



## In defence of democracy: parliamentary opposition and democratic resilience in Poland

Viktoriiia Muliavka<sup>ab</sup>, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska<sup>ac</sup>, and Hubert Plisiecki<sup>ad</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Institute of Social Sciences, SWPS University, Poland;* <sup>c</sup>*Institute of Political Science, University of Bamberg, Germany;* <sup>e</sup>*Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Italy;* <sup>d</sup>*Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland*

Contact: Viktoriiia Muliavka, [viktoriiia.muliavka@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:viktoriiia.muliavka@uni-bamberg.de)

### Abstract

The 2023 electoral victory of Poland's liberal opposition halted democratic backsliding and exemplified democratic resilience. This study provides a novel empirical analysis of discursive strategies used by the main opposition party, Civic Platform/Civic Coalition, in parliamentary speeches on democracy from 2001 to 2020. Using a mixed-method approach with temporally sensitive word embeddings and discourse analysis, we highlight shifts in opposition discourse since 2015—from radicalization to a more moderate, focused response addressing key aspects of democratic breakdown—demonstrating an adaptive strategy of democratic resilience.

**Keywords:** democratic resilience, democratic backsliding, Poland, opposition, parliament, Civic Platform

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in East European Politics, 15.10.2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2024.2415633>

**To cite this article:** Muliavka, V., Kwiatkowska, A., & Plisiecki, H. (2024). In defence of democracy: parliamentary opposition and democratic resilience in Poland. *East European Politics*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2024.2415633>

## Introduction

The process of democratic backsliding in Poland started in 2015, when the nationalist conservative party, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), won the outright majority in the Polish parliamentary elections. Already in 2015, massive protests erupted in Warsaw and other major Polish cities against PiS's successful takeover of the Constitutional Court through the appointment of its candidates in a way that violated the Constitution. After thus disabling constitutional scrutiny over the government's actions (Sadurski 2019), the party imposed restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, and gained control over the state media and some private media. In 2017, Law and Justice introduced a judiciary reform which undermined the independence of the judiciary and weakened institutional checks and balances (Przybylski 2019). In response, the European Union initiated the Article 7 infringement procedure against Poland due to the risk of undermining the rule of law (Moberg 2020) and, subsequently withheld the funds from the EU Reconstruction Fund until the violations of the rule of law are removed.

The main parliamentary opposition during the period of democratic backsliding has been the liberal party Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) - the second-largest party in the Polish parliament in the observed period and one of the dominant parties in Poland since the 2000s. Although PO was founded in 2001, simultaneously with PiS, initially sharing a similar right-wing position, its program has notably evolved, gradually shifting towards the centrist position on the socio-cultural axis (Kwiatkowska et al. 2016). Since 2018, PO has been leading the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO), an electoral alliance formed in response to the undemocratic decisions imposed by the ruling PiS party.

In this study, we analyse the evolving discursive strategies of the Civic Platform/Civic Coalition in the parliamentary speeches on democracy before and during the period of democratic backsliding. While the research on the response of the opposition parties to the recent wave of democratic backsliding focused mainly on the scenarios of strategic actions (e.g., Cleary and Öztürk 2020; Lührmann 2021; Somer et al. 2021; Somer and Tekinirk 2024), we supplement existing scholarship by introducing an empirical discursive perspective as a novel approach to capturing the changes in political narratives across time. To examine the opposition discursive response to democratic backsliding as a distinct facet of democratic resilience, the study uses a mixed-methods design comprising temporally sensitive word embeddings (Di Carlo, Bianchi, and Palmonari 2019) and discourse analysis based on the authors' adaptation of the Varieties of Democracy's classification of dimensions of democracy (Coppedge et al. 2021).

This article contributes to the existing research on democratic erosion by providing an in-depth case study of the evolution of the framing of democracy by the parliamentary opposition during the period of democratic backsliding. It should be underscored that, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic mixed-methods analysis of the evolution of opposition's discursive strategies amid democratic backsliding. Based on the analysis of a large dataset of parliamentary speeches and covering nearly twenty years of parliamentary debates, it provides reliable knowledge about the opposition discourse as one of the mechanisms of democratic resilience. While a precise estimation of the effectiveness of the parliamentary opposition's impact on the democratic resilience in Poland - especially considering the ultimate outcome of opposition's electoral victory in October 2023 and halting the process of democratic erosion - is beyond the scope of this study, as it is intertwined with the actions of both domestic (e.g., civil society, media, trade unions) and international (the European Union, the United States, transnational networks) actors, the analysis of parliamentary debates provides an opportunity to track quantitative and qualitative shifts in how opposition party adapted their discourse in response to the anti-democratic actions of the ruling party.

## Democratic backsliding and democratic resilience

Democratic backsliding is commonly defined as a deterioration in the quality of democracy (Bermeo 2016) following a preceding period of successful democratisation (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018, 247). The relatively young democracy in Poland, which underwent a rapid process of democratic consolidation after the collapse of the socialist block, is frequently cited as a classic case of democratic backsliding (e.g., Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018; Gandhi 2019; Lührmann 2021). While applying the concept of democratic backsliding universally across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is highly debatable due to the varying stages of democratic development and unique country-level challenges (see Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018; Stanley 2019), there is consensus in the literature regarding the case of Poland (Hanley and Vaduchova 2018; Holesch and Kyriazi 2022).

In the context of post-socialist states, democratic backsliding is frequently accompanied and reinforced by the capture of the state, which in turn undermines both political representation and the efficacy of public policy implementation (Tudoroiu 2015; Dimitrova 2018; Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018). The exploitation of state resources by ruling parties or corrupt elite networks in CEE since the onset of the democratic transformation (Innes 2014), had progressively weakened democratic institutions and eroded their legitimacy. This process culminated in the rise of populist parties and governments formed by them deteriorating democratic institutions, making the concept of democratic resilience surge to prominence in democratic backsliding debates (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018, 250).

Democratic resilience refers to the persistence of democratic institutions and practices. It is frequently operationalised as the sustained presence of democracy without substantial deterioration in its quality, and the avoidance of autocratisation despite anti-democratic challenges (Boese et al. 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021). The degree of democratic resilience within a given society depends on various internal and external factors. These include mechanisms of horizontal and vertical accountability, the effectiveness of institutional constraints on the executive, economic conditions, prior experiences with democracy, type of neighbouring regimes, as well as the presence and strength of a democratic opposition (Boese et al. 2021; Laebens and Lührmann 2021). These factors can be segmented into four interrelated levels of the political system: the political community, institutions, actors, and citizens (Merkel and Lührmann 2021). The strength of these components can mitigate the threatening impact of democratic backsliding on the political system (Helgest et al. 2022). As empirical studies on democratic resilience demonstrate, judicial constraints on the executive and past experience of democracy are among the main factors that enable effective democratic resilience, confirming the judiciary's role as "the last bulwark against autocracy" (Boese et al. 2021, 886). Once the process of democratic backsliding advances, weakened accountability mechanisms and incapacitated opposition actors enable democratic breakdown and open the way to autocratisation (Lührmann 2021).

The process of democratic backsliding is frequently associated with the concept of *executive aggrandisement* (Bermeo 2016), defined as its core element by some scholars (Gidengil, Stolle, and Bergeron-Boutin 2022). In numerous documented cases of democratic backsliding (e.g. Venezuela, Turkey and Thailand), democratically elected leaders enacted laws that infringed upon political rights and freedoms, disenfranchised voters, attacked the media, restricted powers of legislatures, altered term limits, dismissed judges, and weakened opposition parties by asserting executive power and utilising partisan allies within legislature (Gandhi 2019; Cleary and Öztürk 2020). Furthermore, the ruling parties seized control of state bureaucracy, enabling executive mandates to outweigh constitutional principles. Such consolidation of power may result in political repression, imprisonment of journalists and opposition politicians, and nullification of unfavourable electoral results (Cleary and Öztürk 2020, 4). The persistent formal institutional changes aimed at weakening the opposition stands out as hallmarks of democratic backsliding (Gandhi 2019, 13).

Although at risk of being attacked by the ruling party, a united opposition, alongside resilient formal institutions, may serve as “the last line of democratic defence” (Lührmann 2021, 1017). The outcomes of democratic backsliding depend on constant interactions and choices made by both incumbent and opposition actors during critical periods when operating under significant institutional, strategic and regime uncertainty (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñan 2013; Bernhard 2015; Cleary and Öztürk 2020; Somer and Tekinırk 2024). Within this context of uncertainty, a dilemma emerges regarding whether oppositional political strategies should prioritise adherence to conventional principles of party-based competitive politics or instead emphasise the protecting of democratic values in the face of imminent threats, that could lead to opposition divisions and indecisions (Somer and Tekinırk 2024).

While the process of democratic resilience relies on the specificity of the country’s political system and the remaining power of democratic institutions and political opposition, the mechanisms of democratic resilience across different countries share many common features. Opposition actors - comprising parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition parties, civil society groups, unions, religious organisations, business groups, and legislatures (or one of their chambers) - can create accountability mechanisms providing constraints on the power of the ruling party and limiting their manoeuvres (Cleary and Öztürk 2020; Guasti 2020; Lührmann 2021). Although opposition parties do not have access to substantial sanction mechanisms such as withdrawal of the majority support, they still can challenge incumbent party’s initiatives, try to reduce informational asymmetries, and propose some legislative alternatives (Proksch and Slapin 2011, 58). These are critical for halting autocratisation, limiting the damage to democratic institutions and enabling further democratic recovery (Lührmann 2021).

