancy in Hungary was 62.5 years in 2021 (male: 61.6; female: 63.5). The retirement age in Hungary is 65 years.



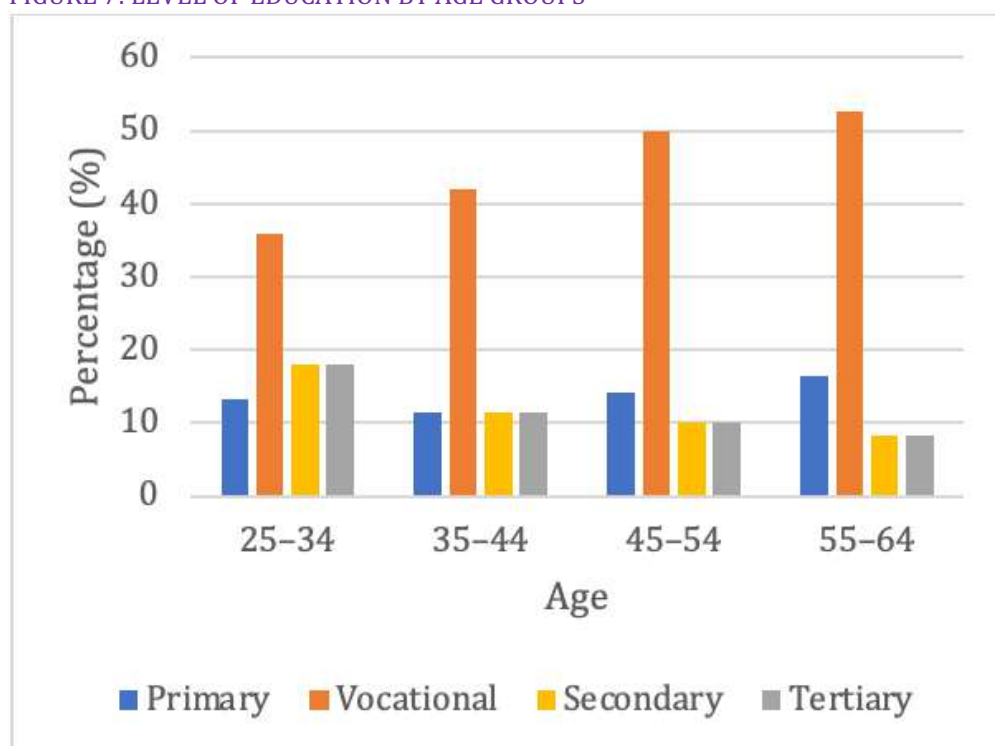
education lost its relevance for decades, initially secondary education, then tertiary one became the dominant.

FIGURE 6: THE IMPACT OF AGE AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION ON ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION



Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

FIGURE 7: LEVEL OF EDUCATION BY AGE GROUPS



Source: Own calculations based on ESS10.

If this is a valid assumption, it would provide support for cognitive theories, which highlight the association between the level of education and higher

cognitive skills, which may contribute to develop of egalitarian values (Lancee and Sarrasin 2015), including openness and tolerance (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014) and anti-racist attitudes (Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Beside the educational factor, generational differences could emerge as well, due to the different experiences of various generations. Besides the educational effect, the impact of age could be explained by Inglehart's theory (1977) as well, which highlights a value-based difference between generations. Following the line of reasoning of Inglehart, younger generations, who grew up in an era with relative economic security and peace, tend to prioritize post-materialist values, like openness and tolerance. In contrast, those who were socialized in decades of shortage and conflicts, often emphasize the relevance of materialist values, such as economic and physical security. This kind of generational gap might influence attitudes toward social, political and cultural issues – even attitudes toward immigration, where low-educated older-generation more against immigration, but higher-educated younger generation are more tolerant. Although the association is U-shaped, and positive attitudes is rising again after certain years, which is questioning the materialist/post-materialist theory's exclusive explanatory power.

Presumably, we are observing a triple effect. On the one hand, there may be a value-based generational shift which has led to a re-evaluation of the relevance of post-materialist values, as Inglehart argues. Secondly, a generational shift has occurred in the education system, whereby the demand for higher-value-added knowledge has been accompanied by an increase in the proportion of secondary and tertiary qualifications, which may contribute to greater tolerance among younger generations. Additionally, different life stage experiences (including career building, starting a family, and retirement) may also influence the judgement of immigration.<sup>15</sup> However, based on the data presented, it is evident that there is a strong association between educational level and age, which also influences attitudes toward immigration.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The research confirmed the initial hypothesis that educational level can influence attitudes toward immigration: respondents with higher educational attainment tend to have a more positive attitude towards immigration, while those with only primary or vocational qualifications generally have a negative one. In parallel, individuals with a secondary education typically have more neutral attitudes. However, the explanatory power of educational level is conditional. It may vary depending on other factors such as political orientation and age.

Since in the case of Hungary, workers had only a low level of experience with foreign guest workers, economic factors seem less significant. Concurrently, the European migration crisis has increasingly evolved into a political issue in Hungary, which divided the political elite into two groups with fundamentally opposing viewpoints: while the liberal-left opposition rather supports the relocation mechanism and considers immigration as a positive factor of the European societies, the conservative right (both the governing parties and the right-wing opposition) more likely consider irregular migrations as a threat for national states. Based on the analyses, the political orientation and party influences attitudes toward immigration on the level of respondents as well: those who identified themselves as political right-wing, probably show more

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<sup>15</sup> This question requires a multi-decade longitudinal study to reach a conclusive result.

anti-immigrant sentiments than individuals on the political left-wing. Similar association can be observed regarding to political party affiliation. Fidesz being in government since 2010 politicised the issue in 2015 and has had a harsh anti-migration rhetoric since then. Hence, its voters might form their attitude towards immigration based on their party's opinion. The socio-economic factors (age, residence, etc.) of the voters of Fidesz also show similarities with those who generally have a more negative view on migration. However, analysing this question requires further.

According to the results, political alignment effects on the association of educational level and attitudes toward immigration. In this context, the more left-oriented an individual is, and the higher their educational attainment, the more positive their attitude toward immigration. In contrast, right wing-orientation shows that only those with tertiary educated have slightly negative, while others have strongly opponent attitude. Furthermore, age indicates a U-shaped association with attitudes toward immigration: younger generation of active workers have higher rate of tertiary qualifications and have more positive attitudes toward immigration, but moving toward older generations the positive attitude is decreasing, which ends with improvement of attitudes in a positive way.

Overall, we can assume that younger, higher-educated, left-wing respondents are more likely support immigration in Hungary, than older, lower-educated, right-wing respondents. Although economic considerations appeared less relevant compared to other explanatory variables, changes in the labour market conditions, as increasing blue-collar foreign workers, may intensify the significance of economic factors in the future. Furthermore, the association between education, age, party affiliation and attitudes toward immigration is probably only one component of a multi-factorial research framework, which requires multi-decade longitudinal surveying.

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## VPLIV IZOBRAŽEVANJA NA MADŽARSKI ODNOS DO PRISELJEVANJA

V zadnjih letih je priseljevanje postalo osrednja tema raziskovanja v politični znanosti, kar je spodbudilo obsežno in raznoliko znanstveno produkcijo. Namen prispevka je obogatiti obstoječi diskurz z analizo vpliva izobrazbe ( $X$ ) – enega ključnih socialno-demografskih dejavnikov – na odnos do priseljevanja ( $Y$ ) na Madžarskem. Za natančnejšo interpretacijo rezultatov so kot kontrolne spremenljivke vključeni politična usmerjenost ter izbrani socialno-demografski dejavniki, med katerimi so spol, starost in veroizpoved. Študija dodatno preučuje, v kolikšni meri politična usmerjenost in starost vplivata na raven izobrazbe. Rezultati več linearnih regresijskih modelov kažejo, da je višja raven izobrazbe statistično povezana s pozitivnejšim odnosom do priseljevanja, pri čemer pa se ta povezava pomembno razlikuje glede na politično opredeljenost in starost anketirancev. Analiza temelji na podatkih iz Evropske socialne raziskave (ESS), s posebnim poudarkom na Madžarski v obdobju 2020–2022 (deseti krog ESS), in si prizadeva prispevati k boljšemu razumevanju povezave med stopnjo izobrazbe in odnosom do priseljevanja.

**Ključne besede:** migracije; izobraževanje; politična polarizacija; generacijski prepad; Madžarska.





# IMPORTANCE OF THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FOR EUROPEANIZATION

Markus REINERS<sup>1</sup>

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*Public administration plays a prominent role in state transition and modernization processes. Therefore, the quality of public administration affects transition processes in Eastern European states on their way to joining the European Union. This hypothesis is proven by analysing former socialist or communist countries that became members of the European Union during the two major waves of accession in 2004 and 2007 because, to do so, they had to implement internal modernization processes to more democracy and a market economy. A quantitative research design is used to investigate whether a functioning administration has a strong positive impact on transition, its effectiveness and sustainability. The result shows that a well-functioning administration significantly promotes transition processes and has a positive impact on transition to more democracy and a market economy.*

**Key words:** Public Administration; democracy; market economy; European Union; Europeanization.

## 1 CONTEXT

The object of the study is to determine whether the quality of public administration affects the transformation of East European states on their way into the European Union (EU). The EU accession process promotes such transformation since a state that wishes to join the EU needs to implement standards that support democracy and a market economy, and this encompasses the transition from a planned to a market economy and, accordingly, from an autocratic to a democratic form of government.

Starting from the 1990s, many Eastern European states faced dramatic changes. Following the fall of the Eastern Bloc, they turned to the West, more prosperity and democratic forms of government. At the end of the 1980s, no-one would have believed that centrally planned economies would be integrated in the EU. Besides

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having to overcome ideological differences, the largely successful transition to market-economic democracies is remarkable because there was no plan for outside support such as, for example, that given to the German Democratic Republic by the Federal Republic of Germany. Then, the EU granted accession to twelve new countries within a relatively short period of time from 2004 to 2007, among them ten former socialist or communist states. The latter, also called transition countries, are the research units of this study: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. These post-socialist countries underwent consolidation. Dictatorships became democratic states, whose elites relied on a market economy as the foundation for facing the challenges of a competitive model of democracy. In just a short time, the ten countries diametrically changed their form of government and, in this respect, were able to comply with the standards required by the EU. Although Cyprus and Malta also joined the EU in 2004, they are not considered transition countries and, thus, are excluded from the analysis for lack of comparability. Furthermore, Croatia joined much later (2013). The country was not part of the enlargement between 2004 and 2007 and, hence, it is not included in the study (Willershausen 2002; Berend 2005, 401–416; Blokker 2005, 503; Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 610; Ismayr 2010, 9).

## 2 CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The national governments, public administrations or political institutions of the countries under review have been the subject of numerous studies. So, for example, Rice (1992), Balázs (1993), Newland (1996), Ellison (2007) or Kukovič (2013) studied the situation of political institutions in post-Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. How the EU exerts pressure to initiate reforms in potential members also has been the topic of numerous research articles. Accordingly, for example, Hughes, Sasse and Gordon (2004), Papadimitriou and Phinnemore (2004), Pippan (2004), Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), Sedelmeier (2008), Epstein and Sedelmeier (2008) as well as Toplak (2011) have considered this subject. Questions regarding transformation were analysed, amongst others, e.g. by Weidenfeld (2001) (see all in all Busch and Matthes 2004; Reiners 2013a; Busch et al. 2014; Böttger 2020; Lippert 2020; Libman and Platzer 2021; Reiners 2023; Beichelt 2022; de Munter 2023 or country-specific e.g. Ahrens and Zweynert 2012; Kasekamp and Treichel 2013; Cianciara 2019; Damian 2019; Deimel 2020; Sapper, Weichsel and Handl 2023).

In addition to the fundamental findings of EU research, another aspect worth looking at is how the processes can be comprehended theoretically. By expressing their intention to join the EU, the countries gave the EU power to induce change in institutions and policies. Based on the assumption that the public administration is the central actor in this respect, it is reasonable to assume that measures will be implemented much more effectively when it performs efficiently. This is illustrated by the variables as well as index values and rankings in Section 4. Therefore, implementing the necessary reform steps in the process and overcoming behavioural patterns calls for appropriate political steering by the governments and the respective public administrations because they explicitly have operative responsibility (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, 126–141; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2007, 675–677).

High-quality public administrations can efficiently implement policies and generally execute the political demands of the government effectively. Qualitative public administration is characterized by professional staff, clear-cut

decision-making rules and structures, objectivity, transparency and responsibility. Such administration acts as an intermediary, interwoven with the government in the overall machinery of government. It is, so to say, the "transmission belt," between the state and its citizens; and this alone signalizes its central status (see Rice 1992; Balázs 1993, 75–88; Ellison 2007; Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 620–625).

Political programs and legislative procedures usually are initiated there. Even if the initiatives originate with other actors, the proposals, more often than not, are handled by administrative staff in the government departments or ministries. Accordingly, public administration is at the foreground of implementing EU standards and specific transformation measures since, in most cases, it is the first instance to be notified of the necessary changes required by EU bodies. It sets standards, works out the details of laws and, ultimately, is responsible for their realization and implementation. When the public administration does not operate efficiently, the result could well be stagnation of the transition process (see Scharpf 2000, 323; Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 606–630; Nicolaides 2004). Therefore, all in all, it is plausible that the quality of public administration significantly affects the process because when public administration is addressed as an actor, its central role in the political cycle inevitably becomes evident, for example, in connection with setting the agenda, formulating policy or implementing policy (see only Schuppert 2000 or Seibel 2016).

Almost necessarily, this view directs attention to the ensuing question whether reforms depend on the structure of political institutions or structures have an impact on the transition process and its results. The clear-cut answer of political science, neo-institutionalism or, for example, actor-centred institutionalism is: "Institutions matter." In fact, a core neo-institutional assumption is that institutions have significant influence on political events and that, to a large extent, results can be traced back to institutional origins; and so, particularly the public administration plays a prominent role in this context (see i.e. Hall and Taylor 1996; Scharpf 2000; Ostrom 2008; Reiners 2008, 30–31, 89; Peters 2019, 281–285).

In many cases, it is evident that, in addition to the quality of the public administration, precarious financial framework conditions promote a paradigm shift. Therefore, in view of the control variable, the focus is on whether modernization is induced by financial difficulties. The situation of the public budget can be determined by specific key indicators. Such figures as the increase in debt, overall public debt or public debt per capita, which is even more appropriate because it is related to the population, are suitable for this purpose (see e.g. Reiners 2008, 39). Therefore, the latter debt level allows an even more precise assessment of the economic situation of the respective countries than the other factors. In many instances, the economic starting position or considerable external pressure stimulates such processes because political, social and/or economic crises or preliminary stages of such crises and the pressure created by them are frequently considered a trigger for state transformation as manifested, for example, by learning theories. Economic pressure in particular frequently is the motivation and drive to undertake modernization measures. In this connection, it becomes evident that whenever features of crises are perceived strongly, the willingness to intervene in institutionalized structures and traditions rises, even if financial restrictions may limit the scope of modernization (see only Hall 1993; Rose 1993, 2004; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Biegelbauer 2013; Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 607; Reiners 2016, 17–18).

### 3 HYPOTHESIS AND THE EU'S PROFILE OF REQUIREMENTS

The study concentrates on common lines of development and differences between various public administrations. All research units exhibit fundamentally similar systemic preconditions for transformation, because they all originated in socialist or communist systems and, moreover, had to meet the same EU accession standards within a tight time frame. For all these countries, the process resulted in their request being fulfilled, albeit this cannot be taken for granted: Before a country is allowed to join the EU, standards and directives need to be fulfilled and implemented. When accession is granted, it indicates that the public administration of the country concerned functions properly. Therefore, it can be assumed that high-quality administrations are better able to implement changes to democracy and a market economy effectively and sustainably. Presumably, they play a very important role as regards the implementation of EU standards and modernization processes. The normative characteristics or qualifications of "high-quality" administrations can be expressed empirically based on index values and rankings in the set of variables that will be presented later. The assumptions and theoretical foundations lead to the nomological hypothesis (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, 675–677; Ellison 2007, 221–232; Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 606–630; see e.g. Mayer and Palmowski 2004, 579–582):

*The higher the quality of the public administration, the better the course of the EU transition process.*

It is hard to find arguments against the thesis because – not least due to the theoretical context – it is intuitively plausible that the quality of the public administration has a considerable impact on the transformation process. In fact, it suggests itself that the hypothesis may be logically consistent simply based on the theoretical explanations.

The EU sets requirements for candidate countries because only countries that demonstrate progress in establishing democracy and a market economy have a chance of achieving EU candidacy (Schimmelfennig 2007, 126–141). The EU requires that liberal-democratic standards be implemented for gaining accession to the community. By making the implementation of policy reforms a prerequisite for accession, the EU can influence the transformation process. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier find that the EU imposed high requirements on Central and East European countries, on those that were part of the two large waves of accession, and thereby exerted pressure on the countries (2004, 669).

Formally, several steps need to be completed before a country can become a member of the EU. The Copenhagen Criteria that were set up in 1993 stipulate that candidates need to demonstrate a functioning market economy and the ability to assume the obligations and goals connected to EU membership. In addition, political criteria need to be fulfilled: democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities. Signing the Europe Agreement then marks the preliminary stage of official accession negotiations. It needs to be ratified by all EU members and the state concerned. It comprises initial contractual agreements to ensure economic and political alignment with the community. The research units of this study still signed the Europe Agreement with the EU; it was later replaced by the Stabilization and Association Agreement. This step per se sets high demands on the public administrations: they need to expend enormous resources and work efficiently without having any assurance of gaining membership (Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 610–611). Once the accession

negotiations have been successful, the next step is attaining the official status of an accession candidate, which is followed by accession as a full member and, finally, the ratification of the accession treaty. Apart from Bulgaria and Romania, eight countries opted to let their citizens decide about EU accession by direct vote in a referendum (Gabriel 2008, 190–193; Trüdinger 2008, 221–223; Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 610–612).

#### 4 METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

No comparison can reproduce reality in all its complexity. Comparisons not only involve many variables but also a limited number of suitable cases, which, ultimately, leads to many degrees of freedom for explaining the variance. Therefore, the focus is on the probable determining factors and the probable central actor. The analytic focus is on states that had basically similar preconditions and gained accession to the EU within a limited period during the large enlargement in the mid-2000s (see e.g. Hartmann 1995, 32; Reiners 2008, 80–82).

The correlation of the variables is checked by means of a quantitative paradigm. The comparative approach follows the most-different ("method of difference") or most-similar systems design with a view to the variances in the dependent variable or rather the transformation. It needs to be determined to what extent the quality of the public administration can be used to predict the course of the transformation (Mill 1846; Hartmann 1995, 30; see Lijphardt 1975, 164; Ragin 1987, 37; Kühnel and Krebs 2006; see critical: Przeworski and Teune 1982, 34–36; Dogan and Pelassy 1984, 117–119). Observations for nine points in time are available for each country. In the end, ten units with 90 observations are studied. The evaluations basically concentrate on the period starting with EU accession and the subsequent sixteen years. In view of the data available for the dependent variable, it would not be possible to study a more retrograde period. For this reason, the period under review begins in 2004 and is oriented to the future – almost to the present – because, it goes without saying, that transformation has not been completed at the time of accession, even though certain criteria need to be fulfilled to gain accession. All in all, the manner of proceeding provides an overview of the differences between the states and developments.

Numeric values for the independent variable, i.e. the quality of public administration, are obtained by using the data of the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) of the World Bank for nine points in time in cycles of two years from 2004 to 2020. These cycles were chosen because data on the dependent variable are only available at intervals of two years. The first point in time (2004) reflects the EU accession of eight states; Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU later (2007). The pressure to carry out economic modernization, measured by the level of public debt in relation to the population, is taken as another independent variable or rather control variable for the same points in time to prove that the first variable mentioned may possibly have a relatively high explanatory power. Data from the transformation index of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI) are used to determine the dependent variable, the transformation, in two-year intervals for the period from 2006 to 2022. By reason of a certain time lag, the data of the independent variable are correlated to those of the dependent variable but staggered by a time lag of two years because it is obvious that the processes will run into some delays and the causes will not have an immediate effect.



#### 4.1 Independent variables: Quality of the public administration and public debt

The quality of the public administration is operationalized using the Worldwide Governance Indicators. The six indicators compiled by the World Bank for almost all countries and regions permit a realistic assessment of a state's governance and steering capability and help to describe a state's general situation. The indicators are generated from statistics, evaluations of experts and surveys that are provided by research institutes, think tanks, NGOs and international organizations. The indicators are as follows: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (World Bank 2022a).

Only one indicator is used in the study because it, to put it precisely, is basically concerned solely with operationalizing the quality of the public administration system. The government effectiveness indicator (GE) or, in other words, the performance of the government and, thus, the public administration associated with it, provides detailed information on the quality of the administration, its independence of political pressure and the quality of policy implementation. Since the GE indicator is based on several representative and non-representative sources, it gives a comprehensive assessment of the public administration. This, in turn, ensures that the analysis is largely well-founded. The measuring unit of the indicator is the percentile rank of the country in relation to all other countries. The higher the value, the better the performance of the public administration. Table 1 shows that there are variances: Such countries as Estonia, Slovenia or the Czech Republic have higher values, whereas Bulgaria and Romania lag behind. The ten units have the following index values and rankings:

TABLE 1: INDEPENDENT VARIABLE, QUALITY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION WGI – GE

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	Median	Rank
<b>BG</b>	58.71	51.71	50.97	54.55	55.45	49.04	56.19	57.14	43.81	53.06	9
<b>EE</b>	80.10	83.90	84.47	82.30	77.25	80.29	81.90	83.33	87.62	82.35	1
<b>CZ</b>	79.10	83.41	79.13	77.03	76.30	81.25	78.57	78.57	78.57	79.11	3
<b>HU</b>	77.11	77.56	73.30	71.77	69.67	72.12	68.57	68.10	70.00	72.02	7
<b>LV</b>	71.64	72.20	69.42	72.73	74.88	77.88	78.10	79.52	76.19	74.73	5
<b>LT</b>	75.12	73.66	70.39	73.68	74.41	78.85	80.48	80.48	81.43	76.50	4
<b>PL</b>	67.16	64.39	67.48	70.81	70.62	74.52	72.38	71.90	64.29	69.28	8
<b>RO</b>	51.24	49.76	43.69	51.20	49.29	62.02	49.52	46.67	41.43	49.42	10
<b>SK</b>	78.11	76.59	77.18	75.12	73.93	75.00	74.76	72.38	69.05	74.68	6
<b>SI</b>	79.60	80.00	83.01	80.86	80.57	79.81	82.86	82.38	84.76	81.54	2

Source: World Bank 2022b (values rounded); BG: Bulgaria, EE: Estonia, CZ: Czech Republic, HU: Hungary, LV: Latvia, LT: Lithuania, PL: Poland, RO: Romania, SK: Slovakia, SI: Slovenia (Österreichische Nationalbank 2024).

Economic modernization pressure, measured by public debt in relation to the population, serves as independent (control) variable. Based on, amongst other things, fundamental learning theories, it can be deduced that economic preconditions frequently are important for state transformation, particularly with respect to stimulating transition (Reiners 2016, 17–18). In view of the theoretical context, the control variable suggests itself, even if only to prove that the quality of public administration is very important. The data are as follows:

TABLE 2: INDEPENDENT CONTROL VARIABLE – DEBT PER CAPITA IN EURO

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	Median
<b>BG</b>	822	778	631	862	1,026	1,509	2,212	1,953	2,531	1,369
<b>EE</b>	295	371	380	556	1,037	1,220	1,493	1,363	3,355	1,119
<b>CZ</b>	2,154	2,668	2,964	4,210	5,315	4,717	5,546	5,384	6,637	4,399
<b>HU</b>	3,873	4,670	5,188	5,981	6,088	6,085	7,787	7,927	9,557	6,351
<b>LV</b>	567	562	1,228	2,604	3,075	3,431	4,510	4,752	5,838	2,952
<b>LT</b>	809	1,011	1,007	2,470	3,456	3,800	4,887	4,631	7,239	3,257
<b>PL</b>	1,948	2,709	3,024	3,876	4,347	4,155	5,506	5,414	6,932	4,212
<b>RO</b>	428	454	595	1,354	1,823	2,231	2,909	3,087	4,686	1,952
<b>SK</b>	2,882	2,626	2,479	3,892	5,462	5,654	7,067	6,903	8,828	5,088
<b>SI</b>	2,996	3,252	2,779	5,124	7,347	11,032	13,893	13,165	15,592	8,353

Source: Länderdaten 2022 (values rounded).

## 4.2 Dependent variable: Transformation

The dependent variable is operationalized using the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI/Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022). The Bertelsmann Stiftung provides two indices: the Status Index indicates the status of transformation, and the Governance Index assesses the quality of political steering with respect to the transformation (for this reason, it will be referred to as Management Index). The Status Index shows how far the transition to democracy and a market economy has progressed. In contrast to narrow definitions of democracy, the BTI's understanding of democracy is broader and includes additional criteria. Thus, although objections may be raised, democracy is interconnected with a market economy both empirically and functionally because democratic and economic developments are not always necessarily linked to one another, as demonstrated by China.

For every two-year evaluation period, the Bertelsmann Stiftung analyses and evaluates the situation in more than 100 countries to draw up the indices. This study uses the Status Index because, contrary to the Management Index, it provides information on the progress of transformation without including other factors. Thus, by using the Status Index, the dependent variable can be operationalized in such a way that it only assesses the transformation proper. Five political and seven economic criteria as well as 32 sub-categories are assessed by qualified country experts. The research units are all sovereign states that cannot yet be considered a consolidated democracy with a social market economy.

The Status Index calculates the average of the scores given for the dimensions of "political transition" and "economic transition." Political transition is formed by the average rating of five political criteria (statehood, political participation, rule of law, stability of democratic institutions, political and social integration) with altogether 18 sub-categories, and economic transition is formed by the average of seven economic criteria (socioeconomic level of development, organization of market and competition, monetary and fiscal stability, private property, social organization, economic performance, sustainability) with altogether 14 sub-categories.

Only the BTI's Status Index is used to minimize the risk of assessing a tautology because the independent and dependent variables used in the indices sometimes have similar indicators; moreover, it is adjusted for both criteria. Thus, the following categories of BTI are eliminated as regards the quality of administration (GE): Basic administration structures, effective power to govern, stability of democratic institutions and market organization. With respect to the state of public debt in a country, the following BTI categories are excluded: Socio-economic barriers and performance. Other categories which may be considered concordant in the broadest sense are retained. In fact, it was determined in this

context that other adjustments do not yield additional significant deviations. The two BTIs (unadjusted and adjusted) correlate highly with one another (an  $R^2$  value of 0.98). Ultimately, it is insignificant which BTI is used. The table below shows the values of the adjusted Status Index as well as the resulting index values and rankings. The maximum number of points is 10.0, which indicates an optimal transformation:

**TABLE 3: DEPENDENT VARIABLE, STATUS OF TRANSFORMATION BTI – STATUS-INDEX ADJUSTED**

	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022	Median	Rank
<b>BG</b>	8.18	8.55	8.44	8.43	8.31	8.19	8.06	8.00	7.76	8.21	8
<b>EE</b>	9.30	9.39	9.37	9.39	9.49	9.59	9.62	9.66	9.55	9.48	2
<b>CZ</b>	9.32	9.48	9.63	9.58	9.55	9.46	9.60	9.57	9.39	9.51	1
<b>HU</b>	9.24	9.32	9.24	8.58	8.18	7.65	7.34	7.00	6.73	8.14	9
<b>LV</b>	8.28	8.63	8.55	8.45	8.52	8.68	8.76	8.83	8.90	8.62	7
<b>LT</b>	9.06	9.24	9.12	9.10	9.03	9.26	9.40	9.38	9.33	9.21	4
<b>PL</b>	8.99	8.72	9.00	9.08	9.24	9.28	8.74	8.32	8.05	8.82	6
<b>RO</b>	8.04	8.34	8.33	8.34	8.10	8.18	8.26	7.72	7.89	8.13	10
<b>SK</b>	9.01	9.18	9.21	8.90	8.79	8.80	8.66	8.74	8.91	8.91	5
<b>SI</b>	9.52	9.49	9.52	9.44	9.15	9.01	9.07	9.09	8.82	9.24	3

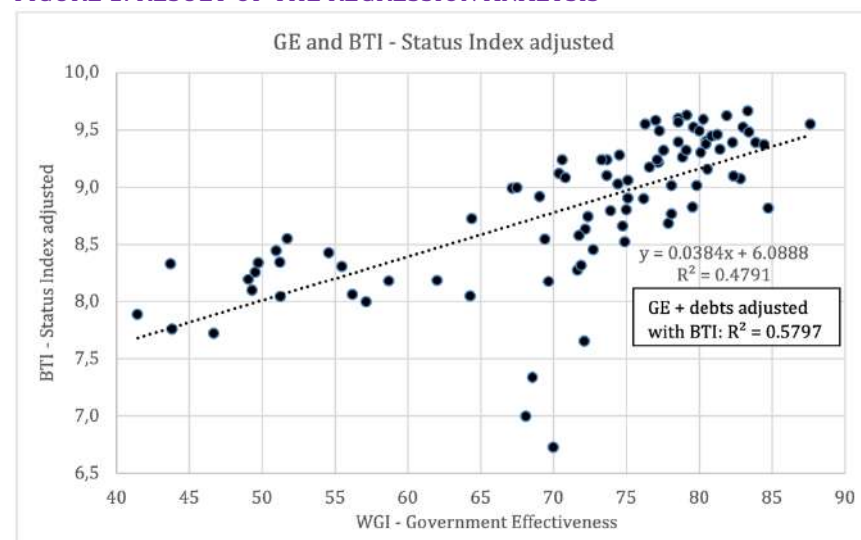
Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022 (values rounded).

