

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE (DEMRES)

The stability of democracy in Europe is increasingly threatened by the growing support for anti-democratic populist parties. Since the 2010s, populist parties have increased their electoral bases and secured governmental representation, eroding democratic norms and institutions (Bogaards, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). As of December 2024, far-right populist parties govern in five European Union countries (Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia), and in several other EU countries they have sufficiently high public support to be able to reach those positions in the near future. The growing support of the populist parties has been recently evidenced in the 2024 European Parliament elections. The threats to the stability of democracy in Europe manifest through various discursive strategies employed by political actors, which form the basis of institutional and policy changes, aim to justify anti-democratic actions, and shape voting behaviours of the citizens (Rooduijn et al., 2014; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Rooduijn, 2018). Understanding discursive mechanisms of democratic backsliding is critical to addressing these challenges and ensuring the stability and robustness of democracy in Europe.

At the same time, the successes of anti-democratic parties within the European Union are uneven, as countries differ significantly in their levels of democratic resilience, operationalised as the sustained presence of democracy without substantial deterioration in quality and the avoidance of autocratisation despite anti-democratic challenges (Boese et al., 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). Beyond the structural factors, the type of opposition response plays a crucial role in the trajectory of democratic backsliding and chances of democratic resilience (Gamboa, 2017; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Tomini et al., 2022; van Lit et al., 2023). However, reliable, systematic, long-term analyses of the narratives of the political parties, including framing of justification of anti-democratic actions of the governments, as well as the type of discursive opposition response, are rare (Oksanen, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2020; Kwiatkowska et al., 2023; Muliavka et al., 2024). Therefore, the primary objective of this project is to address this gap through:

- 1) Identifying and analyzing **the main discursive strategies employed by populist and anti-populist parties in Europe**, focusing on their scope, underlying mechanisms, and targeted social groups.
- 2) **Evaluating the responsiveness of these key social groups** to discursive strategies of democratic erosion or resilience targeted at them, and **assessing their potential for electoral mobilization of these groups**.

The innovative nature of the projects stems both from the research objective and applied unique multi-stage mixed-methods approach. The project addresses an underexplored area in social and political sciences and is a pioneering study in assessing the prevalence and impact of discursive strategies of democratic backsliding and investigates the mechanisms through which democratic resilience can be fostered. The unique **multi-stage sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2021)** employed in this project, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches across four distinct phases (**advanced analytics of political textual data, expert interviews, nationwide survey with survey experiments, and focus group interviews**) is a pioneering approach to analysis of democratic backsliding and democratic resilience.

The project's findings will advance theoretical frameworks in democratic studies by identifying the specific discursive strategies that political actors employ to either undermine or reinforce democratic norms and institutions and testing their potential effectiveness. This will fill a critical gap in the existing literature, which often lacks detailed, longitudinal analyses of these phenomena across different national contexts. The creation of the 'European Populist Challenge & Response' database will be an invaluable resource for researchers, allowing for comparative diachronic studies of political discourse. Finally, the research will provide actionable insights for policymakers, international organizations, civil society organizations, and educators. In this way, the project will contribute to the broader effort of safeguarding democracy in Europe.