In addition, the nature of the opposition’s response to executive aggrandisement plays an important role in shaping the trajectory of democratic backsliding and regime outcomes. Based on various conceptualizations, such responses could be classified as radical vs moderate, institutional vs extra-institutional, and ‘normal’ vs ‘extraordinary’ (Cleary and Öztürk 2020; Somer and Tekinırk 2024). There is the lack of consistent empirical evidence regarding whether the most effective approach to counter radical parties is through radicalization or moderation (Bustikova, 2019). Nonetheless, when it comes to the cases of democratic backsliding, the studies clearly indicate that the attempts of the opposition to remove the ruling party through non-electoral means contribute to further democratic breakdown (Cannon 2014; Gamboa 2017). This is particularly threatening when opposition parties resort to radical or extraordinary actions immediately following their electoral defeat, especially when using “extra-institutional” strategies, such as coups, violence, or boycotts.

At the level of political discourse, radical actions of the opposition may manifest as maximalist demands (e.g., calling for cancelling elections or advancing the next ones, or even for the non-electoral removal of the incumbent) as well as extensive mobilisation via discourse among allies in bureaucratic, economic, and military sectors. Such tactics align with the *militant democracy* paradigm (Loewenstein 1937), which in contemporary cases is aimed at defending democracy from the subversion by democratically elected leaders using undemocratic methods. Radicalisation of the opposition’s discourse may reinforce legal attempts to ban the incumbent party, election boycotts, popular mobilisation demanding the removal of the elected leaders, or calls for military intervention (see Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022). However, such actions lead to further violation of democratic norms and the polarisation of public opinion. Furthermore, failed attempts of this kind could bolster political support for the incumbent party and enable further aggrandisement (Cleary and Öztürk 2022).

While there are no studies yet on the changes in opposition parties’ discourse during democratic backsliding in CEE, research on the increasing prevalence of populist discourse suggests its high transmissibility, as other parties adopt populist themes into their discourse in order to compete more effectively for voters who are prone to respond to them (Bale et al. 2010; Rooduijn et al. 2014). Although the incorporation of populist and radical elements into political discourse most strongly affects challenger parties (Rooduijn et al. 2014) and radical parties

on both the left and right (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017), the very change in a party's status from government to opposition is able to trigger the radicalisation of its discourse (Rooduijn et al. 2014), which is the case of the large opposition parties, as in Poland. Furthermore, a situation in which the foundations of democracy are at stake may also prompt the opposition to shift from policy-focused competition to more radical, Manichean rhetoric.

Conversely, more moderate responses to aggrandisement can give the opposition the chance to “buy time until the next election” (Cleary and Öztürk 2020, 1), thereby fostering democratic survival. These responses typically encompass reformist demands for policy changes or institutional amendments, coupled with restrained resource mobilisation. For instance, opposition parties can try blocking or obstructing certain legislation, initiate cross-ideological electoral alliances, or enhance popular mobilisation against antidemocratic constitutional changes. As a result, such a political strategy has the potential to reinvigorate democratic norms and uphold the political legitimacy of the opposition (Cleary and Öztürk 2022, 209).

### **Democratic backsliding and democratic resilience in Poland**

During the first decade of post-socialist transformation, Poland was seen as a successful example of rapid democratic consolidation in the CEE region (Linz et al. 1996). At that juncture, an authoritarian reversal in the country was deemed by social scientists as inconceivable (Ekiert and Kubik 1998; Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018). However, over the last decade, the quality of democracy in certain CEE states, including Poland, has rapidly declined (Freedom House 2022). Alongside Hungary, the process of democratic backsliding in Poland, characterised by executive aggrandisement and illiberal nationalism (Herman 2016; Gora and de Wilde 2022), has resulted in the largest and sharpest drop in the levels of democracy in CEE (Lührmann et al. 2018; Freedom House 2022).

The Law and Justice party, with its program based on the Christian conservative-national ideology, secured a parliamentary majority in the 2015 elections and maintained it in the 2019 elections (Ost 2016; Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018; Skórzyński 2019). Its electoral success has largely been attributed to the shortcomings of previous governments in ensuring effective economic redistribution (Guriev 2018; Gidron and Hall 2017; Engler and Weisstanner 2020), particularly against the backdrop of resentments and uncertainties brought by the rapid transformation from a centrally planned to a free-market economy (Stanley 2019; Słomczyński et al. 2007). At the cultural level, the process of autocratisation initiated by PiS became possible due to the previous “over-liberalisation” of the regime: liberalisation raised to a higher level than the advancement of the emancipative values of the electorate (Welzel 2021). As a result, skilful populists capitalised on this discrepancy, initiating a counter-reaction in the form of illiberal backlash (Guasti and Bustikova 2023), seizing the window of opportunity for autocratisation (Welzel 2021; Lührmann 2021).

Nationalistic and socially conservative appeals by Law and Justice were framed in an anti-pluralist way that challenged the liberal democratic state (Judis 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018). The party's populist, anti-elitist discourse was also applied to legitimise institutional reforms aimed at weakening the opposition. An executive in cooperation with a legislative majority was able to attack the institutional pillars of opposition in the courts, legislature, and media (Gandhi 2019). As early as 2015, PiS successfully attempted to illegally appoint its candidates to the Constitutional Court in parallel with legally elected judges in order to disable constitutional scrutiny over its actions (Sadurski 2019). In the following months, PiS also made amendments to the Law on the Constitutional Tribunal, the Law on Public Media, and the Law on the Civil Service that contradicted the principle of political independence of these institutions (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2016, 29). The party also imposed restrictions on the freedom of speech and assembly, and has gained control over the state media and many regional private outlets. The 2017 judiciary reform further eroded judicial independence and weakened institutional checks and balances (Przybylski 2019).

Such drastic infringements of the democratic regime in Poland by PiS inevitably brought about noticeable changes in the political actions and discourse of the opposition parties. Since 2015, the opposition protested on the parliamentary stage against the subjugation of the judiciary and, later, restrictions imposed on media freedoms, culminating in the so-called “Sejm crisis” - a month-long period of political stalemate in legislature at the turn of 2016 and 2017, accompanied by protests instigated by limitations on media freedom and opposition rights imposed by the governments. Additionally, opposition parties mobilised their supporters in street protests and alarmed the European Union and other international organisations (Zakrzewski 2017; Skórzyński 2019).

Before the 2019 elections, the opposition also made efforts to consolidate the democratic forces. In 2018, the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO) of centrist and left-wing parties, led by the Civic Platform, was formed. The subsequent year, the short-lived umbrella European Coalition (Koalicja Europejska, KE), comprising twelve opposition parties spanning ideologies from right to left, was established for the 2019 European Parliament election, but it dissolved shortly thereafter. As a consequence of partial de-consolidation of the opposition, combined with the strong mobilisation of Law and Justice voters, the 2019 national parliamentary elections yielded a worse result than the previous one for the Civic Coalition. In contrast, the left-wing parties, who learned from their 2015 defeat when separate electoral lists resulted in none of them gaining parliamentary representation, united in 2019 and returned to the parliament. The good electoral result of the joint opposition’s party candidates in the majority-elected Senate, which gave the opposition marginal control of that chamber, was particularly noteworthy.

In addition to opposition parties, civil society actors have played a substantial role in maintaining democratic resilience. In 2015, the Committee of Defence of Democracy was formed and massive protests were organised in numerous Polish cities, attracting tens of thousands of participants. Furthermore, several Polish NGOs, including the Polish Robert Schuman Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Poland, and the Centre for Civic Education, organised public readings of the Polish Constitution. Throughout the entire period of PiS rule, there have been frequent and large-scale public protests defending the independence of judiciary, free media, opposing the so-called ‘surveillance law’, permitting uncontrolled collection of internet data by the police and special services, against restrictions on freedom of assembly and government’s attempts to subordinate the NGO sector. Anti-government demonstrations have been also organised by various community groups antagonised by the government, including environmentalists, teachers, women, LGBT+ individuals, medical workers and carers of people with disabilities (Zakrzewski 2017).

The democratic erosion was also slowed down by the existence of key independent judiciary institutions, primarily the Supreme Court. Until it was dismantled in 2018, the National Council of the Judiciary, responsible for nominating judges and appointed to guard the independence of courts and judges, stood as the guardian of the constitutional independence of judiciary. National associations of judges and lawyers, including the National Council of Legal Advisers, the Association of Polish Judges “Iustitia” and the Supreme Bar Council, have publicly condemned the government’s anti-democratic actions. Local government politicians have also engaged in protests, notably forming “Yes! For Poland” - the largest association of local government activists in the country (Skórzyński 2019). Moreover, the progression of democratic backsliding was unexpectedly further impeded by internal disputes within the Law and Justice party, primarily between the government and president, exemplified by the presidential veto of laws on the National Council of the Judiciary and the Supreme Court that would have given control over the courts to the prosecutor general.

Finally, domestic actors have received strong and growing support over time from the democratic international community. Starting with the critical opinions of the Venice Commission and the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights in 2016, the influence of the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has become increasingly strong in subsequent years. Owing to the Polish government’s repeated failure to comply with the European Commission’s recommendations on judicial

independence, a procedure regarding the possibility of violation of European values was initiated in 2017 (Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union). In subsequent years, the European Commission has referred multiple cases concerning Poland to the CJEU, imposed high financial penalties on Poland, and eventually blocked funds from the Reconstruction Plan. Furthermore, the UN Human Rights Committee voiced its opposition against the anti-democratic actions of the Polish government, and the United States joined in the defence of democracy and media freedom, particularly the main oppositional media group (TVN group) owned by the American corporation Discovery, Inc (see Skórzyński 2019).