The interval-scaled rankings shown in Tables 1 and 3 provide an expanded overview and prove helpful for interpreting the result. If the rankings of GE and the adjusted BTI are compared by means of the average values, it already becomes evident that the individual rankings remain mostly unchanged. This supports the assumption that the hypothesis may point in the postulated direction. Then the multiple linear regression is calculated using the index values. The following regression result shows how the independent variables or the two predictors correlate with the values of the dependent values.

## 5 RESULTS

The results are based on the index values. First, the values from the regression analysis are depicted in a coordinate system and, for reasons of clarity, only with regard to the dominant independent variable (GE), correlated with the adjusted BTI, because the independent control variable seems to be rather marginal and, in particular, proves that GE has a relatively high explanatory power:

**FIGURE 1: RESULT OF THE REGRESSION ANALYSIS**



Source: Author's own illustration.

The values of the independent variable are plotted on the x axis and those of the dependent variable are plotted on the y axis. The positive relation between quality of the public administration and transition is evident. As shown below, a country's state of public debt plays a marginal role with respect to transformation. Ultimately, this supports the explanatory force of quality of public administration as the decisive value. The regression line for quality of public administration explains the different values relatively well. The value described provides information about the strength of the linear correlation. All in all, this shows a mediocre relationship. The regression provides the following information in detail, shown with adjusted BTI:

TABLE 4: REGRESSION STATISTICS

	<b>GE and debts adjusted with BTI</b>
<b>Multiple correlation coefficient</b>	0.7614
<b>Coefficient of determination <math>R^2</math></b>	0.5797
<b>Standard error</b>	0.4129
<b>Research observations</b>	90
<b>Coefficient GE</b>	0.0445
<b>Coefficient debts</b>	-6.9107E-05
<b>Test size F</b>	60.0055
<b>Critical F-value</b>	4.2013E-17
<b>p-value GE</b>	6.0534E-18
<b>p-value debts</b>	1.6314E-05
<b>Significance level</b>	0.05
<b>Coefficient of determination <math>R^2</math> GE</b>	0.4791
<b>Coefficient of determination <math>R^2</math> debts</b>	0.0059

Source: Author's own illustration (values rounded to four decimal places).

Ninety observations for ten research units at nine points in time were available for the regression analysis. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is fundamental for the interpretation. It is insignificant and non-correlated for public debt (an  $R^2$  value of 0.0059). This is different regarding the quality of public administration. The correlation of GE indicates an  $R^2$  value of 0.48; moreover, both independent variables together indicate an  $R^2$  value of 0.58. The explained percentage of the variance in the dependent variable is 0.61 for the non-adjusted BTI. Therefore, this value and the quality of the regression model are in a medium range, which means that the statistical model explains a larger percentage of the variance in the dependent variable. Accordingly, the model explains 61% and, following adjustment, 58% of the variation of the index values of BTI. The differences after adjustment, with minimally different values, can be neglected. The adjustment shows that no significant changes are involved and, contrary to the assumption stated above, the risk of a tautology does not emerge.

The study dispensed with other regression models because of the relatively small population and the limited amount of data, which, vice versa, justifies the method that was chosen. Since the study works with a relatively low number of cases, it seems appropriate to look at possible outliers to determine whether they may affect the overall result and to consider the robustness of the results as well. It should be noted that the status of democracy may well have changed for the

worse in some countries. In addition, the regression data showed that, in terms of figures, only Hungary stands out as an outlier as of 2014, namely with four data records. If the country were completely removed from the analysis, the overall result (an  $R^2$  value of 0.74) would be affected.

Moreover, it is debatable whether the regression model provides a significant contribution to explaining the dependent variable. In this case, the test statistic (F) and the critical F-value play a part. The latter (4.2013E-17) must be less than the test statistic (60.0055), and this is obviously the case. Thus, it can be concluded that the multiple regression model provides a statistically significant explanatory contribution.

Furthermore, the regression coefficients GE and public debt should be significant ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ). GE has a  $p\text{-value}$  of 6.0534E-18. This is clearly less than 0.05. The GE coefficient is positive, which means that if the variable increases by one unit, the dependent variable (BTI) increases by 0.0445 units. The  $p\text{-value}$  of public debt comes to 1.6314E-05 and, hence, it also is less than 0.05. The public debt coefficient of -6.9107E-05 is negative; therefore, it has a negative effect on the y-variable, which signalizes that an increase in public debt by one unit will cause the dependent variable to be reduced by -6.9107E-05. For this reason, the variable BTI can be derived with statistical verifiability through GE and public debt. Moreover, the varying  $p\text{-values}$  (GE and public debt) show that the quality of public administration is considered a decisive factor. A null hypothesis is considered unconfirmed, which is why it can be assumed that the statistical relationship between GE and debt affects the BTI (Status Index). Furthermore, the hypothesis is considered proven, even though Hungary is included in the analysis, which means that the hypothesis is confirmed with Hungary and even more so without this country. Accordingly, for all intents and purposes, the results can be considered robust.

However, in numerical terms, the strength of the effect that the quality of administration has on the transformation is relatively low because the value of 0.0445 indicates a weak positive effect. The model predicts a change in value of the dependent variable by 0.0445 if the value of the independent variable increases by one unit. However, this needs to be qualified by bearing in mind that the scale of values of the independent variable is broader than that of the dependent variable. The range of the dependent variable is from about 6.7 to 9.7, whereas values of about 41 to just short of 88 are possible for the independent variable. This means that when the value of the independent variable increases by ten points, the value of the dependent value is predicted to change by just under 0.5 points. In view of the different ranges of values, this does in fact describe a relatively appealing effect.

## 6 SUMMARY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

The conclusion is preceded by a critical reflection on the design of the study.

Some questions remain unanswered although the quality of the regression model is positive given that  $R^2$  has a value of 0.58 and, thus, supports the hypothesis. The open and unanswerable aspects can be attributed to the focused design of the study, i.e. questions that cannot be answered by the study indicate that other variables have an impact as well. As is frequently explained, a corresponding value of two variables x and y alone is not sufficient proof of an obligatory causal relationship. It goes without saying that there is room for alternative and



intervening factors that may influence the transformation. Complex processes cannot be completely reduced to individual parameters. They always are the result of the interaction between several actors and actor constellations as well as different structural and institutional conditions (see Lorig 2001, 207; Reiners 2008, 29–31). However, for example, it may be assumed that the partisan composition of the government concerned could be significant. Nonetheless, it isn't always of substantial importance because the pressure or the desire to gain access to the EU supersedes partisan politics in many cases, as has become evident in similar cases in the past (see e.g. Reiners 2013b, 76–79).

In addition, the quality of the result would be limited if only one independent variable were used. Therefore, another independent control variable is added. Even if the focus is on public administration and, correspondingly, on an influential and most likely the central actor in the overall government machinery, governments possibly need to be mentioned as additional potential factors of influence. However, they are included in some sense in the analysis through the interdependence between the public administration and the government within the government machinery of the political-administrative system. Furthermore, the wealth or economic strength of a country always is stated as a predictor (all in all Radosevic 2004, 641–666; Gabriel 2008, 190–193; Trüdinger 2008, 221–223; see Haensch and Holtmann 2008, 620–625). Hence, this economic factor is included in the analysis by way of the independent control variable.

The independent variable of quality of the public administration is based on the Government Effectiveness indicator, which comprehensively measures its quality, independence of political pressure and the quality of policy implementation. Accordingly, it integrates, *per se*, different factors and provides a detailed assessment of the public administration, which ensures a well-founded analysis and considerably relativizes any objections claiming that the set of independent variables is overly limited. Moreover, another control variable that was derived from the theoretical context is included and a multiple regression is calculated. A larger number of control variables, however, would be problematic because the GE index already includes very many factors and there is the risk of multicollinearity making the assessment unstable or inaccurate. All in all, it is evident that the quality of public administration is a decisive variable with relatively high explanatory power. In contrast, public debt barely has any impact on the transformation. In fact, as established in many cases elsewhere, the factor rather may prove conducive to stimulating transformation processes, acting as a catalyst or awakening willingness to intervene in existing structures and traditions and, hence, promoting a system's willingness to learn (see only Reiners 2016, 17–18).

Merging the GE and BTI indices in a correlation analysis is sometimes criticized because the WGI index is based on the BTI with respect to the GE dimension (Langbein and Knack 2010, 350–370; Kaufmann and Kraay 2023; see also Wagschal and Jäckle 2009; Brusis 2009). For this reason, it runs the risk of assessing a tautology. However, when referring to the BTI, the WGI primarily reverts to the Management Index, which is not included in the analysis of the dependent variable, and less to the Status Index that is included here. This considerably reduces the risk of a false tautological conclusion because of potential overlaps of the two indices. In addition, the BTI was adjusted for the two independent variables and possibly overlapping factors were subtracted out. It appears that there essentially weren't any other similar or identical indicators in the independent variables and dependent variable. In the end, possible objections can be mitigated because the correlation with the adjusted BTI does not manifest a substantially different result.

The regression model demonstrates the confirmation of the hypothesis. A well-functioning and efficient public administration promotes transformation. It has a significant positive impact on the transition to more democracy and a market economy. In statistical terms, this can be argued with a "double negative." What was not proven was that X doesn't influence Y or, to put it differently, a moderate indication shows that X affects Y. This effect supports the assumption that the public administration is a dominant actor in the process of implementing EU standards. Accordingly, this means that a functioning administration is a fundamental prerequisite to successfully achieve EU accession. It is recommended that future research be embedded in a larger longitudinal study and an expanded set of variables. To be sure, other factors have an influence on the process, too. Yet, the objective of the study was not to illuminate all effects, but rather to lay some groundwork. Even if the approach seems to limit somewhat the explanatory power, the study, based on its design, will be conducive to and fundamental for future research.

The topics of public administration and transformation offer ample starting points for research. Particularly against the background of globalization and new management concepts, public administrations, which are undergoing a transformation process in many countries, are interesting research subjects. Therefore, in view of the continuous modernization of states and against the background of European developments, policy analyses as well as qualitative and quantitative analyses that study, among other things, how administrations function and their effect, may be considered a focal point of research in political science and public administration

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## POMEN KAKOVOSTI JAVNE UPRAVE ZA EVROPEIZACIJO

*Javna uprava ima ključno vlogo v procesih tranzicije in modernizacije države. Njena kakovost pomembno vpliva na tranzicijske procese v vzhodnoevropskih državah, ki so se usmerile na pot priključevanja Evropski uniji. Ta hipoteza je potrjena z analizo nekdanjih socialističnih oziroma komunističnih držav, ki so postale članice Evropske unije v okviru dveh večjih širitvenih valov v letih 2004 in 2007. Te države so bile za uspešno vključitev v evropske integracije primorane izvesti obsežne notranje reforme, usmerjene v krepitev demokracije in vzpostavitev tržnega gospodarstva. Z uporabo kvantitativne raziskovalne zasnove je analizirano, ali dobro delujoča javna uprava pomembno prispeva k učinkovitosti in vzdržnosti tranzicijskih procesov. Rezultati kažejo, da kakovostna in učinkovita javna uprava pomembno spodbuja tranzicijo ter pozitivno vpliva na prehod v stabilnejšo demokracijo in delujoče tržno gospodarstvo.*

**Ključne besede:** javna uprava; demokracija; tržno gospodarstvo; Evropska unija; evropeizacija.





# THE INNOVATIVE FORMS OF PARTICIPATION: CASE OF SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Veronika DŽATKOVÁ<sup>1</sup>

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*One of the long-term interests of political scientists is researching the scope of civic and political participation in public affairs. The current decrease in civic activism is related to the crisis of representative democracy which reflects a growing distrust of politicians and political institutions. Innovative forms of participation serve as tools to mitigate this crisis and support civic engagement. The result of a comparative analysis reveals that the online activism of politicians significantly impacted political awareness during the Slovak parliamentary election in 2020 and 2023. In addition to traditional media, online campaigns had a substantial mobilizing influence on voter turnout, particularly in 2023. However, a negative aspect of citizens' online participation is slacktivism which refers to participation that lacks a real impact on social change.*

**Key words:** participation; civil society; crisis of representative democracy; slacktivism.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The challenge for the most modern democracies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the research of civic and political participation. The current state of low activism results from the continuing existence of the crisis of representative democracy which manifests in an increasing degree of distrust and apathy towards politics, politicians, and political institutions. This includes criticism of the institutional representative form of politics (Reiners 2023). Concrete manifestations of disinterest in public affairs are evident in the decreasing participation in elections and membership in political parties (Watts 2008). Furthermore, the last decade has shown that political parties struggle to attract new members, particularly among the youth, who are underrepresented in political decision-making positions and whose involvement in political parties is declining. At the same time, voter turnout among the youth is significantly low (Župová 2022). It

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is essential to note that the downward trend of civic participation within liberal democracies is increasingly noticeable across many countries (Bláha 2023).

The development of recent years, coupled with the massive influence of information and communication technologies, impacts all areas of an individual's life, including civic and political activities. Consequently, a notable outcome of these circumstances is the transformation of activism into the online space. A segment of the expert community believes in innovative technologies and new types of participation associated with Internet use. (Davis 2010; Jakubowicz 2013).

Information and communication technologies have transformative potential for both politicians and citizens. Politicians strive to enhance their popularity by utilizing social networks, which have become rapid channels for addressing information to voters and expanding their voter base. The campaign of B. Obama in 2008 serves as an inspiring example of mobilizing voters through Facebook (Lilleker and Jackson 2010). In Slovakia, the parliamentary election to the National Council in 2020 exemplified a successful activation of the voter base due to political party activities conducted through online campaigns (Klingová et al. 2020). The voter turnout for this election was 65,8 %, the highest number since 2002. Additionally, in an early parliamentary election in 2023, voter turnout reached 68,1%, surpassing that of 2020. (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2023). Both elections were characterized by politicians adopting innovative communication methods and motivating citizens via social networks.

For citizens, certain social groups find that using innovations represents a more effective and quicker means to enhance their civic participation or influence decision-makers. It is crucial to emphasize that successful activism requires genuine participation through active engagement in decision-making processes such as elections or referendums. It remains clear that in democratic political systems, politicians and political parties aim to gain power through elections, thus, civic activity in the electoral process is a high priority for them.

In the online space, we may observe the phenomenon of slacktivism, a form of false participation where citizens engage electronically by sharing or expressing agreement with a politician's or party's post without contributing additional value through actual participation in elections or referendums.

Two research questions are formulated based on the outlined considerations:  
RQ1: What is the scope of transforming traditional forms into innovative forms of participation during election campaigns before parliamentary elections?  
RQ2: How does the intensity of social media use and the variety of political content online influence voter turnout in parliamentary elections?

In this context, the first hypothesis posits an increasing diversity of online activism significantly influences electoral mobilization. The second hypothesis suggests that slacktivism without real participation does not affect societal changes.

## 2 TRADITIONAL AND INNOVATIVE FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation in civic and political forms is a long-standing focus object within the political science community, particularly regarding its potential to influence the actors of the decision-making process. In this case, it acts as a vital link between citizens and the state, addressing the challenge modern democracies face in engaging citizens in governance. The ability of citizens to express their interests and demands is recognized as a crucial aspect of a democratic establishment.

The traditional concept of participation defines it as essential for the functioning of a modern and democratic political system. It is viewed as a fundamental aspect of an effective civil society, characterized by diverse forms of activism. Traditional political participation can be evaluated through various factors, including involvement in elections, campaigns, referendums, or even personal interactions with politicians (Ekman and Amna 2012). Democracy seeks to establish a relationship between those who govern and those who are governed (Reiners 2023).

Based on the above, we are inclined to a broader understanding that participation encompasses more than just electoral involvement. In other words, this perspective focuses attention on the complex forms of engagement where citizens actively influence public policy. In that context, political participation includes both direct involvement in the decision-making process and efforts to sway decision-makers, particularly through electing representatives. Participation serves as a means for citizens to communicate their opinions and needs, thereby influencing decisions that affect them (Nie and Verba 1972). Dahl (1995) describes this engagement as active volunteering aimed at enhancing cooperation in public affairs. Subsequently, it can be argued that civil society represents an imaginary mirror for the degree of political participation in society while it has an informative value regarding the division of citizens into politically active and passive ones.

The traditional understanding of citizen participation has evolved, tracing back to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, who differentiated between rulers and the ruled. Thinkers such as Locke and Hobbes emphasized individual roles within civil society (Störig 2007). In this context, despite not delving into the detailed perspectives of individual theorists from antiquity to the present, it is essential to emphasize that the entire historical development of the understanding of civil society and its associated participation has been accompanied by changes driven both by political transformations and by the evolution of democracy. Consequently, we can identify distinct periods within this historical framework that exhibit noticeable elements of the growth of democratic principles, leading to the creation of an active and effective civil society and increased participation. Conversely, the absence of fundamental democratic features, resulting from centralized governance with significant control over various socio-political domains, has led to the non-existence of civil society and minimization of manifestations.

The traditional view of participation since the early 20th century, during what is often referred to as the renaissance of civil society, is characterized by efforts to regulate it through active intervention in the political system. For clarification, we define civil society as a collection of non-governmental institutions that are strong enough to act as a counterbalance to the state (Gellner 1997). This definition is further supported by other authors who emphasize local-level

participation. A specific feature of local self-government is its indication of community interest in self-governance, self-regulation, or self-decision-making (Žofčinová, Čajková and Král 2022, 10).

The validity and importance of civil society draw attention to several prominent tasks performed by a functioning civil society (Ghaus-Pasha 2004): political analysis and advocacy, monitoring public officials' activities, building social capital, providing a space for citizens to express their values and attitudes, developing public welfare. We support the view that there is a parallel between increased participation and higher levels of democracy. Furthermore, we endorse a positive perspective on participation based on opinion Warren's (1992) arguments regarding its benefits in public life: increased opportunities for citizen self-awareness, greater participation leads to an expansion of democracy, citizen participation in public events reduces conflict, civil activism enhances the acceptability and co-responsibility for decisions.

Recent decades in the development of civil society underscore its significance through additional critical tasks such as agenda-setting and generating new ideas, which it accomplishes alongside participation in decision-making and oversight. The responsibilities of civil society, coupled with the adherence to transparency, openness, and accountability, contribute to creating an effective counterbalance to the state.

The current impact of innovative forms of participation is particularly striking due to the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies and unforeseen events like global pandemics that have accelerated online engagement. We observe that the Internet and social media significantly influence political activity at all levels from local to national primarily because they enable outreach to a broad segment of the population. It is important to note that innovative forms of participation are viewed as essential tools for addressing initial deficits in civic engagement while simultaneously bringing citizens closer to political decisions in ways they find most effective and easy to implement. We reference Dahl's (1995) assertion that every citizen should have opportunities for meaningful cooperation without encountering barriers from authorities, no interested citizen should be denied access. Equality of opportunity is crucial when seeking involvement in public life.

We advocate for the incorporation of innovative forms of participation as vital components of modernization processes across various aspects of individuals' lives, including public policy. According to Mital' (2020), innovative communication methods provide a unique platform for two-way communication, with information value serving as the starting point for this process. Free access to truthful information is necessary condition to free decision-making and the conduct of citizens (Jesenko 2013). The promotion of modern methods also stems from ongoing Europeanization and globalization processes that underscore the importance of supporting and enhancing the number of decision-making actors to improve openness and transparency in policy-making processes. Moreover, the complexity of contemporary issues such as geopolitical climate, disinformation, pandemics, military conflicts, and various political tensions highlights the necessity for awareness regarding political topics (Moravec, Hyněk, Gavurová and Kubák 2024).

Based on these observations, we find it necessary to analyse how political activities are transforming within online spaces. We consider political science research on participation that examines political behaviour, such as electoral participation or protest activities, or interactions with politicians. All these forms

can be effectively implemented through the Internet and social networks. Specifically, we refer to transferring election campaigns into social media platforms through status updates or video sharing, contacting politicians via their official websites, or using social networks to mobilize citizens for electoral participation.

### **3 ONLINE PARTICIPATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A SOURCE OF SLACKTIVISM**

The opportunities for online participation have become integral to daily life, reflecting the significant extent and development of contemporary digital forms. Among their most notable benefits is the capacity for rapid and effective dissemination and sharing of information in formats that are accessible to citizens. However, alongside these advantages, it is crucial to consider the negative aspects, such as the widespread dissemination of disinformation, hateful content, and conspiracy theories, which may adversely affect certain forms of political participation, particularly voter turnout in elections (Haček 2024; Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Nonetheless, this negative dimension is not the primary focus of the analysis presented in this paper.

From a political science perspective, online participation remains a relatively new and unexplored field. This raises questions about the extent to which such participation can be classified as political engagement. Online participation allows multidisciplinary research that encompasses not only political and social sciences but also communication and media studies. A political science standpoint examines behaviours on social networks, particularly in terms of agreement with shared content, commenting on posts, or creating original content. Consequently, online activities characterized as slacktivism cannot be classified as traditional forms of participation due to their lack of tangible outcomes, specifically the absence of genuine citizen involvement in decision-making processes. It is important to note that while expressing support through sharing a politician's or political party's post is prevalent, it does not necessarily reflect a true representation of societal engagement. The most significant drawback of slacktivism is that it does not encompass the entire society, however it should not be disregarded entirely.

To maintain a balanced viewpoint, it is essential to highlight the potential positive impact of slacktivism, provided it serves as a preliminary step toward genuine offline participation. We argue that any form of participation necessitates time and effort, this requirement is often unmet in cases of slacktivism. In other words, online participation on social networks can be viewed as an initial stage leading to offline engagement if it demonstrates mobilization potential. This mobilization ability is linked to access to online platforms and their impact on public discourse coherence, which is a fundamental variable for analysing the relationship between social media influence and the democratization of political systems.

For a deeper understanding of this issue, we must consider Dahlberg's (2011) analysis concerning the interplay between democratic forms and social network usage, focusing on participatory potential.



TABLE 1: FOUR MODELS OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

Type of Model	Meaning in Online Space
Liberal-Individualist	Online referendums or online public opinion polls
Deliberative-Digital	Aa arena for expressing diverse ideas and discussing social issues
Digital Democracy	The uniqueness of online media among others
Autonomist-Marxist	Democratic subjects creating alternative structures to state and corporations

Source: Jungherr (2012), Gerbaudo (2012).

The basic analysis devoted to participation in the online space focuses on two main objects of interest: the definition of the term itself and its real effects. Regarding the first object, we discuss defining the boundary between real participation and participation in the online space. In the words of Carpentier (2011), this refers to the difference between interaction perceived as simple online activity facilitated by information and communication technologies, and full participation, which represents an activity centered on the decision-making process requiring more intense involvement. Within this context, we can identify false participation or slacktivism, where individuals believe they are engaged, whereas, in reality, they are not (Vaccari, Valeriani, Barberá, Bonneau, Jost, Nagler and Tucker 2015).

To further define the extent of the impact of online participation on the democratization of the political system, attention must be focused on three basic variables. Firstly, we discuss individuals' access to social networks. According to Habermas (2000), public space serves as a sphere for sharing diverse viewpoints. However, the heterogeneity of opinions can be constrained by access to information and communication technologies, which is influenced by media literacy or social capital. In this context, social networks may become exclusive spaces where only a certain segment of society has access. Unequal access to information through modern information and communication technologies exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities (Davis 2010; Norris 2001; Zillien and Hargittai 2009). The second object of interest examines how participation through social media affects the coherence of political communication. On one hand, there are benefits from a public sphere that supports diverse opinions, on the other hand, there is a tendency for like-minded individuals to isolate themselves (Dahlberg 2007). This isolation ultimately contradicts Habermas's theory. The final object of interest is the mobilizing nature of online participation. If online engagement serves as a precursor to offline participation, it can be viewed as mobilizing. However, Hirzall (2010) presents an opposing view that suggests online active individuals were already engaged before participating online. Similarly, Davis (2010) argues that innovative forms of communication serve as a source of deeper engagement for those already interested in politics. Conversely, inactive segments of society face even greater communication exclusion. The same results are examined in the findings of Kuba and Stejskal (2024) who indicate that e-participation, particularly e-voting, reduces citizens' voting costs, however empirical observations show that increased e-voting options do not correlate with higher voter turnout. Inactive citizens remain inactive even when given innovative voting options such as electronic voting.

Another factor influencing voter turnout is polling station location. Studies indicate that relocating polling stations closer to citizens can increase turnout by up to 4-5% (Cantoni 2020). Additionally, extending polling station hours may boost turnout by 0.5-0.9% (Potrafke and Roesel 2020). Bradfield and Johnson (2017) propose establishing a special election day to ensure all citizens have adequate time and conditions to participate in elections. Furthermore, holding multiple elections may also enhance electoral participation (Franklin 2001). It is crucial to note that none of these measures reduce potential citizens' costs as

effectively as e-voting does, however e-voting primarily benefits Internet users and more educated and affluent citizens (Oostveen and van den Besselaar 2004).

The question remains: what is the potential of online forms of participation? The professional community presents several perspectives. One viewpoint emphasizes the positive influence of online participation on offline engagement, particularly among young people, as it reduces turnout inequalities by motivating youth (Vassil, Solvak, Vinkel, Trechsel and Alvarez 2016). Social networks are believed to impact political interest comparably to television (Holt et al. 2013), with Boulianne (2011) arguing for an even stronger effect from social media than television.

Conversely, Vissers et al. (2011) suggest that online media serve merely as a supplement to political communication. The most sceptical viewpoint comes from Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison and Lampe (2011), who regard online activity as superficial political engagement and highlight the negatives associated with slacktivism, political activity with minimal impact on social change. The ambiguity surrounding the demonstrable effect of online participation on political engagement arises from various influencing factors. Vissers et al. (2011) assert that any citizen's online activity results from prior offline engagement. Meanwhile, proponents of online participation acknowledge a small but existing effect on individuals' political involvement (Boulianne 2011).

#### 4 DATA AND ANALYSIS

Based on the aforementioned diversity of opinions regarding the transformation and the subsequent relationship between traditional i.e. offline participation and innovative i.e. online participation, there is no consensus on which form is superior. This lack of agreement stems from varying degrees of attention to the issue under investigation. As previously mentioned, participation has been a long-term focus for political and social scientists, and analysing the heterogeneity of participation today requires an understanding of new innovative media from both the recipient's and provider's perspectives. Nevertheless, we can apply partial theoretical knowledge to practical contexts, specifically within the conditions of the Slovak Republic. A pertinent example is the parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2023, which were characterized by mobilization efforts that significantly utilized online platforms for voter activation.

Referring to the data in Tables 2 and 3, we can conclude that the online activism of the most successful political parties in both elections was closely related to their interactions in online spaces, particularly on social networks. In both elections, the political party with the highest number of interactions on these platforms emerged as the winner, with their leaders subsequently becoming prime ministers. Analyses by Havlík, Lysek, Spáč and Zvada (2024) demonstrate a new trend in electoral behaviour, highlighting the significance of leadership personality in shaping political party preferences.

TABLE 2: ONLINE CAMPAIGN OF SELECTED POLITICAL PARTIES AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ELECTION RESULTS

<b>Political Parties with the Highest Number of Interactions on Facebook in the Monitored Sample (November 2019-February 2020)</b>	<b>Coalition Party in 2020</b>	<b>Election results 2020</b>
OLANO (1,22 M) (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)	Yes	25,02%
SMER-SD (482 K) (Directon - Social Democracy)	No	18,29%
Sme rodina (467 K) (We are Family)	Yes	8,24%
SNS (278 K) (Slovak National Party)	No	3,16%
Sloboda a Solidarita (264 K) (Freedom and Solidarity)	Yes	6,22%
Vlast' (151 K) (Homeland)	No	2,93%
Dobrá voľba (90 K) (Good Choice)	No	3,06%
Za ľudí (88 K) (For the People)	Yes	5,77 %
Demokratická strana (75 K) (Democratic Party)	No	0,14%

Source: Author according to Klingová et al. (2020), Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2020).