While acknowledging the diverse range of actors contributing to democratic resilience in Poland, this study focuses specifically on changes of the discourse of the main opposition party, the Civic Platform. As pointed out by previous studies (Cannon 2014; Gamboa 2017; Cleary and Öztürk 2020; Somer and Tekinirk 2024), the repertoire of actions undertaken by the political opposition, in conjunction with organised civic groups and institutions controlled by pro-democratic actors, is crucial during the critical period of democratic backsliding for fostering of democratic resilience and further restoration of democracy. Institutional strategies and political dialogue with the ruling party, as opposed to radical responses, can prevent or at least delay democratic breakdown, thereby enhancing the prospects for democratic survival.

Despite the importance of opposition's discursive strategies, there remains a dearth of studies analysing shifts in the political discourse of the opposition during periods of democratic backsliding. Nonetheless, research exploring shifts in political discourse in other contexts (e.g., when parties move from opposition to government) suggests that the broader topics of political discourse remain largely consistent, despite the changing context (Bobba and McDonnell 2016). Considering that liberal democracy has been the dominant dimension of democracy in the political discourse of all major Polish parties (Kwiatkowska et al. 2023), our study is confined to this aspect. Through a cross-temporal quantitative and qualitative analysis, we analyse the impact of democratic backsliding on the narratives of the parliamentary opposition concerning democracy. Particularly, based on the literature review, we focus on discursive shifts in the application of various aspects of liberal democracy before and during the episode of democratic resilience to determine if there is evidence of adaptation to more moderate, and thus potentially more effective discursive strategies. Consequently, we propose the hypothesis that the discursive strategy adopted by Civic Platform/Civic Coalition has transitioned from a generalised and militant to a more specific and moderate stance. This shift is perceived as a reaction to the deepening of democratic decline, reflecting the party's organisational learning, with significant implications for democratic resilience in Poland.

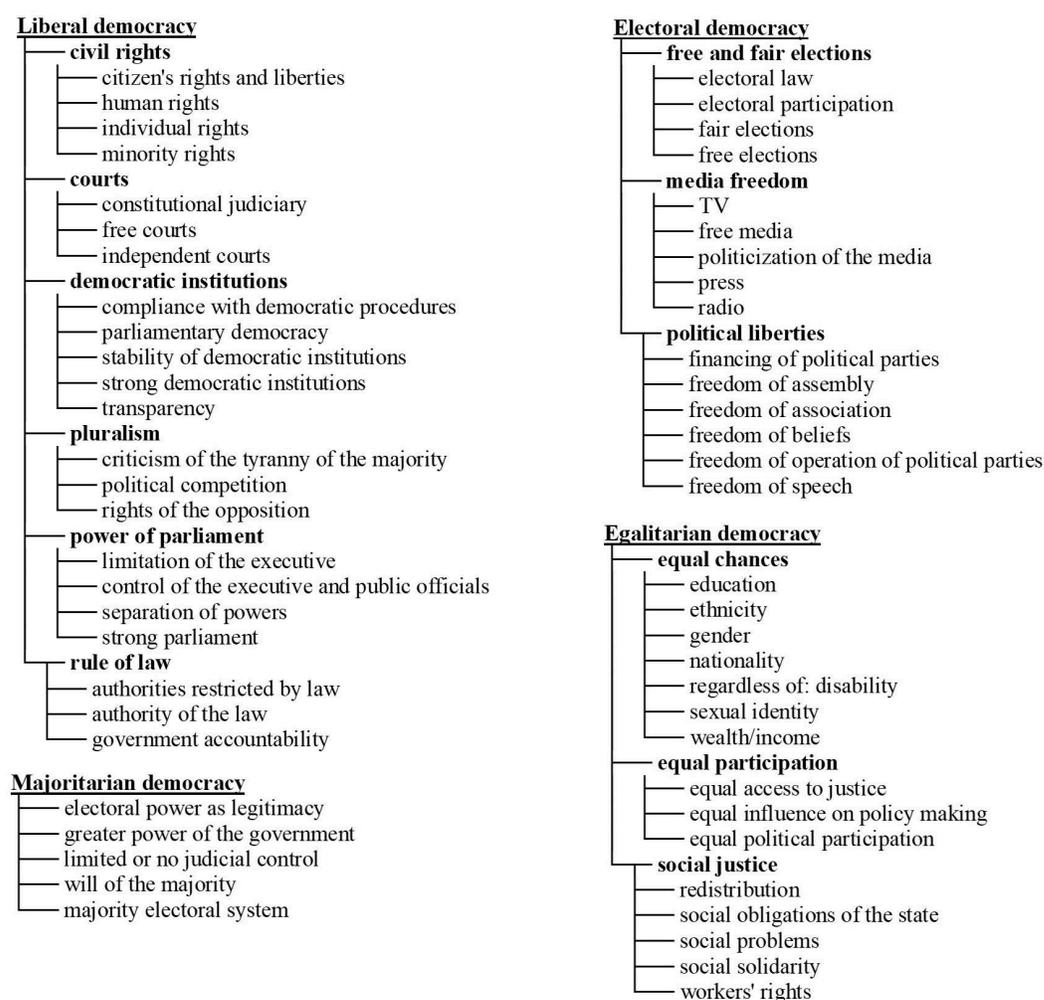
## Data and Methods

To analyse the discursive shifts in the opposition's narratives on democracy during the backsliding episode, we conducted a mixed-methods analysis of parliamentary speeches in Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament. Focusing specifically on opposition responses to the illiberal turn, we narrowed down our analysis to speeches made by representatives of the Civic Platform/Civic Coalition (PO/KO) during the period from the party's formation in 2001 until November 2020 inclusive. To ensure that the data was directly relevant to our research, we exclusively selected speeches containing at least three mentions of democracy (excluding proper names), resulting in a sub-corpus of 284 speeches for manual coding. For comparative purposes, to identify changes concerning PO/KO alone, we also coded and included in our analysis speeches from the two other most relevant parliamentary parties during this period: PiS and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD; since 2019 The Left, a political alliance consisting of three left-wing parties: SLD, the Spring and the Left Together).

For the qualitative component of discourse analysis, we used manual coding of speeches related to democracy based on our adaptation of the Varieties of Democracy scheme (Coppedge et al. 2021). Employing a two-phase methodology of the empirical analysis of parliamentary speeches, we adapted the VoD code system, which covers

theory-driven indicators describing the party system, political parties, the executive and legislature, mechanisms of direct democracy, civil society, and civil liberties. Following a deductive, concept-driven approach, we developed a code system prior to viewing the data, then assigned it to the relevant text segments accordingly. In the subsequent, data-driven stage, we used the lexical search function to find the stem *demok* independently from the currently existing code system. The new sub-codes were then inductively added to the coding system from the data.

Our coding system is organised hierarchically with several levels of sub-codes (Figure 1). To validate the coding system, we used automatic counting to verify the frequency with which particular codes were assigned to text segments, and the number of segments coded within the corpus. Then, we analysed all text segments of the same category, which allowed us to trace how a given aspect of democracy changed over time. Although the whole coding scheme encompasses multiple types of democracy (electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian), this article focuses on the liberal model of democracy, the most predominant model in Polish political discourse (Kwiatkowska et al. 2023) and the most relevant to our research problem.



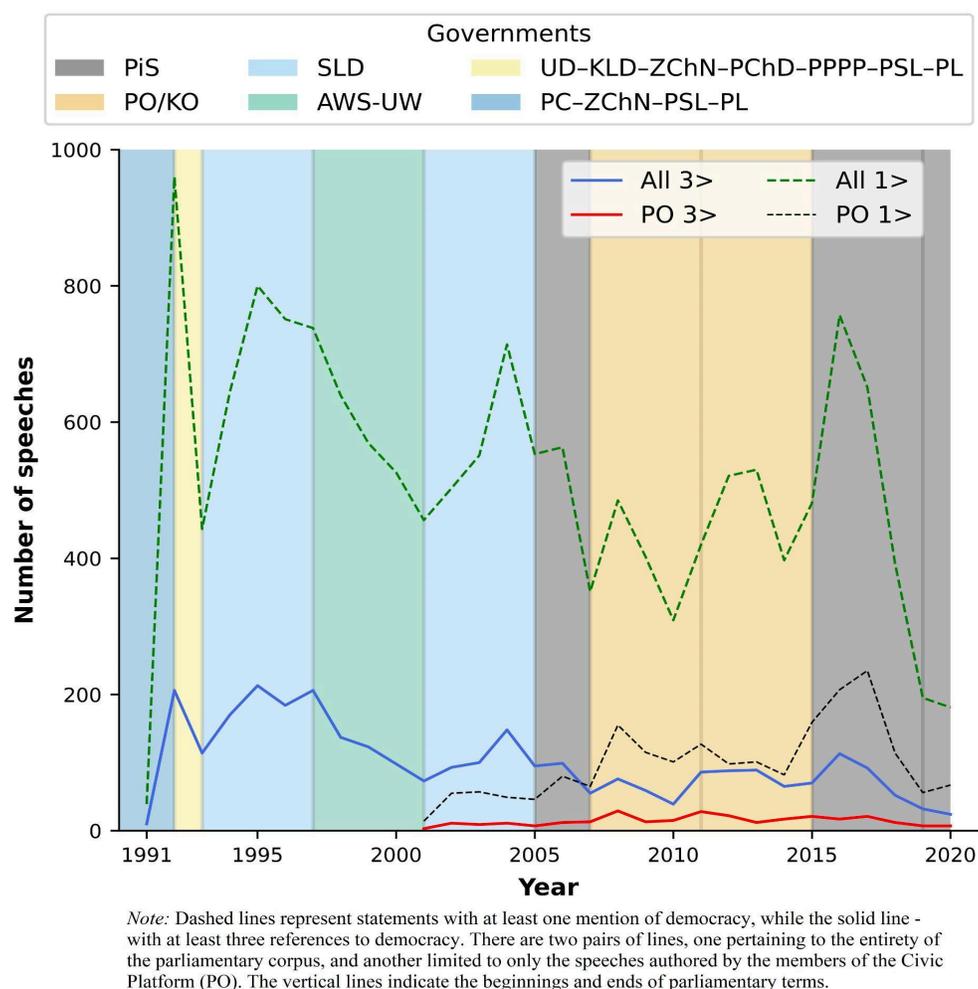
**Figure 1. The coding system.** Note: The coding system applied to the analysis of parliamentary speeches. The dimension of liberal democracy, which is analysed in the article (highlighted), is presented against the background of three other most prevalent dimensions from the VoD classification system adapted from Coppedge et al. (2021).