TABLE 3: ONLINE CAMPAIGN OF SELECTED POLITICAL PARTIES AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ELECTION RESULTS

<b>Political Parties with the Highest Number of Posts in the Monitored Sample of the Most Popular Posts (July-September 2023)</b>	<b>Coalition Party in 2023</b>	<b>Election results 2023</b>
SMER-SD (56%) (Directon - Social Democracy)	Yes	22,94%
Hnutie Republika (17%) (Movement Republika)	No	4,75%
SNS (10%) (Slovak National Party)	Yes	5,62%
HLAS-SD (5%) (Voice - Social Democracy)	Yes	14,70%
OLANO (4%) (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)	No	8,89%
ĽSNS (3%) (People's Party Our Slovakia)	No	0,84%

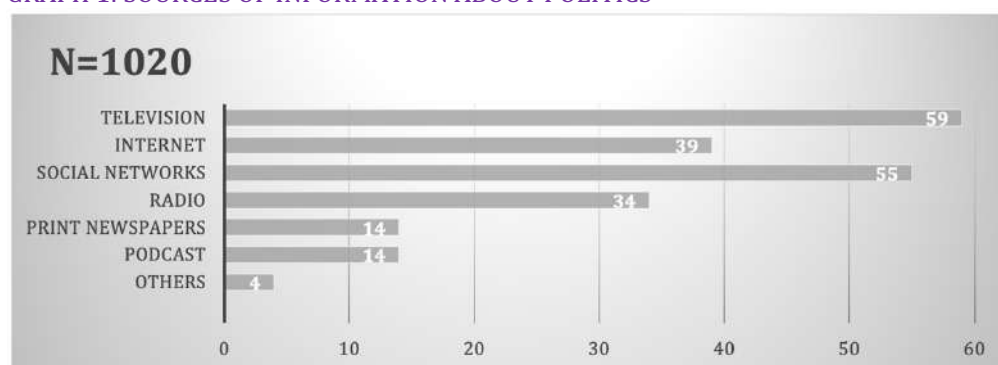
Source: Author according to Strauszová and Nemečková (2023), Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2023).

Social network Facebook had a significant influence on the information campaign before elections, and it also contributed to election dynamics (Klingová et al. 2020). Moreover, according to Kužel (2021), the activities and interactions of politicians on social networks influence a higher level of mobilization and information in parliamentary elections.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the global pandemic, we observe a notable increase in politicians' activity in online spaces even after election campaigns have concluded. While we do not consider the pandemic to be the sole reason for this rise in social media campaigns, it is certainly one contributing factor. It is also crucial for politicians to avoid being misled by slacktivism and instead encourage genuine participation.

While we seek parallels in our chosen examples, as mentioned earlier, this area warrants long-term data analysis. However, it is highly likely that due to ongoing modernization processes, online participation has the potential for sustained existence as a permanent aspect of political life in society. The elections in 2023 recorded the highest voter turnout since 2002, suggesting that political candidates' decisions to utilize social networks for campaigning may have played a significant role in increasing voter turnout (Kevický 2020). Furthermore, there is a noticeable upward trend in acquiring political information through online environments, particularly via the Internet and social networks. Similar findings are analysed by Murray-Švidroňová, Kaščáková, and Bambuseková (2019), who examined the Slovak presidential election and found that the information and recommendations spread by friends are often more trustworthy than candidates' posts. Their results emphasize the massive influence of social networks on voters, particularly highlighting that the number of comments from other voters influenced people's opinions more than candidates' posts. Moreover, among young people, this trend shows an equally significant increase. We assume that the sources from which individuals obtain political information also exert a mobilizing influence on electoral participation, as evidenced by a direct correlation between politicians' online activities and increased mobilization during elections. In other words, social media serves as a popular forum where voters can interact with politicians and express their views on politics and public affairs (Vaccari et al. 2015).

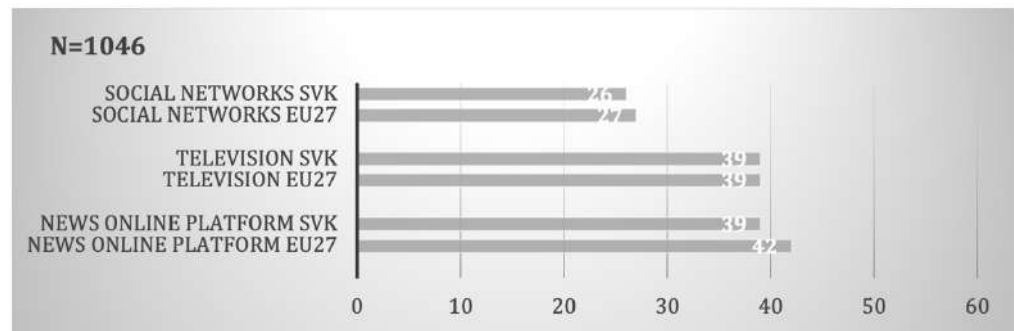
GRAPH 1: SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT POLITICS



Source: Author according to NMS Market Research Slovakia (2024).

Comparing the data from Table 1 and Table 2, along with Graph 1, we can observe a clear connection between the success of political parties in elections and their campaign activities in the online space. Political parties that received the highest number of votes were significantly active in the online environment. Based on the data from Graph 1, it is evident that citizens primarily obtain information from social networks and television. Notably, up to half of the population in Slovakia gets information about domestic and foreign politics from social networks. This trend is particularly pronounced among young people, where information acquisition from online sources reaches even higher levels, as illustrated in Graph 2.

GRAPH 2: SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT POLITICS AMONG YOUTH



Source: Author according to European Union (2025).

More than 18% of Slovak youth consider political podcasts a crucial source of information about politics and society. This places Slovakia third, after Denmark and Czechia (European Union 2025). Additionally, news podcasts have emerged as an interesting phenomenon, gaining a larger audience share than print media. From a sociological perspective, a typical podcast subscriber tends to be under the age of 35, holds a university degree, and resides in an urban area. In contrast, television remains the primary source of information for individuals aged over 65 (MNS.global 2024). Furthermore, it relates to the examination of voter turnout and geographical areas in the Slovak Republic, where Kevický (2020) notes higher voter turnout in developed regions situated in western and northwestern parts of the country.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The processes and possibilities of activating citizens to increase their interest in public affairs are a long-standing phenomenon. However, in recent years, we have observed a growing appeal for its enhancement. One outcome of these developments is the variety of alternatives that today's modern and constantly evolving society provides. We consider the significant impact of information and communication technologies on all areas of an individual's life, including civic participation, as a crucial tool for raising public awareness of public affairs. At the same time, we recommend these technologies as effective means to ensure transparency and openness in public administration. The same demand exists at the municipal level, influenced by challenges such as sound financial management, engagement of citizens, eGovernment, digital transformation, crisis management, and a package of ambitions known as European Green Deal (Ručinská, Mital', Fečko and Miňová 2022).

Based on our findings, we assert that the stated goal of this contribution has been achieved, specifically through an analysis of both traditional and innovative forms of participation. We have highlighted the ongoing relevance of utilizing online spaces to support activism and engage citizens in decision-making processes. Additionally, we examined the phenomenon of slacktivism and conducted a subsequent analysis of its impacts, evaluating both its potential positive and negative consequences.

We also note that our hypotheses were confirmed. Using the example of increased voter participation in the parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2023 in the Slovak Republic, we demonstrated the mobilization potential of campaigns conducted in online spaces, primarily through social networks (Strauszová and Nemečková 2023). We also confirm that slacktivism does not have the



potential to bring about significant social change without real participation. The same findings emerged in research by Kancik-Kořtun (2024), which confirmed through analysis across Visegrad countries that slacktivism will have negative long-term consequences for civic engagement and public spaces. Additionally, citizens' online views may remain less visible compared to their physical presence at public assemblies.

Given the continuously evolving processes of modernization, Europeanization, and globalization, we lean toward the prevailing perspective that online participation will play a significant role in the future. In light of recent global events, it is essential to acknowledge the fragility of democracy. As Norval (2016) emphasizes, we become democrats repeatedly through our daily activities, thus the health of democracy is also dependent on citizens' activism.

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## INOVATIVNE OBLIKE UDELEŽBE: PRIMER SLOVAŠKIH PARLAMENTARNIH VOLITEV

*Eden izmed dolgoročnih raziskovalnih interesov politologije je proučevanje obsega državljanske in politične participacije v javnih zadevah. Trenutni upad državljanske angažiranosti je pogosto povezan s krizo predstavniške demokracije, ki se kaže v naraščajočem nezaupanju do politikov in političnih institucij. Inovativne oblike participacije predstavljajo eno izmed možnih orodij za ublažitev tega stanja in spodbujanje večje vključenosti državljanov v demokratične procese. Rezultati primerjalne analize kažejo, da je spletni aktivizem politikov pomembno vplival na politično zavest volivcev ob slovaških parlamentarnih volitvah v letih 2020 in 2023. Poleg tradicionalnih medijev so imele spletne kampanje zlasti leta 2023 izrazit mobilizacijski učinek na volilno udeležbo. Kljub temu pa spletna participacija državljanov pogosto ostaja na ravni t. i. slaktivizma – oblike participacije, ki ne vodi do dejanskih družbenih sprememb.*

**Ključne besede:** sodelovanje; civilna družba; kriza predstavniške demokracije; slaktivizem.



# BEYOND ETHNIC OUTBIDDING: ELECTORAL DESIGN AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATIONS IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

Soran TARKHANI<sup>1</sup>

*This study investigates how electoral system design shapes intra-ethnic competition, focusing on Iraqi Kurdistan from 1992 to 2013. Challenging Horowitz's outbidding model, which assumes that ethnic parties escalate demands to outcompete rivals, this research demonstrates that electoral rules—including thresholds, ballot structures, and district demographics—mediate party strategies. Through mixed-methods analysis of elections, party platforms, and campaign materials, the findings reveal that high thresholds incentivize coalition-building, while their absence enables narrower appeals. Similarly, heterogeneous districts encourage inclusive strategies targeting diverse electorates, while homogeneous districts promote exclusivist appeals. The study concludes with actionable recommendations for electoral system design to balance inclusivity, stability, and representation in divided societies.*

**Key words:** electoral systems; intra-ethnic competition; thresholds; ballot structures; Kurdish politics; Iraqi Kurdistan; ethnic party strategies.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Electoral systems profoundly shape political parties' strategies, goals, and interactions, particularly in multiethnic societies where electoral rules mediate both inter- and intra-ethnic competition (Lijphart 1994; Taagepera and Shugart 1989; Reilly 2001; Norris 2004). While research has extensively examined inter-ethnic competition under varying electoral systems (Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 1999), the mechanisms shaping intra-ethnic competition remain less explored (Tarkhani 2024; Bochsler 2007; Birnir 2007). This study addresses this gap by investigating how electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district demographics shape intra-ethnic competition in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Horowitz's (1985) seminal outbidding model posits that intra-ethnic competition compels parties to escalate demands to surpass rivals. However, this model overlooks the moderating influence of electoral systems. Institutional constraints, such as high thresholds, encourage broad-based coalitions, while permissive rules, like open-list systems, enable fragmented appeals (Chandra 2004; Norris 2004). This research contends that electoral design, rather than ethnic rivalry alone, determines whether parties adopt bridging or bonding strategies.

Iraqi Kurdistan provides a compelling case study. Since its first parliamentary elections in 1992, the region has experienced significant shifts in electoral frameworks, including changes in thresholds, ballot structures, and district demographics. Major parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Gorran Movement, and the Kurdistan Islamic Union operate within a diverse demographic landscape that includes Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, and Yazidis. These parties' inclusion of minority communities in their electoral platforms is shaped by institutional incentives.

This study asks how do electoral system variables—thresholds, ballot structures, and district demographics—shape intra-ethnic party competition in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq? It further examines whether these institutional variables moderate the bonding vs. bridging strategies Kurdish parties adopt. For example, high thresholds historically fostered coalition-building, while semi-open-list systems enabled more fragmented campaigning (Carey and Shugart 1995; Hangartner 2019). Similarly, heterogeneous districts like Kirkuk incentivize inclusive rhetoric, while homogeneous regions such as Duhok encourage bonding appeals (Reilly 2001; Norris 2004). This study challenges conventional models of ethnic outbidding by demonstrating that electoral rules moderate party strategies, offering both theoretical and empirical insights into intra-ethnic dynamics.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between electoral systems and party behaviour remains central to political science research, particularly in divided societies. Electoral rules shape party strategies, influencing coalition-building, ideological positioning, and voter outreach (Lijphart 1994; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). Proportional representation (PR) systems, for instance, promote inclusivity and minority representation, but their effects depend on electoral thresholds. High thresholds incentivize coalition-building by limiting party fragmentation, whereas low thresholds enable smaller parties to pursue particularistic appeals (Bochsler 2007; Norris 2004).

While extensive research has examined inter-ethnic party competition (Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 2004), the study of intra-ethnic dynamics remains underdeveloped. Horowitz's outbidding model suggests that ethnic parties escalate demands to outflank rivals, yet this framework often overlooks the moderating effects of institutional constraints (Chandra 2004). Recent studies challenge this model by demonstrating how high thresholds and structured ballot systems reduce radicalization by fostering coalition-building and cross-ethnic cooperation (Reilly 2001; Lubin 2017).

Bochsler (2007) and Birnir (2007) highlight how intra-ethnic competition in permissive systems leads to fragmented party landscapes, particularly in

homogeneous regions. In contrast, structured electoral designs—through thresholds and ballot centralization—moderate exclusivist appeals by compelling parties to expand their voter base (Zuber 2015). This study builds on these insights to examine how electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district composition jointly shape intra-ethnic competition in Iraqi Kurdistan.

To conceptualize party strategies, the study adopts the bridging-bonding framework (Norris 2004; Reilly 2001). Bridging strategies, which emphasize cross-ethnic cooperation, are typically incentivized by high thresholds or heterogeneous districts. For instance, Kurdish parties in Kirkuk have historically emphasized regional development and shared governance to attract diverse voters (Rudaw 2019). In contrast, bonding strategies focus on consolidating support within a core ethnic base, often prevalent in homogeneous districts or low-threshold environments. The PUK's nationalist rhetoric in Sulaymaniyah during the 2014 elections exemplifies such bonding appeals (PUK Media 2014).

Despite advances in the field, existing research has yet to fully explain how electoral design interacts with district composition to shape intra-ethnic competition. While most studies focus on inter-ethnic competition (Horowitz 1985; Chandra 2004), the role of institutional constraints in moderating exclusivist appeals remains underexplored. By analysing electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district heterogeneity, this study provides new insights into how institutional design influences Kurdish party strategies, contributing to broader debates on party competition in divided societies.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines how electoral design and district composition shape intra-ethnic party competition, challenging Horowitz's (1985, 141) outbidding model, which posits that ethnic parties escalate demands to outcompete rivals within their ethnic group. While influential, this model overlooks the moderating effects of institutional constraints, such as electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district demographics, which collectively influence whether parties adopt bridging or bonding strategies (Chandra 2004, 20–21; Norris 2004, 89). By integrating insights from ethnic party competition, electoral system design, and district-level dynamics, this study develops a framework that emphasizes the interaction of institutional and contextual factors in shaping party behaviour.

Horowitz's (1985, 142–144) outbidding model assumes that ethnic identities are fixed and that intra-ethnic competition inevitably leads to the escalation of radical demands. However, this perspective neglects the role of institutional mechanisms that can moderate these tendencies. For example, high electoral thresholds compel parties to aggregate votes from diverse constituencies, promoting inclusive coalition-building. Similarly, ballot structures that centralize candidate selection encourage parties to prioritize collective goals over narrow appeals, reducing incentives for outbidding (Chandra 2004, 22–23; Norris 2004, 90). Building on critiques by Chandra (2004, 24) and Zuber (2015, 518–520), this study contends that intra-ethnic competition is shaped not solely by ethnic rivalry but also by institutional constraints and contextual pressures, particularly district composition.

Recent contributions to the study of ethnic party strategies (Norris 2004, 91–93; Zuber 2015, 519) highlight two primary strategies: bridging and bonding. Bridging strategies are inclusive appeals aimed at cross-ethnic cooperation and

are typically driven by heterogeneous districts or high electoral thresholds that require broad-based voter support. For example, in Kirkuk, Kurdish parties formed alliances such as the Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance to attract Arab and Turkmen voters, demonstrating the influence of district diversity on inclusive rhetoric (Rudaw 2019, 12; McDowall 2007, 321). Conversely, bonding strategies are exclusive appeals targeting a core ethnic base, often encouraged by homogeneous districts or low thresholds that lower the barriers to entry for narrowly focused parties. For instance, in Sulaymaniyah, the PUK's 2014 platform intensified ethnic demands to counter Gorran's urban reformist appeal, contrasting with the party's more inclusive rhetoric in Kirkuk (KNN 2013, 5–6; PUK Media 2014, 27). These strategies are not fixed but vary in response to institutional incentives and contextual pressures, such as district composition. Moreover, the interaction of electoral system variables—such as thresholds in heterogeneous districts or ballot structures in homogeneous areas—can amplify or mitigate these strategic choices (Reilly 2001, 65–67). Bridging strategies refer to inclusive appeals aimed at cross-ethnic cooperation—e.g., multilingual campaigns, interethnic electoral coalitions, or shared governance platforms. Bonding strategies emphasize ethnic identity, exclusivist narratives, or ideological particularism, typically resonating within a homogenous constituency. While not inherently radical, bonding strategies tend to reduce cross-ethnic coalition potential.

Three key institutional variables shape ethnic party strategies: electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district composition. High electoral thresholds act as filters, compelling parties to aggregate votes across diverse constituencies to secure representation, thereby reducing the viability of narrowly focused parties (Farrell 2011, 112). For example, the high 7% threshold in the 1992 Kurdistan elections forced the KDP and PUK to adopt bridging strategies focused on pragmatic goals such as security and stability (McDowall 2007, 323). In contrast, the removal of thresholds in the 2005 and 2009 elections enabled smaller parties, such as the Kurdistan Islamic Group and Kurdistan Islamic Union, to pursue bonding strategies with narrower Islamic/ideological appeals to Islamists who had traditionally voted to their Islamic parties (Al Baziani 2006, 243). In practice, KIG aligned with other Islamist factions rather than broad multi-ethnic coalitions. For instance, you could revise to: “the Kurdistan Islamic Group pursued bonding strategies by allying with fellow Islamist parties (e.g. the Kurdistan Islamic Union) and focusing on its conservative Kurdish support base (Romano 2006, 14; Baker 2014). Ballot structures further shape party strategies by influencing the degree of candidate centralization. Closed-list systems, which concentrate candidate selection within party leadership, promote party cohesion and coalition-building. By contrast, semi-open-list systems empower individual candidates, leading to personalized and fragmented campaigns. For example, the closed-list system in the 2005 and 2009 Kurdistan elections fostered broad coalitions, while the semi-open list introduced in 2013 encouraged localized appeals (Carey and Shugart 1995, 423; Hiltermann 2010, 19). District composition also plays a critical role: heterogeneous districts encourage bridging strategies that appeal to diverse electorates, while homogeneous districts incentivize bonding strategies that consolidate support within a core ethnic base. In Kirkuk, Kurdish parties adopted inclusive rhetoric to attract Arab and Turkmen voters, whereas in Duhok, the KDP's reliance on Kurdish nationalism and autonomy resonated with rural Kurdish constituencies (Reilly 2001, 68; Norris 2004, 94).

The interaction between these institutional variables and district composition further shapes party strategies. For example, high thresholds imposed by heterogeneous nature of districts reinforce bridging strategies by compelling



parties to seek cross-ethnic support. Kurdish parties in Kirkuk have emphasized regional development and shared governance to attract Turkmen and Arab voters (Rudaw 2019). Conversely, in homogeneous districts, high thresholds may encourage bonding strategies by limiting the viability of smaller, cross-cutting parties (Farrell 2011, 114). Similarly, semi-open-list systems in heterogeneous districts fragment bridging coalitions, while closed lists in such contexts foster cross-ethnic alliances by centralizing candidate selection (Carey and Shugart 1995, 424). These interactions are evident in Kurdish politics: Kirkuk's heterogeneous electorate required cross-ethnic coalition-building under the high threshold in 1992, while Sulaymaniyah's homogeneity facilitated exclusivist appeals after the removal of thresholds in 2005 (McDowall 2007, 324; Rudaw 2019, 13). Thus, electoral design, rather than ethnic rivalry alone, determines whether parties adopt bridging or bonding strategies, underscoring the importance of institutional context in shaping intra-ethnic competition.

This theoretical framework advances the study of ethnic party competition by demonstrating that electoral rules and district composition jointly shape party strategies. By showing that institutional constraints moderate the effects of intra-ethnic competition, the framework challenges the assumption that ethnic rivalry inevitably leads to radical demands. The interaction of electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district demographics determines whether parties adopt bridging or bonding strategies, offering a more nuanced understanding of political behaviour in divided societies. This framework thus provides a foundation for examining how electoral design can promote inclusive governance and mitigate ethnic polarization in multiethnic contexts.

#### 4 ANALYTICAL APPROACH: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a dual-method approach, combining process-tracing and qualitative content analysis to examine how electoral rules and district composition shape Kurdish party strategies. This mixed-method design facilitates causal inference and allows for a systematic analysis of party rhetoric, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of institutional and contextual influences.

Process-tracing establishes causal links by analysing sequences of institutional changes and their effects on party strategies. This method is particularly suited to examining the interaction between electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district composition (George and Bennett 2005, 215). The study applies process-tracing to determine whether shifts from bridging to bonding strategies correspond with changes in electoral rules. For example, the removal of high thresholds in 2005 lowered barriers for smaller parties, enabling bonding strategies such as Komal's religious appeals (McDowall 2007, 314–316; Wimmer 2013, 127; KNN 2009). Similarly, the introduction of a semi-open-list system in 2013 encouraged personalized campaigns, as evidenced by the PUK's localized appeals in Sulaymaniyah (PUK Media 2014, 23–24). Comparative analysis across districts further isolates the effects of institutional variables. While Kirkuk's demographic diversity incentivized cross-ethnic coalition-building, Duhok's homogeneity fostered bonding strategies centred on Kurdish nationalism (Helbijardin 2013, 67; Rudaw 2019, 12). To strengthen causal inference, the study triangulates electoral data, campaign materials, and secondary literature (Lijphart 1999, 45–47; McDowall 2007, 318–320; Wimmer 2013, 129), ensuring that alternative explanations, such as economic grievances or external pressures from Baghdad, are accounted for.

While this study primarily focuses on Kurdistan Region parliamentary elections (1992–2013), it also draws on Kurdish party strategies in federal and provincial elections in districts like Kirkuk and Mosul. These areas lie outside the administrative boundary of the Kurdistan Region but offer insights into party adaptation in heterogeneous electoral contexts.

In addition to process-tracing, qualitative content analysis identifies thematic patterns in party rhetoric, enabling systematic comparisons across elections and districts. The analysis draws on a broad collection of political documents, including electoral manifestos, speeches, and campaign materials from major Kurdish parties (KDP, PUK, Gorran, and Komal). These sources were obtained from party archives, independent media outlets (such as Rudaw and KNN), and official electoral commission reports, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. Materials were analysed in Kurdish, Arabic, and English to provide a comprehensive assessment of party rhetoric.

The coding process followed a structured framework to classify party rhetoric into two primary themes: bridging strategies, which emphasize cross-ethnic cooperation and inclusive governance, and bonding strategies, which focus on ethnic identity and exclusivist appeals. To enhance reliability, materials were collected from both party-affiliated and independent sources. Comparative analysis across heterogeneous and homogeneous districts further contextualized strategic variations, demonstrating how institutional and demographic factors influence party rhetoric.

By integrating process-tracing with qualitative content analysis, this study ensures a robust examination of Kurdish electoral politics. Process-tracing establishes temporal sequences linking institutional changes to shifts in party strategies, while content analysis provides a detailed examination of rhetorical patterns. Triangulation with secondary sources, including electoral commission data and scholarly analyses, strengthens the validity of the findings and mitigates potential biases.

## 5 ANALYTICAL APPROACH: EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

This study employs a descriptive analytical approach to examine the strategic adaptations of Kurdish political parties under varying electoral systems and district compositions. By analysing electoral results, party platforms, and campaign materials, the research identifies patterns in party behaviour, particularly in the balance between bridging and bonding strategies, coalition-building and fragmentation, and the increasing personalisation of campaigns. The findings demonstrate that electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district demographics are central factors in shaping intra-ethnic competition.

Electoral thresholds play a critical role in shaping party strategies by regulating inclusivity in political competition. High thresholds compel parties to aggregate votes across diverse constituencies, encouraging coalition-building and broad-based appeals. The seven percent threshold in the 1992 Kurdish parliamentary elections, for example, required dominant parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan to consolidate support across subethnic and regional lines. By contrast, smaller parties that relied on narrower bonding strategies, such as the Kurdistan Socialist Party, struggled to meet this threshold and failed to secure representation. However, the removal of

electoral thresholds in the 2005 and 2009 elections facilitated the emergence of smaller parties, including the Kurdistan Islamic Group and the Gorran Movement, both of which employed bonding strategies to target specific ideological or regional constituencies. This shift demonstrates how electoral rules shape the fragmentation of party competition over time.

Similarly, ballot structures influence intra-party dynamics and coalition stability. The transition from closed-list proportional representation in 2005 and 2009 to a semi-open-list system in 2013 altered electoral incentives, reshaping both party cohesion and candidate behaviour. Closed-list systems concentrated candidate selection within party leadership, strengthening ideological coherence and party unity. This system enabled the formation of broad electoral coalitions, such as the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, which campaigned on shared goals such as regional autonomy and national security. The introduction of a semi-open-list system in 2013, however, allowed individual candidates greater autonomy, fostering personalised campaign appeals at the expense of party cohesion. This was particularly evident within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Sulaymaniyah, where candidates adopted locally focused platforms, emphasising governance issues such as public services and anti-corruption rather than adhering strictly to nationalist rhetoric.

Beyond institutional constraints, district composition mediates the trade-off between inclusivity and exclusivity in party strategies. In Kirkuk, a multiethnic electoral district, Kurdish parties such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan moderated their rhetoric and pursued alliances with Turkmen and Arab voters, forming electoral coalitions such as the Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance. These alliances emphasised inclusive governance, appealing to voters across ethnic and sectarian divides. In contrast, in homogeneous Kurdish provinces such as Sulaymaniyah and Duhok, parties relied on bonding strategies, appealing primarily to core Kurdish constituencies. The Kurdistan Democratic Party, for example, capitalised on tribal networks and nationalist sentiment, reinforcing its electoral stronghold in rural areas, whereas Gorran's success in Sulaymaniyah was driven by urban discontent with the dominance of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, as well as a strong emphasis on local governance and anti-corruption measures.

To ensure the validity and reliability of findings, the study employs methodological triangulation, integrating quantitative electoral data with qualitative content analysis of party materials and secondary sources. Electoral records from the Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission and the Kurdish Institute for Elections provide a statistical foundation for evaluating vote shares and seat distributions. Meanwhile, qualitative analysis of party manifestos, candidate speeches, and media coverage contextualises shifts in party rhetoric, demonstrating how institutional incentives shape electoral strategies over time.

By focusing on electoral design and intra-ethnic competition in Iraqi Kurdistan, this study contributes to the broader understanding of political behaviour in divided societies. It highlights the extent to which electoral rules moderate competition, shaping whether parties adopt inclusive or exclusionary campaign strategies. The findings underscore the importance of considering district-level demographic factors alongside institutional incentives, providing insights that may inform electoral reforms in similar post-conflict settings.

## 6 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the study's empirical findings, demonstrating how electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district composition have shaped Kurdish party strategies. The analysis examines whether high thresholds incentivise coalition-building and broad-based strategies, whether low thresholds encourage more fragmented, bonding-oriented appeals, and how ballot structures affect party cohesion and candidate personalisation. The findings also assess how heterogeneous districts foster cross-ethnic coalition-building, while homogeneous districts promote exclusivist strategies.

### 6.1 Electoral Thresholds and Party Strategies

The experience of Kurdistan Region Parliamentary elections between 1992 and 2009 illustrates the influence of electoral thresholds on party strategies, representation, and political dynamics. The 1992 elections, conducted under a proportional representation system with a seven percent electoral threshold, highlight how institutional mechanisms shaped coalition-building and moderated exclusivist appeals. To illustrate the range of elections under analysis, table 1 summarizes key institutional features of each.

TABLE 1: INSTITUTIONAL FEATURES OF ELECTIONS EXAMINED IN THE STUDY

Year	Election Type	District	Threshold	Ballot Type
1992	KRI Parliament	KRI-wide	7%	Closed-list PR
2005	KRI Parliament	KRI-wide	None	Closed-list PR
2009	KRI Parliament	KRI-wide	None	Closed-list PR
2013	KRI Parliament	KRI-wide	None	Semi-open list PR

The Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the two dominant parties, adopted broad-based strategies to consolidate support across different subethnic and regional groups. The Kurdistan Democratic Party, for example, emphasised regional autonomy, economic development, and political stability, attracting support from tribal leaders and rural communities in Duhok and Erbil (McDowall 2007, 323). The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan combined Kurdish nationalism with a more inclusive appeal, integrating minority communities into its broader coalition, particularly in multiethnic regions such as Kirkuk (Leezenberg and Muller 1992, 58; Ahmad 2011, 112).

TABLE 2: ELECTORAL OUTCOMES IN THE 1992 IRAQI KURDISTAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Electoral Alliance	Votes	%	Seats	Leader
Kurdistan Democratic Party	437,879	45.3	51	Masoud Barzani
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	423,833	43.8	49	Jalal Talabani
Islamic Movement of Kurdistan	49,108	5.1	0	Osman Abdulaziz
Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party	24,882	2.6	0	Mahmoud Othman
Iraqi Communist Party	21,123	2.2	0	Aziz Muhammad
Kurdistan Popular Democratic Party	9,903	1.0	0	—
Independent Democrats	501	—	0	—

Source: Adapted from electoral commission reports and secondary sources (Habeeb 1998).