For our quantitative analysis, we employed temporally sensitive word embeddings (Di Carlo, Bianchi, and Palmonari 2019), exploring the evolution of semantic context of key words over time. Word embedding is a technique used in natural language processing where words or phrases from a vocabulary are mapped to numerical vectors. This method captures the context of a word in a document, its semantic and syntactic similarity, and relation with other words, representing words in a form of numbers and reliably encoding dimensions of semantic information (see Gutiérrez and Keith 2018). Di Carlo and colleagues (2019) advanced this approach by allowing for multiple training of these embeddings on different sub-corpora from the original corpus while retaining a common numerical latent space. Thus, temporally sensitive word embeddings are a type of word embedding that not only maps words to numerical values based on their context and meaning but also takes into account how these meanings may change over time. This method allows for the analysis of language and concepts within texts across different time periods, capturing shifts in political discourse over time using computational methods.

In our study, we trained separate models for different years on the corpus comprising all parliamentary speeches of PO and KO MPs. For the analysis, we selected specific keywords identified in the qualitative analysis as representing the main areas of intense political conflict between the government and the opposition in the context of liberal democracy: *civil rights, free courts, the constitution, rights of the opposition, separation of powers and the rule of law*. In order to assess shifts in the political discourse of the opposition over time, we measured the cosine similarity (the angle between word embedding vectors in a multi-dimensional space) between the word *democracy* and each of these keywords separately for each year. This method allowed us to examine how the opposition's political discourse shifted over time, highlighting the aspects of liberal democracy they emphasised during different periods, both prior to and throughout democratic backsliding.

## Results

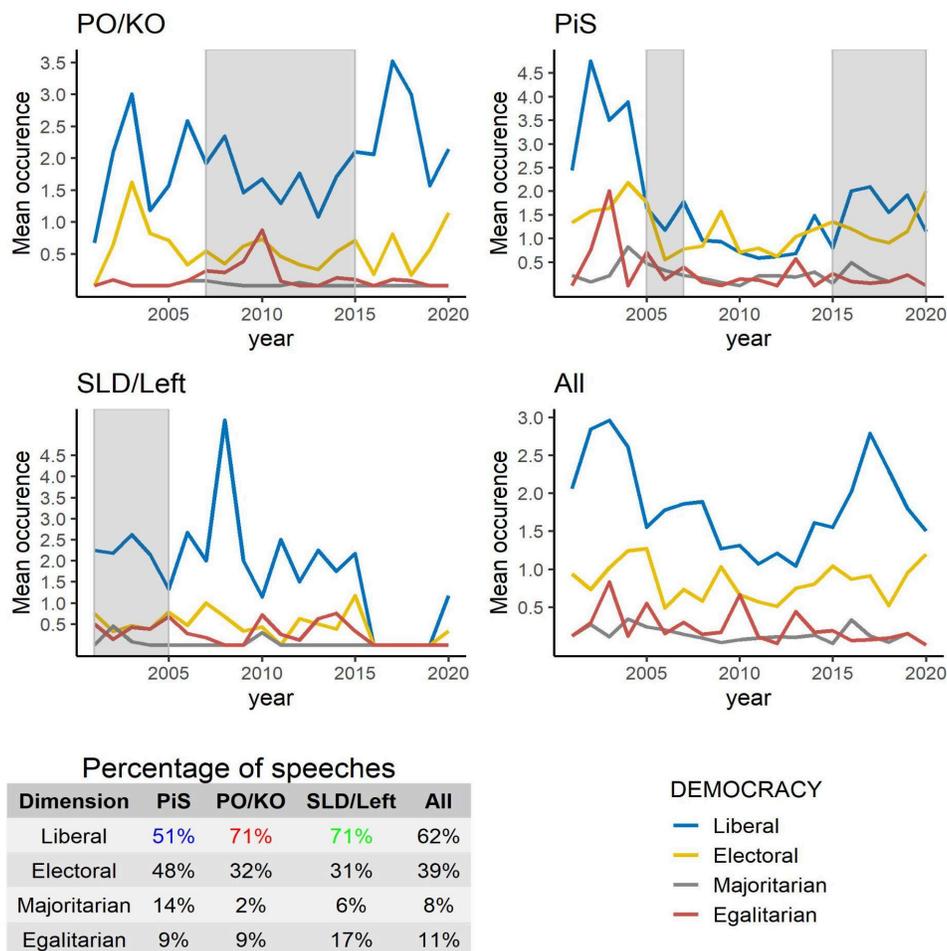
References to democracy are routinely made in the Polish parliament. They were most prevalent during the initial period after the democratic transition, when crucial state institutions and procedures were being established, until the ratification of the 1997 constitution, which consolidated the political system (Figure 2). In subsequent years, discussions about democracy among MPs peaked during significant events such as Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, and during the early stages of the de-democratisation process initiated by PiS in Poland since 2015. Following these periods, there was a noticeable decline in the number of appeals to democracy in parliamentary debates. Notably, the frequency of speeches on democracy in the subcorpus selected for qualitative analysis (containing at least three mentions of democracy in a single speech) closely mirrors over time the frequency of speeches on democracy in the entire corpus (speeches containing at least one mention of democracy), thus validating our selection method.



**Figure 2. Frequency of mentions of democracy in parliamentary speeches, 1991-2020**

The prevalence of speeches referencing democracy in the main opposition party's (PO/KO) discourse also varied significantly across time. During the period of democratic backsliding, it echoed the pattern observed in the overall corpus of speeches, with an increase immediately following the PiS election victory and a subsequent decrease in the following years. However, a distinct contrast emerges when examining the differences in the speeches containing at least one reference to democracy and those with at least three references. The pronounced rise in speeches containing at least one mention of democracy during the early years of democratic backsliding is not paralleled by a similar increase in speeches containing at least three mentions. This discrepancy can be attributed to the opposition MPs' tendency to make brief references to democracy in their speeches without delving deeper into the subject. Consequently, the number of speeches meeting the criterion for manual coding and qualitative analysis was rather low in 2001-2007 opposition period (36 speeches in the 4th term (2001-2005) and 23 in the shortened 5th term (2005-2007)); it increased when PO formed the ruling coalition in 2007-2015 (92 in the 6th term (2007-2011) and 67 in the 7th term (2011-2015)) and remained at similar level since the Law and Justice party came to power in term 2015-2019. However, there were only 7 speeches on democracy in the over-year-long initial period of the 9th term included in our analysis (2019-2020) which could be interpreted as indicative of the hypothesis of a discursive shift by the opposition towards a more moderate stance.

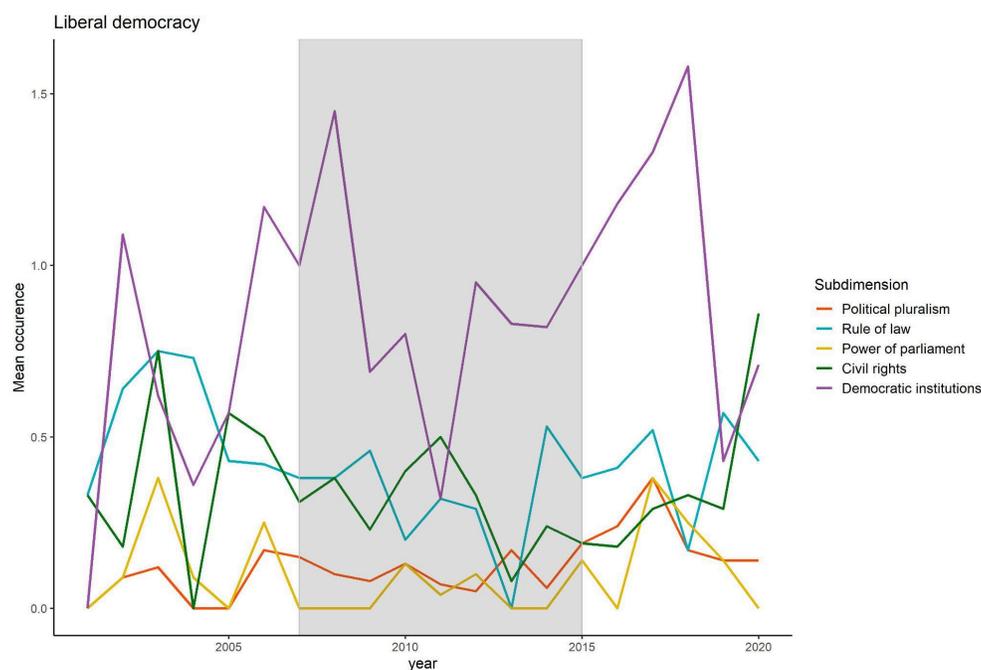
Consistently with their official political ideology, the liberal model of democracy is predominantly featured in the opposition parties' political discourse. It remains the central theme in their speeches referencing democracy over time, and reached its highest average occurrence during the period of democratic backsliding (8th term, 2015-2019). Other models of democracy are relatively underrepresented in the speeches of PO and KO MPs (Figure 3). For instance, despite the increasing attempts of the ruling party to violate LGBTQ rights, we do not observe a significant increase in references to egalitarian democracy in the discourse of the opposition. While the liberal model of democracy also dominates the political discourse of PiS and SLD/The Left, its peak prevalence during the democratic backsliding episode is only observed in PO/KO speeches.



**Figure 3. Prevalence of dimensions of democracy.** Note: The prevalence of the four most prominent dimensions of democracy was measured separately for each party over time. The table in the bottom left corner displays the percentage of each party's speeches having codes for each dimension. A grey background signifies the party being in government.

Throughout the various components of liberal democracy, illustrated in Figure 4, the largest increase during the backsliding episode was observed in mentions of *democratic institutions*, with a particularly notable surge in references to the *constitution*, which is discussed later. However, the topic of democratic institutions was also prevalent in earlier terms, particularly around the 2007 parliamentary elections. These elections saw the defeat of the first PiS government (2005-2007), after an initial, unsuccessful attempt to undermine democratic institutions

and subsequent premature termination of the parliamentary term, leading to PO's victory in the snap elections. In the period 2015-2020, there was also a moderate increase in the average occurrence of components such as *the rule of law*, compared to the previous parliamentary term under the Civic Platform government.



**Figure 4. Prevalence of various aspects of liberal democracy in KO/PO speeches.** Note: A grey background indicates PO/KO being in government.

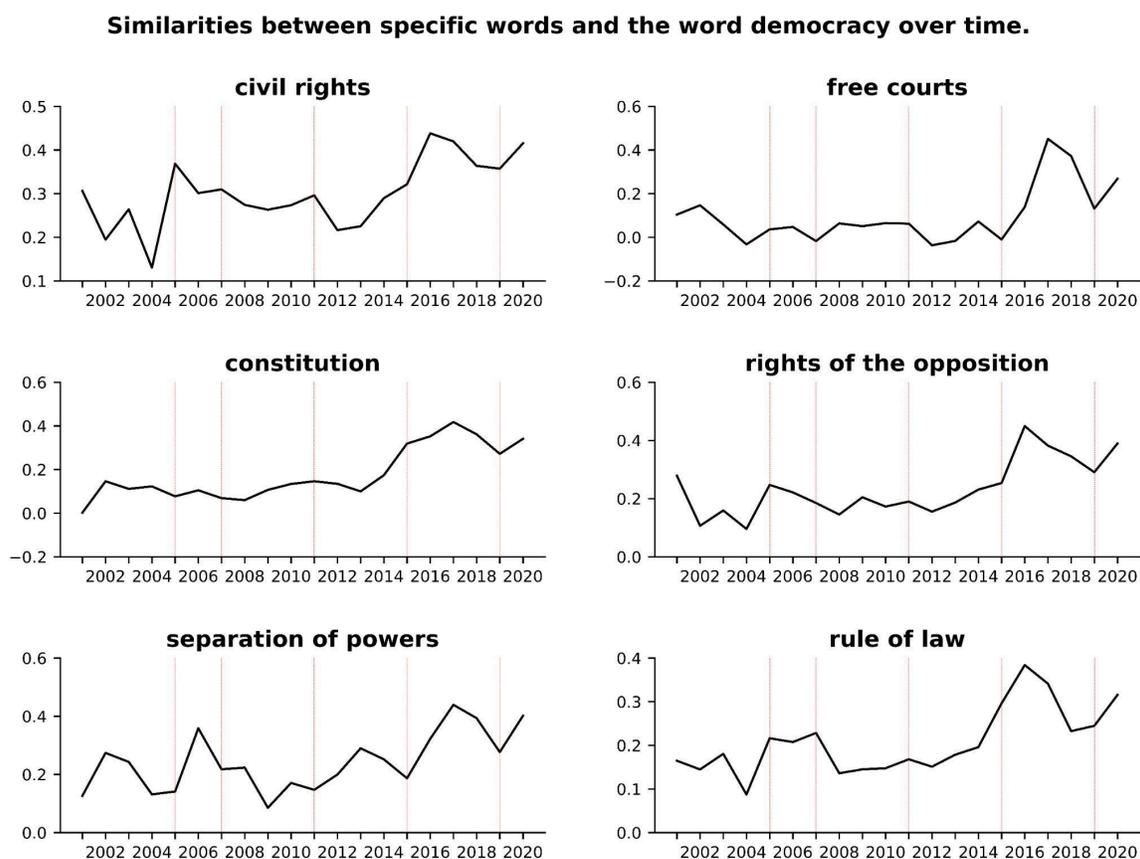
After PiS assumed power in 2015, the concepts of *power of the parliament* and *political pluralism* were initially raised much more frequently than in previous years under the PO/KO government. However, from the second half of the term of the second PiS government onwards, their prevalence sharply declined, reflecting an evolution of the opposition's narrative. Conversely, while the number of mentions of the subcategory of *civil rights* was relatively low at the beginning of the 8th parliamentary term (2015-2019), it steadily increased in the subsequent years, particularly after the 2019 elections and the beginning of the third PiS government. It ultimately became the second most frequently discussed aspect of liberal democracy undertaken by the opposition.

This shift in the opposition's discourse suggests a deliberate rhetorical adaptation by PO/KO, transitioning from generalised democratic principles to a focused critique of specific aspects of democratic breakdowns under PiS rule. This change mirrors the evolving political landscape, highlighting the opposition's attempt to anchor their discourse in the core tenets of liberal democracy, while responding to PiS's specific actions undermining these principles. Therefore, this pattern of increasing specificity in the opposition's messaging aligns with our hypothesis of the party's evolution in response to escalating democratic threats.

For further qualitative analysis, from our coding system covering 22 aspects of liberal democracy organised within 6 categories, as presented in Table 2, we selected the set of the most prevalent ones in the parliamentary speeches. For the quantitative part of the analysis, we examined shifts in the opposition party discourse based on the co-occurrence of the concept of *democracy* with the aspects of the liberal model of democracy derived from the

qualitative analysis as representing the main areas of intense political conflict between the government and the opposition: *civil rights*, *free courts*, *constitution*, *rights of the opposition*, *separation of powers* and *rule of law*. Some of these aspects coincide with the corresponding names of the broader categories (e.g., *civil rights*, *rule of law*), while others represent the most prevalent concepts within categories applied by the opposition party (e.g., *constitution* from the category *democratic institutions*, *rights of the opposition* from the category *pluralism*).

The use of temporally sensitive word embeddings (Di Carlo, Bianchi, and Palmonari 2019) enabled us to ascertain how the emphasis on different aspects of liberal democracy shifted before and during the process of democratic backsliding and which of those concepts played a pivotal role in the democratic resilience discourse of the opposition party. The word-embedding approach is currently the most sophisticated and precise measure of semantic shift (e.g., compared to analysing the frequency of word collocations, Heyer et al., 2009) based on the distribution of contextual words. The results of the changing term proximity relationships between *democracy* in general and its most prevalent aspects engaged in the government-opposition conflict are plotted over time in Figure 5.



**Figure 5. Relevance of key aspects of liberal democracy within the opposition's discourse.** Note: The relevance levels are based on changes in the similarity between the word *democracy* and the key aspects of its liberal component, and were measured separately for each selected aspect in Civic Platform/Civic Coalition speeches across time.

As Figure 5 illustrates, there was an increased similarity to the word *democracy* across all selected aspects of the liberal democracy model during the period of democratic backsliding (2015-2021). Moreover, while before 2015, the temporal dynamics varied between particular aspects of democracy, the onset of democratic backsliding saw

the emergence of some homogeneous trends in the fluctuations of similarity levels across different concepts. These trends indicate that all these concepts have started being applied in similar contexts, and the shifts in opposition discourse followed a specific scenario during the democratic backsliding episode. In particular, for all the concepts, a peak in similarity to the concept of democracy can be observed in 2016-2017, followed by a decline in similarity levels in 2018-2019, and then another increase in 2020.

The similarity levels between the selected aspects of the liberal model and the word *democracy* in Civic Platform speeches were generally low during the 4th parliamentary term (2001-2005) when the party was in opposition to the SLD government. However, the dynamics varied considerably across the concepts. For instance, a relative increase of the concepts of *civil rights* and *rights of the opposition* can be observed in 2001, and for the concept of *separation of powers* in 2002, in comparison with other aspects of liberal democracy. During this period, the concepts of *civil rights*, *rights of the opposition* and *power of parliament/separation of powers* were applied in the context of criticism of the incumbent party. However, unlike during the period of democratic backsliding (which we discuss later), the opposition responses in 2001-2002 could be classified as moderately aimed attempts to block certain legislation (e.g., *the Lustration Act*), or to express disapproval of the dysfunctions of certain aspects of liberal democracy (e.g., *parliamentary control over the executive*):

*The Civic Platform (...) regards transparency as the fundamental condition of democratic order, the legal protection of a citizens' honour as one of the important tasks of the state, and deems the rehabilitation of the People's Republic of Poland to be a highly detrimental idea, and our club, therefore, calls for the rejection of the draft amendment to the lustration law at first reading. (4\_003\_2\_83)<sup>1</sup>*

*It is also tempting to treat parliament as a voting machine on matters of importance to the government. (...) To exercise its control function, the parliament, and particularly the opposition, since it is supposed to control the government, must have the tools in the form of free access to information (4\_033\_1\_6)*

The most salient differences in dynamics across different contexts are observed in the periods preceding democratic backsliding. In particular, concepts such as *civil rights*, *separation of powers* and *the rule of law* already had periods of increased similarity with the concept of democracy in 2005-2007 (first government of PiS). In contrast, the concepts of *free courts*, *constitution*, and *rights of the opposition* were relatively weakly related to *democracy* in the PO discourse before 2015 (with a slight sporadic increase in 2001 and 2005), and became highly associated with *democracy* only during the process of democratic backsliding.