The threshold acted as a major barrier for smaller parties with more narrowly defined agendas. The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, which campaigned on an Islamic governance platform, struggled to attract secular and moderate voters, receiving just over five percent of the vote and failing to meet the threshold for

representation. Similarly, the Kurdish Socialist Party's nationalist platform was unable to generate broad-based support, leading to its electoral failure (Stansfield 2003, 211; Habeeb 1998, 147). These results demonstrate how high thresholds discourage fragmentation by preventing the success of narrowly focused parties.

The removal of the threshold in the 2005 and 2009 elections significantly altered these dynamics. Without restrictive barriers, smaller parties were able to enter the political arena and appeal to more narrowly defined constituencies. The Kurdistan Islamic Group secured parliamentary representation in 2005 by focusing on religious values and appealing to rural and conservative voters disillusioned with the dominant secular parties (Bakawan 2017, 109; PeyamTV 2009, 4). Similarly, the emergence of the Gorran Movement in 2009 marked a shift towards more localised, reform-driven politics. Gorran capitalised on dissatisfaction with the ruling parties by focusing on anti-corruption and governance reform, particularly in Sulaymaniyah (Romano 2010, 145; KNN 2009, 5).

**TABLE 3: 2005 KURDISTAN REGION PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS**

<b>Electoral Alliance</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Seats</b>	<b>Leader</b>
Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan	1,570,663	89.55	104	Jalal Talabani, Masoud Barzani
Kurdistan Islamic Group	85,237	4.86	6	Ali Bapir
Kurdistan Toilers Party and Independents	20,585	1.17	1	Qadir Aziz
Kurdistan Democratic Labour Party	11,748	0.67	0	—
Kurdistan People's Democratic Movement	10,953	0.62	0	—

Source: Kurdistan National Assembly, 2005 Election Data.

**TABLE 4: 2009 KURDISTAN REGION PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS**

<b>Political Entity</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Seats</b>
Kurdistani List (KDP & PUK)	1,076,370	57.34	59
Change List (Gorran)	445,024	23.75	25
Reform and Service List	240,842	12.8	13
Kurdistan Islamic Movement	27,147	1.45	2
Turkmen Democratic Movement	18,464	0.99	3

Source: Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission, 2009 Election Data.

These findings highlight the trade-offs associated with lower thresholds. While reducing barriers increased political diversity, it also led to greater political fragmentation, complicating coalition-building and governance. The Kurdish political landscape became increasingly competitive, with smaller parties challenging the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's dominance. However, the absence of a threshold also encouraged more ideologically narrow strategies, as parties could prioritise core supporters over broad-based appeals (Reilly 2001, 67; Bochsler 2012, 94).

Ballot structures also played a crucial role in shaping party strategies. The transition from a closed-list proportional representation system in 2005 and 2009 to a semi-open-list system in 2013 altered intra-party dynamics by shifting incentives from party-driven to candidate-driven campaigning. In closed-list systems, party leadership-controlled candidate selection, ensuring ideological coherence and fostering coalition-building. This system encouraged broad electoral alliances, such as the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, which promoted Kurdish autonomy and political stability as its primary objectives (Carey and Shugart 1995, 423; Bochsler 2007, 102).



The introduction of a semi-open-list system in 2013 allowed voters greater influence over candidate selection, leading to more individualised and localised campaigns. This change was particularly evident within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Sulaymaniyah, where candidates focused on governance issues such as public services and anti-corruption rather than prioritising broader nationalist objectives (Hangartner 2019, 211; PUK Media 2013, 24).

District composition also shaped electoral competition. In multiethnic provinces such as Kirkuk, Kurdish parties moderated their rhetoric and pursued alliances with Turkmen and Arab voters to broaden their electoral appeal. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's participation in the Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance illustrated how parties adjusted their strategies to attract diverse constituencies. By contrast, in more homogeneous Kurdish provinces such as Sulaymaniyah and Duhok, parties relied on bonding strategies that reinforced ethnic solidarity (McDowall 2007, 321; Wimmer 2013, 129).

These findings demonstrate the complex relationship between electoral thresholds, ballot structures, and district composition. High electoral thresholds encouraged broad-based strategies, while their removal fostered fragmentation. Changes in ballot structures influenced party cohesion, and district composition determined whether parties pursued inclusive, or exclusivist appeals. These dynamics illustrate how electoral design moderates' intra-ethnic competition, shaping party strategies in Kurdish politics.

## 6.2 Ballot Structures and Party Cohesion

The transition from closed-list systems in 2005 and 2009 to a semi-open-list system in 2013 reshaped intra-party dynamics and campaign strategies. Closed-list systems, which centralise candidate selection within party leadership, promote ideological coherence and coalition-building. Under this system, party elites control candidate placement on the list, ensuring alignment with broader party strategies. The Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, for example, united the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan under a platform focused on Kurdish autonomy and regional stability, minimising internal fragmentation and consolidating voter support (Carey and Shugart 1995, 423; Bochsler 2007, 102). The emphasis on party discipline in this system facilitated coalition-building and broad-based electoral appeals.

The introduction of a semi-open-list system in 2013 allowed voters to influence candidate selection, leading to greater personalisation of campaigns and a weakening of party cohesion. This shift was particularly evident within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Sulaymaniyah, where candidates increasingly focused on locally relevant issues such as public services and anti-corruption, rather than adhering to a unified party narrative centred on Kurdish nationalism (Hangartner 2019, 211; PUK Media 2013, 24). As a result, intra-party competition intensified, with candidates prioritising personal electoral appeal over party cohesion.

The shift from a closed-list to a semi-open-list system also affected campaign strategies. Under the closed-list system, parties structured their electoral messaging around collective goals, such as security and regional governance, with party elites directing candidate priorities. By contrast, the semi-open-list system incentivised candidates to develop individual platforms, leading to a more fragmented electoral landscape. This transformation illustrates how ballot structures influence the balance between party-driven and candidate-driven strategies, with semi-open lists encouraging greater competition within parties



while reducing ideological unity.

### 6.3 District Composition and Strategic Variation

District demographics shape electoral strategies by determining the trade-offs between inclusivity and exclusivity. In Kirkuk, a multiethnic province, Kurdish parties moderated their rhetoric to appeal to Turkmen and Arab voters, forming alliances such as the Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance (McDowall 2007, 321; Wimmer 2013, 129). These alliances emphasised cross-ethnic cooperation and inclusive governance, demonstrating the role of district heterogeneity in incentivising broad-based electoral strategies. The presence of multiple ethnic groups created electoral incentives for parties to adopt bridging strategies aimed at securing support across different communities.

By contrast, homogeneous provinces such as Sulaymaniyah and Duhok encouraged bonding strategies that reinforced ethnic solidarity and local grievances. In these provinces, electoral competition was predominantly intra-Kurdish, reducing the necessity for cross-ethnic coalition-building. The Kurdistan Democratic Party leveraged tribal networks and nationalist rhetoric to consolidate its core voter base, appealing to rural communities through promises of economic development and cultural preservation (Reilly 2001, 65; Gulan Magazine 2013, 8). Similarly, Gorran's success in Sulaymaniyah was rooted in its emphasis on local governance and anti-corruption, resonating with urban voters who had grown disillusioned with the long-standing dominance of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Romano 2010, 145).

These patterns illustrate the extent to which district composition interacts with electoral design in shaping party strategies. In heterogeneous provinces, parties are incentivised to broaden their electoral appeals and form cross-ethnic alliances to maximise vote share. In homogeneous districts, where electoral competition occurs predominantly within a single ethnic group, parties rely on bonding strategies that emphasise ethnic identity, political grievances, and local concerns. The variation in party approaches across different districts underscores the importance of institutional and demographic factors in structuring intra-ethnic electoral competition.

### 6.4 District Composition and Party Strategies

The demographic and geographic composition of electoral districts in Iraqi Kurdistan has played a critical role in shaping party strategies and electoral outcomes. Heterogeneous provinces, such as Kirkuk and Mosul, incentivised bridging strategies that prioritised cross-ethnic collaboration, while homogeneous provinces, like Duhok and Sulaymaniyah, encouraged bonding strategies targeting core ethnic constituencies and localised appeals. These dynamics illustrate the interaction between district composition and electoral institutions, demonstrating how demographic diversity moderates the effects of electoral rules.

In heterogeneous provinces like Kirkuk, where Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and other minorities coexist, Kurdish parties adopted inclusive strategies to broaden their appeal beyond core Kurdish constituencies. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan emphasised infrastructure development and coexistence, framing demands such as the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution as a regional benefit rather than an ethnic one (PUK Media 2014, 26). Campaign materials were produced in Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish, underscoring this inclusive approach (Rudaw 2019, 12; McDowall 2007, 321). Similarly, the Kurdistan Democratic

Party employed coalition-building strategies, such as the Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance during the 2013 Mosul provincial elections, to attract support from Turkmens, Christians, and other groups. This alliance secured 29.87 percent of the vote and 11 seats by emphasising shared goals such as security and economic development (IHEC 2013, 8).

TABLE 5: RESULTS OF THE 2013 PROVINCIAL ELECTION IN MOSUL PROVINCE

<b>Electoral Entity</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Seats</b>
Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance	173,687	29.87	11
Muttahidoon (Uniters for Reform)	129,556	22.28	8
Loyalty to Nineveh List	66,517	11.44	4
United Nineveh	45,971	7.91	3

Source: IHEC 2013, Provincial Election Data.

By contrast, homogeneous provinces like Duhok and Sulaymaniyah encouraged bonding strategies aimed at consolidating core Kurdish constituencies. In Duhok, the Kurdistan Democratic Party invoked Kurdish nationalism and leveraged tribal networks, emphasising its historical role as a defender of Kurdish identity and rights (Stansfield 2003, 210; Xebat 2014, 6). Meanwhile, in Sulaymaniyah, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the reformist Gorran Movement competed intensely during the 2014 provincial elections. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan adopted a nationalist platform centred on radical ethnic demands, including calls for a Kurdish confederation if Article 140 remained unimplemented. In contrast, Gorran focused on anti-corruption and economic grievances, resonating with urban voters frustrated by governance failures (Romano 2010, 145; PUK Media 2014, 27).

TABLE 6: RESULTS OF THE 2014 PROVINCIAL ELECTION IN SULAYMANIYAH PROVINCE

<b>Party</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Seats</b>
Gorran Movement	359,600	39.66	12
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	318,723	35.15	11
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	88,655	9.57	3

Source: IHEC 2014, Provincial Election Data.

These findings illustrate how district heterogeneity fosters bridging strategies, while homogeneity enables bonding approaches that target specific constituencies. In more diverse electoral provinces, political parties must appeal to a broader constituency, incorporating cross-ethnic alliances to maximise electoral success. In contrast, homogeneous provinces reduce the incentive for coalition-building, enabling parties to prioritise ethnically driven or localised policy appeals.

However, the Kurdish case presents a more complex dynamic than traditional ethnic outbidding models suggest. Rather than consistently escalating ethnic demands, parties in homogeneous provinces often prioritised governance and socioeconomic reforms over radical nationalist rhetoric. The ability of parties to adapt their strategies to local electoral contexts reflects the moderating effects of institutional rules and voter preferences.

### 6.5 Interactions Between Institutions and District Composition

The interaction between electoral systems and district composition has profoundly shaped party strategies and electoral outcomes in Iraqi Kurdistan. Institutional design and demographic diversity have either amplified or constrained exclusivist appeals, depending on the electoral incentives present in each district. Heterogeneous provinces like Kirkuk incentivised bridging strategies aimed at cross-ethnic collaboration, while homogeneous provinces such as Duhok and Sulaymaniyah enabled bonding strategies that reinforced ethnic solidarity and localised concerns.

In Kirkuk, the multiethnic composition—comprising Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and others—created electoral pressures that discouraged reliance on ethnic-based appeals. Even in the absence of formal institutional barriers such as electoral thresholds, the necessity of attracting diverse voter blocs compelled dominant parties like the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party to adopt inclusive platforms. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan framed policies such as the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution as broadly beneficial to all communities, rather than as an exclusively Kurdish demand. The Kurdistan Democratic Party, meanwhile, emphasised regional stability and coalition-building, as exemplified by the Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance's success in the 2013 Mosul provincial elections (McDowall 2007, 322; Rudaw 2019, 13; IHEC 2013, 9). Smaller parties that lacked broad-based appeals, such as Komal and the Kurdistan Islamic Union, struggled to gain traction in diverse contexts (Ordeshook and Shvetsova 1994, 105).

Homogeneous provinces like Duhok allowed parties to adopt bonding strategies without significant electoral risk. The Kurdistan Democratic Party leveraged its deep organisational roots in the region, invoking Kurdish nationalism, tribal networks, and cultural identity to consolidate its voter base. This focus on ethnic solidarity was complemented by socioeconomic initiatives, such as rural development and infrastructure improvements, further solidifying the party's dominance (Stansfield 2003, 214; Norris 2004, 92). The district's homogeneity reduced the need for coalition-building, enabling the Kurdistan Democratic Party to maintain electoral dominance without moderating its rhetoric.

Sulaymaniyah presented a more complex dynamic due to its subethnic diversity and evolving institutional context. The introduction of a semi-open-list system in 2013 decentralised party control, allowing individual candidates to tailor their appeals to localised concerns rather than adhering to strict party discipline. This system amplified personalistic campaigns, as seen in the competition between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Gorran. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan emphasised historical achievements in Kurdish autonomy while addressing local grievances related to public services and rural development. Gorran, in contrast, capitalised on urban dissatisfaction by promoting anti-corruption measures and governance reform. This fragmentation weakened party cohesion, reflecting the trade-offs associated with decentralised electoral systems in homogeneous but politically competitive provinces (Goran.net 2019, 11; Taagepera and Shugart 1989, 221).

TABLE 7: ELECTORAL DYNAMICS BY DISTRICT IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

District	Key Parties	Strategy	Outcome
Kirkuk	KDP, PUK	Bridging: Multiethnic cooperation	Dominance of KDP/PUK coalitions
Duhok	KDP	Bonding: Kurdish nationalism, tribal ties	KDP landslide
Sulaymaniyah	PUK, Gorran	Localised appeals under semi-open lists	Gorran gains at PUK's expense

Source: Adapted from electoral commission reports, secondary sources (McDowall 2007; Habeeb 1998), and Rudaw (2019).

These patterns underscore the critical interplay between electoral rules and district demographics. High electoral thresholds in heterogeneous provinces, as observed in Kirkuk, mitigated polarisation by fostering cross-ethnic collaboration. In contrast, low thresholds and semi-open-list systems in homogeneous provinces, such as Sulaymaniyah, exacerbated political fragmentation by amplifying localised appeals. The Kurdish case also challenges conventional ethnic outbidding models, as even in homogeneous provinces, parties frequently prioritised governance and socioeconomic reforms over radical ethnic demands.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how electoral design and district composition shape party strategies in divided societies, addressing key gaps in the literature on intra-ethnic competition. By analysing the interplay between institutional rules and demographic diversity, the research provides a deeper understanding of how party strategies evolve under varying electoral conditions. The findings underscore that high electoral thresholds and closed-list systems incentivise bridging strategies and promote ideological cohesion, particularly in heterogeneous provinces. Conversely, low thresholds and semi-open-list systems enable personalised and bonding-focused appeals, enhancing political representation but increasing party fragmentation.

The study also offers theoretical and practical insights into the role of electoral institutions in moderating ethnic competition. The findings challenge the applicability of Horowitz's (1985, 144–146) outbidding model, demonstrating that institutional constraints and voter preferences often prevent the escalation of radical ethnic appeals. Instead, electoral design moderates intra-ethnic rivalry, promoting more inclusive political behaviour. These insights are particularly relevant for electoral policymakers considering how to balance representation with political stability in contested and multiethnic regions.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. It relied on publicly available election results and qualitative assessments of party strategies, which may not fully capture the complexities of voter behaviour or intra-party dynamics. Future research could integrate survey data, voter interviews, or experimental methods to provide a more detailed understanding of how electoral design influences political strategy. Additionally, while the study's findings offer valuable insights into electoral competition in Iraqi Kurdistan, further research is needed to explore whether similar mechanisms apply in other political settings.

By contextualising these findings within broader debates on electoral design, this study advances the understanding of intra-ethnic party competition and contributes to discussions on electoral reform in divided societies. Tailoring electoral systems to balance inclusivity and stability remains a critical challenge

in politically contested regions. Future research should further examine how these dynamics manifest across different electoral configurations, enhancing the understanding of political behaviour in ethnically diverse societies and informing electoral reforms aimed at fostering more inclusive governance.

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## ONKRAJ ETNIČNEGA PRESEGANJA: VOLILNA ZASNOVA IN STRATEŠKE PRILAGODITVE V IRAŠKEM KURDISTANU

*Članek analizira vpliv zasnove volilnega sistema na znotrajetnično politično konkurenco, s posebnim poudarkom na primeru iraškega Kurdistanu v obdobju 1992–2013. Študija izpodbija Horowitzov model »draženja«, ki predpostavlja, da etnične stranke stopnjujejo svoje zahteve z namenom prehiteti etnične tekmece. Nasprotno avtor ugotavlja, da so strategije političnih strank v večji meri oblikovane z volilnimi pravili – vključno z volilnimi pragovi, strukturo glasovnic in demografskimi značilnostmi volilnih okrožij. Z uporabo mešanih metod, ki vključujejo analizo volilnih rezultatov, programov političnih strank in kampanjskih gradiv, študija pokaže, da visoki volilni prag spodbuja oblikovanje predvolilnih koalicij, medtem ko njegova odsotnost omogoča polarizirane in partikularne nagovore volilcev. Podobno heterogena volilna okrožja spodbujajo vključujoče, široko usmerjene kampanje, medtem ko homogena okrožja krepijo ekskluzivistične, etnično usmerjene strategije. Študija se zaključi s praktičnimi priporočili za oblikovanje volilnih sistemov, ki naj bi v razdeljenih družbah uravnotežili cilje politične vključenosti, stabilnosti in reprezentativnosti.*

**Ključne besede:** volilni sistemi; znotrajetnična konkurenca; volilni prag; glasovne strukture; kurdska politika; iraški Kurdistan; strategije etničnih strank.

## SWIMMING AGAINST THE EUROPEAN CURRENT: SMALL SIZE AS A THREAT TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IN CZECHIA

Jakub HORNEK and Pavel MAŠKARINEC<sup>1</sup>

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*Czechia represents an outlying case of a settlement structure where more than half of the municipalities have under 500 inhabitants but account for only eight percent of the country's total population. This study analyses the factors behind variability in the amount of liabilities (as a possible indicator of development) in the balance sheets of the more than three thousand smallest Czech municipalities. The results show that the amount of liabilities is strongly positively associated with municipality size, which also explains a negative effect of voter turnout, which decreases with growing local population in the Czech context. Besides the effect of size, there are also constant (albeit much weaker) effects of geographical factors, with higher amounts of liabilities found in larger municipalities in closer vicinity to regional centres and outside structurally disadvantaged regions. This suggests the problem of an ineffective state of local governments in Czechia. Thus, the smallest municipalities with low levels of competitiveness (i.e. citizens' low willingness to join their local governments) found in peripheral regions or in the peripheries of more developed regions are faced with major developmental problems. An increasing number of municipalities are stagnating due to insufficient funds for their development.*

**Key words:** Czechia; local governments; small municipalities; competitiveness; liabilities; sustainable development; municipal reform.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Whereas Western Europe at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a continued process of municipal amalgamation aimed at rationalising the workings of local governments, Czechia, along with other Central European countries, set out on a different path in the early 1990s. Paradoxically, the democratisation and democratic consolidation processes in Czechia contributed to a substantial increase in the number of municipalities. Nevertheless, this process took place in response to forced amalgamations implemented under the communist regime.<sup>2</sup> Thus, by the end of the millennium, Czechia exhibited a record increase of the number of municipalities, both in European comparison and globally, or at least among OECD countries (see OECD and UCLG 2016).<sup>3</sup> Between 1 January 1990 and the first free local elections that took place on 24 November 1990 (following the first free parliamentary elections of 8–9 June), a total of 1,649 new municipalities were formed in what is today Czechia. And by the next local elections of 1994, the number of municipalities approximated today's figure at 6,226.<sup>4</sup>

The subsequent period only saw a very minor increase. As a result, Czechia has one of the most fragmented settlement structures and an extremely high number of very small municipalities. For this reason, the country (especially its experts) has been consistently debating the possibilities of municipal amalgamation. This is because the territorial-administrative fragmentation reflected in the existence of many small municipalities impacts negatively on the cost effectiveness of public services and on the availability of the necessary skills and administrative capacities (including difficulties recruiting qualified personnel). Due to this mix of factors, most Czech municipalities are too small to ensure cost-effective provision of public services. Indeed, findings from other countries indicate a U-shaped relationship between the cost-of-service provision and municipality size (OECD 2020).<sup>5</sup> The cost of public service provision is further increased by the fact that many of these small Czech municipalities are outlying and sparsely populated.

However, while experts have consistently recommended increasing the effectiveness of local administrations (Sila and de la Maisonnette 2021; OECD 2016; NERV 2022), there has been strong resistance against any amalgamation, especially by representatives of small municipalities (Vajdová and Illner 2004;

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<sup>2</sup> Czechoslovakia was established in 1918, and by 1921, the number of municipalities in the Czech lands reached 1,413. An additional increase after World War II resulted in a total of 11,459 municipalities (1950), yet a subsequent centrally managed administrative amalgamation ensured a gradual decrease of the number of municipalities to 8,726 (1961), 7,511 (1970), 4,778 (1980), and 4,100 in the year 1990 (see Kučera 1994, 78–80).

<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, Czechia has the lowest median municipality size of all EU and OECD countries, namely 1,710 inhabitants per municipality, compared to 10,250 in OECD countries and 5,960 in the EU (OECD 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Other post-communist countries of Central Europe also exhibited growing numbers of municipalities, albeit none as sharp. For example, Slovakia saw an increase by 198 municipalities between 1989 and 2002, 41 more municipalities were added till 2012, and the total number reached 2,890 in 2022. The number of Polish municipalities first decreased from 5,599 in 1970 to 2,070 in 1980. However, subsequent reforms of the years 1992, 1994, 1997, and 1999 led to an increase to 2,497 municipalities (2012) and finally to 2,477 (2022) (see Hornek 2016, 32–33; Statistics Poland 2023).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Spanish researchers estimated that municipalities with a population of 1,000 have a 20% higher total expenditure per inhabitant than those with a population of 5,000. Swiss evidence shows higher cost and lower service quality in municipalities with under 500 inhabitants (OECD 2020).

Ryšavý and Bernard 2011; Ježek 2016) and associations of municipalities (SMO ČR 2010; SMS ČR 2022),<sup>6</sup> which enjoy long-term support in both chambers of the Czech parliament.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the resistance to amalgamation is contrary to the facts of everyday life and administration of Czech municipalities (see OECD 2023), something admitted by mayors themselves in interviews (see Hornek 2016). More specifically, small municipalities with under 500 inhabitants,<sup>8</sup> i.e. more than half of Czech municipalities, can only perform so-called maintenance functions and often fail to comply with legal requirements (of the Act on Municipalities)<sup>9</sup> by not developing due to a lack of funds for that purpose; keeping the municipalities going is basically their only activity (Bubeníček 2010; Hornek 2016). As a result, citizens of small municipalities are not guaranteed public and medical services, transportation, education, etc., despite explicit intentions of the central government (see Vláda ČR 2017, 75–88).<sup>10</sup> This situation is also contrary to the strategic Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 and specifically to the Czech response to those goals (Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030), as municipalities have failed to create (or are not even creating) conditions for sustainable development, adaptation to the ongoing climate change, or addressing other negative phenomena.

Relatedly, municipalities are often directed by part-time mayors, who work their regular jobs and only devote their leisure time to administering local affairs. This tends to be associated with weak administrative and expert capacities (Hornek 2022)<sup>11</sup> due to lower education and skills levels of local leaders in small municipalities (Střeleček 2006) and local people's much lower willingness to run for local offices, i.e. to participate in administering their municipality (Ryšavý and Bernard 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> This is especially the oldest association, the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic (established 1989) with a membership of 2,828 municipalities, i.e. 45.16% of the total number, and a combined population of 8,477,060, i.e. 78.29% of the country's total population (10,827,529) (SMO ČR 2024). A younger organisation, the Association of Local Authorities of the Czech Republic, was established in 2008, primarily brings together small municipalities, and has over 2,200 members (SMS 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Historically, proponents of small municipalities have been especially represented in the Senate (the upper chamber of the Czech parliament), which is strongly localised due to a majoritarian electoral system. The chances of rationalising Czech local administration have especially diminished after 2010, when the Mayors and Independents (STAN) joined the lower chamber of the Czech parliament (see Maškarinec 2020). After the election of 2021, STAN became the third-strongest group in the parliament and a member of the government coalition, holding the office of the 1<sup>st</sup> Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior.

<sup>8</sup> The array of functions performed by a municipality depends on the size of its population (Swianiewicz 2002). In the Czech case, this is amplified by the financial redistribution system in place, as the incomes of small municipalities consist primarily of redistributed tax revenue. For that reason, tax revenue is key to whether a municipality can be truly autonomous and what services it will be able to provide.

<sup>9</sup> For general information on the development and issues of public administration at the local and regional levels in Czechia, see OECD (2023).

<sup>10</sup> This also shapes the options small municipalities have in responding to new technological challenges and potentials, e.g. those presented by the smart cities concept. In Czechia, this concept has typically been implemented by larger or medium-sized municipalities (see MMR 2018). For example, the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic had its own project/concept, Smart Czechia, for the entire country because small municipalities are not actually equipped to implement this.

<sup>11</sup> Worth mentioning here is the fact that Czechia does not consider itself bound by all provisions of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, e.g. by the provision that "the conditions of service of local government employees shall be such as to permit the recruitment of high-quality staff on the basis of merit and competence". This, too, has been criticised by Czech associations of municipalities.

These facts have long been known to the Czech government, including the Ministry of Interior, which used to have a working group for small municipalities whose members argued that small municipalities: (1) have difficulties performing the roles of local government; (2) have such local fiscal revenue that fails to cover even basic investments; (3) are unable to tackle the lack of economies of scale in providing public services; (4) are faced with unfavourable local age structures; (5) have difficulties recruiting skilled personnel; (6) sometimes have difficulties manning their local councils; etc. (Working group of the Ministry of the Interior as quoted in Hornek 2016, 58). In addition, the Ministry of Finance has been consistently pointing to similar issues (Hornek 2016; Matej 2021). Even if these problems of managing small municipalities have been known to government institutions, independent experts, and the last ten Czech governments (since 2005), they have not been reflected in those governments' policy statements. Therefore, no substantial shifts have been achieved.<sup>12</sup>

Of high importance here is the fact that all the above aspects are directly or indirectly associated with municipalities' financial autonomy (and fiscal revenues), which ultimately shapes their local (political) life. At the same time, the question of the municipal financial autonomy plays a very important role (given the settlement structure and the size and number of municipalities in Czechia, among other things).<sup>13</sup> For the above reasons, the present paper focuses on one of the important characteristics of the financial autonomy of municipalities, namely their liabilities, i.e. all funding they have to pay back (equity is not included). Such liabilities often comprise of pre-funding for municipal investments. We build on the assumption that a growth of municipal liabilities may indicate a local government's higher willingness to invest in local development. This is because Czech municipalities find it less costly to use debt financing for local development, something even the Ministry of Finance has been encouraging (Matej 2021, 2022).<sup>14</sup>

The goal of the present paper is to identify factors that explain higher municipal liabilities as a possible indicator of local development in the smallest Czech municipalities with under 500 inhabitants in the years 2014 and 2018. There are several reasons for limiting the research sample to the category of municipalities with under 500 inhabitants: (1) it accounts for most Czech municipalities (55% – a unique value in the European context, as will be shown below); (2) local

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the right-wing government of Petr Nečas (13 July 2010 – 10 July 2013) was the first to mention an effort to reduce an existing discriminatory difference in revenue per inhabitant between the "poorest" and the "richest" municipalities by bringing the situation in line with advanced EU countries. The same government also intended to analyse possible steps toward solving the issues of municipal indebtedness (Vláda 2010). The governments of PM Andrej Babiš (13 December 2017 – 17 December 2021) declared their support for collaboration in addressing the issues of the rural space between municipalities and for upholding the principles of LEADER partnerships (Vláda 2018). More to Czech governments, see Hloušek and Kopeček (2014), Brunclík (2016), Svačinová (2016) or Naxera (2024).