The dynamics of similarities between the concepts of *civil rights*, *separation of powers*, and *rule of law* and the concept of *democracy* in PO speeches developed in waves. Although the highest levels of similarity were reached in 2016-2017, a considerable degree of similarity is also observable during the preceding period when PO was in opposition to the PiS government from 2005 to 2007. However, the political narratives incorporating these concepts differed substantially before and during the process of democratic backsliding. In particular, during the 5th parliamentary term (2005-2007), these concepts mostly were referred to in a neutral or positive manner. Similarly, to the discourse patterns in 2001-2002, criticism of the PiS government in 2005-2007 was comparatively moderate. The opposition's discourse targeted specific elements of liberal democracy, mainly related to the categories of the *power of parliament*, *democratic institutions*, and the *rule of law*. Notably, while criticising PiS policies, they made specific allegations rather than expressing discontent with the functioning of the entire political system.

*Meanwhile, the politicians of Law and Justice, regardless of the far-reaching consequences, are trying to remodel the [Constitutional] Tribunal, transforming it into an organ submissive to executive power, disrupting the tripartite separation of powers adopted in democracy. (5\_022\_3\_49)*

*What you are doing now is an attack on article 227 of the constitution (...) on the institution of a democratic state ruled by law, which is the National Bank of Poland. (5\_012\_3\_132)*

The strategy applied by the opposition party during the 5th parliamentary term (2005-2007) appears to have been quite effective as the Kaczyński government coalition eventually collapsed in August 2007. By contrast, since the start of democratic backsliding in 2015, these same concepts have been applied by the opposition more frequently, often in the context of more radical criticism of the political actions of the incumbent party. Unlike the narratives of the previous periods during SLD and PiS governance, which were directed at specific elements of democracy, the narratives of post-2015 democratic resilience became more radical, pompous and explicit in describing the state of democracy. Specifically, opposition party MPs used powerful phrases such as *striving for authoritarianism*, or *destroying democracy*:

*It is the ombudsman who defends the democratic state of law and the rights of minorities and reports human rights violations to international organisations. In short, it disturbs the party that, in front of our eyes, is overturning the legal system and striving for authoritarianism, destroying democracy. (8\_067\_3\_254)*

*You are proposing changes that hit the foundations of the rule of law and a democratic state. You propose changes that affect the separation of powers, and the independence of courts and judges. (8\_006\_2\_25)*

Along with the progress of democratic backsliding, opposition's portrayal of the government emphasised its regressive, anti-democratic nature, and steering the country toward centralised, unaccountable power structures. The narratives compared the PiS government to authoritarian practices reminiscent of the communist era and modern autocracies like the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus.

*But what are you doing about democratic elections? If we hear about the electoral law that PiS will be counting the votes, that PiS will be determining electoral districts, that PiS will be appointing the National Electoral Commission, and finally that the Supreme Court, appointed by PiS, will be confirming the legality of the elections, then what is that? These are Eastern standards, this is Putin's Russia, this is Belarus. (8\_053\_2\_4)*

*This debate is a disgrace to Polish parliamentarism. This debate and the deceitful arguments presented here show only that you are not mature enough for democracy, that mentally you are stuck in the PRL [Polish People's Republic], an era characterised by uniform state power. It was there that there was no separation of powers, no judiciary independent of the legislative and executive branches. (8\_063\_3\_128)*

The second important difference in the opposition's discourse is that concepts such as *constitution*, *free courts* and *rights of opposition* started to be evoked in relation to democracy much more frequently since 2015. Already in 2015, when PiS initiated the reforms destroying the checks and balances system, the opposition party actively referred to the concept of breaking the *constitution* and destroying democracy in their political narratives. The majority of speeches mentioning the concept of the *constitution* during this period referred to the subjugation of the Constitutional Tribunal by PiS.

*A bit like Cato the Elder, who spoke of Carthage having to be destroyed, so we are all repeating that the verdict of the Constitutional Court must be printed, in fact the verdicts already, and also the three judges legally elected should be sworn in by the President. The violation of the constitution should be stopped. (...) Fear of democracy, it seems, guides your steps. Fear of democracy. Sheer cowardice before submitting to laws that have been established in the constitution. (8\_020\_2\_148)*

The concepts of *free courts* and *civil rights* were applied in similar opposition narratives of democratic resilience. During this period, the opposition directly expressed their resistance, emphasising that PiS *would not be allowed to destroy Polish democracy silently*:

*If you try to eliminate the independence of the judiciary, personal freedom, or the sacred right to property, if you attack women's rights, be sure that you will not be allowed to do so (...) Even if you outvote us, you will definitely not be able to destroy Polish democracy silently. (8\_001\_1\_25)*

Since 2017, when the peak in the level of similarity between the concepts of democracy and all its liberal aspects in the opposition party's discourse was reached, some new elements emerged in the narratives of the Civic Platform MPs. Specifically, besides expressing resistance to the PiS government, members of the opposition party introduced certain positive programs on how to restore democracy and the key role of the constitution in democratic order:

*The Constitution of the Republic of Poland will again be a fundamental law. We will prepare an act of restoring democracy, an act of constitutional restitution. With one large law, we will amend several dozen particularly harmful laws that you have introduced, laws that violate the constitution, the democratic order of the rule of law, and the balance of the tripartite division of powers. (8\_039\_3\_2)*

However, as the analysis of other aspects of liberal democracy (e.g., *the rights of the opposition*) shows, Civic Platform/Civic Coalition MPs continued to harshly and uncompromisingly criticise the incumbent party, focusing on the disparity between the democratic standards and the outcomes of their governance.

*You are reducing us, the Members of Parliament, the Sejm, to the role of a machine that will vote through anything that comes into Kaczyński's head and wants to force the European Union to do so. This is the level of democracy you are proposing. (...). We fought for a free Poland, we fought for Poland in the European Union, not so that you could make a farce of the Polish Sejm ... (8\_038\_2\_131)*

*In fact, it is the abolition of parliamentary democracy. (...) Your children and grandchildren will be ashamed of those who will vote for the introduction of despotism [org. 'zamordyzm'] in Poland, for the introduction of an authoritarian system, because they will read about today's stances of Law and Justice MPs in textbooks, and it will be a very harsh assessment. (8\_052\_1\_153)*

In 2019, the opposition party's discourse shifted in the context of the upcoming elections. Surprisingly, that year, the level of similarity with the term *democracy* fell for all aspects of liberal democracy. The most drastic decline was observed for the concept of *free courts*, which, according to the results of qualitative analysis, almost disappeared from the opposition party's democracy-related discourse. At the same time, other concepts, such as the *constitution*, were applied in the narratives of hope for victory in the elections *against the dark side represented by PiS*:

*So let's not lose hope (...) that the constitutional, democratic and civic side of Poland you represent will win against the dark side represented by PiS today. (8\_086\_1\_224)*

In 2020, the similarity with the term *democracy* increased again for all aspects of the liberal model after Law and Justice won the 2019 parliamentary elections and the 2020 presidential election. These political outcomes triggered a wave of criticism, condemning the abuse of power and suppressing political competitiveness. This change is visible in the narratives surrounding the constitutional, pluralist, and civil aspects of liberal democracy:

*There are so many words about democracy, human rights, and the constitution, and today in Poland civil rights are drastically limited by the unconstitutional ban on assemblies and by unlawful, reprehensible and excessive actions of the Police and state services. (9\_012\_1\_8)*

*You're not yet at the stage of imprisoning candidates, as happens in so-called Eastern democracies, to prevent them from running, but you've engaged the state apparatus to discredit candidates. When we talk about all these irregularities, we want to emphasise once again: the elections were neither equal nor universal; the elections were unfair. (9\_014\_2\_77)*

However, while some speeches still featured sharp accusations, since 2018 there have been clear signs indicating a general de-radicalization in the opposition's discourse. This is evidenced primarily by a noticeable decrease in the frequency of statements on democracy overall. The shift is not just thematic but also tonal, with speeches showing a marked decrease in aggressive language and a move toward a more moderate stance. Coupled with the observed weakening of the semantic link between the concept of democracy and key areas of intense political conflict between the government and the opposition, this suggests that the opposition has shifted from making general allegations to more specific and targeted ones. This transition was accompanied by speeches proposing detailed legislative reforms rather than merely criticising government actions. Moreover, the accusations have taken on a less general and militant character, becoming more specific to particular violations. Additionally, accusations have increasingly shifted from attacking the destruction of democracy to criticising incompetence, nepotism, and the squandering of public funds.