<sup>13</sup> Concerning the subnational level in CEE, Czechia ranks right behind the leading Poland (followed by Lithuania, Estonia, and Slovakia) in the Local Autonomy Index (LAI), whereas Latvia, Slovenia, and Hungary have exhibited (after 2010) the lowest levels of LAI (Ladner et al. 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Municipal financial management exhibits a number of problems, e.g. a failure to tap available funding (which results in the loss thereof), revenue irresponsibility, failure to generate additional income from property tax, inconsistencies between local service fees and the costs of providing such services (waste collection), and pricing local services out of touch with actual costs (public transportation, rent, heat, water, sewage). Therefore, municipalities often rely on subsidies, with frequent pressures on the central budget to repeatedly increase the transfers they receive (the allocation of certain tax revenues to local governments, so-called "budgetary use of taxes" or BUT) (Matej 2021, 2022).

politics in Czechia is primarily characterised by the realities of this category of municipalities. It is dominated by independent candidates, with almost no political parties running in elections (and if they do, their candidates are often not even their members); (3) the smallest municipalities find it difficult to comply with their legal obligations and ensure local development, only funding maintenance activities; (4) relatedly, these municipalities often do not have enough funding for their operations. As they often lack professional management and sufficient administrative capacities, they may not manage their funds effectively (leaving money idling on their bank accounts); (5) consequently, precisely these municipalities would be affected by a possible municipal reform (amalgamation).

Our primary reason for limiting the time frame of the analysis to the years 2014 and 2018 is to focus on years in which regular local elections took place. By using the four-year interval, we can work with the results of local elections for the entire size group. At the same time, the analysis relies not only on election data but also on financial indicators. The revenues of municipalities in this size category are dominated by tax revenues allocated to each of them through the so-called budgetary use of taxes (BUT) system.<sup>15</sup> The parameters and other characteristics of the BUT system are based on political decisions and subject to ongoing political debates.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary subsidies for self-employed persons and businesses were financed from local budgets. As a result, municipalities persuaded the central government to introduce a special compensatory bonus. This, along with developments and changes in the system of monitoring local finances, prevents any meaningful long-term comparison of local revenues, including any comparison of the period of interest with previous or subsequent time periods.

## 2 CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPEAN MUNICIPAL STRUCTURES<sup>17</sup>

The differences between the municipal structures of European countries are primarily due to each country's historical development and its concept of the roles and functions to be performed by municipalities. Even the World War II did not break the continuity of the different approaches to transforming a country's municipal structure. Overall, though, most countries prefer reducing the number/amalgamation of their municipalities to make their functioning more cost-effective. The amalgamation processes in European countries began especially in the 1960s and 1970s, then slowed down in the 1980s (due to the predominant neoliberal approach and low confidence in the possibilities of directing society). In the early 1990s, though, the opinions in Europe changed again, also because of the globalisation wave and efforts to further democratise public administration (Keating 1995; Illner 2006).

This was accompanied by a renewed tendency to form larger municipalities in many countries, including the new federal states of Germany, Denmark, The

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<sup>15</sup> Local tax revenue is significantly shaped by the BUT system that redistributes shared taxes (especially VAT, personal income tax, corporate tax, and property tax) between the different public budgets (central, regional, local). Since 2018, municipalities have been obtaining a total share of 23.58% of the above shared taxes.

<sup>16</sup> Between the years 2017 and 2024, the BUT legislation was amended more than ten times, i.e. on average more often than every two years.

<sup>17</sup> When referring to Europe in this paper, we mean the current 27 member states of the EU, 4 EFTA countries, and the United Kingdom.



Netherlands, or Lithuania (Baldersheim and Rose 2010). Over the past 15 years, this trend has remained visible in Europe, as shown by Table 1 in more detail. In the years 2007–2022, the number of municipalities in European countries decreased by 5,608 (6%) to a total of 89,145. The strongest decreases in the number of municipalities were seen in Ireland (by 72.8%), Greece (by 68.9%), Estonia (by 65.2%), or Latvia (by 60.9%). More than 20-percent decreases occurred in Finland (25.7%), Switzerland (22.1%), and The Netherlands (20.2%), and 11–20% decreases in Iceland (19%), Norway (17.4%), United Kingdom (13.3%), Germany (12.4%), Luxembourg (12.1%), and Austria (11.2 %).<sup>18</sup> Measured by the total number of amalgamated municipalities, two countries with the highest numbers of municipalities (France and Germany) were most affected by this trend.

TABLE 1: DEVELOPMENT OF THE NUMBER OF MUNICIPALITIES IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, 2007–2022

Rank	European state	Year 2007 Total no. of municipalities	Year 2022 Total no. of municipalities	Change	Rank	European state	Year 2007 Total no. of municipalities	Year 2022 Total no. of municipalities	Change
1	France	36,683	34,966	–1,717	17	Poland	2,479	2,477	–2
2	Germany	12,312	10,789	–1,523	18	Slovakia	2,891	2,890	–1
3	Greece	1,034	322	–712	19	Denmark	98	98	0
4	Switzerland	2,758	2,148	–610	20	Cyprus	615	615	0
5	Austria	2,357	2,093	–264	21	Lithuania	60	60	0
6	Italy	8,101	7,904	–197	22	Malta	68	68	0
7	Estonia	227	79	–148	23	Portugal	308	308	0
8	Finland	416	309	–107	24	Sweden	290	290	0
9	The Netherlands	431	344	–87	25	Liechtenstein	11	11	0
10	Ireland	114	31	–83	26	Croatia	556	556	0
11	Norway	431	356	–75	27	Bulgaria	264	265	1
12	Latvia	110	43	–67	28	Slovenia	210	212	2
13	United Kingdom	437	379	–58	29	Hungary	3,175	3,178	3
14	Iceland	79	64	–15	30	Romania	3,173	3,181	8
15	Luxembourg	116	102	–14	31	Czechia	6,249	6,258	9
16	Belgium	589	581	–8	32	Spain	8,111	8,131	20

Sources: Own elaboration of data by Eurostat (2023), statistical offices, and Baldersheim and Rose (2010).

As a result of what was practically a long-term pressure for amalgamation, with countries transforming their municipal structures (in the context of their respective concepts of municipal roles and functions) in both Western European and CEE countries, most European countries currently exhibit low (and in most cases still decreasing) levels of settlement structural fragmentation. Moreover, many countries' municipal structures are firmly established, with no more ongoing changes (e.g. Denmark, Lithuania, Malta, Liechtenstein, or Sweden).<sup>19</sup> In 2024, the process of municipal reform in Cyprus, which had been underway for several years, came to an end, with municipal elections in June 2024 under the

<sup>18</sup> The issue of municipal mergers in Austria, specifically in the federal state of Styria, is examined in detail by Heinisch et al. (2019), who address the impact of municipal mergers on local democracy.

<sup>19</sup> De facto, we can also include countries that experienced negligible changes in the number of their municipalities over the examined 15-year period—Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. The case of Slovenia may illustrate other potential issues. While the number of municipalities remains unchanged, significant population shifts occur between them. This impacts municipal governance and gives rise to further specific challenges at the national level (see Kukovič 2018; Haček 2020).

new municipal arrangements (see Cyprus Mail 2021). Switzerland, too, exhibits a slow amalgamation process, with each canton providing municipalities with services and administrative assistance in the process. Spain exhibits efforts for rationalisation and sustainability of local administration, yet even a new law from the year 2013 failed to substantially accelerate the amalgamation process, which has been politically unfeasible (Gosálvez 2015).<sup>20</sup> To the contrary, Spain has seen a slight increase in the number of municipalities despite the legal rule that a new municipality can only be formed with at least 5,000 inhabitants and it should be financially sustainable, have sufficient resources for performing the responsibilities of local government, and should not cause a decrease in the quality of services provided thus far. Overall, then, newly established municipalities have been rather rare in Europe over the past 15 years, except for countries like Czechia or Romania.

In the case of Czechia, the subject of this paper, a total of 22 municipalities were formed in 2000–2015, including 15 at the turn of the millennium, in 2000/2001 (Hornek 2022). The 6 most recently created municipalities were established by a special law of 2016 that changed the cadastral delimitation of military training areas. They were exceptions from a rule set by another law, namely that a new municipality must have at least 1,000 inhabitants. No new municipalities have been formed since then. It should be mentioned that Czechia has also seen some rare cases of voluntary amalgamation (see Musilová and Heřmánek 2015), yet only 18 Czech municipalities have ceased to exist since 1995 (Hornek 2022).

Let us now briefly outline the prevalence of small municipalities across Europe. In the years 2020–2022, there existed more than 32 thousand (32,265) municipalities with under 500 inhabitants, accounting for 36% of all European municipalities (Table 2). Czechia has by far the largest share of small municipalities of all European countries (54%), followed by France (53%), which also has the highest absolute number of such municipalities (over 18,000), Slovakia (50%), Spain (49%), and Hungary (36%). In contrast, more than half of the countries under comparison (19) have fewer than 10 municipalities with under 500 inhabitants each, including 12 countries (38%) with no such municipality in their territory.

TABLE 2: MUNICIPALITIES WITH UNDER 500 INHABITANTS IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Rank	EU+ state	Number of municipalities with under 500 inhabitants	Total number of municipalities	% of municipalities with under 500 inhabitants	Rank	EU+ state	Number of municipalities with under 500 inhabitants	Total number of municipalities	% of municipalities with under 500 inhabitants
1	France	18,382	34,966	52.57%	17	Malta	2	68	2.94%
2	Spain	3,993	8,131	49.11%	18	Liechtenstein	1	11	9.09%
3	Czechia	3,391	6,258	54.19%	19	Portugal	1	308	0.32%
4	Germany	2,094	10,789	19.41%	20	Slovenia	1	212	0.47%
5	Slovakia	1,468	2,927	50.15%	21	Belgium	0	581	0.00%
6	Hungary	1,147	3,178	36.09%	22	Bulgaria	0	265	0.00%
7	Italy	900	7,904	11.39%	23	Denmark	0	98	0.00%
8	Switzerland	366	2,148	17.04%	24	UK	0	379	0.00%
9	Cyprus	281	615	45.69%	25	Greece	0	322	0.00%
10	Austria	111	2,093	5.30%	26	Ireland	0	31	0.00%
11	Norway	78	356	21.91%	27	Latvia	0	43	0.00%
12	Iceland	16	64	25.00%	28	Lithuania	0	60	0.00%
13	Romania	16	3,181	0.50%	29	Luxembourg	0	102	0.00%
14	Croatia	9	556	1.62%	30	The Netherlands	0	344	0.00%
15	Finland	6	309	1.94%	31	Poland	0	2,477	0.00%
16	Estonia	2	79	2.53%	32	Sweden	0	290	0.00%

Sources: Own elaboration of data by the statistical offices of individual countries and Eurostat (2023).

<sup>20</sup> Only two amalgamations took place in Spain 1981–2016, namely in Galicia. They were motivated by demographic problems and efforts to ensure service provision for citizens (Gosálvez 2015; Reinero 2016).

### 3 DETERMINANTS OF LIABILITIES IN SMALL MUNICIPALITIES

Although issues of fiscal responsibility and sustainable financing in small municipalities represent an important research topic, there have been few studies in this area. Financial aspects of funding municipalities have primarily been studied at a more general level, even in studies focusing on small municipalities. As one of a few exceptions, Burešová and Balík (2019) investigated economies of scale in small municipalities. The authors use the term “effectiveness” as an indicator of (un)successful governance. On the example of the Vysočina Region, which has the highest share of small municipalities in Czechia, they proved that economies of scale are not a suitable measure of the effectiveness of local administration.

Furthermore, Nemec et al. (2021) studied the impact of fiscal rules on the financial management of municipalities in Czechia and Slovakia. Sedmíhradská and Bakoš (2016) or Kruntorádová and Jüptner (2012) researched issues of local finance and the relationship between local autonomy and the tax autonomy of Czech municipalities. Other authors, then, focused on municipal insolvency (Hrůza and Novotná 2017; Sedmíhradská and Hrůza 2014), redistribution of subsidies and distribution of public resources (Spáč et al. 2018; Lysek and Ryšavý 2020), local development potentials (Bernard 2011), determinants of local indebtedness (Maličká 2024), or the administrative and expert capacities of concrete local governments (Hornek 2016; Hornek and Jüptner 2020).

Let us recall that liabilities amount to all funding a municipality must pay back, most often pre-funding for municipal investments, equity is not included, and we treat them as a possible indicator of local development. Existing studies have paid little attention to the factors of variability in such liabilities, although credit financing is often the only way small municipalities can implement substantial investment projects.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the present study is based on exploratory research of the relationship between liabilities and several factors that influence the functioning of Czech municipalities in the long term.

Population size has been considered one of the key variables affecting the form of local politics (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Newton 1982; Anckar 2000). Similarly, the degree of politicisation of local political systems is also affected by municipality size in Czechia.<sup>22</sup> This finding was previously verified by the body of work analysing the relationship between municipality size and, for example: (1) voter turnout (Kostecký and Krivý 2015; Maškarinec 2022); (2) competitiveness, democracy, and uncontested elections (Ryšavý and Bernard 2013; Kouba and Lysek 2023); or (3) the success of lists of independent candidates (Kostecký et al. 2023).

Since the fiscal revenue of Czech municipalities largely depends on their population (given the parameters of the BUT system), we believe a positive association between size and liabilities can be expected. There are several reasons behind this expectation. First, larger municipalities have larger revenue,

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<sup>21</sup> We primarily mean larger investment projects that municipalities cannot fund from their annual budgets and regular tax revenues. More specifically, these include the re/construction of local roads, sewage systems, water supply systems, municipal buildings, playgrounds, sewage treatment plants, etc.

<sup>22</sup> Czechia's considerably fragmented settlement structure has strong effects on the politicisation of local politics, which depends precisely on municipality size (Maškarinec 2015). Therefore, while local elections in small and partly also medium-sized Czech municipalities are dominated by the phenomenon of independent candidates, the role of political parties increases proportionally to municipality size (cf. Balík et al. 2015, 139–142).

better financial capacities for their development (including access to external resources for that purpose), and larger expert capacities for applying for development subsidies.<sup>23</sup> The following two variables that may potentially influence the level of municipal liabilities are financial in nature. First, for fiscal responsibility,<sup>24</sup> we expect small municipalities to comply with the legal rule because we do not expect them to take large amounts of credit/debt. Given the total number of municipalities, cases emerge every year of municipalities temporarily violating that rule (especially to obtain pre-funding for a single project). In contrast, transfers received, i.e. basically subsidies that go to municipalities (both entitlements and optional payments from different providers: state funds, regional governments, central budget, etc.) should be strongly positively associated with the level of liabilities. Indeed, higher capacities to obtain external subsidies for a municipality's development should logically correlate with higher liabilities it will have to pay back in future.

The next group of variables characterises the local political-economic context. Here, the nature of electoral competition represents an important factor, with previous studies demonstrating a linear growth of competitiveness with municipality size (Ryšavý and Bernard 2013; Bernard et al. 2024). As for the effect of competitiveness, i.e. local citizens' increased efforts to take an active part in political decision-making as indicated by candidacy levels or party list characteristics in local elections,<sup>25</sup> a positive relationship can be expected between competitiveness and the level of liabilities incurred by a municipality. Our expectation builds mainly on the assumption that municipalities where citizens are more willing to participate in public life will exhibit a stronger drive for local development, something small municipalities can consistently achieve primarily by tapping external resources. This is because the amounts of guaranteed revenue (from the BUT) do not exhibit a long-term growth and rather serve to fund the daily operations of local governments, rather than larger development plans.

Level of voter turnout is another contextual factor and can serve as a complement to competitiveness. While competitiveness indicates higher levels of political activity among citizens who seek to directly participate in political decision-making (i.e. the supply side), voter turnout informs us about the level of voter demand for the supply offered by the different candidates. However, although one might expect a positive relationship between development efforts and voters' willingness to participate in local elections, the fact that municipality size has a negative effect on turnout in Czech local elections (Kostecký and Krivý 2015; Maškarinec 2022) makes us rather expect a weak negative relationship between turnout and liabilities.

Education is one of the key socioeconomic factors when it comes to explaining voting behaviour. People with higher education participate in politics more because it enables them to attach higher importance to politics (Norris 2002).

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<sup>23</sup> There are practically no civil servants employed by small municipalities. They typically have a full-time mayor and a part-time accountant. "Better-off" municipalities also have a secretary or a full-time accountant to assist the mayor. In contrast, large municipalities have entire dedicated departments and personnel with a relevant education background.

<sup>24</sup> A municipality is obliged to manage its finances so as its total debt for Year T does not exceed 60% of its revenue averaged over the last 4 financial years. If this happens and subsequently the excess debt does not decrease by at least 5% in Year T+1, the transfers from central tax revenue will be restricted in Year T+2.

<sup>25</sup> Citizens of smaller municipalities are increasingly willing to use the opportunity to initiate local referenda. Between 2000 and 2020, a total of 378 local referenda were held in Czechia, with more than half of them taking place in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (see Bláha 2023).

Similarly in Czechia, higher-educated people are more likely to participate in elections, although the positive effect is slightly weaker in local elections than in parliamentary elections (Kostecký 2011). For that reason, we expect municipalities with relatively larger college-educated populations to also have a higher degree of liabilities. Indeed, educated citizens' traditional higher participation in politics can be expected to spark more interest in local development, and at the same time, the larger college-educated population provides a richer pool of candidates both for politicians presenting development visions and for the bureaucracy needed to implement them.

In contrast, negative effects can be expected in municipalities with older age structures, where a more conservative political climate can be expected that reduces public demand for substantial changes that accompany local development in many areas. As for turnout, municipalities with older populations exhibit slightly higher turnout in parliamentary elections but the effect is close to zero in local elections (Kostecký 2011).

Another factor possibly differentiating municipal approaches to development is women's political representation on local councils. In this regard, previous works demonstrated that although representation of women generally declines with growing municipality size (Tounstine and Valdin 2008; Smith et al. 2012), such decline may not occur immediately. More specifically, female representation is stronger in Czech municipalities with 301–500 inhabitants than in smaller municipalities, especially those with up to 150 inhabitants (Maškarinec 2023). When treating women's higher success as an indicator of more liberal environments that allow more women to participate in the decision-making of their local governments, but also as a trait of modernisation and people's willingness to develop their community in new directions (Bláha 2017), we believe a positive relationship between women's descriptive representation and municipal liabilities can be expected.

The final two factors that may influence the level of liabilities, as an indicator of local development based on external subsidies, are related to the above findings about the spatial dimension of economic development in Czechia, which both influences political behaviour (Lysek and Macků 2022) and gives rise to so-called left-behind places (see Suchánek and Hasman 2022) or inner peripheries, where local people suffer from multiple exclusion (Bernard and Šimon 2017). The country's three structurally disadvantaged regions used to be dominated by the mining, processing, and chemical industries and currently exhibit low levels of economic growth, considerable lagging behind the most advanced regions, and specific patterns of voter behaviour (Bláha 2024).<sup>26</sup>

Given the high level of settlement fragmentation in Czechia, the spatial aspects of socioeconomic exclusion may have stronger effects than in other countries. Especially the smallest municipalities with fewer inhabitants dispersed within their administrative boundaries pay more for service provision due to higher transportation costs and no economies of scale. Similarly, rural areas tend to have older populations than cities, which requires different and potentially more costly public services, a fact especially highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jüptner and Klimovský 2022). Over time, the situation is going to deteriorate as outlying and rural areas or border areas are exposed to several megatrends, such as depopulation and demographic ageing, that will shape the

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<sup>26</sup> These three regions (Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem, and Moravia-Silesia) also represent a large portion of the so-called Sudetenland, a territory that faced the expulsion of more than 3 million Sudeten Germans after WWII.



availability and quality of public services (Haist and Novotný 2023; Novotný 2025). For the above reasons, then, we expect municipalities located in peripheral regions, where citizens have worse access to centres, to be much less likely to tap external financing for development projects.

## 4 DATA AND METHODS

In this paper, we analyse data considering municipal liabilities during Czech local elections in the years 2014 and 2018. We use data for all Czech municipalities with a population under 500 inhabitants. Our dependent variable indicates the amount of liabilities (logged), namely all funding they must pay back (equity is not included). We use various independent variables to explain the varying levels of liabilities, which correspond to the hypotheses defined above: (1) municipality size, or the logarithm of the number of inhabitants more specifically; (2) the fiscal responsibility variable, whereas municipalities with a debt in excess of 60% of their revenue averaged over the past four financial years are in violation of the budgetary responsibility rule, and growing values of the variable indicate deteriorating financial health; (3) the transfers received variable is measured as the amount of transfers received (basically subsidies obtained by the municipality from external sources) in CZK per 1,000 inhabitants (logged); (4) the competitiveness variable is measured as the logarithm of the ratio of the number of candidates to the number of seats in a particular local council; (5) the non-plurality dummy variable is coded 1 for municipalities where the total number of candidates on party lists equals the number of seats available and 0 where there are more candidates than seats; (6) turnout is measured as the logarithm of the ratio of voters (those issued an official envelope) to registered voters (persons listed in the electoral rolls); (7) the university-educated variable is defined as the share of college graduates in the population aged 15+; (8) the retired variable is measured as the share of persons aged 65+ in the population; (9) the women councillors variable indicates the share of women among winners of local council seats in a given municipality and election year; (10) the centre-periphery variable is measured as the commuting distance from the municipality to its regional capital in kilometres;<sup>27</sup> (11) the structurally disadvantaged region dummy variable is coded 1 for municipalities found in one of the country's three structurally disadvantaged regions (the Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem, and Moravia-Silesia Regions) and 0 for municipalities found in the remaining Czech regions.

The data for the dependent variable – the amount of municipal liabilities –, as well as some independent variables (fiscal responsibility, transfers received) were obtained from MONITOR, an information portal of the Ministry of Finance (Monitor 2023) based on data from the Integrated Information System of the Treasury (Státní pokladna 2022) and the Central System of Accounting Information of the State (Státní pokladna 2024) and matched to other socio-demographic and economic data sets at the same level of aggregation. The data set of the remaining indicators (independent variables), then, was compiled from

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<sup>27</sup> Although periphery can be considered as a multidimensional concept encompassing an accumulation of different social disadvantages (see Bernard and Šimon 2017), we primarily define periphery geographically, in terms of core and periphery, focusing on only one possible measure of peripherality (the so-called inner periphery). Alternatively, commute length in minutes could be measured. Yet given a very high correlation between both variables (0.94), only commuting distance in km was included in the analysis.



two basic sources: the decennial population censuses of 2011 and 2021 and other statistics of the Czech Statistical Office.<sup>28</sup>

The effects of the above-mentioned indicators were analysed using the classic ordinary least squares method (multiple linear regression). The results of each regression model are indicated by basic parameters, namely unstandardised regression coefficients (B; measuring the effect of an independent variable on the dependent variable when controlling for all other variables, it tells us how much the dependent variable changes per unit change in the independent variable), standardised regression coefficients (Beta; measuring the weight of each independent variable in the model), and adjusted coefficients of determination (adjusted R-squared; measuring the overall performance of the model in explaining variance in the dependent variable).<sup>29</sup>

## 5 RESULTS

Table 3 illustrates the results of our models which regress the amount of liabilities as all funding a municipality must pay back (most often pre-funding for a municipal investment project, equity is not included), as the dependent variable, on our set of independent variables. The empirical results presented in Table 3 show that the chosen variables do not explain the level of municipal liabilities quite consistently across the models for the 2014 and 2018 local elections. For several independent variables, the strength of their effects strongly varies, or their effects even shift from negative to positive or vice versa. Furthermore, the regression models assessing the effects of our independent variables on the amount of municipal liabilities were relatively successful, as the regression model for the 2014 local elections explained 37% of detected variance and the 2018 model even 58% of detected variance.

Starting with the effect of municipality size in the 2014 local elections, the results lend robust support to our assumptions. We confirmed the fact that rising municipality size has a strong positive and significant effect on the level of Czech municipalities' liabilities. At the same time, this may correspond to the strong correlation found in Czechia between a municipality's size and its tax revenue, to a lesser extent also total revenue, which is also the reason why these variables are excluded from the regression analysis.<sup>30</sup> The number of inhabitants shapes not only the economic aspects (higher fiscal revenue) but also the administrative and expert capacities of local governments, which ultimately influence the amount of funds (smaller municipalities do not have sufficient capacities credit-financing their development activities).

Furthermore, considering the effect of other individual variables, the amount of transfers received (practically subsidies for municipalities) proves as the second-strongest factor (after size) influencing the amount of municipal liabilities. However, the fact that increasing both investment and operational subsidies leads to higher municipal liabilities cannot be viewed in negative terms only.

<sup>28</sup> The data were obtained from the Czech Statistical Office's Public Database (ČSÚ 2024).

<sup>29</sup> Tests of multicollinearity between independent variables were performed for each regression model. To avoid problems with multicollinearity, we excluded from the analysis variables with high levels of correlation (e.g., local tax revenue, to a lesser extent also total municipal revenue, are strongly associated with the size variable, see below). Subsequently, multicollinearity in the regression model was tested using the tolerance statistic and the variance inflation factor (VIF).

<sup>30</sup> There is a near-perfect relationship between municipality size and tax revenue (both logged – 0.931 in the year 2014 and 0.937 in 2018), compared to a slightly weaker but still very strong association between size and total revenue (also logged): (0.762 in 2014 and 0.832 in 2018).

Higher liabilities may indicate municipalities' more active efforts to obtain external financing for their development. It is in this context, too, that we view the effect of the variable indicating municipalities in potential financial jeopardy, i.e. fiscal responsibility. Yet there is only a very weak positive effect of deteriorating fiscal responsibility (i.e. threat to a local government's financial stability) on the amount of municipal liabilities.

Other independent variables also have interesting effects on municipal liabilities. Let us first focus on indicators of local political context. Higher liabilities are typical of municipalities with more competitive local elections (i.e. more candidates per councillor seat)<sup>31</sup> and without non-plurality of party lists (i.e. number of candidates on a list equal to number of seats available). Since people in smaller municipalities are less willing to run in elections and more likely to know one another (higher level of social control), the absence traditional electoral competition leads to low local government revenue due to the small population. At the same time, though, municipal liabilities grow in a political environment characterised by lower turnout in local elections (relatively strongly) and by weaker descriptive representation of women among councillors (not so strongly).

The relationship between a municipality's socioeconomic characteristics and its liabilities also paints an interesting picture. Local indebtedness rises in places with higher shares of college graduates and, in contrast, lower shares of retired persons. Thus, we can hypothesise that councillors in municipalities with younger and more educated populations take more interest in local development and have more courage to go into debt. They do not view debt as a problem, also because the overall low size of local budgets makes any major local development impossible without debt or pre-funding. At the same time, municipal liabilities grow in places with shorter commuting distances to regional centres and ones that do not belong to a structurally disadvantaged region.

Moving on to whether the factors of interest had similar effects on the amount of municipal liabilities four years later (in the 2018 local elections), municipality size remains (despite a slight weakening) a very strong positive determinant of liabilities. Similarly, the positive effects of subsidies received remains almost unchanged, with higher transfers (per capita) associated with higher amounts of liabilities that municipalities must pay back in future. As for financial jeopardy, the year 2014 saw a very weak (albeit positive) association with liabilities but four years later, the effect was even stronger than that of municipality size. Our working hypothesis to explain the changing strength of this relationship is that an overall improvement of tax revenue and GDP growth after 2014 helped increase local revenues from the BUT and decrease the overall indebtedness of Czech municipalities. The larger funds available to municipalities may have incentivised them to apply for subsidies and finance their local development. While this would have worsened the municipalities' financial health in the short term, it would also have contributed to a much more sustainable form of development in the long term, compared to the scenario of not investing and keeping one's money on bank accounts.

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<sup>31</sup> Higher numbers of candidates per councillor seat are primarily typical of larger municipalities. Yet compared to a very strong correlation between size (log) and competitiveness (log) at the level of all Czech municipalities (0.753 in 2014, 0.741 in 2018, and 0.733 when averaged over the local elections of 1994–2018), the relationship is much weaker in our sample of municipalities with under 500 inhabitants (0.374 in 2014 and 0.332 in 2018).

TABLE 3: LEVEL OF MUNICIPAL LIABILITIES, 2014 AND 2018 (MULTIPLE REGRESSION MODELS, OLS)

	2014			2018		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Size (log)	1.369***	0.051	0.488	1.006***	0.037	0.393
Fiscal responsibility	0.041	0.033	0.017	1.081***	0.024	0.523
Transfers received (log)	0.484***	0.018	0.366	0.391***	0.017	0.265
Competitiveness (log)	0.166*	0.076	0.041	0.194***	0.058	0.051
Non-plurality (1 = 1 list)	-0.033	0.036		0.008	0.025	
Turnout (log)	-0.350*	0.161	-0.042	-0.390***	0.121	-0.050
University-educated	0.229	0.282	0.011	-0.221	0.214	-0.012
Retired	-0.293	0.211	-0.020	0.039	0.158	0.003
Women councillors	-0.071	0.056	-0.018	0.030	0.041	0.008
Centre-periphery	-0.011	0.044	-0.003	-0.015	0.033	-0.005
Structurally disadvantaged region	-0.026	0.037		-0.021	0.028	
Constant	1.554***	0.358		-2.687***	0.276	
N	3460			3420		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.369			0.577		

Note: The dependent variable is the logarithm of the amount of liabilities, B: unstandardised regression coefficients, Beta: standardised regression coefficients; SE: standard errors; statistical significance level: \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ , \*:  $p < 0.05$ .