## Conclusion

Democratic resilience is a multilevel process that intertwines the activities of democratic parties, non-governmental organisations and social movements, state institutions, as well as local, national, and supranational organisations (Boese et al. 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021). In this article, we have analysed the evolution of discursive strategies of the main opposition party in the Polish parliament (the Civic Platform/the Civic Coalition) during the period of democratic backsliding. Using a mixed-methods approach combining temporally sensitive word embeddings and the discourse analysis based on the classification of dimensions of democracy from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al. 2021), modified for textual data, we analysed a representative subset of 284 parliamentary speeches on democracy delivered by PO and KO MPs between 2001 and 2020. Our focus was on the dimension of liberal democracy, as it was the most prevalent in the parliamentary discourse and the most adversely affected by backsliding.

Summarising the results of the analysis, we observed a general increase in the number of mentions of liberal democracy during the period of democratic backsliding, particularly concerning the notion of *democratic institutions*. However, despite the increased occurrence of the institutional aspects, further testing our hypothesis with the temporally sensitive word embeddings method showed that all aspects of the liberal democratic model were strongly associated with democracy during the period of democratic backsliding. Contrary to other concepts such as *civil rights*, *separation of powers* and *the rule of law* - which were strongly associated with democracy not only during the period of democratic backsliding, but also during the previous period of PiS governance (2005-2007) - the concepts of *free courts*, *constitution*, and *rights of the opposition* only reached high levels of association with the concept of *democracy* in opposition speeches during the democratic backsliding episode. Furthermore, in contrast to the period 2005-2007, since 2015, there has been an increase in the radicalization of the democratic narratives of opposition parties. While earlier PO directed their criticism of the incumbent party towards specific cases of infringement of liberal democracy (e.g., *disrupting tripartite separation of powers*, *attack on article 227 of the constitution*), during the PiS's rule in the 8th parliamentary term (2015-2019) this criticism broadened to articulate the risks to Polish democracy as a whole (e.g., *striving for authoritarianism*, *destroying democracy*).

Furthermore, and most importantly from the perspective of the role of the parliamentary opposition in democratic resilience, we identified a shift in the PO/KO political discourse during various stages of democratic resilience. At the onset of the democratic erosion in 2015 and 2016, the democratic opposition expressed their resistance by emphasising that PiS *would not be allowed to destroy Polish democracy silently*. This resistance was subsequently demonstrated in their tactic of a total rejection of PiS, that could be classified as 'extraordinary politics' (Somers and Tekinirak 2024). Particularly, PO/KO MPs made several attempts to block the work of

parliament, and striving to prevent any legislative changes. In line with findings from prior studies (Cannon 2014; Gamboa 2017; Cleary and Öztürk 2020), this tactic only contributed to the complete exclusion of the opposition by PiS from the decision-making process, culminating in the transfer of the parliamentary sessions to another room where opposition MPs were not admitted, thus further exacerbating the democratic breakdown.

Later, opposition shifted to the tactic of ‘normal political behaviour’ (Sommer and Tekinürk 2024), with moderated and coordinated actions that seemed to focus more on using their position to delay the dismantling of democracy as much as possible to gain the chance “to buy time until the next election” (Cleary and Öztürk 2020, 1). In particular, in 2017, when we observed a peak in the levels of association between democracy and all the aspects of the liberal democratic model in web embeddings analysis, qualitative examinations of data suggested that Civic Platform MPs began introducing a positive program on how to restore democracy. Since 2018, we observed the evolution in PO/KO’s discourse, from general statements to a more targeted emphasis on constitutional integrity and civil rights, reflecting an adaptive strategy aimed at countering democratic erosion, which aligns with our hypothesis. It was accompanied by a noticeable decrease in the frequency of statements on democracy and weakening of the semantic link between the concept of democracy and key areas of intense political conflict between the government and the opposition. This discursive shift, combined with the overall decrease in usage of derogatory language and replacing some of the general accusations of destroying democracy with criticisms of specific cases of incompetence, nepotism and excessive spending of public funds, illustrates a critical aspect of democratic resilience — the ability of opposition parties to adapt and recalibrate their strategies to broaden the electoral base. However, as shown by the temporal increase in militant liberal democratic discourse after the victory of PiS in the 2019 parliamentary elections, while the opposition party’s shift from a militant to a more moderate strategy indicates organisational learning, it continues to be significantly influenced by the electoral cycle and the prevailing government-opposition power dynamics.

Displaying the findings of our research against the background of previous studies (cf Lührmann 2021, 1017), the analysis of Polish parliamentary debates reveals that the parliamentary opposition was shifting between ‘extraordinary’ and ‘normal’ political tactics (Sommer and Tekinürk 2024), suggesting that the moderate approach may be more effective in countering radical parties (Bustikova, 2019). PO/KO adapted its political narratives aimed at the defence of democracy over time, following the failures of its initial militant democracy strategy. In cooperation with other domestic and external actors, pro-democratic opposition succeeded in delaying the autocratisation process in certain state sectors. In the general elections in Poland following the onset of the democratic backsliding process, the full unification of the democratic opposition (in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament) or its partial unification (in the 2019 parliamentary and 2020 presidential elections) demonstrated the potency of democratic resilience to voters. Although the 2019 elections did not result in a governmental victory for the democratic opposition, they greatly increased the difficulty of dismantling the democratic state for Law and Justice. This was especially evident in the 2019 Senate election, narrowly won by the opposition (51 to 49 seats), which halted the express mode of adopting legislative changes previously used by PiS, and blocked several of their anti-democratic projects in which PiS lacked voting unity. Finally, the victory of the opposition parties in the 2023 parliamentary elections ended an eight-year period of erosion of democracy in Poland, representing a pivotal moment for the country’s democratic integrity.

Simultaneously, the role of the judiciary in upholding democratic resilience, as emphasised in numerous studies, should not be underestimated (cf Boese et al. 2021, 886). The existence of key judicial institutions independent of the executive, notably the Supreme Court, certain local common and appellate courts, and, until 2018, the National Council of the Judiciary safeguarding the independence of courts and judges, posed significant challenges for the government’s efforts to legally target democratic opposition leaders. This resistance not only prolonged this process but also rendered it less feasible and predictable for the authorities. Consequently, the fiercest attacks by the Polish authorities engaged in democratic backsliding were predominantly directed against the political opposition and the judiciary. This had a positive influence on the prevalence of these topics in the

parliamentary discourse of PO/KO, and caused a substantial increase in their semantic association with democracy after 2015.

To summarise, this study offers new and original insights into the main themes and shifting priorities of Polish opposition discourse over time, based on an empirical analysis of a large, representative sample of parliamentary speeches. By examining the evolving discourse of the parliamentary opposition during the period of democratic backsliding, particularly their efforts to halt or delay anti-democratic policies and practices initiated by the ruling party, this article makes a significant contribution to existing scholarship in the field of democratic resilience, highlighting the critical role of opposition discourse in safeguarding democratic norms and institutions, particularly in contexts of rising autocratic tendencies worldwide (Bustikova 2019; Cianetti et al. 2018; Freedom House 2022). While acknowledging the unique political context of Poland, the empirical findings and analytical framework of the study have wider applicability, being relevant to other countries encountering democratic erosion, especially where institutional aggrandisement is countered by organised actions of the parliamentary opposition.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that our study faces certain limitations. Primarily, our focus on parliamentary speeches means we capture only one dimension of the opposition's strategy. This approach may not fully encompass the wider array of tactics and communications employed by these parties, including media interactions, public statements, or grassroots campaigns. Furthermore, the inherent nature of parliamentary speeches, formal and strategically crafted, might not reflect the complete spectrum of the opposition's discourse.

Additionally, while we aim to explore the topic of discourse and action of the political opposition in democratic resilience, we acknowledge that a precise estimation of the effectiveness of democratic resilience in Poland and evaluating the impact of remaining independent democratic institutions and other actors, such as civil society, media, and foreign and transnational actors, falls beyond its scope. These factors play crucial roles in shaping the democratic landscape and can significantly impact the position and repertoire of possible strategies of the political opposition. However, due to the specific focus and constraints of the study, a comprehensive analysis of their influence cannot be provided. To address these gaps, future research could expand the analysis to include a broader range of communication channels and actors and consider comparative studies across different democratic contexts. Such research would enhance our understanding of the multifaceted nature of political discourse and its impact on democratic resilience, providing a more holistic view of how opposition parties adapt and respond to challenges in varied democratic environments.

## Notes

1. Speeches are coded using the scheme: term\_session\_day\_speech number.

## References

- Bale, Tim, et al. 2010. "If you can't beat them, join them? Explaining social democratic responses to the challenge from the populist radical right in Western Europe." *Political Studies* 58 (3): 410-426.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On democratic backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5-19.
- Bernhard, Michael. 2015. "Chronic instability and the limits of path dependence." *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (4): 976-991.
- Bobba, Giuliano, and Duncan McDonnell. 2016. "Different types of right-wing populist discourse in government and opposition: The case of Italy." *South European Society and Politics* 21 (3): 281-299.
- Boese, Vanessa A., Amanda B. Edgell, Sebastian Hellmeier, Seraphine F. Maerza, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2021. "How

democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process." *Democratization* 28 (5): 885-907.