In contrast, the effects of political-contextual variables on the level of municipal liabilities were highly stable in terms of both direction and strength. Thus, the year 2018 again saw a negative effect of turnout and a positive effect of competitiveness on liabilities. In contrast, there was a change in the direction of the effect of non-plurality, with higher liabilities recorded in municipalities with a single party list and one candidate per councillor seat, although the effect was even weaker than in 2014, namely close to zero. Moreover, all local socioeconomic characteristics saw a change in the direction of their effects. Yet while municipal liabilities decrease rather sharply with growing numbers of college-educated residents, they now increase with the share of retired residents, although the relationship is much weaker than in 2014; the same applies to women's descriptive representation, even though its effect was already rather weak in 2014. Finally, we found high stability in the case of geographic factors, where the effects kept the same direction and strength. Thus, municipal liabilities grow with decreasing commuting distance from regional centres and for municipalities outside structurally disadvantaged territories.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we consider the potential underlying factors that may have facilitated or, conversely, limited the amount of liabilities in the balance sheets of the smallest Czech municipalities (with under 500 inhabitants), viewed as a possible indicator of local development. The results of our models are somewhat novel, albeit ambiguous at times, especially as our indicators did not explain the amount of liabilities in balance sheets quite consistently across models. First, we confirmed that growing amounts of liabilities in a municipality's budget/balance sheet are very strongly associated with municipality size (thus bringing additional evidence of the fact that the factor of size is key to explaining a large portion of the political and economic life of Czech municipalities). Similarly,

according to expectations, lower amounts of liabilities exist in municipalities found in one of the three structurally disadvantaged regions or with worse access to regional centres, suggesting that smaller municipalities in peripheral areas, or their political leaders, are much less willing to use external financing for local development projects, as also evidenced by the effect of the transfers received variable. In contrast, the effect of fiscal responsibility requires further research, as its strength changed considerably. Constant effects were found for competitiveness (positive) and turnout (negative). However, this contrasts with the effect of higher numbers of candidates, or the level of non-plurality, which indicate whether local voters really have a choice (or can only vote for a single list where the number of candidates equals the number of councillor seats) – the direction of this effect on local development efforts changed between elections. Finally, the results for demographic factors are again rather ambiguous. In the elections of 2014, efforts to ensure local development by obtaining external subsidies were more often seen in municipalities with higher shares of college graduates, younger populations (fewer retired persons), and fewer women councillors. The situation completely reversed in 2018, when higher amounts of liabilities were associated with more retired residents, more successful women councillors, and fewer university-educated residents. Yet while the effects of women's descriptive representation were rather weak in both elections, the effect of retired residents not only reversed but also weakened, and the share of college graduates reversed but remained relatively strong. It remains an inspiration for further research to identify the reasons behind the considerably volatile effects of these variables.

In addition to expanding knowledge about the specific empirical case of Czechia, our results also provide an important contribution to the international literature. In our opinion, the fact that increasing both investment and operational subsidies leads to higher municipal liabilities cannot be viewed in negative terms only. Higher liabilities may indicate municipalities' more active efforts to obtain external financing for their development. These cases often indicate that local leaders have managed to find at least some way of funding local development. In other words, municipal representatives (most often full-time mayors) have a vision of how to develop their community and, given the nature of local politics in such small municipalities with under 500 inhabitants, they can persuade their councillors to take the risk of going into debt to pre-fund local development subsidies. This can be driven by higher levels of education among residents (elected councillors), younger local populations, more advantageous locations (municipalities closer to a centre, nature, mountains, other attractive destinations), more practical experience with inter-municipal cooperation, or experience with external subsidy consultants (which, however, means that the local government can tap funds to pay for their services).

Once again, the above facts highlight one of the interesting contributions of our study, which uses the variable of municipal liabilities to confirm and shed more light on the state of ineffectiveness of local administrations in Czechia. The large number of small municipalities with the above characteristic of small local democracies, along with inadequate incentives for local development, present a potential ticking time bomb for local governance. Indeed, if the country's settlement structure does not change substantially, there will be more and more municipalities without sufficient funds for their development, resulting in stagnation or even exacerbation of people's long-term unwillingness to run in local elections, which in turn may effectively undermine local democracies for many years.

On the one hand, residents of municipalities with higher revenues, which have more leeway in using their finances, find that there is something “at stake” and thus become interested in running for office and managing their municipalities. On the other hand, municipalities whose governments primarily only have tax revenue at their disposal are less prestigious and less attractive to potential candidates, which may result in decades of having (almost) the same people on their councils. They may enter the vicious circle wherein an existing local council is less likely to take the risk of an investment project that might ensure development, make the place more attractive, and consequently boost long-term revenue, and instead it opts for savings, not going into debt, and maintaining the status quo. The only possible solution is to elect new councillors who find the courage and try to make their municipality more attractive.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the Czech experience with a non-democratic regime and the ways it forced municipal amalgamation has motivated, till present day, an at-times-irrational resistance to efforts to increase the effectiveness of local administrations (by reducing the number of the smallest municipalities) which do not perform well and cannot live up to future demands, despite frequent recommendations from both local and international experts. In the unique Czech case of settlement structural fragmentation, problems are likely to exacerbate over time, as the smallest municipalities will be faced with a growing administrative burden, continued ageing, and depopulation. A solution is probably to gradually increase pressure on small municipalities to choose amalgamation over complete abandonment of their basic (but especially developmental) functions. Then again, soon, Czechia is unlikely to implement the necessary municipal reform by setting a clear lower limit for continued existence of municipalities, e.g. 500 inhabitants. We do not expect this even in the longer term, given the above-mentioned Czech specifics such as representation of municipalities at the central level (in both chambers of the national parliament, whereby especially the Senate is undergoing gradual regionalisation or even localisation of representation, or of the interests Senators advocate for), the influence of associations of municipalities, the historic experience of municipal centralisation under the communist regime, or possible misunderstanding of the possible reform by local leaders, who refuse to even hear the argument behind it.

A more likely path forward in the Czech case (on which the country is in fact slowly moving) is by amending existing legislation to improve the conditions for functional 21<sup>st</sup>-century local administrations as we know them from other countries (e.g. the NOTRe reform in France or the PARAS reform in Finland). More specifically, we mean supporting and creating effective partnerships of municipalities to make their operations more effective and ensure their development. Yet merely offering the option will certainly not be enough; the central government will have to provide significant guidance to local governments so that they start using such instruments or use them effectively. If nothing changes, several small municipalities will be at risk of gradually collapsing. However, the path of inter-municipal cooperation was not effective in the long term, and current Czechia still lacks some options that exist abroad, including both financial incentives for inter-municipal cooperation <sup>32</sup> and adequate and effective consulting and technical assistance by the government administration at the central or regional level.

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<sup>32</sup> France provides special subsidies and a special tax regime in some cases; Estonia and Norway additional funding for common public investment; Slovenia a financial incentive to cover 50% of the personnel costs of common managing bodies; Spain's Galicia a preference for multi-municipal investment projects in drawing regional funds; and Poland is also slowly moving in that direction by providing additional funding to municipalities that have drawn up a common strategic plan for a functional area (OECD 2023).

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Zákon č. 128/2000 Sb., o obcích, ve znění pozdějších předpisů, Act No. 128/2000.



## PLAVANJE PROTI EVROPSKEMU TOKU: MAJHNOST KOT GROŽNJA LOKALNEMU RAZVOJU NA ČEŠKEM

Češka predstavlja poseben primer poselitvene strukture, saj ima več kot polovica njenih občin manj kot 500 prebivalcev, pri čemer te občine skupaj predstavljajo le okoli osem odstotkov celotnega prebivalstva države. Namen te študije je analizirati dejavnike, ki vplivajo na variabilnost zneskov obveznosti – razumljenih kot možni kazalnik razvojnega potenciala – v bilancah stanja več kot tri tisoč najmanjših čeških občin. Rezultati analize kažejo, da obstaja močna pozitivna povezanost med višino obveznosti in velikostjo občine. Ugotovitev pojasnjuje tudi negativni vpliv volilne udeležbe, ki praviloma upada z naraščajočim številom prebivalcev. Poleg vpliva velikosti občine imajo opazno, čeprav šibkejšo vlogo tudi geografski dejavniki: višje ravni obveznosti so značilne za večje občine v bližini regionalnih središč in zunaj območij, ki so strukturno zapostavljena. Ti vzorci razkrivajo širši problem neučinkovitosti lokalne samouprave na Češkem. Najmanjše občine, ki jih zaznamuje nizka raven politične konkurenčnosti – tj. nizka pripravljenost prebivalcev za vključevanje v lokalno upravljanje – in ki se nahajajo v perifernih regijah ali na robu razvitih območij, se soočajo z izrazitimi razvojnimi izzivi. Zaradi pomanjkanja dostopa do razvojnih sredstev vse več občin stagnira, kar dolgoročno pogloblja regionalne razlike.

**Ključne besede:** Češka; lokalne vlade; majhne občine; konkurenčnost; obveznosti; trajnostni razvoj; občinska reforma.

# INTRODUCING QUALIFIED MAJORITY VOTING IN THE COMMON FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY: PERSPECTIVES FROM SLOVENIA AND SLOVAKIA

Boštjan UDOVIČ and Tomáš ŽIPAJ<sup>1</sup>

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*The article examines the positions of Slovenia and Slovakia on introducing qualified majority voting in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (QMV CFSP). This topic has gained significance in recent years due to various attempts to obstruct decision-making within the European Union. The analysis is conducted on two levels: official government statements from both countries and the perceptions of students on the issue. The findings reveal a stark contrast between the two levels. While Slovenia and Slovakia hold opposing official positions on QMV CFSP, students from both countries largely support its introduction. However, there is a notable difference regarding QMV CFSP as a preliminary step towards deeper integration: Slovak students are somewhat more reserved than their Slovenian counterparts. This suggests that the political discourse in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly concerns over the 'dangers of EU deepening', is influencing younger generations and the student population.*

**Key words:** qualified majority voting; Common Foreign and Security Policy; Slovenia; Slovakia; students.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the European Union (EU) has been a subject of extensive debate among member states since the EU's founding. While member states have expressed a willingness to consider delegating certain decision-making powers to the EU – particularly in areas requiring significant human resources or binding commitment – in practice, limitations often arise, with the most significant being “national interest”. This concept, often elusive and abstract, resembles a spectre: intangible and universally referenced yet uniquely interpreted by each member state. Due to its ambiguity, “national interest” can

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be viewed as either a panacea or a curse, depending on the perspective. In the context of the EU, national interest is frequently invoked by member states as a reason for resisting further delegation of power, particularly in foreign policy. As Haass (2013) aptly notes, “foreign policy begins at home,” highlighting that national interest in foreign policy encompasses both “foreign” and “domestic” concerns. Within modern political systems, domestic issues can sometimes outweigh foreign ones due to two main factors: the symbolic value attached to both domains (Arbeiter 2019) and the heightened sensitivity among citizens regarding potential losses of national autonomy in foreign affairs. This sensitivity is mirrored within the EU, where member states are *prima facie* unwilling to facilitate decision-making in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), widely perceived as the final safeguard of national interests. This resistance became evident in recent years, when Poland and Hungary leveraged the CFSP’s unanimity requirement as a kind of “negotiating tool” during contentious EU discussions. The limitations of unanimity in the CFSP have become even more apparent since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, prompting calls for reform to enable the EU to present a unified voice in its foreign policy decisions.

This article does not aim to explore the general importance, challenges, and limitations of qualified majority voting in depth (for more on this, see Sancin and Mediževc 2024, 429–451). Instead, it seeks to empirically analyse the views of Slovenia and Slovakia on the topic. Our analysis operates on two levels. First, we examine the level of political decision-makers, comparing the official stances of each country on QMV CFSP to identify both commonalities and differences. Second, we focus on political science students in both countries. There are two key reasons for including this group in our analysis. First, as political science students study topics like QMV CFSP, they are likely to have formed opinions on it. Second, these students – by virtue of their studies – are potential future agenda-setters and decision-makers, and their current opinions may influence future national or EU-level policies.

Why did we select Slovenia and Slovakia as case studies to explore perspectives on QMV CFSP? First, Slovenia and Slovakia are small, Central European countries that joined the EU in 2004, making them relatively new members. Second, while both countries share political and historical similarities, they occasionally differ in their approaches toward the EU: Slovenia generally aligns its policies with the expectations and guidelines of EU institutions, whereas Slovakia is sometimes more cautious or even oppositional in specific areas. This dynamic between two comparable yet at times contrasting countries offers an intriguing framework for examining their positions on QMV CFSP. Our framework led us to form two hypotheses that we then wanted to test in the case of these two countries:

H1: The historical legacies and similar political-economic paths to EU membership are not reflected in the views of Slovak and Slovenian authorities on QMV CFSP.

H2: The official positions of both countries are mirrored in the perceptions of political science students in each country regarding QMV CFSP.

The analysis was conducted using a combination of three methods. First, we analysed primary and secondary sources, examining the official statements of both countries. This was complemented by an interview with a Slovenian expert on Slovenia’s position regarding CFSP QMV, as well as a survey administered to Slovenian and Slovak political science students. The survey took place in the first quarter of 2024 among students at the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia), and



the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia). A total of 86 students participated, with 45 respondents from Slovakia and 41 from Slovenia; of these, 32 identified as male and 38 as female.

This article is structured in three parts. Following the introduction and presentation of the research problem, we provide a theoretical framework on CFSP decision-making by qualified majority voting, focusing particularly on the official Slovenian and Slovak positions. The empirical section follows, presenting the results of the survey among Slovenian and Slovak students. The article concludes with a discussion and evaluation of the hypotheses, reflecting on the findings and suggesting questions for future research on this topic.

## 2 QMV IN CFSP WITH REFERENCE TO OFFICIAL POSITIONS OF SLOVAKIA AND SLOVENIA: A THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Since the establishment of the CFSP, the main decision-making mechanism has been unanimity, applied at the institutional level of the European Council and the Council of the EU. The Treaty on the European Union codified this mechanism in Article 24, stating, “The common foreign and security policy is subject to specific rules and procedures. It shall be defined and implemented by the European Council and the Council acting unanimously, except where the Treaties provide otherwise” (Consolidated Version of The Treaty on European Union 2012). Article 11 of the Treaty of Lisbon reaffirms unanimity as the primary decision-making mechanism for foreign and security matters. However, the Lisbon Treaty revision expanded the range of situations in which decisions can be adopted by QMV, with certain limitations. QMV decision-making cannot be applied to matters that directly impact on the defence and military areas. Instead, it applies to cases involving joint actions, the adoption of joint strategies, and the appointment of special representatives (Treaty of Lisbon 2007).

Since November 2014, a new QMV voting procedure has been introduced within the Council, implementing the double majority rule. Under this rule, the traditional principle of ‘one state, one vote’ no longer applies. Instead, both the number of states and the total population they represent are considered. QMV is thus achieved when at least 55% of member states (a minimum of 15) vote in favour of a proposal, provided they also represent at least 65% of the EU’s total population (approximately 290 million people) (The Council of the EU 2024). However, within the CFSP framework, an exception allows member states to use an “emergency brake.”<sup>2</sup> When invoked, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) must revise the proposal. If consensus cannot be reached even after the revision, QMV cannot proceed, and the final decision reverts to unanimity (Blockmans 2017).

The debate surrounding the effectiveness of unanimity in decision-making, and its impacts on the EU, is longstanding. Since the establishment of the CFSP, discussions have continued, yet recently, decision-making within the CFSP has received heightened attention. The primary driver of these debates is the increasing difficulty member states face in reaching a unified stance on various foreign policy issues. Divergent views often arise from differences in geographic

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<sup>2</sup> Article 31(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning the European Union includes an important provision in the form of an “emergency brake” which inhibits the calling of a vote in the Council if a Member State invokes vital and stated reasons of national policy.

location and perceptions of the security environment. This growing heterogeneity of perspectives among member states complicates negotiations, creating obstacles that impede the effective implementation of the CFSP (A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence 2022; Žipaj 2021). Consequently, some argue for abandoning the unanimity requirement in favour of QMV. Nonetheless, despite calls for change, there are still compelling arguments for retaining unanimity as the foundational principle of CFSP decision-making.

A frequently cited argument for maintaining unanimity is the goal of a unified external EU representation. Unanimity aims to strengthen the EU's external presence by ensuring that foreign policy positions reflect the consensus of all member states. agenda. Charles Michel, the outgoing President of the European Council, has advocated for preserving unanimity, viewing it as a mechanism that facilitates the achievement of shared goals. The need for unanimous decisions, he argues, encourages representatives to find compromises that accommodate diverse member state interests (Repčys 2022). This view has garnered support from several EU member state representatives, such as those from Poland<sup>3</sup> and Czechia,<sup>4</sup> and resonates with some EU-level advocates who favour the current system.<sup>5</sup>

Proponents of unanimity warn that changing decision-making mechanisms could exacerbate foreign policy divisions within the EU. In this context, the unanimity requirement serves as a reference point for defining the interests and boundaries within which the CFSP operates (Kuusik 2019).

Arguments in favour of retaining unanimity, and against shifting to QMV, are also grounded in concerns about weakening the democratic legitimacy chain among member states. Under QMV, there is a risk that this chain could be disrupted, especially if member states perceive outcomes as inequitable (Schuette 2019). Advocates of unanimity view the national veto as a tool that ensures final decision incorporate the interests of all member states. Adopting decisions via QMV could lead to a sense of imposed resolutions and injustice among certain countries, potentially eroding democratic legitimacy and fostering mistrust within the EU (Latici 2021; Bendiek et al. 2024; cf. Haček and Brezovšek 2014).

Support for unanimity is also bolstered by representatives who oppose or question deeper EU integration, often aligning with Eurosceptic, nationalist, populist, or right-wing positions. These voices argue for strengthening the authority of individual member states over transferring greater powers to the supranational level, often criticising the concept of the "Brussels bubble"<sup>6</sup> (Žipaj 2023). They contend that a shift to QMV could fuel Euroscepticism, especially if member states present QMV-based decisions as imposed from above (Pisklová 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> "What suits one country may not suit another. We should find a way to respect the differences between all 27 countries." (Morawiecki 2022)

<sup>4</sup> "It's a question of sovereignty. Losing the veto would be fatal for us." (Babiš 2023) Much like EU integration, the idea of QMV CFSP is sometimes also the subject of conspiracy theories (cf. Kukovič 2022; Fiot and Tecovich 2023; Haček 2024; Kukovič et al. 2024; Šteger 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Mainly EU Parliament members affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists and the Identity and Democracy political groups. They demonstrated this stance by voting against the resolution expanding the use of QMV in the CFSP (European Parliament Plenary 2024).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of the Brussels bubble originated from the myth propagated by the EU's opponents, suggesting that all important decisions are made within a single power centre in Brussels. This notion is closely associated with Eurosceptic, nationalist, and populist tendencies (Papagianneas 2024).

Opposition to QMV is especially strong among smaller member states, who fear subordination to larger countries. For these states, unanimity and veto rights on proposals are seen as vital for maintaining stability. Countries such as Hungary, Malta, Bulgaria, and Cyprus strongly oppose switching to QMV in all CFSP matters, with Austria, Croatia, and Lithuania also aligned in favour of unanimity (Navara and Jančová 2023).

On the other side, proponents of QMV argue that the national veto can hinder effective EU decision-making, as member states may use it to pursue domestic interests at the expense of broader EU priorities. For example, in 2020, Cyprus vetoed sanctions against Belarus – not due to opposition to the sanctions themselves, but as a leverage to press the EU to adopt a stricter stance toward Türkiye (Intel and Ondarza 2022). Similarly, Hungary’s use of the veto complicated sanctions against Russia, aiming to pressure the EU into a softer stance on Hungary’s domestic policies and to release blocked EU funds (Moen, Barigazzi and Lynch 2022). In response, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz joined calls for CFSP reform, urging member states to reconsider the national veto and explore a transition to QMV (Zachová et al. 2022). In May 2023, the foreign ministers of several EU countries published the “Joint Statement on the Launch of the Group of Friends on Qualified Majority Voting in EU Common Foreign and Security Policy”, commonly referred to as the Group of Friends to Foster QMV.<sup>7</sup>

Supporters of QMV, recognising the complexity of the decision-making process as an EU weakness, also argue that shifting to majority voting would enable faster, more efficient decision-making. The Conference on the Future of Europe emphasised this, calling for reduced reliance on unanimity (Drachenberg 2022). This aligns with the European Commission’s ‘A Stronger Europe in the World’ initiative, which aims to streamline the EU’s external action (European Commission 2024). The Strategic Compass also advocates for a move toward QMV on select security matters, suggesting it could significantly enhance the EU’s responsiveness in crisis situations (A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence 2022).

An additional rationale for QMV is the mitigation of “Trojan horse” risks – situations where a single EU member state could block action under the influence of an external actor. With unanimity, an external power needs to influence only one member state to block a decision. Under QMV, however, influencing at least a third of member states would be necessary, making such interference nearly impossible (Orenstein and Kelemen 2017). Unanimity also restricts the HR to presenting only those positions unanimously supported by all member states (Žipaj 2021). Josep Borrell, former High Representative, has argued for reform in CSFP decision-making, noting that QMV already applies in areas like the single market and climate policy, which are not necessarily less “sensitive” than foreign and security policy (Borrell 2020). These arguments for and against QMV were extensively debated, with member states either supporting or rejecting them.

## 2.1 The Slovak Approach to QMV CFSP

In recent years, Slovakia has shifted from a ‘neutrally-reserved’ stance to a more ‘reserved-opponent’ position regarding the potential switch to QMV in CFSP. Between April 2020 and May 2023, under a centrist conservative government, Slovakia maintained a quasi-neutral stance on the issue, despite a generally pro-European outlook (Pisklová 2023). Former Slovak prime minister Eduard Heger underscored the importance of unanimity in matters of European security: “We

<sup>7</sup> Full statement at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2595304>.

need to speak with one voice, and when it comes to geopolitics [...] when we are talking about European security, Europe must be represented there, we must find a mechanism to achieve such a mandate.” (Heger 2022). In April/May 2023, following a government crisis and Heger’s resignation, Slovakia’s interim government<sup>8</sup> took a more ‘pragmatic approach’ to the member states’ veto power and QMV CFSP. Miroslav Wlachovský, the interim foreign minister and a seasoned diplomat, emphasised that Slovakia “should not turn voting by qualified majority into another ‘mythical spooks from Brussels’”. He pointed out that QMV is already the primary voting method in the EU Council, with over 80% of EU legal acts approved this way (Wlachovský 2023). Wlachovský argued that Slovakia should not distance itself from these discussions, particularly with the prospect of EU enlargement – a longstanding Slovak priority. “If there are to be more of us [member states] in the future that will sit at the same table, it is necessary to ask ourselves how we want to function more effectively” (ibid. 2023).

In Autumn 2023, Slovakia appointed a new government, marking a decisive shift from its previously pragmatic approach to QMV CFSP. The first indication of this change came in November 2023, when Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár emphasised that the new government’s agenda restored sovereignty to Slovak foreign policy, which, according to him, had been lacking under the previous administration. Blanár stated, “Slovakia will not agree to the abolition of the right of veto in the EU Council and insists on the principle of unanimity among all member states, when making decisions in the fields of foreign policy and security” (Blanár 2023). This position was further reinforced during a session of the Council for Foreign Affairs, echoing the government’s stance expressed throughout the pre-election campaign.

Prime Minister Robert Fico reiterated this position on potentially doing away with the veto rights in an April 2024 interview following Slovakia’s presidential elections. Fico described the right of veto in CFSP as “[...] the right to survive in the European Union. If someone wants to take away the right of veto, we have nothing to do there [...] you just come to some negotiation and the French with the Germans will let you know what the result is” (Fico 2024). His statement reflects a concern shared by some Central and Eastern European countries – the fear of being outvoted on critical issues. The hot-button issue of QMV CFSP was further highlighted by two prominent political scientists, Miroslava Pisklová and Jozef Bátora<sup>9</sup>. Pisklová urged that the discussion should focus on addressing the concerns of those advocating for unanimity, rather than pushing a single approach. Bátora, meanwhile, noted that the prospect of EU enlargement could act as a catalyst for revisiting the CFSP decision-making process (Pisklová 2024; Bátora 2024).

The most recent comment on the topic came from Slovakia’s newly elected president, Peter Pellegrini. Previously viewed as a moderate pro-European by Slovakia’s Western allies, Pellegrini voiced support for unanimity in CFSP, asserting that the veto right benefits Slovakia by providing “a real influence” in this area and the ability to “deflect” some decisions of the future head of diplomacy [sic]” (Pellegrini 2024).

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<sup>8</sup> The interim government exercised its mandate from May 15 to October 25, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Miroslava Pisklová is a Research fellow at Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Jozef Bátora is a Professor at the Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava.

## 2.2 The Slovenian Approach to QMV CFSP

Slovenia is member of the 'Group of Friends to Foster QMV', indicating it is willing to discuss switching to QMV CFSP. However, Slovenia's stance has evolved over time. In 2019, under the government of PM Marjan Šarec, Slovenia opposed moving away from unanimity in CFSP. Then-Foreign-Minister Miro Cerar explained that Slovenia "never supported qualified or any other kind of majority decision-making anywhere [...]", adding: "Our opinion is that decision-making in the EU should be based on consensus [since] EU members are weak if they are not united" (STA 2019).<sup>10</sup>

The first indication of a shift came when a letter supporting QMV in EU foreign policy, co-signed by seven EU foreign ministers, was published in *Politico*.<sup>11</sup> The article, which was titled *It's time for more majority decision-making in EU foreign policy*, did not go unnoticed in Ljubljana. his letter sparked mixed reactions in Slovenia, with opposition leader Janez Janša tweeting that for a small country like Slovenia, "which represents less than 0.5% of the EU population, QMV would be "a catastrophe," even suggesting it could breach the Slovenian constitution by infringing on sovereignty. Janša labelled the government's position as bordering on "treason" (Janša 2023). In response, the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified via Twitter that Slovenia's support was not binding, but rather aimed at ensuring small states remain influential in discussions about QMV. They explained that the intention of the ministry "is to be part of the debate and to ensure small states are not outvoted" (MFA Twitter 2023).

To address these concerns, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised a public hearing in the National Assembly on 29 September 2023, inviting MPs, researchers, and the interested public. In her opening debate, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tanja Fajon, clarified that Slovenia "actively supports the discussion [emphasis by authors] on increased use of QMV in CFSP". Her explanation of why Slovenia joined the like-minded group of member states was the following: "Slovenia must be present and actively involved in all discussions on the future of the EU. We must not let anything take us by surprise. That is why we have joined the debate among the member states on the effective use of the QMV, which includes a review and examination of the safeguards that would be available to countries to protect their national interests in potential cases of the QMV." (Fajon 2023) Speakers at the hearing, including professors and researchers, supported discussions on QMV but advised caution, echoing the *festina lente* principle. MEPs Klemen Grošelj, Milan Brglez, and MP Anže Logar, who also participated, backed active Slovenian involvement, although Logar also stated that "Slovenia should not be member of the Groups of Friends of the QMV", since its membership could limit its ability to advocate independently (Logar 2023). Additionally, EU Commissioner Janez Lenarčič expressed support for QMV CFSP, viewing it to prevent EU paralysis and enable quicker responses to international events (Esih 2023). Following the public hearing, no other formal statements on the QMV issue were made public.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In 2023, Miro Cerar wrote a column on why Slovenia should not be part of the group of countries supporting QMV CFSP (Cerar 2023). Dimitrij Rupel, the former Slovenian foreign minister, similarly highlighted (2023) that Slovenian support for QMV in CFSP would mean the end for the "sovereign Slovenian state" and cause "damage to Slovenian national interests".

<sup>11</sup> The signatories were Annalena Baerbock (Germany), Hadja Lahbib (Belgium), Jean Asselborn (Luxemburg), Wopke Hoekstra (the Netherlands), Bogdan Aurescu (Romania), Tanja Fajon (Slovenia), and José Manuel Albares Bueno (Spain).

<sup>12</sup> The academic circles organised different debates. One of these was at the New University in Ljubljana where different academics debated the challenges and opportunities of QMV CFSP. One



However, unofficial sources indicate that the Group of Friends to Foster QMV CFSP met in March 2024 to discuss legal frameworks for its implementation. In June 2024, a committee of experts, nominated by interested member states and known as the “Sounding Board”, published a commentary in Delo outlining some of the challenges and considerations surrounding QMV CFSP.<sup>13</sup>

FIGURE 1: EXCERPT FROM THE COMMENTARY OF THE SOUNDING BOARD PUBLISHED IN DELO

GOSTUJOČE PERO

## (KOMENTAR) Kako se znebiti veta v zunanji in varnostni politiki EU

Svet se spreminja in EU se mora opremiti s sredstvi za ustrezen odziv na velike izzive.



FOTO: Teresa Koudelkova/Shutterstock

Belén Becerra Atienza, Annegret Bendick, Juha Jokela, Sabina Lange, Soňa Vandenbosch, Ramona A. Wessel  
25. 6. 2024 | 05:00  
5:19

Source: Delo (2024).

### 3 POLITICAL SCIENCE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE QMV CFSP IN SLOVENIA AND SLOVAKIA

#### 3.1 Methodological Framework of the Empirical Research

To test the second hypothesis, we conducted a survey among a sample of 41 Slovenian and 45 Slovak students in their final year of undergraduate studies and the first year of postgraduate studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, and the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Matej Bel University (n = 86). The survey was carried out between January and April 2024, coinciding with a period of renewed discussion on the introduction of QMV CFSP within the European Union.<sup>14</sup> The questionnaire, administered electronically via the 1ka platform, consisted of 8 encompassing a total of 20

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of the speakers was also the former president of the republic, who said that “the national interest of Slovenia is to have a better and more efficient decision-making system in the CFSP”, which must be built in a way that would allow Slovenia to protect its national interests (Nova Univerza 2024).

<sup>13</sup> According to the unofficial stances of some Slovenian experts, the QMV CFSP proposal is currently a “dead duck due to the Hungarian and Polish presidencies of the Council and due to the political situation in France, where Macron has lost his political power”.

<sup>14</sup> During the same period, Slovakia held a presidential election campaign – 1<sup>st</sup> round on 23 March, 2<sup>nd</sup> round on 4 April.



variables (sub-statements). Respondents took an average of 2 minutes and 21 seconds to complete the survey.

The composition of respondents was as follows: of the total 86 respondents, 46% were men and 54% were women. Specifically, in Slovenia, 41% of the 41 respondents were men and 59% were women, while in Slovakia, 52% of the 45 respondents were men and 48% were women. Additional demographic data were collected to determine factors that might influence opinions on QMV CFSP. The data revealed that Slovenian respondents were relatively more “left-oriented” compared to their Slovak counterparts.<sup>15</sup> The average ideological self-assessment on a scale from 0 (left) to 100 (right) was 30.6 ( $s = 20.89$ ) for Slovenian respondents, while Slovak respondents had an average of 48.7 ( $s = 17.42$ ), indicating a more centrist position. Another question sought to understand respondents' political/ideological background by asking them to self-assess as either “pro-national” (independentist) or “pro-European.” The results showed smaller differences between the two groups: both Slovenian and Slovak respondents described themselves as strongly pro-European ( $\bar{x}_{SLO} = 69.8$  ( $s = 20.76$ );  $\bar{x}_{SK} = 72.3$  ( $s = 26.76$ )). The Slovak sample showed greater variability compared to the Slovenian sample.

### 3.2 Results

#### 3.2.1 Awareness of the Official Position Regarding QMV CFSP

The first question posed was, “Are you aware of the official position of your country regarding QMV CFSP?” This question aimed to determine two things: the general level of awareness of the national stance on QMV CFSP and to ensure that subsequent questions were answered by those who had some knowledge of their country's position. The results revealed a significant difference between the two countries. In Slovenia, only 39% of respondents were aware of their national position on QMV CFSP, whereas in Slovakia, 60% of respondents were familiar with their country's stance. A gender-based breakdown indicated that women were more likely to be aware of the national position on QMV CFSP than men.

The considerable gap between the two countries raised questions about the reasons for this discrepancy. In Slovenia, the issue of QMV CFSP was relatively absent from public discourse, whereas in Slovakia, it had been a prominent topic during the 2023 parliamentary elections and the 2024 presidential elections<sup>16</sup>. We concluded that the greater presence of the issue in public and political debates in Slovakia likely contributed to higher levels of awareness among Slovak students.

The second part of the questionnaire aimed to explore the reasons behind respondents' support for the introduction of QMV CFSP. Respondents were asked to evaluate four statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = I totally disagree, 7 = I totally agree) regarding why they would want their country to support QMV CFSP. The statements assessed respondents' agreement with the following reasons for support: (1) QMV CFSP would portray their country as more pro-European, (2) it would bring a higher degree of efficiency to EU affairs, (3) it would lead to greater Europeanisation of their country's policies, and (4) it would

<sup>15</sup> We measured a respondent's political and ideological orientation on a differential from 0 to 100, where 0 meant a position that could be described as “far/radical left”, while 100 was intended to describe someone that considers themselves to be “far/radical right”.

<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Slovak presidential elections, Štefan Harabin, an anti-system and right-wing populist candidate, as well as Peter Pellegrini both used this topic as a tool to demonise Ivan Korčok, a candidate that supported the deeper EU integration of Slovakia, claiming Korčok would give up Slovakia's veto right in the event of victory (Mikušovič 2024).

strengthen the EU's geopolitical position in the world. Detailed results of these evaluations are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: REASONS FOR SUPPORTING QMV CFSP (1 = I TOTALLY DISAGREE, 7 = I TOTALLY AGREE)

	SLOVENIA		SLOVAKIA	
	$\bar{x}$	s	$\bar{x}$	s
Europeanisation of my country	5.3	1.4	5.4	1.3
Higher efficiency when it comes to EU decision-making	5.7	1.5	5.7	1.6
Supporting "more Europe"	5.7	1.3	3.9	1.4
Strengthening the geopolitical position of the EU in the world	5.9	1.0	5.6	1.3

Source: Authors' own calculations.

As shown in Table 1, both Slovenian and Slovak students generally agree that supporting QMV CFSP would contribute to the increased Europeanisation of their country and improve the efficiency of EU decision-making processes. Notably, the understanding that QMV CFSP could enhance the EU's geopolitical influence in the world was also prevalent, though somewhat surprising. This perception likely stems from the belief that improved decision-making efficiency in CFSP would enable the EU to respond more swiftly and assertively, thereby boosting its status as a significant global actor.

The difference in the official stances towards QMV CFSP between Slovenia ("pro") and Slovakia ("reserved-opponent") was mirrored in the respondents' views on whether QMV CFSP would signal a shift towards a more "pro-European" orientation. Slovenian students were more inclined to agree with this statement, whereas Slovak respondents showed more hesitation. This divergence can be attributed not only to the perception that QMV CFSP embodies "more Europe" but also to the contrasting political discourse within each country. Slovenia's political narrative, characterised by alignment with Brussels and its preference for being seen as a cooperative, "good pupil" that aligns with EU expectations (cf. Bučar and Udovič 2023; Haček 2019; Horvat 2020), contrasts with Slovakia's more nuanced stance. As described by Mokrá and Kovačikova (2023), Slovakia's relationship with Brussels can be seen as "in and out," demonstrating a willingness not only to adopt EU policies but also to actively shape the agenda.

### 3.2.2 Dangers of Introducing QMV CFSP

The subsequent set of questions focused on potential risks associated with the adoption of QMV CFSP. Slovenian and Slovak respondents exhibited similar beliefs on this matter. Both groups agreed that the adoption of QMV CFSP could result in smaller EU member states being subordinated to the interests of larger states, potentially diminishing the significance of their own interests, sometimes to their detriment. They also concurred that maintaining the national veto (unanimity) is vital for safeguarding national interests. Slovak respondents were slightly more convinced of this than their Slovenian counterparts ( $\bar{x}_{SK} = 4.9$ ;  $\bar{x}_{SLO} = 4.5$ ). A minor difference emerged in responses concerning the link between the introduction of QMV CFSP and a potential rise in Euroscepticism. Slovenian respondents tended to slightly disagree with the notion that QMV CFSP could fuel Euroscepticism, whereas Slovak respondents showed slight agreement. Notably, Slovakian responses were more concentrated around the affirmative side, while Slovenian responses leaned toward uncertainty, falling more in the "we do not know – maybe" category.

One significant concern that could hinder the process of introducing QMV CFSP is the potential need to amend EU treaties. This could become a long-term or even deadlocked process, involving protracted negotiations and numerous

compromises; more critically, changes to foundational EU treaties require unanimous consent. Slovak respondents appeared less worried about this issue, indicating that they did not consider treaty changes necessary. Conversely, most Slovenian respondents agreed that the implementation of QMV CFSP would indeed require amendments to EU treaties.

### 3.2.3 *If I Were a Politician ...*

Building on the insights from Mihelič and Lipičnik (2010), we considered the significant role that today's students, as future leaders and policy-makers, might play in shaping public and political opinion regarding QMV CFSP. To understand their potential approaches if faced with a public declaration on this topic, we posed a scenario in which they had to choose one of the following options: (1) to oppose the introduction of QMV CFSP, (2) to advocate for a national referendum on the issue, or (3) to align with the behaviour of certain EU member states that seek to limit the transfer of power to Brussels. Table 2 presents the results.

TABLE 2: IF I WERE A NATIONAL POLITICIAN I WOULD ... (1 = I TOTALLY DISAGREE, 7 = I TOTALLY AGREE)

	SLOVENIA		SLOVAKIA	
	$\bar{x}$	s	$\bar{x}$	s
be against the QMV CFSP	2.2	1.8	2.9	2.0
call for a referendum on the introduction of QMV CFSP	3.6	2.1	3.2	2.0
never subordinate my state to the EU	2.4	1.8	2.6	1.6

Source: Authors' own calculations.

Table 2 reveals a shared sentiment among respondents from Slovenia and Slovakia that supports the notion of deeper EU integration. This is reflected in their overwhelming rejection of outright opposition to the introduction of QMV CFSP. When considering the possibility of holding a referendum, respondents demonstrated some openness, though with a degree of restraint. The most telling result, however, was their agreement on the need to sometimes prioritise common EU interests over individual national interests, underscoring an understanding that state interests may need to yield for the greater good of collective EU decision-making.<sup>17</sup>

To probe further, we analysed whether gender influenced perspectives on the three response options. The findings revealed notable differences: (1) male respondents exhibited greater overall support for QMV CFSP than their female counterparts, and (2) support for referenda was more common among female respondents.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the article was to examine the views of Slovenia and Slovakia on the issue of QMV CFSP. Why focus on QMV CFSP and these two small post-transition countries? Firstly, the QMV CFSP could facilitate a "smoother" decision-making process within the EU's CFSP, a process that has gained even more importance following the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the Israeli-Gaza war. In both cases, the EU's decision-making in CFSP was partially impeded by the unanimity requirement, suggesting that a shift towards greater efficiency might involve changes in voting and political decision-making procedures. Secondly, we chose to investigate Slovenia and Slovakia because of their shared socialist legacy,

<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, this result seems encouraging. We have to take into consideration the structure of the sample, where the largest part of respondents declares themselves as pro-European.

geographic location in Central Europe, status as small states within the EU, and common cultural and linguistic traditions. These similarities provide a valuable framework for analysing commonalities and differences between the two countries on one of the EU's most pressing issues at the moment.

To focus the discussion, we set two hypotheses for testing. Hypothesis 1 examined the impact of past legacies and similar political-economic paths to the EU on the views of Slovak and Slovenian authorities/politicians regarding QMV CFSP. Hypothesis 2 assessed how the statements made by state officials in both countries influence the perspectives of political science students on the QMV CFSP.

The first hypothesis was confirmed, as we demonstrated that officials from both countries, and therefore the countries themselves politically, hold different positions on the introduction of QMV CFSP. Slovenia supports its introduction and has joined the group of states advocating for a shift in EU CFSP decision-making from unanimity to qualified majority. Slovakia, on the other hand, has historically been "reserved" about the issue and, under the current government and new president, has shifted from a reserved-reluctant stance to an "unrelenting opponent," associating the veto power with preserving national sovereignty in foreign policy. This divergence highlights that a shared cultural and political legacy, as well as a similar political-economic trajectory, does not necessarily impact fundamental perceptions of national interest. In this context, the shared history and socialization of both countries, even with common roots, become secondary to the perceptions of political elites and citizens regarding potential sovereignty loss.

While the first hypothesis was confirmed, the second hypothesis was only partially supported. Our assumption that political statements would directly shape students' perspectives was only marginally validated. Slovak students demonstrated greater awareness of the issue, likely due to its prominence in their recent parliamentary and presidential election campaigns. Conversely, Slovenian students showed lower familiarity with the QMV CFSP topic, as it appears to be regarded as a relatively "irrelevant topic" among political elites and the public. This may be partially attributed to Slovenia's tendency to support proposals originating from Germany or Austria, with the push for QMV CFSP enjoying strong backing from Germany's Wilhelmstrasse.

However, the empirical research reveals several other relevant topics that should be highlighted. First, there is a consensus among both groups of students that the introduction of QMV CFSP would strengthen the Europeanisation process in both countries, enhance the effectiveness of EU decision-making, and reinforce the EU's role in the world. The only divergence is regarding whether QMV CFSP would also signify a shift towards greater integration or deepening of the EU. Slovak students are much more reluctant than Slovenian students on this matter, which suggests that part of the political discourse surrounding the "danger of EU deepening," particularly prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe, is influencing younger people or the student population. Secondly, students from both countries agreed that the issue of introducing QMV CFSP should not be decided by the electorate, but rather by the political elites running the country. This indicates that both groups of students recognise that mismanagement and populist approaches, if the question were left to the electorate, could lead to a result contrary to the actual national interest of both countries.

Finally, a methodological note: While the results presented provide insight into the topic, we must also acknowledge several limitations that are important for

the proper interpretation of the data. The first limitation is that our sample is relatively small and unstructured. The second limitation is that we surveyed students who were at least partially familiar with QMV CFSP, although we were surprised to find that 50% of the students were not familiar with the issue and therefore did not participate in the survey. Another limitation arises in the interpretation of the results, specifically regarding ideological affiliation or orientation. In our sample, students identified themselves as more left-wing on the left-right spectrum, which suggests they may be more likely to support CFSP QMV, as right-wing politicians tend to be more sovereigntist, while left-wing politicians are generally more supportive of deeper European integration.

Despite all these limitations, our results are still revealing and demonstrate a certain orientation of the younger generation towards the European Union and its processes. They also suggest that the theory of cross-cultural convergence may be based more on a “professional” culture rather than a “national” culture, as seen in the case of political science and international relations students. This is undoubtedly an area that warrants further exploration, as it is particularly interesting to compare the views of students in the same field from different EU member states on topics related to European integration.

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## UVEDBA GLASOVANJA S KVALIFICIRANO VEČINO V SKUPNI ZUNANJI IN VARNOSTNI POLITIKI: POGLEDI IZ SLOVENIJE IN SLOVAŠKE

*Članek se osredotoča na stališča Slovenije in Slovaške glede uvedbe glasovanja s kvalificirano večino na področju skupne zunanje in varnostne politike (SZVP) – vprašanja, ki je postalo posebej aktualno v zadnjih letih, ko so se v okviru Evropske unije začeli pojavljati različni poskusi blokiranja odločanja. Analiza je izvedena na dveh ravneh: na ravni uradnih stališč političnih elit oziroma političnih odločevalcev v Sloveniji in na Slovaškem ter na ravni študentske populacije obeh držav. Glavne ugotovitve je mogoče razvrstiti v dve skupini. Prvič, Slovenija in Slovaška imata na ravni političnih odločevalcev nasprotna stališča do uvedbe glasovanja s kvalificirano večino v okviru SZVP. Drugič, stališča študentov obeh držav so si medsebojno bistveno bolj podobna kot stališča političnih elit.*

**Ključne besede:** glasovanje s kvalificirano večino; skupna zunanja in varnostna politika; Slovenija; Slovaška; študenti.



# CYBERSECURITY BETWEEN TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM, POLITICAL GOVERNANCE, AND NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

Uroš SVETE<sup>1</sup>

*The article advances the central thesis that the organization of cybersecurity within a given country is not solely determined by the technical aspects of information and communication technology. Instead, it is profoundly shaped by the relationships among civilian cybersecurity institutions, the intelligence community, military capabilities, and law enforcement agencies, as well as by the country's political (security) culture, its integration into international organizations, and its perception of threats to national security. The study applies the theories of technological determinism and constructivism while employing a comparative methodology. Furthermore, it explores why significant functional and institutional differences exist among countries that are otherwise very similar in political and administrative structures, despite efforts to harmonize approaches through EU cyber legislation, international technical and political standards, and attempts to establish international law in cyberspace.*

**Key words:** cybersecurity; information-communication technology; national security; technological determinism; institutional overlapping.

## 1 INTRODUCTION – A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FUNDAMENTAL CYBERSECURITY CHALLENGES

Since its inception in the mid-1970s, modern digital information technology has oscillated between private, individual initiatives, commercial interests, and state involvement, with governments attempting to influence its development through various mechanisms (Abbate 1999). As the number of users, networked devices, and the capacity for data transfer, processing, and storage increased—following Moore's Law (Moore 1965)—the emerging cyberspace built on this technology

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grew in social power. Its global and international presence also turned it into a new tool in the geostrategic competition between global powers (Nye 2011). While it was crucial to ensure suitable interoperable technical means, such as the TCP/IP protocol (Abbate 1999), the implementation process revealed significant disparities among nations.

The same is the origin of cybersecurity that can be traced back to the 1960s when the development of ARPANET, a precursor to the internet, raised initial concerns about protecting sensitive information. Early efforts focused on physical security and access control to prevent unauthorized use of centralized computing systems (Abbate 1999, 35). In the 1970s, the introduction of the Data Encryption Standard (DES) by the U.S. National Bureau of Standards provided a significant step forward in securing digital communications (Levy 2001, 85).

Cybersecurity became more prominent in the 1980s with the advent of personal computers and networked systems. The 1988 Morris Worm incident—the first major cyberattack—exposed vulnerabilities in internet-connected systems and led to the creation of the first Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) at Carnegie Mellon University (Spafford 1989, 678). This marked the formal beginning of institutionalized cybersecurity responses.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, as internet usage surged, the threat landscape expanded. Tools like firewalls and intrusion detection systems were introduced to protect networks, while the development of public-key infrastructure provided a framework for secure online communication (Nye 2011, 113). Notably, the 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia—considered one of the first state-sponsored cyber warfare campaigns—highlighted the geopolitical implications of cybersecurity and spurred comprehensive international and national efforts, like strategic, legal, and organizational, to address cyber threats (Czosseck, Ottis and Talihärm 2011).

Today, cybersecurity has evolved into a multifaceted discipline addressing threats ranging from cybercrime to state-sponsored attacks, utilizing tools such as artificial intelligence and blockchain to enhance security measures. Despite advancements, the rapidly changing technological landscape and increasingly sophisticated adversaries continue to pose challenges. While the landscape of cyber threats continues to evolve, their sophistication is not primarily driven by the emergence of new attack types. Instead, it lies in the innovative use of Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) employed by threat actors. These adaptive strategies allow cybercriminals and nation-state actors to bypass defences, exploit vulnerabilities, and achieve their objectives with precision. Cybersecurity experts have noted that many attack types, such as phishing, malware, and ransomware, remain fundamentally unchanged in their core methodology<sup>2</sup>. However, the way these attacks are deployed has become increasingly complex. For example, advanced persistent threat (APT) groups often utilize phishing not merely to steal credentials but to establish long-term footholds and persistent presence in target networks. These groups also leverage multi-staged attack frameworks that integrate reconnaissance, weaponization, delivery phase, exploitation installation phase and the command and control (C2) phase, the attacker establishes a C2 channel to the target system – so called Intrusion Kill Chain (Siukonen 2019; Hutchins, Cloppert and Amin 2020; SentinelOne 2024).

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<sup>2</sup> What I published in the same journal twelve years ago (Svete 2012). In this very long era for technology, it has become evident that, from a technical standpoint, attacks have not changed significantly. However, practically everything else has, from complexity and dependence on a functioning cyberspace to, ultimately, geostrategic circumstances.

Moreover, attackers are increasingly exploiting legitimate tools and processes, a tactic known as "living off the land" (LOTL).

This method, which uses native tools such as PowerShell or Windows Management Instrumentation (WMI), enables attackers to blend into normal network traffic and avoid traditional detection methods (Mitre ATT&CK 2023). The MITRE ATT&CK framework highlights the role of TTPs in modern cyberattacks. For instance, attackers are now using techniques like fileless malware, which executes directly in memory and avoids writing files to disk, rendering traditional antivirus solutions ineffective (Mitre ATT&CK 2023). Furthermore, the deployment of modular malware, which can adapt its behaviour depending on the target environment, showcases how TTPs enhance the effectiveness of even well-known attack types). Recent high-profile incidents demonstrate the importance of TTPs in cyber threat sophistication. The SolarWinds attack (CSIS 2021) involved a supply chain compromise that injected malicious code into legitimate software updates, exploiting trust relationships to infiltrate high-value targets. The attackers' meticulous operational security and strategic use of TTPs ensured a prolonged presence in networks before discovery (ibid.). Similarly, the Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack showcased the use of double extortion, combining data encryption with the threat of data leaks to maximize impact and compel victims to pay ransoms. This hybrid TTP significantly increased the pressure on the affected organization to comply (Europol 2022). The sophistication of modern cyber threats does not lie in the invention of new attack vectors but in the innovative application of TTPs. This evolution underscores the need for organizations to focus on understanding and mitigating these techniques rather than solely relying on traditional defence mechanisms. By adopting frameworks like MITRE ATT&CK and enhancing threat intelligence capabilities, cybersecurity practitioners can better anticipate and counteract these advanced strategies. The main elements of cybersecurity, often referred to as the CIA Triad, therefore include confidentiality (ensuring that sensitive information is accessed only by authorized individuals, systems, or processes). Useful measures are encryption, access controls, and authentication mechanisms, integrity (ensuring that data remains accurate, consistent, and trustworthy throughout its lifecycle). This includes protection against unauthorized modifications and ensuring data authenticity and availability (ensuring that information and systems are accessible to authorized users when needed, particularly in the face of threats such as distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks (Whitman and Mattord 2022))<sup>3</sup>.

For that reason, cybersecurity has become a cornerstone of national security in the 21st century. While ICT advancements provide the technical backbone for cybersecurity frameworks, these alone do not account for the disparities in organizational approaches among states. For example, Estonia's response to the

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<sup>3</sup> A very good example are E-elections. The article by Kuba and Stejskal (2024) explores the potential of electronic voting (e-voting) to increase voter turnout and reduce participation inequalities in the Czech Republic. Using survey data, the study predicts that e-voting could boost turnout by 8.5 percentage points, particularly benefiting younger voters, irregular voters, and those facing logistical barriers to traditional voting. However, the adoption of e-voting varies across demographic groups, with wealthier, more educated individuals being more likely to use it. E-voting highlights how indispensable information and communication technology (ICT) has become in modern societies, streamlining democratic processes and making them more accessible. Yet, it also introduces risks to democratic integrity. In November 2024, Romania's presidential election faced significant cybersecurity challenges, leading to the annulment of the first-round results. The Constitutional Court's decision was based on evidence of cyberattacks and foreign interference, notably linked to Russian entities. These cyber activities included over 85,000 attacks targeting election systems, aiming to disrupt the electoral process and influence outcomes (Ilascu 2024).



2007 cyberattacks showcases how cohesive and centralized civilian-led efforts can bolster national resilience (Ottis 2008), whereas the United States struggles with inter-agency silos despite advanced technological capabilities (Healey 2013). Similarly, Israel's integration of military intelligence, such as Unit 8200, reflects the influence of its securitized political culture (Herman 2021). In Slovenia cybersecurity was first recognized in the context of national security in the Resolution on the National Security Strategy in 2001 and more specifically in the Resolution on the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia (ReSNV-1) in 2010: "The Republic of Slovenia will develop a national strategy to respond to cyber threats and the misuse of information technologies and adopt necessary measures to ensure effective cyber defence, involving both the public and private sectors to the greatest extent possible. One of the priority tasks in ensuring cybersecurity will also be the establishment of a national coordination body for cybersecurity." Unfortunately, it took six years to adopt the Cybersecurity Strategy (2016) and another four years to establish the responsible authority (formally, the Information Security Administration of the Republic of Slovenia assumed all tasks on January 1, 2020).

This article posits that effective cybersecurity relies equally on the structural and cultural dynamics of a country's institutions, as well as its geopolitical positioning. By integrating perspectives from technological determinism and constructivism, this research highlights the socio-technical co-evolution of cybersecurity systems and provides a comparative analysis of various national models.

## 2 ICT AND ITS SECURITY (R)EVOLUTION

ICT has undergone transformative changes, from the mainframe computing era of the 1960s to the decentralized (local) networks and cloud computing paradigms of today. These developments have altered the landscape of vulnerabilities and capabilities. Technological determinism suggests that the trajectory of ICT dictates societal and organizational structures (Smith and Marx 1994). However, this view must be tempered with constructivist insights, which emphasize the human agency and cultural factors shaping technology adoption (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987). For instance, the early adoption of cybersecurity measures in the United States contrasted with the delayed but centralized approaches in many European nations, reflecting differing cultural attitudes toward privacy and state intervention. Allan Dafoe examines the theory of technological determinism as well, which posits that technology drives societal and cultural change in a unidirectional and inevitable manner. Dafoe critiques oversimplified interpretations of this theory, offering a typology to distinguish between strong and weak forms of determinism. He emphasizes the interplay between technological innovations and socio-political factors, arguing that the effects of technology are mediated by contextual variables. This nuanced framework moves beyond binary debates, focusing on the conditions under which technological impacts occur (Dafoe 2015, 1047).

As noted by Dunn Cavelty and Wenger (2020), the rapid digitalization of economies and societies has significantly expanded the scope and strategic relevance of cybersecurity, embedding technological development deeply within broader political and security frameworks. They emphasize that cyber incidents increasingly shape both national and international security dynamics, illustrating the intricate interplay between evolving technological capabilities and governance challenges. The integration of cybersecurity into national security strategies reflects its growing importance in modern conflicts.

Cyberattacks, such as the 2020 SolarWinds breach and the 2021 Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack, have demonstrated the vulnerability of critical infrastructure and the potential for widespread economic and social disruption. Governments are increasingly investing in offensive and defensive cyber capabilities as well. Military doctrines now incorporate cyber operations as a core component of national defence. However, this militarization of cyberspace poses challenges for international stability. The lack of clear norms and agreements on cyber warfare risks escalating conflicts and undermining trust among nations.

Dafoe (2015) extends this discussion by proposing a typology of technological determinism, emphasizing the interplay between military-economic competition and sociotechnical evolution. He argues that while technologies often evolve within social contexts, competitive pressures can create deterministic trajectories, especially in domains such as cybersecurity, where national security imperatives dominate decision-making.

### 3 INSTITUTIONAL INTERSECTIONS IN CYBERSECURITY

The interplay between civilian cybersecurity institutions, intelligence communities, military capabilities, and law enforcement agencies shapes a nation's cybersecurity posture. These interactions are deeply embedded in political governance structures and historical experiences of the state. The complexity in delineating the roles and responsibilities among civilian cybersecurity institutions, intelligence communities, military capabilities, and law enforcement agencies arises from overlapping mandates, evolving cyber threats, and the necessity for inter-agency collaboration.

The division of responsibilities among civilian cybersecurity institutions, intelligence communities, military capabilities, and law enforcement agencies is critical for effective national cybersecurity governance, to delineate their roles and avoid overlaps. Firstly, clearly defined laws and regulations (legislative framework) should outline the scope of authority and responsibilities for each entity. Civilian agencies should focus on protecting critical infrastructure, issuing guidelines, and managing public-private partnerships. Intelligence agencies should be tasked with cyber threat intelligence and counterintelligence activities. Military units should handle offensive and defensive operations in cyberspace during armed conflicts. Law enforcement should investigate, prosecute, and prevent cybercrimes<sup>4</sup>.

Secondly, coordination mechanisms in the form of inter-agency coordination bodies can help bridge gaps and prevent overlaps. A National (Cyber)security Council can oversee and harmonize activities across sectors. Regular inter-agency meetings and joint task forces can foster collaboration. As an example, we emphasize the German Cyberabwehrzentrum (Cyber Defence Centre) which is a cybersecurity coordination and response entity in Germany, established to strengthen the country's cyber defence capabilities. It serves as a central hub for cooperation among government agencies, military, intelligence services, and law enforcement in addressing cyber threats. The Cyberabwehrzentrum brings together various federal agencies to ensure coordinated responses to cyber

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<sup>4</sup> In the United States, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) is responsible for civilian infrastructure protection, while the National Security Agency (NSA) oversees cyber intelligence, and the Department of Defence (DoD) conducts military operations in cyberspace (CISA 2023).

incidents. This includes collaboration among the Federal Office for Information Security (BSI), responsible for civilian cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection, the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), focused on cybercrime investigations, the Federal Intelligence Service (BND), which provides intelligence on foreign cyber threats and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), which monitors domestic cyber threats and espionage. The centre manages real-time responses to significant cyberattacks, ensuring information sharing and cooperation between the agencies involved. Collaboration with the Military: The Cyber and Information Space Command (Kommando Cyber- und Informationsraum, CIR) of the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) plays a critical role in defending against cyberattacks targeting military systems, often in collaboration with the Cyberabwehrzentrum (Federal Office for Information Security (BSI, 2024). The solution employed by the Republic of Slovenia is very comparable. According to Slovenia's Information Security Act (ZInfV), cyber defence is primarily implemented by state authorities, with distinct roles being assigned to various institutions. These include government bodies, security services, and specialized agencies tasked with protecting national information infrastructure and responding to cyber threats. The Government Information Security Office (URSIV) serves as the central authority responsible for coordinating cybersecurity policies and implementing the provisions of the national information security bill ZInfV. It oversees national strategies for information security and cooperates with other state institutions. The Ministry of Defence (MORS) is responsible for the military aspects of cyber defence, including protecting defence-related systems. SI-CERT (Slovenian Computer Emergency Response Team) acts as the national response centre for cybersecurity incidents. It provides technical assistance and guidance during cyberattacks and manages incident reporting from critical infrastructure operators and digital service providers. The Ministry of the Interior (MNZ), which includes the police, focuses on cybercrime investigations through law enforcement. Finally, the Intelligence and Security Agency (SOVA) addresses cyber espionage and other threats to national security. The ZInfV establishes a framework for inter-agency collaboration, particularly during significant cyber incidents, ensuring that state authorities act in a unified and efficient manner (Republic of Slovenia Information Security Act (Zakon o informacijski varnosti 2018).