- Bustikova, L. (2019). *Extreme reactions: Radical right mobilization in Eastern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cannon, Barry. 2014. "As clear as MUD: Characteristics, objectives, and strategies of the opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela." *Latin American Politics and Society* 56 (4): 49-70.
- Cianetti, Licia, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley. 2018. "Rethinking "democratic backsliding" in Central and Eastern Europe—looking beyond Hungary and Poland." *East European Politics* 34 (3): 243-256.
- Cleary, Matthew R., and Aykut Öztürk. 2022. "When does backsliding lead to breakdown? uncertainty and opposition strategies in democracies at risk." *Perspectives on Politics* 20 (1): 205-221.
- Coppedge, Michael, et al. 2021. "V-Dem dataset v11. 1." <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3831905>
- Di Carlo, Valerio, Federico Bianchi, and Matteo Palmonari. 2019. "Training temporal word embeddings with a compass." *Proceedings of the AAAI conference on artificial intelligence*. No. 01: 6326-6334.
- Dimitrova, Antoaneta L. 2018. "The uncertain road to sustainable democracy: elite coalitions, citizen protests and the prospects of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe." *East European Politics* 34 (3): 257-275.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit. 2016. *Democracy Index 2015 – Democracy in an Age of Anxiety*. London: EIU.
- Ekiert, Grzegorz, and Jan Kubik. 1998. "Contentious Politics in New Democracies: East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 1989–93." *World Politics* 50 (4): 547-581.
- Engler, Sarah, and David Weisstanner. 2021. "The threat of social decline: income inequality and radical right support." *Journal of European Public Policy* 28 (2): 153-173.
- Freedom House. 2022. "Nations in Transit 2022. From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression." [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT\\_2022\\_final\\_digital.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf)
- Gamboa, Laura. 2017. "Opposition at the Margins: Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy in Colombia and Venezuela." *Comparative Politics* 49 (4): 457-477.
- Gandhi, Jennifer. 2019. "The institutional roots of democratic backsliding." *The Journal of Politics*, 81(1): e11-e16.
- Gidengil, Elisabeth, Dietlind Stolle, and Oliver Bergeron-Boutin. 2022. "The partisan nature of support for democratic backsliding: a comparative perspective." *European Journal of Political Research* 61(4): 901-929.
- Gidron, Noam, and Peter A. Hall. 2017. "The politics of social status: Economic and cultural roots of the populist right." *The British Journal of Sociology* 68: S57-S84.
- Gora, Anna, and Pieter de Wilde. 2022. "The essence of democratic backsliding in the European Union: deliberation and rule of law." *Journal of European Public Policy* 29 (3): 342-362.
- Guasti, Petra. 2020. "Populism in Power and Democracy: Democratic Decay and Resilience in the Czech Republic (2013–2020)." *Politics and Governance* 8(4): 473–484.
- Guasti, Petra, and Lenka Bustikova. 2023. "Varieties of Illiberal Backlash in Central Europe." *Problems of Post-Communism* 70(2): 130–142.
- Guriev, Sergei. 2018. "Economic drivers of populism." *AEA Papers and Proceedings* Vol. 108. 2014 Broadway, Suite 305,

Nashville, TN 37203: American Economic Association: 200-203.

- Gutiérrez, Luis, and Brian Keith. 2018. "A systematic literature review on word embeddings." *International Conference on Software Process Improvement*. Springer, Cham, 132–141.
- Hanley, Seán, and Milada Anna Vachudova. "Understanding the illiberal turn: democratic backsliding in the Czech Republic." *Rethinking Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe*. Routledge, 2020. 34-54.
- Helgest, Johannes, et al. 2022. *A new game in town - Democratic resilience and the added value of the concept in explaining democratic survival and decline*. 2206. [https://download.uni-mainz.de/RePEc/pdf/Discussion\\_Paper\\_2206.pdf](https://download.uni-mainz.de/RePEc/pdf/Discussion_Paper_2206.pdf)
- Herman, Lise Esther. 2016. "Re-evaluating the post-communist success story: party elite loyalty, citizen mobilization and the erosion of Hungarian democracy." *European Political Science Review* 8 (2): 251-284.
- Heyer, Gerhard, Florian Holz, and Sven Teresniak. 2009. "Change of Topics over Time-Tracking Topics by their Change of Meaning." *KDIR* 9: 223-228.
- Holesch, Adam, and Anna Kyriazi. 2022. "Democratic backsliding in the European Union: the role of the Hungarian-Polish coalition." *East European Politics* 38 (1): 1-20.
- Innes, Abby. 2014. "The Political Economy of State Capture in Central Europe." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52 (1): 88-104.
- Judis, John B. 2016. *The populist explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports.
- Kwiatkowska, Agnieszka, Mikołaj Cześniak, Marta Żerkowska-Balas, and Ben Stanley. 2016. "Ideologiczna treść wymiaru lewica–prawica w Polsce w latach 1997–2015." *Studia Socjologiczne* 4 (223): 97-129.
- Kwiatkowska, Agnieszka, Viktoriia Muliavka, and Hubert Plisiecki. 2023. "Hollowed or redefined? Changing visions of democracy in the political discourse of Law and Justice." *Democratization* 30(3): 458-478.
- Laebens, Melis G., and Anna Lührmann. "What halts democratic erosion? The changing role of accountability." *Democratization* 28 (5): 908-928.
- Linz, Juan J., Juan J. Linz, and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and post-communist Europe*. Baltimore: JHU Press.
- Loewenstein, K. (1937). Militant democracy and fundamental rights, I. *American Political Science Review*, 31 (3): 417-432.
- Lührmann, Anna, et al. 2018. "Democracy at Dusk? V-dem Annual Report 2017." V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Lührmann, Anna. 2021. "Disrupting the autocratization sequence: towards democratic resilience." *Democratization* 28 (5): 1017-1039.
- Mainwaring, Scott, and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. 2013. *Democracies and dictatorships in Latin America: emergence, survival, and fall*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merkel, Wolfgang, and Anna Lührmann. 2021. "Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges." *Democratization* 28 (5): 869-884.
- Moberg, Andreas. 2020. "When the return of the nation-state undermines the rule of law: Poland, the EU, and Article 7 TEU." In *The European Union and the Return of the Nation State*, 59-82. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ost, David. 2016. "Regime change in Poland, carried out from within." *The Nation* 8. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/regime-change-in-poland-carried-out-from-within/>.
- Proksch, Sven-Oliver, and Jonathan B. Slapin. "Parliamentary questions and oversight in the European Union." *European Journal of Political Research* 50 (1): 53-79.
- Przybylski, Wojciech. 2018. "Explaining Eastern Europe: Can Poland's Backsliding Be Stopped?" *Journal of Democracy* 29 (3): 52-64.
- Rooduijn, Matthijs, Sarah L. De Lange, and Wouter Van Der Brug. 2014. "A populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe." *Party Politics* 20 (4): 563-575.
- Rooduijn, Matthijs, and Tjitske Akkerman. 2017. "Flank attacks: Populism and left-right radicalism in Western Europe." *Party Politics* 23 (3): 193-204.
- Sadurski, Wojciech. 2019. "Polish Constitutional Tribunal under PiS: from an activist court, to a paralysed tribunal, to a governmental enabler." *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 11 (1): 63-84.
- Skórzyński, Jan. 2019. "Chronique (2015-2019)." Osiatyński Archive, <https://archiwumosiatynskiego.pl/kategoria-osi-czasu/kronika-skorzynskiego/>
- Słomczyński, Kazimierz M., et al. 2007. "Changes in class structure in Poland, 1988-2003: Crystallization of the winners-Losers' divide." *Polish Sociological Review* 1: 45-64.
- Somer, Murat, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke. 2021. "Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies." *Democratization* 28(5): 929-948.
- Somer, Murat, and Metehan Tekinrk. 2024. "Regime uncertainty, democratic erosion and resilience, and Turkish opposition actors." *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*: 18: 1-29.
- Stahl, Rune Møller, and Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen. 2022. "Defending democracy: Militant and popular models of democratic self-defense." *Constellations* 29(3): 267-400.
- Stanley, Ben. 2019. "Backsliding away? The quality of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe." *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15 (4): 343-353.
- Tudoroiu, Theodor. 2015. "Democracy and state capture in Moldova." *Democratization* 22 (4): 655-678.
- Welzel, Christian. 2021. "Democratic horizons: What value change reveals about the future of democracy." *Democratization* 28 (5): 992-1016.
- Zakrzewski, Rafał. 2017. "Civil society resistance calendar (2015-2017)." Osiatyński Archive, <https://archiwumosiatynskiego.pl/kategoria-osi-czasu/kalendarium-oporu/>

#### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

#### Funding

The research was supported by the National Science Centre (research project 2019/33/B/HS5/02648).

### Notes on contributors

**Viktoriia Muliavka** is a postdoctoral researcher of comparative public policy at the University of Bamberg with a PhD in sociology from the Polish Academy of Sciences. Her research focuses on the implications of social inequalities on protest participation, welfare state preferences and democratic resilience. Her work has been published in journals such as *Social Movement Studies* and *Democratization*.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1275-7679>

**Agnieszka Kwiatkowska** is an Assistant Professor at the SWPS University of Social Science and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland, holds PhD in sociology and MA in political science. Her research focuses on political discourse: how issues are politicized, introduced into the parliamentary competition and become determinants of political behaviours. Currently, she is a Principal Investigator in the project PARLIN ‘Institutionalization of political parties in the parliaments of Central Europe - data mining of parliamentary debates’ (funded by the National Science Centre, 2020–2024) in which she researches mixed methods of analysing parliamentary speeches and voting.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2241-0831>

**Hubert Plisiecki**, a PhD Candidate in Psychology, works at the intersection of political science, psychology, sociology, linguistics and machine learning. Granted Masters of Science in Psychological Research Methods with Data Science, currently working on a PhD at Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN). Assistant at the lab of Digital Social Sciences at PAN; on a political grant which uses natural language processing to analyze parliamentary speeches at SWPS University. Coordinator of the Society of Open Science, and the Neurocognitive Society at SWPS University. Member of the Social AI society at Warsaw University. Research interests include: Machine Learning in Social Science, Meta-analytic Bias Detection, Theory of Constructed Emotion and Community Psychology.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5273-1716>