Thirdly, distinct operational domains prevent conflict and confusion. Civilian agencies handle cybersecurity awareness, education, and infrastructure monitoring. Historically, the first CERTs (Computer Emergency Response Teams) were integral parts of the information infrastructure used by end-users, who relied on them to handle incidents. Over time, these teams transformed into more generic support services, offering broad methodological assistance during cyber incidents. However, in recent years, some countries are revisiting their roots, as increasingly more cybersecurity agencies and CERTs are deploying sensors within the infrastructure for which they are responsible. This approach enables them to detect even the most advanced cyberattacks more efficiently and quickly, particularly those designed to evade traditional cyber defence tools. Examples of such practices include the Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA) of Croatia, which has significantly enhanced its cyber defence capabilities through the establishment of the Cyber Security Centre and the implementation of the SK@UT system. In 2019, the SOA inaugurated the Cyber Security Centre to safeguard Croatia's national cyberspace from state-sponsored cyberattacks and advanced persistent threats (APTs). This centre serves as a hub for monitoring, detecting, and responding to cyber threats targeting critical infrastructure and government institutions. Its main application is the SK@UT System, a distributed network of sensors deployed across more than 60 key government and critical

infrastructure entities. It functions by continuously monitoring network traffic to detect anomalies and potential cyber threats in real-time. Notably, SK@UT is recognized among the top three of such programs within the European Union, reflecting its advanced capabilities in cyber threat detection and prevention. On February 15, 2024, Croatia enacted the Cyber Security Act, in compliance with the European Union's NIS2 Directive. This legislation designates SOA as the central state body for cybersecurity, expanding its mandate to include comprehensive oversight and coordination of national cyber defence efforts. Consequently, the existing Cyber Security Centre is being transformed into the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC-HR) to better address evolving cyber threats. The SOA actively collaborates with international partners to bolster its cyber defence capabilities. For instance, in 2022, the U.S. Cyber Command deployed "hunt forward" teams to Croatia, working alongside the SOA's Cyber Security Centre to enhance the security of Croatian cyber infrastructure amid heightened concerns over cyberattacks linked to regional conflicts (SOA 2024; Janofsky 2022; ZSIS 2024).

The next example is a system called Einstein, operated by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). It is an intrusion detection and prevention system deployed across federal civilian networks. Einstein monitors network traffic for malicious activity and provides real-time threat detection. While primarily focused on federal networks, the CISA also collaborates with state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, as well as private sector partners, to enhance cybersecurity monitoring and information sharing (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) 2024).

The third case is the Danish SektorCERT as a private one. SektorCERT is Denmark's cybersecurity centre dedicated to critical infrastructure sectors. It plays a pivotal role in defending these sectors against cyber threats by detecting and managing cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure. SektorCERT also facilitates the accumulation and dissemination of essential knowledge to prevent future attacks. Established by Green Power Denmark, Dansk Fjernvarme, and Energinet, SektorCERT has been operational since 2019. As of January 1, 2023, the DANVA (Danish Water and Wastewater Association) joined as an equal partner, expanding SektorCERT's reach to include the water sector. Among its services, SektorCERT offers network monitoring, OT (Operational Technology) security training, and incident handling during cyberattacks. It monitors companies within its sectors through an extensive sensor network, enabling the early detection and mitigation of cyber threats (Cybersecurity Intelligence 2024).

Intelligence agencies focus on covert cyber operations and international threat intelligence. Covert cyber operations are clandestine activities conducted in cyberspace to achieve strategic objectives without revealing the identity or intent of the actor behind them. These operations typically aim to gather intelligence, disrupt adversarial systems, or manipulate information while maintaining plausible deniability. Covert operations often use tools like proxy servers, anonymizing networks, and compromised systems to obscure the origin of the attack (Rid 2013, 25). These operations may target critical infrastructure, extract sensitive data, or disrupt adversarial capabilities. Examples include the deployment of malware, Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, or disinformation campaigns (Singer and Friedman 2014, 78). Covert cyber operations occupy a grey area in international law. They often blur the line between espionage and acts of war, complicating attribution and response (Lin 2016, 102). Covert cyber operations are a cornerstone of modern geopolitical strategy, offering states a way to achieve objectives without direct confrontation.

However, their covert nature makes them difficult to attribute and respond to, raising challenges for international security and legal frameworks.

Military units conduct offensive cyber operations (OCO's) under strict governmental oversight. OCOs are state-sponsored activities conducted by military or defence organizations to project power in cyberspace. Their goal is to achieve tactical, operational, or strategic advantages using disrupt, deny, degrade, or destroy adversarial capabilities and often together with conventional military campaigns. The targets are enemy military infrastructure, critical infrastructure, or strategic assets (e.g., air defence systems, command centres) (Zetter 2014, 125).

Law enforcement addresses cybercrime within a domestic legal framework. Law enforcement agencies are continually adapting to the evolving landscape of cybercrime by implementing specialized training, fostering international collaboration, and developing advanced investigative frameworks. The establishment of dedicated cybercrime units and the provision of targeted training are essential for effective cybercrime investigation. A qualitative analysis emphasizes the need for law enforcement to enhance capacity, capability, and collaboration to address the complexities of cyber offenses (Holt et al. 2023). Additionally, the integration of body-worn cameras, drones, and artificial intelligence has been proposed to advance policing strategies in the digital age (Davies and Krame 2023). The transnational nature of cybercrime necessitates robust international cooperation. The Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention) remains a cornerstone in facilitating cross-border collaboration (Broadhurst 2006). Recent studies underscore the importance of harmonizing legal frameworks and joint operations to effectively combat cyber threats (Holt and Lee 2019). Law enforcement agencies are developing comprehensive frameworks that integrate technological tools with traditional investigative methods. The Cybersecurity Resilience and Law Enforcement Collaboration (CyRLEC) Framework, for instance, emphasizes collaboration with law enforcement agencies to mitigate cyber threats (Schiliro 2023). Furthermore, the integration of digital forensics into investigative processes has been crucial in addressing cybercrime (Casey 2011). Despite advancements, challenges persist, including rapid technological evolution, jurisdictional issues, and resource constraints. Law enforcement agencies continue to adapt by embracing new technologies, fostering public-private partnerships, and engaging in continuous training to stay ahead of cybercriminals (Wall 2007). The need for a harm-centric perspective in policing cyberspace has been highlighted, necessitating a shift from traditional methods to effectively address cybercrime (Lee 2019). In contrast to other cyber actors, law enforcement agencies are increasingly adopting offensive cyber operations to dismantle the digital infrastructure of cybercriminals, complemented by on-the-ground arrests and asset seizures<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Dismantling of the 'Ghost' Cybercrime Platform. In September 2024, an international law enforcement operation led by Europol successfully dismantled the 'Ghost' cybercrime platform, which was extensively used for drug trafficking and money laundering. The operation resulted in 51 arrests across various countries, with additional apprehensions anticipated. The platform's advanced security features had made it a preferred tool among criminal organizations. This action also prevented several threats to life, led to the dismantling of a drug lab in Australia, and resulted in the seizure of weapons, drugs, and over 1 million euros in cash (Olive and Van Campenhout 2024). Operation PowerOFF is an ongoing joint initiative by the FBI, Europol, and other international law enforcement agencies targeting 'booter' or 'stresser' services that offer Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks for hire. Since its inception in 2018, the operation has led to the seizure of numerous domains associated with these services and the arrest of individuals operating them. In December 2022, the FBI announced the seizure of 48 domains linked to DDoS-for-hire platforms, significantly disrupting these illegal services

TABLE 1: DIVERSIFICATION OF CYBER SECURITY PERPETRATORS

Aspect	Military OCOs	Cyber Espionage	Cybercrime
Primary Goal	Strategic disruption or destruction	Intelligence gathering	Financial gain
Actors	State military organizations	State intelligence agencies, proxy actors	Non-state criminal groups, rogue state "supported" criminal groups
Legal Status	Governed by international law	Often a grey area	Criminalized globally
Targets	Military and strategic assets	Government and private data	Financial institutions, companies, individuals
Implications	Significant due to potential collateral cyber and/or physical damage	Often covert and difficult to attribute	Exploitative and harmful to victims

Source: based on Healy (2024) and own analysis.

From the examples provided, it becomes evident how challenging it is to distinguish between the many "state" cyber actors, as the tools, techniques, and methods they use are often strikingly similar. As a result, the differentiation can only be "artificial and biased" meaning non-technical. The table 1 illustrates that the actual differences lie primarily in the attackers, their legal status, and their targets, with partial distinctions in their (ethical) implications.

The delineation of responsibilities among cybersecurity stakeholders requires a mix of clear legislative frameworks, robust coordination mechanisms, and adaptive operational practices. These analyzed measures ensure that agencies can focus on their core missions while collaborating effectively to address the dynamic nature of cyber threats<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4 POLITICAL GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY CULTURE AS CYBERSECURITY DRIVERS

Political governance structures shape the prioritization and framing of cybersecurity. States with centralized governance structures, such as Russia, favour top-down approaches integrating all aspects of state power, which enables swift decision-making but may limit stakeholder input and adaptability. In contrast, decentralized democracies, like Germany, prioritize sectoral responsibilities and stakeholder engagement, fostering collaboration but sometimes leading to slower response times. The cultural perception of risk— Influenced by historical experiences, such as Estonia's 2007 cyberattacks and the

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([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_PowerOFF](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_PowerOFF). In December 2024, U.S. authorities charged a Russian-Israeli dual national, Rostislav Panev, for his alleged involvement with the LockBit ransomware group. Panev, arrested in Israel in August, is awaiting extradition to the United States. As a developer for LockBit from its inception in 2019 until February 2024, Panev contributed to the group's growth, which has been identified as one of the most active and destructive ransomware operations globally. Since 2020, LockBit has been associated with attacks on more than 2,500 victims across 120 countries, targeting various sectors (Reuters 2024).

<sup>6</sup> As a good practice, the Counter Ransomware Initiative (CRI) could be emphasized. It is a global coalition established in 2021 by the United States to combat the escalating threat of ransomware. Its mission is to enhance collective resilience, disrupt the ransomware ecosystem, and develop comprehensive policy approaches to address ransomware threats. Key objectives of the CRI are building collective resilience, enhancing the ability of member nations to prevent and withstand ransomware attacks through shared best practices and resources, disruption of ransomware ecosystem—coordinating efforts to dismantle the infrastructure and networks utilized by ransomware operators and policy development—formulating and promoting policies that deter ransomware activities, including discouraging ransom payments and countering illicit financial activities associated with ransomware. The CRI underscores the importance of international collaboration in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by ransomware, aiming to create a secure and resilient cyberspace for all member nations (see <https://www.counter-ransomware.org/aboutus>)



United States' emphasis on protecting critical infrastructure from state-sponsored threats—further determines the aggressiveness and scope of national strategies (Ottis 2008). These examples highlight how governance structures interact with security cultures to shape diverse cybersecurity approaches.

Membership in international organizations like NATO, the EU, or ASEAN significantly influences national cybersecurity policies, too. NATO's cooperative defence strategies, including the Tallinn Manual on the Law of Cyber Warfare, provide a framework for member states by offering detailed guidelines on responding to cyber operations within international law, as demonstrated by its influence on coordinated member responses to ransomware threats. Damjan Štručl's article, "Cyber Security and Cyber Defence Comparison of Various NATO Member States," explores the diverse approaches to cybersecurity and cyber defence among NATO countries. It highlights critical variations in strategy, organization, and resource allocation, reflecting each nation's unique geopolitical circumstances and security priorities. Štručl emphasizes that NATO countries vary significantly in their cybersecurity organizational frameworks. Some nations integrate their cyber capabilities within military structures, while others operate through civilian-led agencies, reflecting diverse national priorities. For instance, the U.S. emphasizes offensive cyber operations within its military strategy, while European nations such as Germany focus on defensive measures to protect critical infrastructure (Štručl 2023, 52). The article underscores the disparities in cybersecurity policies, influenced by historical experiences and perceived threats. Countries like Estonia, having faced significant cyberattacks in 2007, have robust national cybersecurity strategies with an emphasis on public-private partnerships. Conversely, nations with fewer historical cyber threats, such as some Southern European countries, have less-developed cyber defence frameworks (ibid., 53). Štručl discusses how NATO's Cyber Defence Pledge serves as a unifying framework, urging member states to enhance their cyber defence capabilities. However, the level of integration and commitment varies. Northern European countries, particularly those bordering Russia, actively participate in NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, while others contribute to a lesser extent (ibid., 55). Štručl concludes that while NATO provides a collective framework for cyber defence, the varying capabilities and priorities of member states pose challenges to achieving a cohesive strategy. He recommends enhancing information sharing, standardizing cybersecurity practices, and increasing investments in capacity building across NATO members (ibid., 59).

Similarly, ASEAN's emphasis on capacity-building has led to initiatives like the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre<sup>7</sup>, which fosters regional expertise and unified approaches to tackling cyber threats. These actions illustrate how such organizations directly shape the cybersecurity strategies of member states, enhancing stability and shared technological growth. Threat perception varies across nations based on geopolitical realities. For instance, the United States' National Cybersecurity Strategy prioritizes countering state-sponsored threats from China and Russia, while smaller states like Singapore focus on cyber resilience against economic espionage and criminal syndicates (National Cybersecurity Strategy 2023).

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<sup>7</sup> ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre, see <https://ajccbc.ncsa.or.th>.

#### 4.1 Cybersecurity Coordination Bodies – Comparative Analysis

By comparing the cybersecurity frameworks of countries such as the United States, Estonia, Israel, and others, this article illustrates the diversity in organizational models, especially in the field of civil cyber security. The analysis highlights the interplay of specific metrics, such as the integration of public and private sectors, the degree of military involvement in cyber operations, and the prioritization of threat types (e.g., espionage vs. sabotage). For instance, the United States' emphasis on inter-agency coordination contrasts with Estonia's cohesive and centralized civilian-led approach, while Israel's innovation-driven model emphasizes rapid technological development. These examples underline the varied approaches to achieving cybersecurity resilience and national security goals.

While differences in cybersecurity frameworks between countries can be understood considering their unique governmental structures and priorities, the situation becomes far more complex when viewed within the context of the European Union (EU). The NIS Directive (Directive on Security of Network and Information Systems) is a key legislative instrument adopted by the EU to enhance cybersecurity across member states. It requires each member state to designate a single point of contact (SPOC) responsible for coordinating EU-wide communication on cybersecurity incidents, at least one competent national authority for cybersecurity, and a national Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT) tasked with managing and mitigating cyber incidents. This directive aims to create a minimum standard for cybersecurity capabilities and coordination across the EU. However, the way member states have implemented these requirements reveals significant institutional and functional heterogeneity.

As illustrated in the table 2, EU member states have applied the NIS Directive's requirements in widely varying ways. **Institutional Variations:** Some countries have centralized their cybersecurity responsibilities under a single coordinating body, while others have distributed responsibilities across multiple agencies. **Functional Variations:** Confirm cybersecurity agencies in the EU perform a diverse range of functions following coordination tasks (acting as liaison bodies between national stakeholders and EU entities (e.g., SPOCs)), policy development (drafting and enforcing national cybersecurity strategies and legislation), fusion cells (integrating intelligence, defence, and civilian capabilities to respond to cyber threats) or cyber defence capacities (playing an active role in national defence against cyber threats). In some countries, cybersecurity agencies are part of national security and counterterrorism efforts, placing cyber threats within the broader context of homeland security. In others, the development of civilian cybersecurity capabilities has been rooted in intelligence services, reflecting the perceived criticality of cyber threats to national security.

This divergence is driven in part by the perception of cyber threats as existential risks to national security across almost all member states. Since the EU's legislative tools—whether directives or regulations—cannot directly dictate national security measures and organizational/institutional models, each country has significant autonomy in defining its cybersecurity strategy. The NIS Directive, while fostering minimum standards, highlights the difficulty of harmonizing approaches in an area where national sovereignty remains paramount. As such, the institutional and functional differences among member states reflect a broader tension between EU-level coordination and national-level autonomy in addressing cyber threats.

TABLE 1: CYBERSECURITY COORDINATION BODIES – COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Country	Placement	Focus Area	Responsible Institution
Belgium	Prime Minister's Office	Centralized Coordination	Cyber Security Center Belgium (CCB)
Czech Republic	Prime Minister's Office	Strategic Oversight	National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NÚKIB)
France	Prime Minister's Office	High-Level Oversight	Agence Nationale de la Sécurité des Systèmes d'Information (ANSSI)
Israel	Prime Minister's Office	Strategic Integration	Israeli National Cyber Directorate (INC4D)
Italy	Prime Minister's Office	Strategic Integration	National Cybersecurity Agency (ACN)
Japan	Prime Minister's Office	Strategic Integration	National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity (NISC)
Slovenia	Prime Minister's Office	Centralized Coordination/ High-Level Oversight	Government Information Security Office (URSIV)
United Kingdom	Prime Minister's Office	Indirect Coordination	National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) / GCHQ
Denmark	Ministry of Defence	Defence Strategy	Centre for Cyber Security (CFC5)
Lithuania	Ministry of Defence	Defence Strategy	National Cyber Security Centre
Portugal	Ministry of Defence	Defence Strategy	National Cybersecurity Centre (CNCS)
Latvia	Ministry of Defence	National Defence and Cybersecurity	Latvian National Cyber Security Policy Coordination
Estonia	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications	Critical Infrastructure Protection	Information System Authority (RIA)
Germany	Ministry of the Interior	Internal Security	Federal Office for Information Security (BSI)
Spain	Ministry of the Interior	Internal Security	National Cybersecurity Institute (INCIBE)
Poland	Ministry of the Interior & Digital Affairs	Counterintelligence & Digital Policy	Ministry of Digital Affairs & Internal Security Agency (ABW)
Ireland	Other Ministry (Environment & Communications)	Policy-Driven Approach	National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC)
Cyprus	Other Ministry (Innovation & Digital Policy)	Digital Innovation	Cyprus Cybersecurity Agency
Netherlands	Other Ministry (Justice & Security)	Legal Framework	National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC)
Sweden	Other Ministry (Justice)	Emergency Preparedness	Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)
Croatia	President and Prime Minister (Hybrid Model)	Hybrid: National Security & Digital Policy	Security and Intelligence Agency (SOA)

Sources: <https://enisa.europa.eu>; <https://csirtsnetwork.eu>; <https://ecs-org.eu/publications/>; webpages of responsible institutions.

## 4.2 Consolidation and International Collaboration in National Cybersecurity Approaches

National cybersecurity frameworks are increasingly converging around common trends, driven by the need for greater efficiency, capacity building, and international alignment. A key development is the consolidation of capabilities, as acute shortages of skilled personnel in public cybersecurity sectors have led to the integration of technical, operational, and policy functions within single agencies. This approach simplifies coordination at national and international levels. Civilian cybersecurity agencies are merging policymaking, operational, and technical responsibilities, while military cyber units and law enforcement are expanding their cyber capabilities. In intelligence, Techint (Technical Intelligence) and Hackint (Hacking Intelligence) have become indispensable tools, reflecting the evolving nature of cyber threats (Singer and Friedman 2014, 95).

Joint operations are increasingly common, showcasing collaboration across civilian, military, intelligence, and law enforcement domains. Notable examples include Operation PowerOFF, targeting DDoS-for-hire services in a joint effort by Europol and the FBI to disrupt illegal cyber services (Europol 2024). Another example is the disruption of the Conti ransomware group, a coordinated effort involving international law enforcement and private cybersecurity firms

(Europol 2022). NATO's Cyber Coalition Exercise serves as a prime example of integrating military and civilian capabilities during simulated cyberattacks to enhance collective defence (NATO 2024).

In May 2024, Polish authorities reported a significant cyber espionage campaign attributed to the Russian-linked group APT28, also known as Fancy Bear. This operation targeted Polish government institutions, aiming to compromise networks and exfiltrate sensitive information. The collaborative response involved CERT Polska (CSIRT NASK) and CSIRT MON, exemplifying the importance of joint efforts in addressing sophisticated cyber threats (CERT Polska 2024).

On the international front, agreements and frameworks are adapting to reflect these changes. NATO's Cyber Defence Pledge requires member states to designate Points of Contact (POCs) that integrate technical, military, and political aspects, ensuring cohesive responses during crises (NATO 2016). Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between NATO and member states formalize collaboration between national and NATO cyber entities. Additionally, updates to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime enhance international cooperation and the ability to conduct joint operations. This consolidation of capabilities and adaptation of international frameworks underscores a global trend toward integrated and interoperable cybersecurity strategies. These efforts aim to address the growing complexity of cyber threats through unified domestic measures and strengthened international collaboration. In our opinion, the future organization of cybersecurity will be determined by the following key factors:

- **Technology Infrastructure:** The evolution of technology infrastructure significantly influences the organization of cybersecurity within nation-states. The integration of advanced technologies such as cloud computing, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and artificial intelligence (AI) has expanded the digital landscape, introducing both opportunities and challenges for cybersecurity frameworks. The convergence of information technology (IT) and operational technology (OT) has led to increased interconnectivity, enhancing efficiency but also broadening the attack surface vulnerable to cyber threats. This integration necessitates a re-evaluation of cybersecurity strategies to encompass both IT and OT environments, ensuring comprehensive protection across all technological facets (Deloitte Insights 2022). Emerging technologies, while offering innovative solutions, also introduce new vulnerabilities. The rapid adoption of AI and machine learning, for instance, presents challenges in securing these systems against adversarial attacks. Similarly, the anticipated rise of quantum computing poses potential risks to current cryptographic standards, prompting the need for quantum-resistant encryption methods. To address these complexities, organizations are increasingly adopting a "resilience by design" approach, which emphasizes building systems capable of withstanding and recovering from cyber incidents. This paradigm shift moves beyond traditional security measures, advocating for inherent resilience within technological infrastructures (World Economic Forum 2024). Furthermore, the expansion of digital infrastructure requires a re-evaluation of cybersecurity investments. Organizations are recognizing the necessity of integrating cybersecurity measures into the foundational design of technological systems, rather than treating them as ancillary considerations. This integration ensures that security is an integral component of technological advancement, aligning with the evolving threat landscape (Katara 2022). In conclusion, the progression of technology infrastructure profoundly impacts the organization of cybersecurity within nation-states. The increasing

complexity and interconnectivity of digital systems demand a holistic and proactive approach to cybersecurity, integrating resilience and security into the very fabric of technological development. By embracing these strategies, nation-states can better safeguard their digital assets and maintain robust cybersecurity postures in an ever-evolving technological landscape.

- **Institutional Dynamics.** Institutional dynamics significantly influence the organization and effectiveness of national cybersecurity frameworks. In the United States, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has faced challenges due to inter-agency silos and political pressures, which have impacted its ability to coordinate comprehensive cybersecurity strategies. Recent developments suggest that changes in administration could further affect CISA's role and effectiveness in safeguarding national infrastructure (Geller 2024). In contrast, Estonia exemplifies a cohesive, civilian-led approach to cybersecurity. Following significant cyberattacks in 2007, Estonia established the Estonian Information System Authority (RIA), which coordinates cybersecurity efforts across government agencies and the private sector. This centralized model has enhanced Estonia's resilience against cyber threats and serves as a model for effective national cybersecurity organization (Choucrist et al 2017). The disparity between fragmented and cohesive institutional approaches underscores the importance of integrated strategies in cybersecurity. Nations with centralized coordination mechanisms, clear policy frameworks, and collaborative environments are better equipped to respond to and mitigate cyber threats. As cyber threats continue to evolve, the effectiveness of national cybersecurity efforts will increasingly depend on the ability to foster cohesive institutional dynamics and inter-agency collaboration.
- **Cultural and Strategic Drivers.** Cultural and strategic drivers significantly influence the organization of cybersecurity within nation-states. National culture shapes perceptions of cyber threats and informs the development of cybersecurity policies. For instance, societal attitudes toward privacy and authority can determine the emphasis placed on individual versus collective security measures. Kshetri and Alcantara (2015) note that cultural factors influence how cybercrimes are defined and addressed, leading to variations in cybersecurity practices across countries. Strategic drivers, including national security priorities and economic considerations, also play a crucial role. Nations perceiving cyber threats as significant risks may establish centralized cybersecurity agencies to coordinate defence efforts. Conversely, countries prioritizing economic growth might focus on protecting intellectual property and critical infrastructure. The alignment of cybersecurity strategies with national objectives ensures that resources are allocated effectively to address the most pertinent threats.

Organizational culture within institutions further impacts cybersecurity effectiveness. An environment that promotes security awareness and compliance can enhance an organization's resilience to cyber threats. Conversely, a lack of emphasis on cybersecurity within the organizational culture can lead to vulnerabilities. The MIT Sloan School of Management defines organizational cybersecurity culture as "the beliefs, values, and attitudes that drive employee behaviours to protect and defend the organization from cyber-attacks" (MIT Sloan School of Management 2018). In conclusion, cultural and strategic drivers are integral to shaping the organization of cybersecurity. Understanding and integrating these factors into policy development and organizational practices are essential for creating robust cybersecurity frameworks that are responsive to both national and organizational contexts.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Cybersecurity is not merely a technological challenge, but a multidimensional issue deeply embedded in political, social, and economic contexts. It intersects with governance, national security, and societal resilience, making it a complex and evolving field. Bridging the gaps between technological determinism, governance, and security demands nuanced understanding and collaborative efforts. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, so too must our approaches to ensuring a safe and equitable cyberspace for all.

The organization of cybersecurity within nation-states exemplifies this complexity. While technology provides the tools, outcomes are critically shaped by socio-political contexts, institutional interplay, and cultural underpinnings. National approaches vary widely, reflecting functional and institutional heterogeneity. Many countries adopt a "silos-based" structure, developing distinct yet interconnected pillars of cybersecurity: cybercrime enforcement, intelligence operations, military cyber commands, and civilian cybersecurity agencies. Each of these pillars addresses specific aspects of cybersecurity, from protecting critical infrastructure and responding to incidents (e.g., GovCERTs and Security Operations Centers, SOC's) to safeguarding national defence and conducting cyber intelligence.

This diversity highlights the tension between the need for functional interoperability and harmonization on one hand, and the persistence of organizational and institutional heterogeneity on the other. While frameworks such as the EU's NIS Directive and NATO's Cyber Defence Pledge promote collaboration and standardization, effective implementation requires significant effort in aligning policies and integrating capabilities across national and international levels. Moreover, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing present new challenges and opportunities. These technologies have the potential to revolutionize cybersecurity practices but also amplify risks, necessitating proactive strategies and adaptive governance. Future research should explore the socio-technical implications of these advancements, focusing on how they can be integrated into existing cybersecurity frameworks without exacerbating disparities or vulnerabilities.

Ensuring cybersecurity requires more than technical solutions; it demands cohesive strategies that balance innovation, governance, and social considerations. Functional interoperability must be pursued alongside respect for institutional diversity, recognizing that cybersecurity is as much about culture and policy as it is about technology. By fostering collaboration and resilience at all levels, from local agencies to global frameworks, we can work toward a secure digital future that benefits all members of society.

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## KIBERNETSKA VARNOST MED TEHNOLOŠKIM DETERMINIZMOM, POLITIČNIM VLADOVANJEM IN IZZIVI NACIONALNE VARNOSTI

Članek izhaja iz temeljne teze, da organiziranost kibernetске varnosti v posamezni državi ni določena zgolj s tehničnimi vidiki informacijsko-komunikacijske tehnologije, temveč jo oblikujejo kompleksni odnosi med civilnimi institucijami za kibernetско varnost, obveščevalnimi službami, vojaškimi zmogljivostmi in organi pregona. Poleg tega imajo pomembno vlogo tudi politična in varnostna kultura države, njena vpetost v mednarodne organizacije ter način zaznavanja groženj nacionalni varnosti. Analiza v članku temelji na teoretskih okvirih tehnološkega determinizma in konstruktivizma ter uporablja primerjalno metodologijo. Avtor preučuje razloge za obstoječe funkcionalne in institucionalne razlike med

*državami, ki so si sicer politično-upravno sorodne in si prizadevajo za uskladitev svojih pristopov prek mehanizmov, kot so evropska zakonodaja o kibernetiski varnosti, mednarodni tehnični in politični standardi ter pobude za vzpostavitev mednarodnega pravnega okvira za delovanje v kibernetiskem prostoru.*

**Ključne besede:** kibernetiska varnost, informacijsko-komunikacijska tehnologija, nacionalna varnost, tehnološki determinizem, institucionalni imperializem.



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